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The future of population statistics

The use of signs of life and administrative data sources to identify the stock of Italian citizens residing abroad

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Summary/Abstract

The Italian National Institute of statistics (Istat) carried out the last ‘Census of the Population of Italians Abroad’ in 2003 with the collaboration of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In recent years, the Italian emigration abroad has grown in intensity and become more complex in its composition. As a result, the interest and need to produce disaggregated and timely information on the Italian population living abroad has also increased, and the availability of information on this phenomenon has become a national political priority. Istat is implementing a new statistical process with the aim of measuring the Italian migration abroad, by assessing the quality of the administrative data sources that can be used. In order to determine the number of Italians residing abroad, the proposed approach will be implemented on the basis of life signs inferred from administrative sources, at the same time as the activity of identifying the usually resident population in Italy.

The implementation of a specific sample survey is also crucial in this context to collect qualitative data on the behaviours, migration plans and living conditions of Italians living outside national borders. The final scope is to produce disaggregated data that could enable policies based on the needs and the aspirations of the new generations of emigrants but also of those who are long-established migrants residing abroad.

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I. Introduction

1. The increase in the level and the characteristics of international migration have correspondingly increased the need for quality data (UN, 2021). Very often the political debate on international migration is based on perceptions, while accurate data are strongly needed. Many studies have highlighted the need to produce reliable statistics, as the perception of the phenomenon could be distorted and out of touch with reality. Objective 1 of the Global Compact on Migration (UN, 2019) as well as target 17.18 of the SDGs (UN, 2015) calls for a better collection and use of disaggregated migration data to develop evidence-based policies, with the aim of preventing discrimination and promoting the integration of migrants in national development planning.
2. In this context of increasing levels of international migration, the European Union plays an important role and can be seen as a unique laboratory of experience as citizens can move freely within its borders. “On 1 January 2022, 23.8 million citizens of non-member countries were residing in an EU Member State, representing 5.3% of the EU population. In addition, 13.7 million persons living in one of the EU Member States on 1 January 2022 were citizens of another EU Member State” (Eurostat, 2023). Italian emigration is also on the increase: in five years, from 2017 to 2021, the number of Italians who left the country to emigrate abroad is almost 570,000 (122,000 in the peak recorded in 2019) while in the previous five years it was just over 450,000. The increase is even more significant if we look at the number between 2007 and 2011, years in which around 200,000 left Italy (Istat, 2022). This trend of an upturn in Italian citizens moving abroad has led to a growing interest in Italians abroad, to understand the nature of these movements and the impact they may have on the demographic, economic and social situation of our country.
3. Politicians are concerned about the ‘brain drain’ and policies are put in place to make Italians with high qualifications return to Italy. According to Istat data, Italian emigration in recent years has mainly involved men, whose share has always been a majority, and people aged between 20 and 39, who make up half of the flow (Bonifazi and Heins, 2019). As far as educational qualifications are concerned, the proportion of emigrants who are university graduates, on whom the media focus, is between 31 and 32 per cent. Studies are disseminated on the economic cost of education for citizens that emigrate abroad, and the objective of political debate is to counter this outflow (Confindustria, 2017). To promote Italy's economic, scientific and cultural development, one of the measures adopted is tax relief aimed at encouraging the return to Italy of Italian citizens who have transferred their residence abroad in recent years.
4. The problem is the lack of accurate and timely data to be informed about the phenomenon in its entirety and complexity, on both stock and flows. As far as flows are concerned, studies have revealed that in fact a high percentage (around 16 per cent) of Italians who emigrate are foreigners who have acquired citizenship. Furthermore, a longitudinal approach would allow us to understand how much of this movement is temporary and circular. Finally, as regards the stock data, it should be noted that the last census of Italians abroad was conducted in 2003.

II. The new strategy of the Italian Permanent Population and Housing Census

5. The strategy of the Permanent Population and Housing Census (hereinafter PPHC) of Italy is based on the use of administrative data and registers currently in use at Istat. The PPHC was envisioned shortly after the 2011 census when Istat began transitioning from a traditional

‘door-to-door’ enumeration to a permanent census. For the population count in 2020 and 2021, it was possible to leverage advancements in terms of quality and timeliness achieved by the registers supporting official statistical production. In this context, the centrepiece of the PPHC of the population is the Base Register of Individuals, Families, and Households (hereinafter RBI), which, together with thematic registers (such as those on employment and education) and the regular acquisition of administrative sources, has made it possible for nearly a decade to integrate the individual data of municipal population registers with information data from other archives, such as those provided by Social Security System, Ministry of Education, Universities and Research, Real Estate Cadastre, Pensioners’ Registry, etc., as required by Law 205/2017.

6. The RBI is an internal information environment within the Institute to support statistical production processes. It serves as the fundamental infrastructure for producing official population statistics and acts as the reference for drawing samples for surveys planned under the PPHC and all sample surveys on households. Following the methodological framework of the PPHC and respecting personal data protection regulations, the RBI and all other administrative sources available at Istat contain ‘statistical’ anonymized data. These data result from a process of statistical elaboration and validation and are related to a limited number of variables. The permanent census and the register system offer a unique opportunity to identify a statistical process that not only provides a measure of the population residing in Italy, but also might produce a measure of the Italian population residing abroad.
7. The RBI is ‘consolidated’ annually with reference to 31 December of each year. This consolidation is achieved by integrating individual registry flows of demographic dynamics (births, deaths, transfers of residence to and from other municipalities or into and out of Italy). This micro-demographic model is used for demographic accounting, and it exploits the potential of the micro-database (flows + stock) to produce more accurate and innovative indicators of demographic dynamics, taking into account the sequence of demographic events experienced by individuals. The main outputs of this system applied to the RBI are the demographic balance of the resident population in each municipality, and the structure of the resident population by gender, age, marital status, and citizenship. The timely production of these outputs anticipates the definitive annual results of the PPHC, with the aim of ensuring the continuity of official statistical production while meeting the stringent timing requirements of both institutional users of population data and the European Regulation on demographic statistics. These same outputs are subsequently reprocessed and disseminated as definitive after the correction of the RBI based on the results of the PPHC.
8. The PPHC count aims to correct the over and under-coverage errors of the RBI by identifying individuals who are present in the register as residents but not found in the administrative archives (over-coverage) and those who are found in administrative data as usual residents but not registered as such (under-coverage). This correction, as occurred in 2020 and in 2021, operates at the micro level through the reclassification of individual records contained in the register, recognizing them as usual residents or not based on administrative signs of life approach. This important methodological innovation ensures a correspondence in terms of ‘heads’ between the count data and the records of usually-resident individuals contained in the RBI, and ensures coherence between stock and flows at the individual level.
9. The major innovation introduced by the PPHC in the statistical landscape is precisely the continuity of data collection and dissemination needed for population counts and socio-demographic information, with a progressive updating of the basic register of individuals allowing the dissemination of municipal data on an annual basis (and less frequent sub-municipal levels). Moreover, it should also be emphasized that the new census framework

provides complete integration within population statistics, contributing to greater stability and coherence throughout the population data system.

10. Therefore, the RBI contains individual data on all individuals in the administrative records, regardless of their presence in Italy. Accurate and complete data are present only for the census population. In this work, a first statistical process is defined to broaden the scope of the Italian population census by providing a measure of the stock of Italians abroad.

III. Administrative data sources on nationals abroad

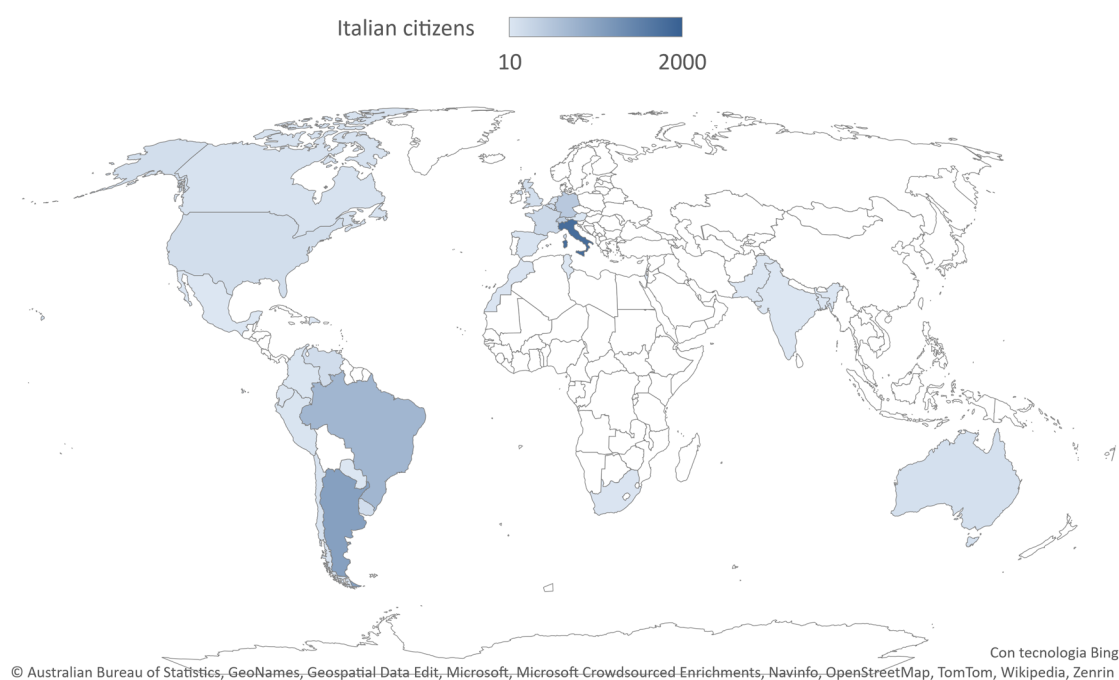
11. Istat has access to two administrative archives that provide information on the population of interest: the Consular Archive and the Register of Italians Resident Abroad (hereafter AIRE). The first is managed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation while the second is under the control of the Ministry of the Interior. Both archives work in parallel with the local population registers and are regulated by a specific law. They represent significant value for the Italian population register system because currently no other country in the world collects information on its citizens residing abroad in a systematic way.
12. The Register of Italians Resident Abroad was established by Law no. 470 of 27 October 1988. It is managed by the municipalities based on data and information from consular representations abroad. Registration with the AIRE is a prerequisite for access to consular services provided by representations abroad, as well as for exercising important rights (e.g., voting by correspondence in political elections and referendums, obtaining identity and travel documents, renewing driving licences). An Italian citizen may apply for registration with AIRE only if s/he intends to reside abroad for a period of more than 12 months.
13. As regards the Consular Archive, the reference rule is Article 67 of Presidential Decree No. 200 of 5 January 1967, which states the principle that each consular office has to maintain an up-to-date list of Italian citizens residing in the jurisdiction (Manni C., 2015). Analyses of consular registry data from the past three years (Table 1 and Figure 1) show a steadily increasing phenomenon, even in the years of the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic. As of 1 January 2020, there were about 5.9 million Italians abroad, which became 6.5 million after one year and 6.3 million as of 1 January 2022. Looking at the distribution of Italians living abroad by country of birth, the number of those born in Italy (emigrants in the strict sense) is substantial, at over 1.8 million, almost 29 per cent of the total. This is followed by countries such as Argentina (over 1 million), Brazil (720 thousand) and Germany (about 450 thousand), historically a destination for migratory flows from Italy in the past century and therefore with a significant number of second-generation migrants. Also worth noting is the number of Italians born in Morocco (nearly 50,000), which likely represents the number of New Citizens who returned to their country of origin or migrated again to a third country.

Table 1
Italian citizens residing abroad by country of birth, 1 January 2022 (in thousands)

<i>Country of birth</i>	<i>Italian citizens</i>	<i>Country of birth</i>	<i>Italian citizens</i>
Italy	1,812	United Kingdom	126
Argentina	1,043	Australia	103
Brazil	722	Chile	73
Germany	449	Canada	68
Switzerland	400	Spain	58
France	217	Peru	45
Belgium	181	Morocco	39
Venezuela	155	South Africa	35
Uruguay	139	Colombia	29
United States of America	126	Other countries	432

Source: Own analyses of Ministry of Foreign Affair and International Cooperation data

Figure 1
Italian citizens residing abroad by country of birth, 1 January 2022 (in thousands)



Source: Own analyses of Ministry of Foreign Affair and International Cooperation data

- Integration between the two archives is already produced at the administrative level to identify the list of Italians living abroad for political elections. Article 5 of Law no. 459 of 27 December 2001 states that “the Government, by means of integration of data from the register

of Italians residing abroad and from consular files and consular registers, provides for the creation of an updated list of Italian citizens residing abroad aimed at preparing the electoral lists". It should be considered that the data validation is an objective that goes beyond the electoral election as the list of Italians abroad is the basis for the effective provision of services and for the proper planning of resource distribution (Manni, 2015).

IV. Signs of presence and consistency with census data

15. The quality of data on Italians abroad allows the definition of a statistical process that, starting from administrative data, aims at increasing the information supply of census data. As already mentioned, currently the migration phenomenon has grown not only in intensity but also in complexity. Furthermore, the possibility of free movement within the borders of the European Union makes it necessary to identify not only the population residing within the country but also that of citizens residing outside its borders. The availability of statistics on this population allows a greater understanding of the phenomenon and helps us to understand the effects of emigration on our economic and social system. This allows both a timely response to the consequences of possible changes in the migration policies of other countries (e.g. 'Brexit') and the evaluation and monitoring of the effects of migration policies implemented in the countries of origin of the flows.
16. To this end, Istat wants to extend the data integration process that is carried out at the administrative level, with an additional source of information already used for the permanent population census count. The 'administrative signs of life' refers to activities carried out by individuals that can be inferred from administrative records. These activities allow for the clear identification of a lasting period (e.g., one year) and a specific location (e.g., a municipality) where they occur. Examples of direct administrative life signals include engaging in self-employment or working for a company, being a public employee, having a regular annual rental contract for a residence, attending a school or university, among others. On the other hand, indirect administrative life signals refer to situations that can also be inferred from administrative records but identify a status or condition. Examples of indirect signals include being a recipient of benefits for dependent family members for whom the income declarant indicates responsibility, such as a spouse, children, or other relatives.
17. For the 2021 population count, the repository named AIDA represents the database by which all individual demographic information from RBI are integrated with data from the Thematic Registers of Labour and Education, tax declarations, social security archives, and the property register from the Revenue Agency (Agenzia delle Entrate).
18. The integration of administrative data and presence signs for the measurement of the Italian population resident abroad aims to enrich the census information offer, but also to provide support for a more accurate measurement of the census population residing in Italy. First, an initial population resident abroad is identified as a synthesis of the data from the consular register and the register of Italians resident abroad. This first comparison also identifies two subgroups of individuals present in one archive but not present in the other, and their location is checked against the presence or absence of signs on the territory (AIDA) which determines the usual residence of these individuals.
19. In the comparison with the presence signals, other sub-populations of Italian citizens to be located emerge, who have no signals in the territory and who are also not present in the data on Italians abroad (always absent). At the same time there will be individuals who are in the administrative records as residents abroad and who also have signs of presence in Italy (ever-present). In these cases, the strength of the signal on Italian territory is observed. For example,

if a resident abroad also has strong signals on Italian territory, it is likely that s/he is a citizen who has not yet communicated her or his return or who for a different reason has a personal interest in maintaining residence abroad. In these cases, it is likely that the administrative situation is not updated. In cases where individuals with a very weak or no sign do not appear as resident abroad, it can be assumed that the residence is still in Italy and that it is AIDA that is failing to capture the individual's presence in the administrative sources acquired. In other words, a strong sign of presence is considered more reliable than the administrative information; on the contrary the absence of a sign is not strong evidence that the person lives abroad, and the administrative information should be considered as more reliable.

20. An additional source of information are the sample surveys designed for the Permanent Population Census. “The survey design for the Permanent Population Census consists of two separate sample surveys, one Areal and the other by List. Both surveys are designed to field the data needed to supplement missing information in the thematic registers, to ensure the completeness and quality of the census data. The outcomes of these surveys could be used as an external statistical source for estimating on-the-ground rates of individuals in AIDA for specific administrative life signal profiles. Comparison of the estimated territory presence rates of individuals by profile with the over- and under-coverage criteria identified by the thematic experts can be considered as an indicator of the validity of the chosen criteria” (Istat, 2022). In the population census, this process was adopted in 2021 using latent class models: specifically, “statistical survey outcomes and the main life signs present in AIDA were treated as categorical variables with two modes (existence/absence of signal), all of which were affected by misclassification. A model was then estimated with two latent classes interpreted as the true presence/absence of the individual in the area” (Istat, 2022). As was the case for the PPHC, it is believed that this methodology can be also used in the case of the population of Italians living abroad. Comparison of the estimated probabilities with deterministic criteria could, in fact, confirm the identification of new deterministic criteria and help in the definition of a final set of rules for measuring the target population.

V. Survey of Italians abroad

21. Once the phenomenon has been measured, qualitative information is also needed for policy migration governance; data that can be collected only by means of a specific survey. The survey aims to collect information on the Italian population living abroad and aims to study some aspects of emigrants with particular reference to the factors that contributed to the migratory choice, living conditions, and future plans. In addition, the survey also aims to study the second generations of Italians born and raised in another country, with particular reference to belonging, identity and plans for the future (e.g. stay abroad or return to Italy).
22. Special attention will be paid to the causes that prompted migration and the choice of destination country, to the world of work (obstacles encountered in the search for a job, relations with natives) but also to aspects of social and family life. Specific questions will be addressed to further investigate the main issues for Italian citizens who have acquired Italian citizenship. In general, the data collected by the survey will be able to provide a useful background for policies aimed at the return of Italians with high professional qualifications (the so-called ‘brain drain’) and will also offer the possibility of comparing the expectations for the future, opinions and attitudes of Italians born abroad with those of those who have undertaken migration abroad.
23. The survey is based on a sample of individuals and on the use of an integrated list of administrative information (consular register and AIRE), in order to extract the sample of

individuals to be interviewed. In addition to Italians living abroad, the voice of organizations and bodies representing a privileged observatory on the condition of Italians abroad, such as Consulates and Italian Cultural Institutes, will also be heard in the survey. The active participation of other entities such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Interior, both in the design and implementation phases of the project, will also be crucial. The survey could be carried out using a CAWI technique and requires a pilot survey to provide an assessment of the data collection tool used, the updating of the lists from which the sample is drawn, and the respondents' response rate.

VI. Conclusions

24. After a long period of emigration abroad, in the last 20 years Italy has become a destination country for significant migration flows (Bonifazi et al, 2009). The economic crisis of 2008 caused a resumption of Italian emigration abroad. These recent flows are different from the first emigrations, both for the consistent level of emigrants with a high level of education (over 30 per cent) and for a significant share of Italians by acquisition of citizenship (around 16 per cent). The phenomenon has therefore become more complex, and a new integrated approach is needed to produce accurate and timely statistics on the number of Italian citizens living abroad (Strozza, Tucci, 2018).
25. The last 'census of Italians abroad' was conducted in 2003 by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in cooperation with Istat and the Ministry of the Interior. In these 20 years, process and product innovations have occurred that allow us to provide additional information and produce new official statistics. Migration in Italy has always been based on the exclusive use of a single source. Today, it is possible to make use of a significant number of administrative data sources and tools that allow an integrated and longitudinal treatment of the collected data.
26. This opportunity allows us to produce statistical information in compliance with international definitions and standards and, therefore, to compare it with data on the foreign presence disseminated by other countries, especially those where the foreign presence of Italians is very significant. In this regard, Istat is open and available to experimentation and joint work with other national statistical offices that share the goal of producing population data on citizens abroad. This collaboration and confrontation would provide a measure of the quality of the information produced and help improve the production process, which, in our case, is still in a planning stage.

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