

## **A TERRITORIAL READING OF HOUSEHOLDS AND FAMILIES CHANGES IN ITALY OVER THE LAST 50 YEARS<sup>1</sup>**

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**Abstract.** In recent decades, Italy has experienced significant family transformations, the patterns of formation, dissolution and reconstitution have become more heterogeneous and family boundaries more ambiguous. Population aging and the increase in relationship instability are associated with the consolidation of new family forms, and same-sex unions have been legally recognized (Cirinnà Law, N. 76 /2016).

The aim of the work is to study the changes in household/family types in Italy over the past half-century, by means of cartographic representation for a territorial reading of household/family models. The structure transformation is described using census data, from which types for smaller spatial units are constructed and compared in a time series.

The territorial analysis is carried out considering Provinces and Metropolitan Cities (MCs) as spatial units. The largest Municipalities tend to ‘drag’ the entire provincial area, for this reason an intermediate layer is constructed: the largest Municipalities are extrapolated from the Provinces/MCs and treated as separate territorial units.

Compared to the past, there is a decline in the traditional family and a consolidation of other forms. The different household/family types (e.g. classic nuclear family, one-person households, lone parent families) are represented on maps to display the evolution over time, to underline extreme values, to make visual comparisons in order to highlight territorial differences or whether there are similarities in household/family patterns across different areas of the country.

### **1. Process of transformation of the households and families**

In recent decades, Italy has experienced significant household and family transformations. Families and households have changed in form and composition, as well as in size, but more in general, what has changed is the way people live in households and families.

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<sup>1</sup> In the context of a joint and shared work, paragraph 1 is attributed to Mariangela Verrascina, paragraph 4 to Silvia Dardanelli, paragraph 3 to Antonio Guglielmi and paragraph 2 to Silvia Dardanelli and Mariangela Verrascina. Paragraph 5 is attributed to all the authors.

The aspects considered underlying the analysis are based on two fundamental definitions: the ‘(private) household’<sup>2</sup> and the ‘family nucleus’<sup>3</sup>, two concepts contained in the International Recommendations for the 2020 Censuses of Population and Housing (UNECE, 2015), but also in the Anagrafe Regulation in force in Italy.

Changes in family life forms reflect the demographic and social transformations still taking place in our country today. Different lifestyles, declining fertility, increasing separations and divorces, growing instability in couple relationships, and longer life expectancy facilitate the formation of smaller and smaller households and more flexible family structures that move away from the traditional model and are associated with the consolidation of new family forms. Patterns of formation, dissolution and reconstitution have become more heterogeneous and family boundaries more ambiguous. The process of transformation of the household/family involves its structure and the relationships among persons who compose it.

Today, in Italy, a true archipelago of family forms exists. For decades, a progressive and unstoppable process of family transformation has been underway. At the same time, there is an acceleration in the spread of new family models. Thus, our country represents a significant study context for the marked differences in the temporal and territorial distribution of the various family types.

The aim of this work is to study the changes in household and family types experienced by Italy over the past half-century through a territorial reading of family models. On one hand, it describes how traditional forms have changed and how they are distributed across the territory over the last 50 years; on the other hand, it shows the evolution of new family models over time in Italy. The goal is therefore to underline extreme values, make visual comparisons to highlight territorial differences or similarities in family patterns across different areas of the country.

## 2. Data and method

The ongoing transformation of household and family structures is described through census ‘pictures’, which also allow for a deeper understanding of the spatial dimension. Census data make it possible to identify household/family types for

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<sup>2</sup> (Private) Household: Group of persons linked by marriage, civil partnership, kinship, affinity, adoption, legal guardianship or personal ties, who cohabit and share a place of usual residence (even if not already registered at the General Register Office). A household may be also constituted by one person.

<sup>3</sup> Family Nucleus: People living in couples, with or without (resident) children, or lone parents with (resident) children. Two or more persons who belong to the same household and who are related as husband and wife (opposite sex), as partners in a registered partnership (same sex), as partners in a consensual union, without or with (resident) children, or as parent and (resident) child. The concept of family nucleus is more restrictive than the private household concept. Within a household there may be one or more family nuclei but there may be none (for example, one-person households).

smaller and more homogeneous spatial units and to capture patterns that might go unnoticed when considering broader spatial levels of analysis. The availability of detailed territorial data, as known, is a characteristic of the population census. The census enables a finer territorial mapping of households compared to other surveys; it records households according to the criterion of co-residence, meaning all those family types that result from the condition of co-habitation in the same dwelling, ‘under the same roof’.

The census years considered depend on when a topic was introduced in the survey questionnaires and how widespread it was. Some forms have been present since the earliest censuses (Mastroi Luca, Verrascina, 2012), while other ‘new’ models began to emerge starting in the late 20th and early 21st centuries and became subject of survey and analysis only when they started to become ‘visible’.

In order to respond to the need for a more in-depth knowledge of family structures, the question on the relationship to the household’s reference person was expanded in the census questionnaire from 1981 onwards (the number of modes was gradually increased from 9 in 1981 to 23 in 2021). This made it possible to identify ‘family nuclei’ for which data had already been compiled in 1971 anyway. Thanks to the opportunities offered by the better articulation of the kinship question, in the latest censuses it has been possible, on the basis of the identification of nuclei, to arrive at a new typology of the family, more detailed and in step with the ongoing transformation of households (Cortese, 2011; Cortese, 1985). Since 2011, it has been possible to enumerate same-sex couples, and furthermore, the precise reference to the ‘affective ties’ referred to in the definition of family adopted today makes the enumeration of so-called ‘de facto couples’ less problematic (Cortese, 2007).

For indicators on households (Average number of components, Households with 5 members and over, One-person households) the time series of the past 50 years has been considered, i.e. the results of the last six decennial Population and Housing Censuses (from 1971 to 2021), while for indicators on family nuclei (Couples with Children, Lone parents, Couples in consensual union), the last three decennial censuses (2001 to 2021) have been taken into account. Lastly, an indicator on same-sex couples is presented based on the last two decennial censuses (2011 and 2021).

Similarities and differences over the territory, trends or observable regularities are sought through the cartographic representation of the spread of the phenomenon, or rather of the portion of the phenomenon captured by the ‘snapshots’ taken in Italy with the censuses.

Through the map sequences we try to answer some research questions concerning how household/family structures have changed in Italy, how the new structures have spread, whether the distribution is homogeneous on the Italian territory, whether the North-South dichotomy prevails, with the more ‘innovative’ North, where the spread

of new behaviours is advanced, and the more ‘traditional’ South, where such a spread still struggles to take hold, as well as whether sub-regional heterogeneities emerge.

We also wondered whether the more traditional forms, involving mutual support and co-residence/cohabitation for economic, housing and care needs, are still rooted in the regions of Southern Italy or whether pockets of ‘new’ household/family types can be observed.

The territorial analysis is carried out considering as spatial units 107 Provinces/Metropolitan Cities (MCs) existing in 2021. However the largest Municipalities (over 150,000 inhabitants or capitals of Metropolitan Cities)<sup>4</sup> tend to ‘drag’ the entire provincial area, their value weighs heavily on the overall figure. So, the approach to the study consists of constructing an intermediate layer in which the large Municipalities are extrapolated from the Provinces/MCs and are treated as separate territorial units, to better highlight their peculiarities.

ArcGIS Pro is a GIS (Geographic Information Systems) software application developed by Esri (Environmental Systems Research Institute) for the analysis and management of geographic information. It offers advanced tools for spatial and geostatistical analysis and interactive visualisation; it allows to manage geodatabases and integrate data from multiple sources; and produce cartographic outputs. In this study, ArcGIS Pro is used to perform analyses, create the ‘rest of the Province/MC’ layer (through the Union function applied to municipal geographic data) and produce maps. For the 26 Provinces/MCs with large Municipalities, two areas were created: the large Municipality and the rest of the Province/MC. So, 133 geographical areas are considered.

### 3. Households are getting smaller

The size of households<sup>5</sup> in Italy has decreased significantly over the last decades. Considering the indicator Average number of components (Figure 1), in 1971 households were composed on average of 3.4 components; this value has been steadily decreasing, reaching 2.2 components in 2021.

This phenomenon was initially visible only in a few areas in Northern Italy, until 1991, when a dichotomy emerged between the Centre-North and the South of the country, with most of the large Municipalities in the North recording the lowest values. The decrease in the average number of household members has continued to the present day, also affecting the Southern regions. In 2021, the only territories with

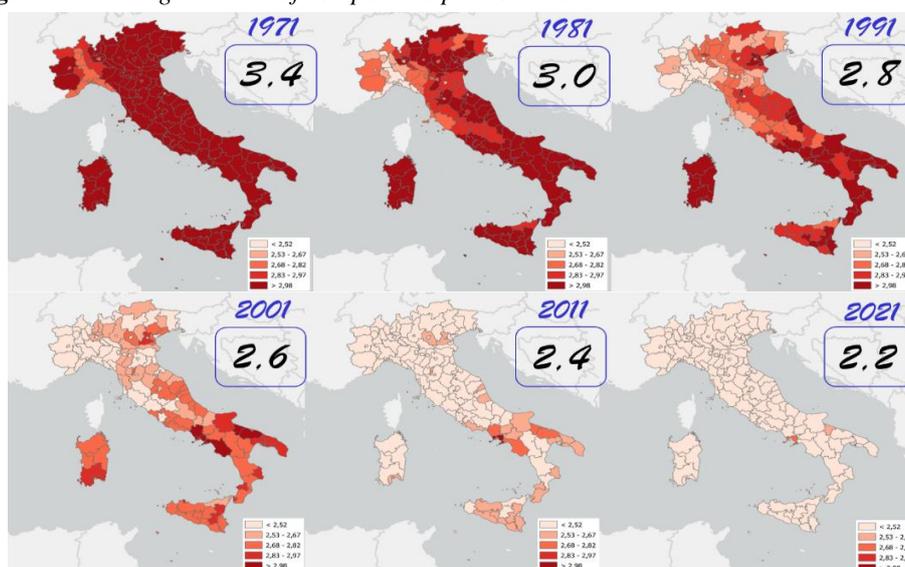
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<sup>4</sup> Turin, Milan, Brescia, Genoa, Verona, Venice, Padua, Trieste, Parma, Reggio Emilia, Modena, Bologna, Ravenna, Florence, Livorno, Prato, Perugia, Rome, Naples, Bari, Taranto, Reggio Calabria, Palermo, Messina, Catania, Cagliari.

<sup>5</sup> See footnote 2.

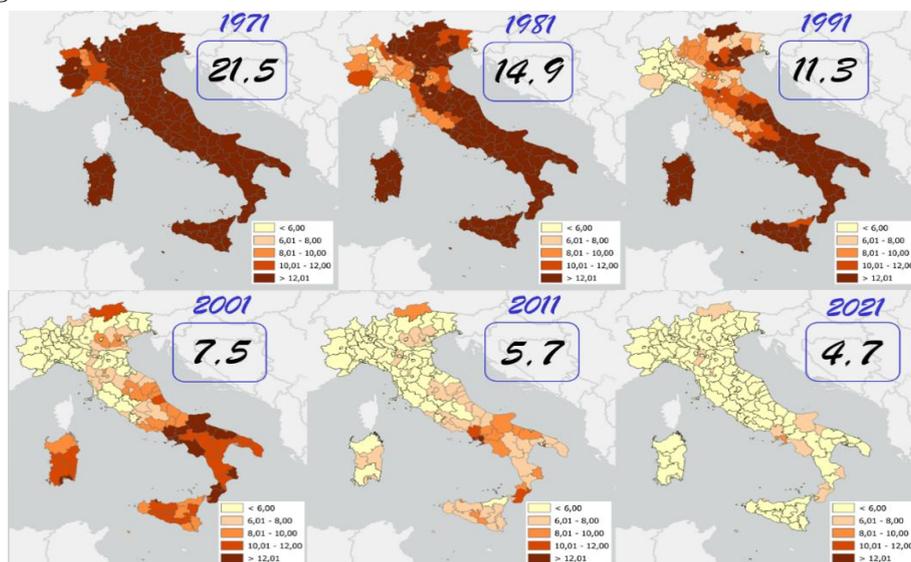
a higher average number of household members are the Provinces of Barletta-Andria-Trani and Naples, with an average of more than 2.5, while the large Municipalities, especially those in the North, continued to show the phenomenon more markedly, their values are lower than the Italian figure, with Bologna that recorded the lowest value (1.8).

**Figure 1** – Average number of components per household.



Source: Istat, General Population Censuses (1971 to 2011) and Permanent Population Census 2021

The results for the percentage of Households with 5 or more members are in line with the Average number of components. The national value of households with 5 or more members fell from 21.5% in 1971 to 4.7% in 2021. As with the Average number of components, in 1971 this trend was initially visible only in the North. The phenomenon evolved in this direction and, from census to census, the percentage of households with 5 or more members decreased in the North and in the Centre of Italy, until 1991, the year in which it is possible to observe a divided Italy, with the South continuing to have a high percentage of more numerous households. In subsequent censuses, the South was also gradually affected by this phenomenon, aligning itself with the data for Northern and Central Italy, until 2021, when only the values for the rest of the Metropolitan City of Naples remains 9.3%. The large Municipalities of Northern Italy record values in most cases lower than the Italian value throughout the historical period analysed, with the absolute lowest value recorded in Trieste in 2001, equal to 2.0%.

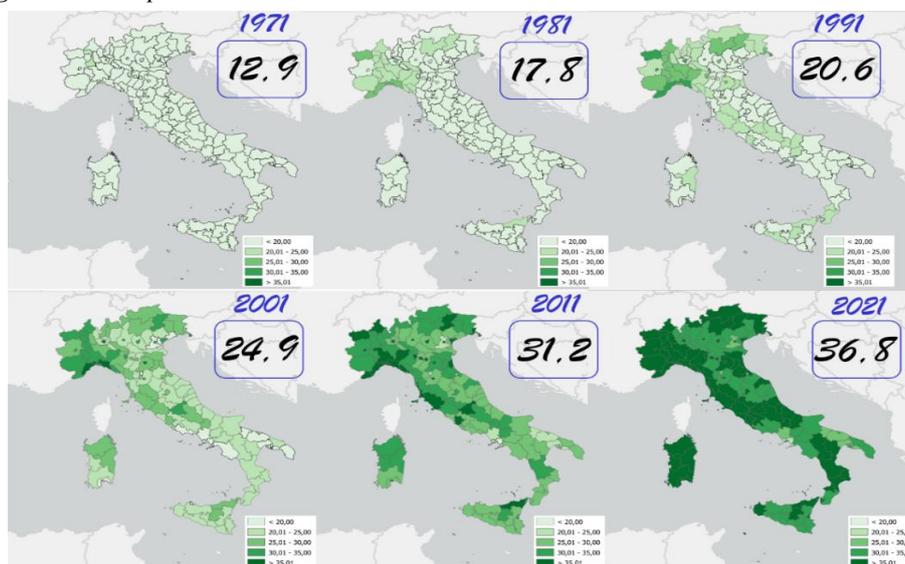
**Figure 2 – Households with 5 members and over.**

Source: Istat, General Population Censuses (1971 to 2011) and Permanent Population Census 2021

Households without nuclei, in which components do not form any kind of relationship as a couple or parent-child, increased especially due to One-person households. Persons living alone are becoming increasingly common across Europe where, on average, the share is 35.9% (Istat, 2022).

The living arrangements of the elderly, and more specifically living alone, are the result of the preferences and resources people have, together with the constraints they face as they age (Reher and Requena, 2018).

Starting with 1971, the phenomenon initially accounted for a small percentage of households, around 12.9%. In the following decades, one-person households have increased, and also in this case, the change is initially visible in Northern Italy. The trend then spread throughout Italy, until it almost doubled in 2001, when one-person households accounted for 24.9%. In 2011, the large Municipalities of Northern and Central Italy led the phenomenon, presenting the highest values of one-person households. These cities could differ by up to 10 percentage points from the national figure (31.2%), as in the case of Bologna, where the highest value of 47.3% was observed. In the later years, its relevance progressively extended not only to the Centre-North areas, but also to the South of Italy. In 2021, the percentage of persons living alone almost tripled compared to 1971, reaching 36.8%. The rest of the Metropolitan City of Naples is the only area least affected by this phenomenon, recording the lowest value of 24.8%.

**Figure 3 – One-person households.**

Source: Istat, General Population Censuses (1971 to 2011) and Permanent Population Census 2021

The different lifestyles, enhanced educational and employment prospects that characterize large urban centers also appear to favour the choice of living alone (Gallo, Dardanelli, *et al.*, 2023). In almost all the large Municipalities of Central-Northern Italy, the proportion of one-person households is above 40%, Milan standing out, where 54.0% of households are made up of one person. In the large Municipalities of Southern Italy, the phenomenon is less extensive, but still marked compared to previous decades, with roughly one household in three made up of persons living alone.

#### 4. Family nuclei change forms

The demographic and social changes still taking place in our country today facilitate the formation of increasingly smaller households and more flexible family structures that move away from the traditional model, with a decline of the classic nuclear family. Couples<sup>6</sup> with (resident) children decreased by more than 1.2 million, from 8,766,690 in the 2011 Census to 7,537,874 in 2021, confirming the downward trend already highlighted at the beginning of the new millennium (were more than 9,2 million in 2001).

<sup>6</sup> See footnote 3.

The marked decline in couples with children is linked to the persistently low fertility rate, but especially to the advancing age of *boomers*, born in the years between 1955 and 1975. The significant decrease in couples with or without children is the combination of an increase in older couples and the sharp decline in younger couples (Dalla Zuanna, 2024).

In 2021, as in past censuses, a gap in families composition between the Southern and Northern areas is evident. Couples with children are more represented in the South, in particular Basilicata, Campania and Apulia; among the values lower than the national data, now widespread throughout the North and the Centre, the Valle d'Aosta, Piedmont and Liguria stand out, reaching a minimum for the Ligurian Provinces, which do not have more than 38.1% of couples with children.

**Figure 4 – Couples with children.**



Source: Istat, General Population Censuses (2001 and 2011) and Permanent Population Census 2021

In the decades, the fall has involved the whole of Italy indiscriminately, albeit with different intensity. Sardinia is the region that experienced the most marked reduction between 2011 and 2021, falling by about 10 percentage points in all the Provinces. In large Municipalities, in line with the differences highlighted between the Northern and Southern Italy, couples with children are more usual in the capital cities of the South and Islands. However, Palermo, Reggio Calabria and Bari, with values between 48.9% and 46.5%, are the only ones above the national figure. The lowest incidences are observed in Trieste, Genoa and Bologna (in 2021, 35.7%, 37.3% and 38.4% respectively), and in Cagliari (37.1%), which is in contrast with the territorial area to which it belongs.

Over the last three decades, partly offsetting the reduction in couples, both female and male lone parents (with one or more resident children) have increased, mainly due to growing marital instability. Comparison with the past shows a shift from an 'old' form of lone parenthood, originating especially from widowhood, to a new form, resulting, above all, from the voluntary dissolution of marriages, out-of-wedlock birth. In 2021, what has the greatest impact on this phenomenon is the growing marital instability; in fact, about half of lone parents are separated or

divorced, 30.7% are widowed, while 22.0% of lone parents have never married. In 2011, there was, on the contrary, a higher incidence (36.5%) of widows/widowers and a lower incidence (30.4%) of separated and divorced (ISTAT, 2024).

Also in the case of Lone parent families, the change compared to the past is generalised across the territory, with an increase affecting all the geographical areas considered (Figure 5). The number of lone mothers in 2021 is 2,967,420, showing an increase of 35.5% compared to 2011 Census, and the number of lone fathers is 855,049 with a change of about 85.0%. Lone parenthood is almost a female prerogative (8 out of 10 cases): women continue to live with their children following separation or divorce also because there is a strong preference for maternal custody in separations. Moreover, men are more likely to form a new union following a widowhood event.

In 2021, the highest percentages of lone parents out of the total number of families are recorded for Latium and Liguria, where the share exceeds 25.0% for all Provinces/MCs.

**Figure 5 – Lone parents.**



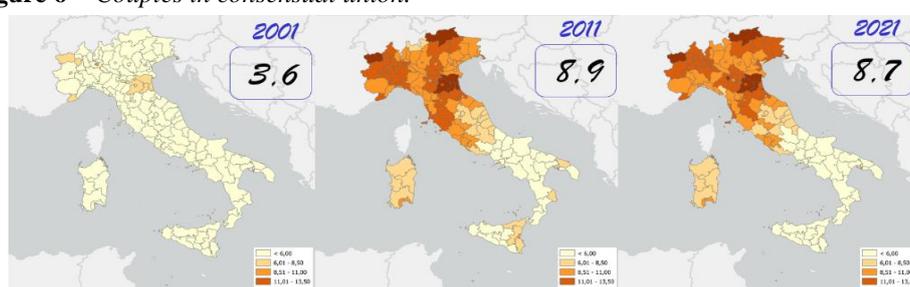
Source: Istat, General Population Censuses (2001 and 2011) and Permanent Population Census 2021

The large Municipalities are characterized by a process of fragmentation that in many cases is more accentuated than in the rest of the country. Different lifestyles and probably more unstable relationships seem to favour the formation of lone parent households. In all these cities there is a higher percentage of lone parents than the country as a whole. In many cases the large centres stand out compared to the rest of the Province/MC, particularly in the North and South, while in others (e.g. Central Italy, Sardinia, Liguria, some Provinces in Campania) the two areas show similar trends. In 2021, Rome, Cagliari, Catania and Naples are at the top of the list with lone parent shares above 30.0%.

Couples in consensual union increased in the decade 2001-2011 and then remained substantially stable until 2021 (Figure 6). The weight of these couples is much more evident in Northern and Central Italy than in the South and in the Islands. Here again, the dichotomy between the Centre-North and South of the country

clearly emerges, while Sardinia shows a separate trend from the Southern regions (8.5% for the rest of the Metropolitan City of Cagliari). The phenomenon already underrepresented in 2011 in the South and in Sicily has further thinned out (except for Catania and Taranto). Less than 2.5% of the couples living in Reggio Calabria and Agrigento are not married to each other, compared to about 15.0% of those living in Valle D'Aosta and the Autonomous Province of Bolzano.

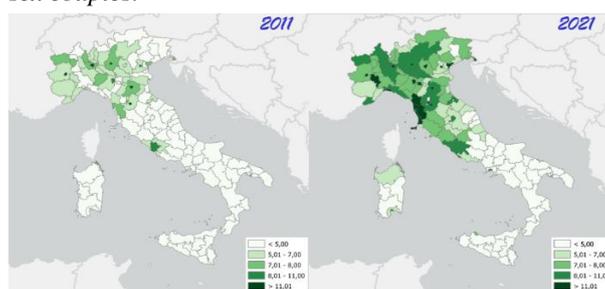
**Figure 6 – Couples in consensual union.**



Source: Istat, General Population Censuses (2001 and 2011) and Permanent Population Census 2021

Among the forms of couple life that emerge in the panorama of family models are those formed by persons of the same sex. These couples were first recorded at the 2011 Population Census (Dardanelli, 2015). Then, following the entry into force of the Cirinnà law regulating civil unions (No 76 of 20 May 2016), couples in civil unions were recorded at the permanent census in addition to those formed by same-sex partners in consensual union. These are families formed by individuals who have their usual residence in the same dwelling and who have declared themselves to be in civil union or cohabiting as a couple.

**Figure 7 – Same-sex couples.**



Source: Istat, General Population Census 2011 and Permanent Population Census 2021

Note: indicator per 10,000 couples

At the 2021 Census, the total number was 9,795, increased compared to the previous decade (7,513). The majority of couples formed by same-sex partners are

concentrated in Northern Italy, where more than 60.0% of them live, while in the Southern Regions and Islands the share stops at 15.2%. Civil unions represent the vast majority (86.3%) of the same-sex couples surveyed, and reside mainly in the North-West (44.2% of the national total) and the North-East (24.2%); instead, consensual unions, with 34.9%, are more represented in the Centre.

The gender analysis highlights the prevalence of those formed by men; in particular, men in civil unions are almost double than the number of women (Vitali, Dardanelli, *et al.*, 2025).

The large Municipalities of Northern Italy stand out for their higher quotas of same-sex couples compared to the rest of their Province/MC and the national value, in particular Milan, Bologna, Brescia and Turin have values of more than 23 per 10,000 couples (Figure 7).

## 5. Conclusions

The analysis of census data and the study of some types of households and family nuclei shows that there is in Italy a wide variety, with a broad combination of roles within the household/family. Compared to the past, there is a significant reduction in households with 5 and more members, and, more generally, in the classic nuclear family (composed of couples with children), the expansion of one-person households continues unabated over time and is distributed throughout the peninsula, lone parent families are growing as a consequence of the ageing population and the increase in relationship instability, same-sex couples, although underestimated, are rising within the forms of family life.

For the indicators considered, the dichotomy between North and South still prevails, but this division conceals substantial sub-regional and sub-provincial heterogeneities in the spatial distribution of family structures. Indeed, even in the most traditional regions, pockets of innovation are slowly gaining ground, while traditional post-war family models have lost ground. This trend is driven, as already mentioned, by profound changes in the demographic and social structure of our country over the last 50 years. Emerging family forms (childless couples, unmarried couples), that began to emerge in the last decade of the 20th century, seem to be preferred and prevalent not only among younger generations.

Only the comparison with future censuses and the analysis of the phenomena in the next few years will tell us if, even for the 'new' households and families, a convergence of the behavior patterns (from the territorial point of view) will come.

The permanent census makes it possible to arrive at a very fine territorial detail and to make more timely analyses thanks to the availability of data no longer every ten years but annual and multi-annual. In the future, it will be possible to conduct

more detailed analyses by sub-populations, including some demographic (age, gender, citizenship, marital status) and socio-economic (educational attainment, occupational status) characteristics, to study how different patterns of family life evolve and develop across the country.

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