THE DIFFERENT ITALIES OF THE DEMOGRAPHIC DECLINE[1]

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Abstract. Italy's population decline is now more than a trend, it is an established (and accepted?) fact that policy seems unable to combat.

However, it does not affect the various territories in the same way: while the South and the Islands continue their significant population loss – as does the Centre, although to a much more limited extent – the North resists, even with some positive signs. This work aims to highlight the differences that have characterized the demographic trend in the Italian regions starting from 2014, the last year in which the national population was growing. The analysis of demographic trends and their effects on population structure will then be put in relation to the main socio-economic indicators released by Istat.

The statistical reading of territorial inequalities therefore aims to offer a useful cognitive contribution to identify any connections between demographic decline and economic vulnerability as well as the presumed links between some socio-economic and cultural characteristics and population decline.

1. Introduction

The demographic trend in Italy in the third millennium is currently characterised by a reversal that led our country towards a real demographic decline. Until 2014, the year in which the population peaked at 60,345,917 residents, the population had steadily increased. On the contrary, from 2015 to the present, there has been a continuous decrease in the population, with a drop of more than 1.4 million inhabitants (-2.3 percent). Only the population with Italian citizenship is decreasing, losing over 2 million individuals (-3.7 percent), while foreign residents continue to grow (+13.3). However, this positive net migration is unable to compensate for the negative natural change. In 2024, fertility reaches an all-time low (1.18 the average number of children per woman) and the birth rate drops from 8.3 (2014) to 6.3 per thousand; there is also a 15.3 percent drop in the female population of reproductive

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[1] Authors contributions: Francesca ALLEGRA paragraph 3; Paola Francesca CORTESE paragraph 5 and Conclusions; Graziella FUSARO Introduction and paragraph 2, Giuseppe STASSI paragraph 4.
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age between 2014 and 2025. Italy remains the "oldest" country in the European Union (EU) with a quarter of the population over 65 and a growing imbalance in the age structure. In fact, the share of individuals over 65 years of age continues to increase year after year (24.7 percent in 2025 against 21.5 in 2014) and the weight of the youngest, under 15 years of age, continues to decrease (11.9 vs 13.9). The mean age of the population is 46.8 years and the elderly population is more than twice the size of the young population, with an ageing index of 207.6 percent. The growing dependency ratio, from 54.8 percent in 2014 to 57.8 in 2025, also shows a continued decline in the active age population.

2. Demographic decline: Macro-Areas and Regions

The demographic decline that began in 2014 affects all macro-areas but with differentiated intensity (Figure 1).

Figure 1 – *Resident population on 1st January by macro-area. Years 2014-2025 (percentage change).*
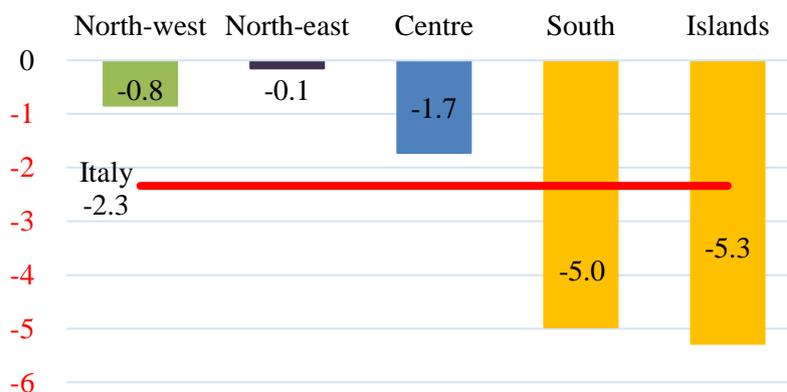
Source: Author's elaboration on Istat data

In the North-east, the resident population remains almost stable (-0.1 percent); in particular (Table 1), there is an increase in Trentino-Alto Adige (+3.2, especially in Bolzano +4.7) and Emilia-Romagna (+0.8) and a loss of population in Friuli-Venezia Giulia (-2.5) and Veneto (-1.1). In the North-west, only Lombardia records an increase in its residents (+1.1); Liguria and Valle d'Aosta suffered a population loss of more than 4 percent (-4.5 and -4.3 respectively). In the Centre, the decrease is -1.7 percent, specifically -4.5 percent in Umbria and -4.4 in Marche; the resident population in Lazio is almost unchanged (-0.2). The macro-areas most affected by

depopulation are the South (-5.0 percent) and the Islands (-5.3). There is a marked decrease in Molise and Basilicata (both -8.0 percent) and in Calabria (-6.4). In these last regions also the decrease in the female population of reproductive age is greater (potential mothers), structural factor that naturally affect the decline in births: Molise and Basilicata (-22.8 percent), Calabria (-20.2). The Sardegna region loses 5.5 percent of its inhabitants and 22.9 percent of its women of childbearing age.

Table 1 – *Total resident population*, *female population of reproductive age and demographic indicators by region.*

Regions and Italy	% Population change 2014-2025		Birth rate (*per thousand*)	Population structure indicators (%) 1st January 2025 (*estimate*)			
	Total	F (*15-49 years*)	Year 2024 (*provisional*)	Ageing index	Dependency ratio	Mean age	> 65 years
Piemonte	-3.7	-15.8	5.8	239.8	61.4	48.1	26.9
Valle d'Aosta	-4.3	-17.9	5.2	227.1	59.2	47.7	25.8
Lombardia	1.1	-10.3	6.4	195.5	56.4	46.4	23.9
Trentino-Alto A.	3.2	-9.4	7.6	162.3	57.3	45.0	22.5
Veneto	-1.1	-14.9	6.2	211.9	57.9	47.1	24.9
Friuli-Venezia G.	-2.5	-15.8	5.8	252.3	62.3	48.6	27.5
Liguria	-4.5	-16.7	5.5	283.2	65.3	49.6	29.2
Emilia-Romagna	0.8	-10.2	6.3	210.8	58.0	47.1	24.9
Toscana	-2.2	-14.5	5.7	241.9	60.7	48.2	26.7
Umbria	-4.5	-17.3	5.5	246.6	62.3	48.4	27.3
Marche	-4.4	-17.0	5.6	235.5	60.8	47.9	26.6
Lazio	-0.2	-15.0	6.0	199.7	55.7	46.7	23.8
Abruzzo	-4.6	-19.0	5.8	228.1	59.8	47.6	26.0
Molise	-8.0	-22.8	5.4	259.0	60.3	48.3	27.1
Campania	-4.1	-16.5	7.4	161.6	53.1	44.5	21.4
Puglia	-5.0	-18.7	6.2	209.8	57.6	46.7	24.7
Basilicata	-8.0	-22.8	5.7	239.4	58.1	47.6	25.9
Calabria	-6.4	-20.2	6.9	196.2	58.5	46.2	24.4
Sicilia	-5.2	-18.1	7.0	184.3	57.5	45.7	23.7
Sardegna	-5.5	-22.9	4.5	281.4	59.2	49.2	27.4
Italy	-2.3	-15.3	6.3	207.6	57.8	46.8	24.7

Source: Author's elaboration on Istat data

In 2024, the lowest birth rate (4.5 per thousand) is found in Sardegna, followed by Valle d'Aosta (5.2) and Molise (5.4). Only five regions are above the national average: Trentino-Alto Adige (7.6), Campania (7.4), Sicilia (7.0), Calabria (6.9) and Lombardia (6.4).

The areas most affected by depopulation are also those characterised by the greatest imbalance in the age structure of the population. The strong ageing of Liguria is consolidated: individuals over 65 years of age make up 29.2 percent of the

total population, the ageing index reaches 283.2 percent and the mean age of the population is 49.6 years. Equally high is the incidence of the over-65s on the total population in Sardegna (27.4 percent) and Molise (27.1), regions with ageing indices of 281.4 and 259.0 percent respectively. The "youngest" regions, with much lower ageing indices, are Campania (161.6) and Trentino-Alto Adige (162.3); in these regions the proportion of the over-65s (21.4 and 22.5 percent) is below the national average. The dependency ratio is a measure of sustainability (ISTAT, 2024c) and high values signal the increasing socio-economic burden of the non-active population on the working age population. The highest indices are observed in Liguria (65.3 percent), Friuli-Venezia Giulia and Umbria (62.3 percent) while the lowest value is found in the region with the smallest elderly population, Campania (53.1 percent).

3. Education levels in the Italian regions

Increased education influences choices and shifts priorities: it can push people to migrate to places with greater opportunities for suitable employment and can impact the decision to have children. This section aims to provide an overview of education levels in Italy to offer possible explanations for the different demographic trends in its regions. The Italian regions present a very heterogeneous panorama concerning the achievement of a high level of education (Table 2). In 2024, in Italy, considering the population in the 25-64 age group, 66.7 percent had obtained at least an upper secondary school diploma. However, this is not a uniform figure across the country: the two largest islands and four regions of the South (Puglia, Campania, Calabria and Basilicata) are positioned with significant gaps below the national figure, while in this range we find only one region of the North (Valle d'Aosta) and none of the Centre. Thirteen regions are positioned above the national average, first of all Umbria (75.9 percent), Lazio (75.1) and Friuli-Venezia Giulia (74.9).

Within the population aged 25-64 who have obtained at least an upper secondary school diploma, gender favours women who, in Italy in 2024, exceed men by 5.4 percentage points. In this case too, substantial differences are found between the Italian regions, which present minimum gender gaps in Molise (1.7 percentage points in favour of women), Puglia (2.2), Campania (2.5) and Basilicata (2.9) and maximum in Sardegna (9.4), Valle d'Aosta (9.3), Toscana (8.8) and Marche (8.5).

Even in 2024, shifting the focus to the population in the 25-34 age group, 31.6 percent completed tertiary education. Among the nine regions that exceed the national value, Lazio is in first place (37.1 percent), followed closely by Emilia-Romagna (36.9), Umbria (36.6) and Veneto (36.3); the almost total absence of the South and the Islands is noted in the upper part of the ranking, represented only by

Abruzzo (32.5). In the last places for incidence of population aged 25-34 having completed tertiary education, we have six regions of the South: Molise (27.5 percent), Campania (27.3), Calabria (26.5), Sardegna (25.6), Puglia (24.4) and Sicilia (23.2).

Table 2 – *Population by educational qualification obtained. Year 2024 (percentage values).*

Regions and Italy	People with at least upper secondary education level (25-64 years old)			People having completed tertiary education (25-34 years old)		
	M	F	Total	M	F	Total
Piemonte	64.4	70.6	67.5	25.8	36.6	31.0
Valle d'Aosta	58.6	67.9	63.3	20.3	41.2	30.5
Liguria	68.9	74.1	71.5	21.7	37.8	29.5
Lombardia	66.3	72.6	69.4	26.6	44.4	35.2
Trentino-Alto Adige	70.9	75.8	73.4	21.8	36.7	29.0
Veneto	66.8	72.6	69.7	28.9	44.1	36.3
Friuli-Venezia Giulia	73.3	76.6	74.9	25.9	45.2	35.2
Emilia-Romagna	67.8	75.4	71.6	29.5	44.9	36.9
Toscana	63.1	71.9	67.6	25.8	38.9	32.2
Umbria	72.6	79.0	75.9	28.9	44.7	36.6
Marche	66.0	74.5	70.3	25.6	41.7	33.3
Lazio	72.7	77.3	75.1	29.3	45.3	37.1
Abruzzo	69.3	73.7	71.5	27.4	38.0	32.5
Molise	68.1	69.8	68.9	18.2	37.9	27.5
Campania	57.2	59.7	58.5	21.7	32.9	27.3
Puglia	55.8	58.0	56.9	18.7	30.3	24.4
Basilicata	64.5	67.4	66.0	20.6	39.8	29.8
Calabria	59.0	63.9	61.5	21.8	31.5	26.5
Sicilia	54.2	58.0	56.1	20.4	26.1	23.2
Sardegna	52.1	61.5	56.8	22.6	28.8	25.6
Italy	64.0	69.4	66.7	25.0	38.5	31.6

Source: Istat, Labour force survey.

In 2024 even among 25-34 year olds having completed tertiary education, women prevail, exceeding men by 13.5 percentage points. There are 12 regions where the gap is greater than the national one, two of which are in the South: Molise (19.7 percentage points in favour of women) and Basilicata (19.2). The differences recorded in Calabria (9.7), Sardegna (6.2) and Sicilia (5.7) are less large.

Early exit from the education and training system has a negative impact on the overall cultural level of a territory. In 2024, in Italy, the percentage of young people leaving education and training (ELET) early – that is, those aged 18 to 24 who have only achieved a low level of education – dropped to 9.8 percent, confirming a trend that has been ongoing for several years. Compared to 2018, the phenomenon has

decreased in all Italian regions, with the exception of Trentino Alto-Adige. In 2024, the highest percentages of people aged 18-24 years who have achieved only lower secondary (ISCED 2) and are not included in a training program were recorded in Sicilia (15.2 percent), Sardegna (14.5) and Campania (13.3). Below the national figure (with values ranging from 9.1 percent in Marche to 4.8 in Molise) are most of the regions of the North and all those of the Centre, as well as Basilicata and Abruzzo.

Early exit from the education and training system affects men more than women: at national level in 2024, 12.2 percent of men left the education and training system early, compared to 7.1 percent of women. At a regional level, the gender gap appears to be independent of the intensity of the phenomenon: limited differences can correspond to a high intensity of the phenomenon and vice versa. For example, in Sicilia the gap is 4.3 percentage points, while in Liguria - where the largest gap is recorded (11.4) - the percentage of ELET is lower than the national average.

Another characteristic that differentiates the Italian regions is the distribution of the percentage of people who are neither in education nor employed (NEET), that is the percentage of people aged 15-29 years that are not in education, employment, or training on total people aged 15-29 years. In 2024, in Italy, NEETs were 15.2 percent of the reference population, a decrease compared to the previous year, confirming the progressive reduction of the phenomenon (eight percentage points less than 2018). The data, however, clearly divide the South from the rest of Italy: all the regions of the South present values higher than the national figure, in particular in Calabria (26.2 percent), Sicilia (25.7) and Campania (24.9). Values very different from those of Emilia-Romagna (9.6), Veneto (9.0) and Trentino-Alto Adige (7.7).

The geography of the gender gap is more heterogeneous. In 2024, at a national level, the percentages of NEETs are 13.8 for men and 16.6 for women. Even for NEETs, the gender gap does not always correspond to a high intensity of the phenomenon: for example, in Emilia Romagna, women outnumber men by 5.7 percentage points, yet the NEET rate is among the lowest in the country; the situation is similar in Veneto. By contrast, in Campania – where the phenomenon is particularly widespread – the difference between men and women is minimal.

4. Economic conditions in the Italian regions

The dynamics of the labour market are closely interconnected with the demographic ones: the territories that offer the greatest employment opportunities are those that are most likely to attract population or, at least, to maintain the existing one; at the same time, having a job might facilitate parenthood.

In 2024, in Italy, the employment rate reached 62.2 percent (Table 3), a value that also marks a clear boundary between the North and the South of the country: Trentino-Alto Adige (72.7) and Valle d'Aosta (72.1) lead the ranking. No region in the South and Islands is above the national average, with significant disadvantages such as in Sicilia (46.8), Campania (45.4) and Calabria (44.8).

The gender gap - which in Italy, in 2024, was equal to 17.8 percentage points - affects the southern regions more, with values that in Basilicata, Campania and Puglia exceed 25 percentage points; the only exception is Sardegna (14.2). The smallest gap between men and women is recorded in Trentino-Alto Adige (10.9 percentage points) and Valle d'Aosta (7.5).

Table 3 – *Employment rate and Unemployment rate (15-64 years old). Year 2024 (percentage values).*

Regions and Italy	Employment rate			Unemployment rate		
	M	F	Total	M	F	Total
Piemonte	75.6	62.3	69.0	5.0	6.1	5.5
Valle d'Aosta	75.9	68.4	72.1	3.6	4.3	3.9
Liguria	74.8	59.8	67.3	4.8	6.4	5.5
Lombardia	76.3	62.3	69.4	3.3	4.3	3.7
Trentino-Alto Adige	78.1	67.2	72.7	2.3	2.5	2.4
Veneto	78.0	62.3	70.2	2.2	4.1	3.0
Friuli-Venezia Giulia	75.5	63.9	69.8	3.8	5.2	4.4
Emilia-Romagna	77.4	63.2	70.3	3.5	5.5	4.4
Toscana	78.1	63.7	70.9	3.2	5.2	4.1
Umbria	74.6	61.5	68.0	4.5	5.4	4.9
Marche	72.8	61.6	67.2	4.7	5.8	5.2
Lazio	72.3	55.8	64.0	5.4	7.6	6.4
Abruzzo	72.0	52.1	62.1	6.7	7.9	7.2
Molise	68.0	47.3	57.9	6.5	10.3	8.1
Campania	58.7	32.3	45.4	14.6	18.1	15.9
Puglia	64.9	37.6	51.2	8.4	11.2	9.5
Basilicata	68.7	42.9	56.0	5.3	9.6	6.9
Calabria	56.6	33.1	44.8	12.4	15.0	13.4
Sicilia	58.9	34.9	46.8	12.1	15.3	13.3
Sardegna	64.7	50.5	57.7	8.2	8.9	8.5
Italy	71.1	53.3	62.2	6.0	7.5	6.6

Source: Istat, Labour force survey.

If we look at the trend of the unemployment rate, we observe a situation similar to the one just described: values higher than the national one (6.6 percent in 2024) in the South and the Islands and lower in the rest of the country.

Even in terms of unemployment, the gender gap penalises women (1.5 percentage points in Italy in 2024), a gap that is often more marked in the southern territories.

Since the characteristics of the labour market are directly reflected in the economic well-being of the territories, it is not surprising that in all the regions of the South and the Islands the GDP per capita is lower than the national one (€ 36,077 in 2023), with values ranging from € 31,012 in Abruzzo to € 21,050 in Calabria.

The 2023 data on annual average households income (not including imputed rents) also suggest a disadvantage for those living in the South and the Islands, with values ranging from €33,343 in Sardegna to €28,131 in Calabria (compared to €37,511 in Italy). The same is true for median income: all southern regions are below the national average (€30,039 in 2023), with the highest figure in Basilicata (€27,922) and the lowest in Calabria (€23,210). Perhaps it is also based on income that, in 2024, in six southern regions the percentage of people dissatisfied with their economic situation exceeds the national figure (40.2 percent): from 41.9 in Campania to 51.4 in Sicilia.

5. Poverty in the Italian regions

The analysis of relative and absolute poverty and the risk of poverty are conceived as a further potential junction and multiplier of depopulation dynamics, particularly in those areas affected by a significant negative population balance.

In the following, poverty is emphasized as a key social and economic dimension that often co-occurs with demographic imbalances, lower education, and weaker labor market conditions. It is considered here as an additional interpretative lens, not as the sole or linear cause of demographic decline.

Poverty is not uniformly distributed across the Italian territory. Marked differences can be observed between:
- territorial divisions (North-West, North-East, Centre, South, Islands);
- individual regions;
- most notably, between small, medium-sized, and large municipalities.

In the southern regions, poverty reaches particularly high levels (Figure 2), often associated with demographic decline, lower levels of education, and higher unemployment. In Calabria, in 2023, about one in three residents lives in relative poverty; in Puglia and Campania, more than one in four. All eight southern regions occupy the top nine most critical positions in the national ranking. However, the relationship between poverty and demographic decline does not follow a single pattern. Some regions, such as Liguria and Umbria, despite experiencing significant demographic decline and population ageing, show nearly overlapping levels of

individual relative poverty (10.0 percent and 9.9 percent, respectively), but more contained compared to other regions with a strong demographic downturn, and still below the national average. The picture regarding individual relative poverty across Italian regions is largely confirmed by the data on individual absolute poverty and poverty risk levels, available for the five territorial divisions (Figure 3). These indicators also show Southern Italy as the area with the most critical levels, confirming the pattern already observed in education and labour market indicators. Although absolute poverty appears with relatively low variability across the divisions (ranging from a maximum of about 12 percent in the South and Islands to a minimum of 7.9 percent in the Centre), the high territorial inequality in the share of population at risk of poverty, highest in the South and Islands (31.5 percent and 35.8 percent, respectively) and lowest in the North-East (8.7 percent), points to a deep divide across a broad set of previously discussed indicators. Nonetheless, the critical levels reached by both statistical measures are evident and widespread throughout the country, including the North.

**Figure 2 –** *Individuals in relative poverty by region. Italy, 2023 (percentage incidence).*
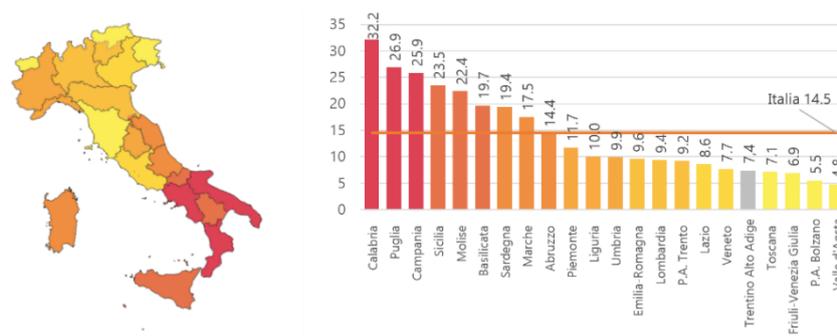
Source: Istat - Household Budget Survey (HBS). Authors' calculations.

To complement the regional analysis, a sub-regional perspective at the municipal level is introduced. This approach highlights vulnerabilities that averages may conceal, especially in smaller municipalities. The Municipal Fragility Index (Istat, 2021) is employed as a composite measure of demographic and socioeconomic conditions; reference is also made to the classification of Inner Areas (SNAI)[2] as examples of limited access to essential services. In fact, the existence of territorially differentiated vulnerabilities, although confirming the persistent weakness of the southern regions, does not spare other areas including the North-West and Central Italy, as shown in Figure 4 (map of the municipal fragility index).

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[2] Inner Areas (SNAI): Italian national strategy (2013) targeting territories far from essential services, to counter demographic decline and marginalization.

Figure 3 – *Individuals in absolute poverty and at risk of poverty by geographical area Italy, 2023 (percentage incidence).*
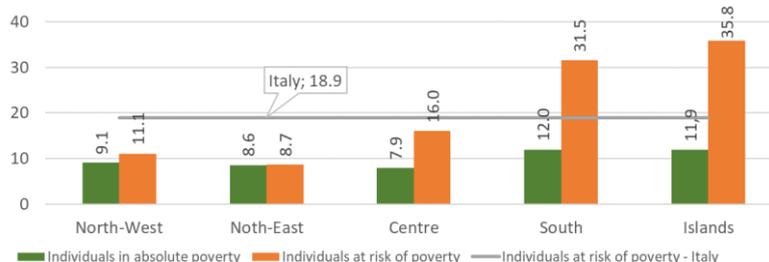
Source: Absolute poverty - Istat, Household Budget Survey (HBS); At-risk-of-poverty rate - Istat, EU-SILC. Authors' calculations.

Demographic dynamics and poverty levels are often observed together, with interactions that suggest mutually reinforcing effects rather than a one-directional causal link. In the most fragile areas, where population decline is pronounced and accompanied by a gradual reduction in the share of the working-age population (mainly small municipalities, particularly those classified as "inner areas"), the value of the municipal fragility index is consistently associated with levels of relative and absolute poverty (Figures 5 and 6), indicating very limited prospects for local and demographic development. Among the smallest municipalities (with up to 5,000 inhabitants), nearly 30 percent are highly fragile; this share decreases to 15.8 percent and 13.6 percent, respectively, in medium-sized and large municipalities.

Figure 4 – *Composite Index of Fragility at Municipal Level. Italy, 2021.*
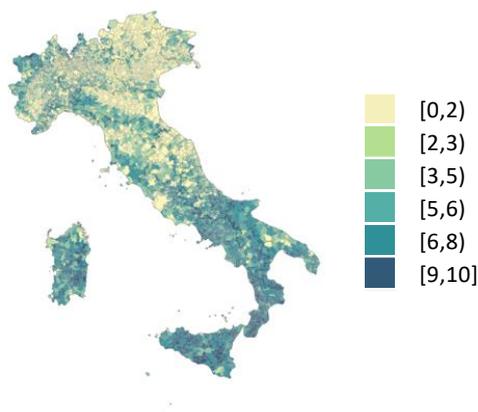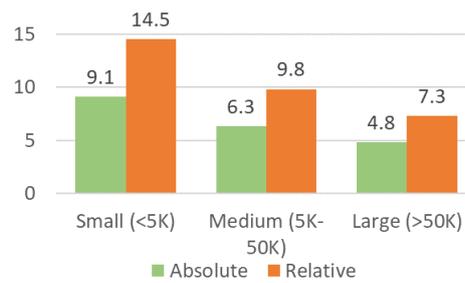

Source: Istat - Composite Index of Fragility at Municipal Level.

Figure 5 – *Municipal Fragility Index by demographic size. Italy, 2021 (percent values).*

Source: Istat - Composite Index of Fragility at Municipal level. Authors calculations.

Figure 6 – *Absolute and relative poverty rate by type Municipality[3], Italy, 2023 (percentage incidency).*

Source: Istat, Household Budget Survey (HBS). Authors' calculations. Municipalities are classified by size (small ≤5,000; medium 5,001–50,000; large >50,000) and, where relevant, by Inner Areas (SNAI).

From a statistical perspective, poverty emerges as a sensitive indicator of a territory's ability to respond to ongoing demographic transformations. Its multiple dimensions require targeted policies capable of addressing both structurally marginalised areas and those where poverty manifests in more latent and invisible forms.

6. Conclusions

Depopulation is not merely a demographic phenomenon, but the result of structural imbalances that also involve education, employment, and economic

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[3] Municipalities are classified by demographic size (small ≤5,000 inhabitants; medium 5,001–50,000; large >50,000) and, where relevant, by belonging to the National Strategy for Inner Areas (SNAI). Poverty rates by type of municipality are based on HBS 2023 data; the Municipal Fragility Index refers to 2021 (Istat).

resources. Southern Italy (the Mezzogiorno) remains, dramatically, the most fragile area, where lower levels of schooling, lower participation in the labour market, lower income, and widespread poverty converge – factors that fuel outmigration and hinder territorial development. However, differentiated territorial models emerge: some regions in Central and Northern Italy, though affected by population decline and aging, demonstrate greater socio-economic resilience. In the most vulnerable areas, the loss of working-age population triggers vicious cycles of impoverishment and decline, weakening the capacity for response and regeneration. Depopulation thus appears to be linked to a broader territorial and generational crisis, which calls for sub-regional analyses and integrated approaches aimed at strengthening territorial attractiveness.

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