

Italian Global Families: Changes over time

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Introduction

The outmigration of Italians to foreign countries has been a persistent trend, reflecting broader socio-economic changes in Italy and across Europe. These population outflows to other countries were particularly intense at the beginning of the 20th century, continued after the Second World War, and declined sharply from the 1970s through the 1990s (Bonifazi, 2013). More recently, often driven by financial reasons and the challenging situation of the Italian labour market (Bonifazi 2017), there has been an increase in the number of Italians migrating abroad, a trend often referred to as the “new Italian emigration” (Gjergji 2015; Pugliese 2018; Sanfilippo 2017), which is more widespread among younger Italians who move abroad and start families in another country. Several studies have estimated these populations' movements, although these are usually challenging and limited to official data (Bonifazi, 2013), surveys, and, more recently, social media use (Zagheni et al., 2014). However, to date, fewer have described how outmigration impacts family members left in the country of origin, overlooking a family dimension with important consequences for caregiving and intergenerational exchanges. Therefore, this study aims to estimate the prevalence of Italian households with family members living abroad and to provide an overview of how this prevalence has changed across age groups over time. Using data from two waves of the Italian “Families, social subjects, and life cycle” Survey, conducted in 1998 and 2016, we offer new insights into how emigration has influenced family structures in Italy, including contacts with and support from family

members living abroad, and examining changes over time across different age groups.

Background

Migration has shaped Italy's demographic and social landscape for over a century. Historically, large waves of emigration from Italy were linked to economic challenges, particularly in the Southern regions of the country. While net migration rates have fluctuated, recent years have seen an increase in emigration among young Italians due to employment challenges and better labour opportunities abroad (Bonifazi 2013, 2017). These migration flows are not merely economic; they also significantly impact family cohesion, support networks, and intergenerational bonds. In migration research, identifying indirect impacts of emigration on families (such as households with family members abroad) is complex but critical for understanding the broader effects of migration. Over the past three decades, high-skilled migration has grown significantly, attracting attention for its economic and political impacts. While research has extensively explored its economic effects—both positive (e.g., remittances, return migration) and negative (e.g., brain drain, productivity loss)—and its influence on governance in origin countries, less is known about its demographic effects, with a few exceptions on fertility (Anelli and Balbo, 2021) and social and psychological effects (Sabater and Graham, 2016). In this study, we aim to describe the demographic signal left by having family members abroad and how this impacts different subgroups of the population by age and the family member who lives abroad (parents, siblings, children, or grandchildren).

Data and Methods

We draw data from the 1998 and 2016 Family and Social Subjects Surveys, conducted by the Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT), with response rates above 75% for each survey. These datasets include comprehensive harmonised questions on familial relationships and the residence locations of most family members (i.e. parents, siblings, children, and grandchildren). Respondents are asked, for each category of family members, whether they have any alive, and, if so, how many and where they live; respondents must list the residences of their non-coresident relatives from closest to farthest. Although information is available for all siblings and both parents, it is limited to up to three children and grandchildren. The

analytical sample was restricted to respondents born in Italy and varied by wave and measure of interest. For example, in both surveys, only respondents aged 35 and older are asked whether they are grandparents, with about 6K respondents (and 30% of the sample at each wave) asked about their grandchildren and their residence. In our analysis, we present the prevalence of each family member category abroad over time, by age groups (18-34, 35-49, 50-64, 65+). After providing descriptives at each wave, we use regression models to test whether the prevalence of family members abroad changed over time, both overall and across age groups. All analyses are weighted to ensure the results are representative.

Expected and Preliminary Results

Our research plans to highlight the proportion of Italian households with family members living abroad, reflecting the pattern of outmigration across cohorts and over time. We expect these findings to underscore the complex interplay among migration, longevity, and fertility patterns, with younger generations more likely to have fewer siblings overall and more of them abroad, for example.

Preliminary findings show that the overall number of brothers and sisters alive has decreased over the years among younger generations, particularly those aged younger than 50. In 1998, about 90% of those aged 35-49 had at least one sibling, with 66% of them having two or more brothers or sisters, whereas in 2016, 86% had siblings and 45% only one. Regarding residence, 4.4% of those aged 25-34 in 2016 had at least one sibling abroad, compared to 2.4% in 1998, with higher percentages observed particularly among those with two or more brothers or sisters. For parents, we observe that the likelihood of having a mother or father alive is much higher in the latest data collection across all age groups (and among those age 50 and older in particular, reflecting improved longevity), although the percentage of mothers and fathers living abroad has not changed dramatically over the years, and across age groups (with a slightly higher percentage at ~1.5% of respondents aged <34 having at least one parent living abroad in 2016, compared to ~0.4% 20 years earlier).

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