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**Giving children and young people a voice: the  
experience of the sample survey on children and  
young people in Italy**

**Note by ISTAT\***

*Abstract*

Since 2014, Istat has been carrying out surveys in which young people are the real protagonists. Presently, Istat is carrying out a CAWI survey on “Children and young people: behavior, attitudes, and future projects” (data collection period: October 2nd – December 20th, 2023) that directly involves respondents aged between 11 and 19 years. The sample is representative of foreign young people as well. The survey collects information about different dimensions of young people’s everyday life, including school life, social relationships, use of social networks, leisure time, sport, future projects etc. The questionnaire focuses also on vulnerabilities such as bullying, cyberbullying and educational poverty. The aim of this contribution is to share the Italian experience and to discuss the innovations introduced in the statistical process to reach young people. Specific strategies adopted by Istat include a web questionnaire optimized for any kind of device (including smartphone), the use of QR code to directly access the form, the availability of the questionnaire in Italian and nine other languages, simplified invitation letters and reminders, and a dedicated communication campaign. The paper also discusses the difficulties faced in interviewing directly children and young people, such as data protection policies and statistical burden.

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## I. Introduction

1. It is possible to distinguish three different phases in the complex relation between children and Official Statistics in Italy. A first period in which children were perceived as an “age class” for statistics and no specific attention was paid to them as a social subject. In this period there was one exception: the infant mortality rate; but it is important to remember that at the beginning infant mortality was considered more as a general indicator of the social and health status of the population than as an indicator of childhood conditions. In general children were not considered as a specific social category (Bardi et al., 1994; Belloni, 2006). From an operational point of view this meant a lack of indicators, but also the inadequacy of statistical categories that were often the same ones as used for adults (Bardi et al., 1994).
2. In a second period the official statistics in Italy paid attention to children. Relevant indicators were disseminated (e.g. about school attendance) and there were also specific questions in questionnaires for families (Fig,2). In 2005, Istat carried out a specific survey on the quality of life of children and young people aged between 0 and 17 years.
3. A third period was launched with the new survey on “The integration of the second generation” carried out in 2015: here children were an active part of the statistical process. Information on childhood is usually by proxy, a by-product, that is, of data collected in interviews with parents and guardians (Conti, Sgritta 2004). The language, the point of view, the new issues of each generation have been mediated by adults: experts, parents, statisticians... For the new survey the perspective will be reversed: young people are cooperating in shaping the survey. During the last years Istat and UNICEF have organized many “focus groups” and workshops in order to listen to young people on the most relevant topics for a survey. Experts discussed concepts (citizenship, integration, space, city, social media, etc.) with students. But they also discussed the language used by the young. For the first time an Official Statistics questionnaire is a cooperative work with input from young students. A survey was conducted in 2021 on pandemic consequences for young people (IDAC, 2023).
4. In 2023 Istat carried out a new survey on “Children and young people: behaviours, attitudes and future plans” studying specific methods and instruments to collect data directly from the young.

## II. The aim of the project

5. The new edition of the Survey on children and young people (year 2023) aims to collect information on the behaviour, attitudes and living conditions of Italian children and children from a migratory background (both born in Italy and immigrants at a very young age) aged between 11 and 19 years. The aim of the survey is to highlight both any weaknesses and the strengths of the new generations, to allow for a better valorisation of their energies and abilities in terms of policies and action. The research was set up, right from the early planning stages, with children at the centre as active and participating subjects. Children represent a fundamental social subject for building the future and at the same time a particularly vulnerable population, something brought out by the recent European Child Guarantee plan. In an era of crisis and profound social change, such as the current post-pandemic period, there

is a need to further enrich the statistical information collected and analyzed for the implementation of policies that allow us to enhance the human capital of the very young and to improve their well-being. Statistics on the new generations appear, therefore, today more than ever, indispensable; not least with a view to the recovery of the country and the improvement of living conditions after the complexities of the COVID-19 pandemic.

6. There are numerous international recommendations. The Committee on the rights of the child in its General comment no. 5 (2003), “General measures of implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child” (arts. 4, 42 and 44, para. 6) includes the following passage: “Data collection and analysis and development of indicators 48. Collection of sufficient and reliable data on children, disaggregated to enable the identification of discrimination and/or disparities in the realization of rights, is an essential part of implementation. The Committee reminds States parties that data collection needs to extend over the entire period of childhood, up to the age of 18 years. It also needs to be coordinated throughout the jurisdiction, ensuring nationally applicable indicators. States should collaborate with appropriate research institutes and aim to build up a complete picture of progress towards implementation, with qualitative as well as quantitative studies”
7. Survey implementation also represents a great opportunity to make children “protagonists”, not least in the statistical processes that directly concern them. The Committee on the rights of children writes, in the same document cited above: “The Committee emphasizes that, in many cases, only children themselves are in a position to indicate whether their rights are being fully recognized and realized. Interviewing children and using children as researchers (with appropriate safeguards) is likely to be an important way of finding out, for example, to what extent their civil rights, including the crucial right set out in article 12, to have their views heard and given due consideration, are respected within the family, in schools and so on”.
8. “*Statistics on children. Spotlight on children exposed to violence, in alternative care, and with disabilities*” states “Countries should include children in regular data collection, including child focused surveys, to ensure that the main national statistical reports highlight the situation and needs of child and youth in all relevant policy areas” (UNECE, 2022, p.19).

### III. Principle organisational challenges

9. The survey was conducted between 2 October and 20 December 2023 and involved almost 20,500 Italian young people and almost 18,000 young foreign residents in Italy.
10. Making children the protagonists of statistical surveys poses a series of challenges for researchers who have the difficult task of finding a balance between contradictory pressures, both in terms of content and in terms of tools and methods:
  - 1) Information needs are numerous and varied, but for this type of population it is particularly important to lighten the statistical burden
  - 2) It is important that children are protagonists, but the Regulation (EU) 2016/679 of the European Parliament and of the Council on the protection of natural persons with regard to the processing of personal data and on the free movement of such data, requires particular care with minors. Consequently, the survey on Children and young people was followed with special care by the Data Protection Authority

- 3) It was important to directly collect the opinions of children (no proxy is acceptable for opinions), but it was also necessary to have the consent of parents before interviewing minors.
  - 4) It was important to use standardized and tested tools. But it was necessary to try new strategies to make the interview more friendly for kids.
11. In the following paragraphs some strategies for overcoming these challenges will be described.

#### **IV. Data confidentiality and contacting strategies**

12. Data confidentiality is an essential element of information security in Europe. Key here is Regulation (EU) 2016/679 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 27 April 2016 on the protection of natural persons with regard to the processing of personal data and on the free movement of such data, and repealing Directive 95/46/EC (General Data Protection Regulation). This grants additional protection to personal data for minors since children are less aware of the risks and consequences of sharing data and of their rights. Any information addressed specifically to a child should use clear and plain language.
13. The age threshold for obtaining parental consent is established by each EU Member State and is between 13 and 16 years of age. For our survey Istat decided, with the National Data Protection Authority, to extend consent to 18 years. The parents of the minors included in the sample received at home (their residence addresses) a letter signed by the President of National Institute of Statistics. The letter contains the QR code or the access code for filling out the questionnaire. The act of parents giving the code to children constituted consent.
14. A facsimile version of the questionnaire was (and is still) available online if parents wanted to check the questions given to their children.
15. The Italian Data Protection Authority gave special attention to the survey that is part of the current National Statistical Program. The information provided will be handled in accordance with the regulations on the protection of statistical confidentiality. The questionnaire represents a compromise between information needs (political and otherwise), and the protection granted to young people.
16. Impact evaluation including an evaluation of risks was carried out by Istat in order to maximize the protocols for data protection. After this evaluation, though the data protection authority encourages the use of proxies, Istat decided not to use proxies. This was because the survey gather information about the opinions of the young people, their feelings of identity and belonging. Here, clearly it is impossible to use proxy respondents effectively.
17. Istat sent an informative letter – to residential addresses – inviting young people to participate. Two different texts were prepared: one for the minors; and one directly addressed to people over 18. Istat took special care over the graphics and the wording of the letter, in order for young people to find it easy to read, and easy to access. The informative letter was translated into 10 languages, available online. Istat also sent 3 reminders, based on the same principles of clearness and simplicity.
18. Another reminder was sent by the IO APP, a mobile application launched in 2020 by the Team and Department for Digital Transformation, which features messages from the Public

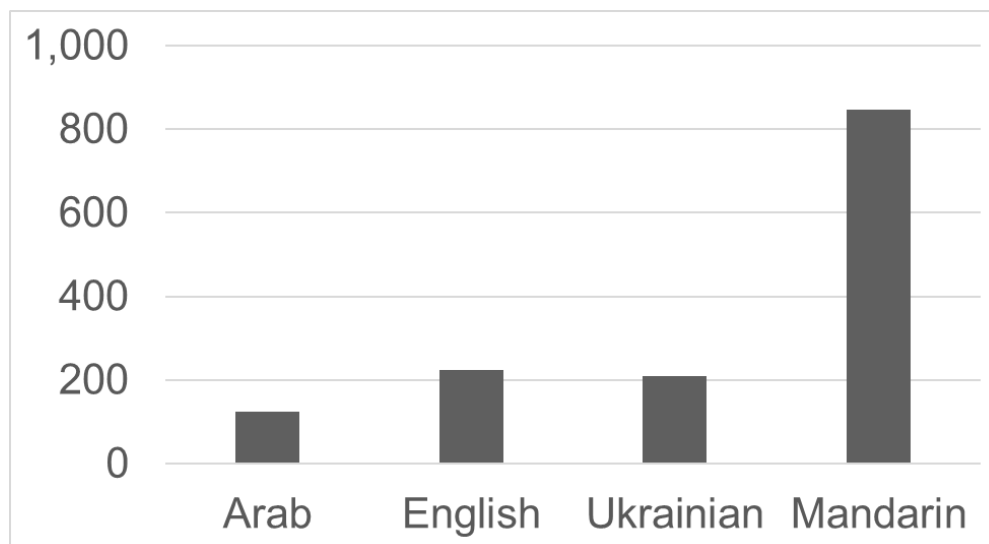
Administration. These include notices and communications regarding application deadlines, documents, and payments.

## V. The questionnaire and its translations

19. The questionnaire of the survey “Children and young people: behaviours, attitudes and future plans” is implemented in Limesurvey. It is a “light” questionnaire planned to minimize the statistical burden for young respondents and designed to be comfortably filled out even on a smartphone. As mentioned above the questionnaire is also the result of studies conducted during the previous years involving focus groups and other participative experiences with young people and students. The questionnaire – through a few questions – covers many different aspects of everyday life of young people. It includes 8 sections:
  - A. Who are you? (demographic information)
  - B. The study (school life, performances, intentions for the future, etc.)
  - C. Citizenship and identity
  - D. Social relationships (social relations, bullying, cyber bullying, etc.)
  - E. Leisure (sport, reading books, cinema, etc.)
  - F. Your future (expectations about marriages, children, emigrations, etc.)
  - G. Opinions about men and women (gender stereotypes)
  - H. Other information
20. The questionnaire can be taken using a PC, smart phone or tablet by scanning the QR code. It can also be done via PC, smartphone or tablet by accessing the link reported and typing the access code printed in the informative letter. The CAWI platform adopted guarantees for the standard security measures and protocols for Istat in the transmission and storage of survey data.
21. This is the download of the questionnaire in the Italian and German version: <https://www.istat.it/it/archivio/287601>
22. In the “*Statistics on children. Spotlight on children exposed to violence, in alternative care, and with disabilities*” it is reported: “Specialized methods may be required to target and include the most vulnerable groups of children including very young children. In general, data should capture the children most at risk of social exclusion...” UNECE, 2022, p.19. One of the most vulnerable groups here are children from a foreign background.
23. To meet the difficulties of young immigrants, for the first time in the history of Istat, the web questionnaire is available in Italian and in 9 other languages: Albanian, Arabic, Mandarin, French, English, Romanian, Ukrainian, Slovenian, Spanish and German. The World Bank supported the Italian Institute of Statistics with the translations.
24. Also, the letter sent to the families for giving information about the survey and collecting their consensus to the interview are available in the same languages.
25. The provisional results about the data collection show that 32% of young people from a Chinese background decided to fill out the questionnaire in Mandarin Chinese (more than 800 questionnaires). Apart from German that in Italy is spoken by national minorities, English is

the second language to be chosen and the third is Ukrainian (Fig.1). About 1,700 foreign respondents filled out the questionnaire in a language other than Italian.

**Fig. 1 Questionnaires filled out by foreign respondents in Italy in languages other than Italian: absolute numbers**



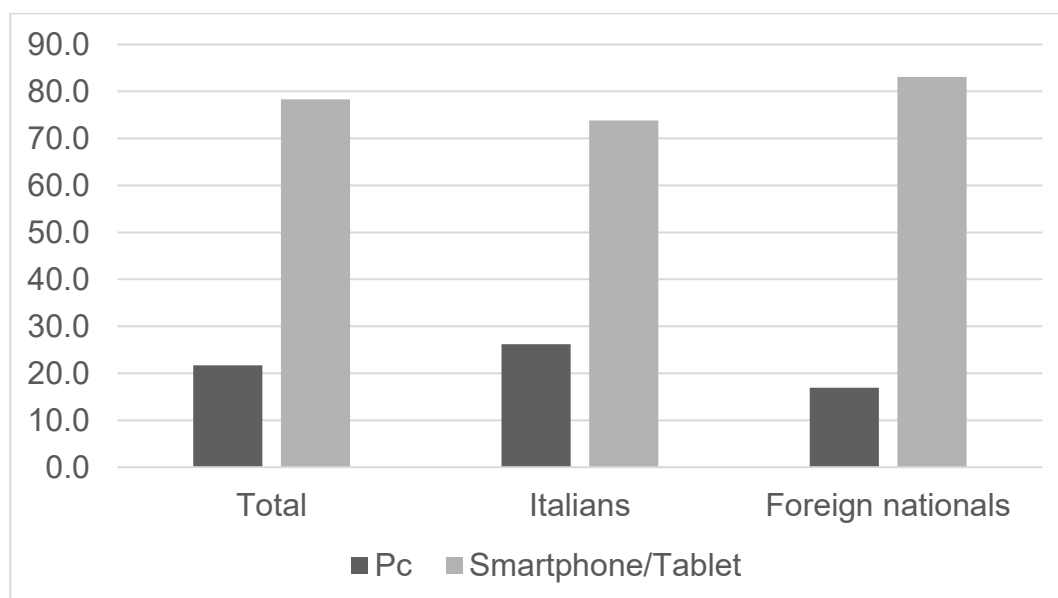
Source: Istat, Provisional data

## VI. A smart survey

26. The guidelines “*Statistics on children. Spotlight on children exposed to violence, in alternative care, and with disabilities*” (UNECE, 2022) encourages users to “Increase and promote the visibility of data on children and youth through: (...) The development of user-friendly approaches to disseminating data on and to children and youth, including the use of interactive platforms, infographics, videos, and social media. Children and youth should be consulted on the design of dissemination products aimed at them”.
27. Istat started a targeted communication campaign from the data collection phase.
28. The survey is based on the consideration that the younger generations are “digital natives”. In the design of the survey Internet, social media and smartphones are central.
29. The provisional results indicate that most of the sample was filled out the questionnaire using a smartphone. Among foreign respondents the percentage that used a smartphone was higher.
30. It takes about 23 minutes to fill out the questionnaire. The Italians filled the questionnaire in 22 minutes, foreign respondents in 24 minutes. Respondents that used a PC took longer to fill out the webform.
31. The percentage of completed questionnaires with access via the QR code was between 65% and 69% of all completed questionnaires.

32. The results show that for this targeted population it is essential to use the smartphone to access the form. Only a minority used the PC. Foreign children use smartphone and tablets more than Italians.

**Fig 2. Respondents to the survey “Children and young people: behaviour, attitudes, and future projects” 2023, by instrument used to fill out the web questionnaire**



Source: Istat, provisional data.

33. In order to reach young people Istat carried out a communication campaign based on social media. Information circulated on the Istat website and also in the web pages of some Ministries (Ministries of ...) and other bodies that deal with young people. But an *ad hoc* campaign was launched on Facebook, Instagram and Tik-Tok. Some influencers were employed to spread word of the survey through the target population that is largely present on social media. There follow some of the images used for the survey.

**Fig.3 – Examples of images from the information campaign**





34. Also, for the communication of results Istat is studying specific campaigns and dissemination programs involving young people (especially through schools). The National Institute of Statistics has signed a specific agreement with the Ministry of Education to this end.

## VII. Cooperation among public institutions

35. The survey is largely based on cooperation between Istat and other public entities dealing with young people for different purposes. The Ministry of Labour and Social Policy and the Department for Youth Policy supported the information campaign on data collection on their websites and using their mailing lists. The Ministry of Education was involved in the definition of the principal topics of interest. All these three ministries will be involved in the dissemination of data.
36. Also, UNICEF (the Italian committee) participated in the definition of the main goals and of the survey strategies.

## VIII. Concluding remarks and further steps

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