

Population

Territory and urbanisation process

The population census not only records the number of individuals and their main socio-economic characteristics,¹ but also provides important information on the type of municipality and geographical area in which they live (size of municipality, altitude zone and type of residential centre), thereby making it possible to analyse trends of settlement in the territory. The exploitation of the potential of the census survey has improved over time, and the information available on urbanisation have become ever wider and more detailed with respect to the past. The analysis of time series regarding the phenomenon of urbanisation, in the same way as for the depopulation of rural and mountainous areas, has however been made more complex by the fact that over time the administrative structure of Italy and the areas belonging to the various regions has undergone profound changes. For this reason, the time series relating to the geographical area, both on a national and regional level, refer to historical borders.² For the same reasons, some tables use modern-day geographical divisions, re-aggregating regions or districts according to recent structures.³

Furthermore, it is important to consider that in the course of the various census surveys, the definitions of some aggregates that play an important role in analysing geographical population distribution have changed. This is the case for “small inhabited areas”, known as “rural houses” in 1861⁴, and for “localities”, the definition of which has changed several times in the various census editions, although without substantially modifying the meaning. In the censuses conducted between 1871 and 1921, the analysis of population settlement focused on the terms “agglomerates” and “scattered”, without defining intermediate settlements. Reduced interest in these aspects also had a negative influence on the study localities in that, while the concept of centre as “an aggregation of houses separated by roads where the inhabitants of nearby places gather for religious, business or similar reasons” remained constant (censuses of 1871, 1881 and 1901), the municipalities were left considerable latitude for establishing the importance a group of houses should have in order for it to constitute a population centre. “This was done in consideration of the fact that it was impossible to set down consistent rules to cover all municipalities, given the extremely varied conditions of life in the various regions and provinces in our country” (see *1881 census report*).

In the 1931 census a significant step forward was taken with the introduction of the obligation for municipalities to draw up a map of their areas on the 1:25,000 maps of the Military Geographical Institute, marking on them the border of the municipality and the division of the area into enumeration areas, and indicating the position of the town hall. This meant that for the first time, the higher census bodies (prefectural offices and cadastral offices) could count on a means of checking the work done by municipalities. The most evident result of this work was the list of localities in each municipality, divided by enumeration areas.⁵

In the next census in 1936, it was required to indicate the position of localities on the municipal map. The maps were then systematically reviewed by the central body. For the 1951 census, the collection of data on the forms of population settlement was preceded by a study phase partly conducted

¹ More detailed information on the census is provided in: [General population censuses](#).

² For the main changes to the Italian administrative structure over the last 150 years, please refer to the Warnings for time series comparisons.

³ The districts – geographically similar to modern-day regions, but without any form of administrative function – were used only for statistical purposes from the 1861 census to the one of 1936.

⁴ The original definition read: “Hamlet is defined as a group of houses divided by roads determined by the convenience of living together without any contact with the places nearby”.

⁵ Istat. 1935. Built-up areas. Vol. 7 of the General Population Census of 21 April 1931. Rome: Istituto Poligrafico dello Stato

directly by Istat and partly with the collaboration of university professors of geography. These studies led to the definition of the features of geographical fractions (no longer recorded from the 1991 census onwards), localities, small inhabited areas and wide spread houses, as follows:

- *geographical fraction*: the part of the municipal area including, usually, a locality and small inhabited areas with surrounding wide spread houses, gravitating around the centre;
- *locality*: a group of houses located near or attached to one another, with roads, squares or otherwise small gaps between them, characterised by the existence of public services or establishments forming a gathering place, where the inhabitants of nearby places typically congregate for religious, educational or business reasons or for obtaining provisions and suchlike;
- *small inhabited area*: a group of houses with at least five households without any form of gathering place such as the one that characterises a built-up area;
- *wide spread houses*: houses spread over the countryside or located along roads with such a distance between them that they do not even form a residential nucleus.

It should be noted that during the course of the censuses the population used to describe these forms of settlement has changed: until the 1931 census the present population was used, while censuses from 1951 onwards refer to the resident population.

Warnings for time series comparisons

- The 1891 and 1941 censuses were not conducted, the first due to organisational and financial issues and the second due to the war.
- The total present population in the 1921 census was corrected and published at a later date, as the number of inhabitants was artificially increased in some districts for political and administrative or economic and financial reasons. The resident population was subsequently estimated (compare: Central Statistical Institute of the Kingdom of Italy. 1938. *Preliminary report*. Vol. 1 of the *1931 General Population Census*, 24. Rome: Istat).
- The 1936 census was conducted following Legislative Reform no. 1503, introduced in 1930, which specified that censuses should be conducted every five years instead of every ten years.
- Until the 1931 census, the population figure presented refers to the present population, and from 1951 to the resident population.
- The population figure for 2009 is taken from the “Movement and calculation of the resident population” survey.
- Regarding the centralised and scattered population, the 1861 census classifies population as those with residence in “localities”, “rural houses” and “wide spread houses”. In the 1871 and 1921 censuses rural houses were not recorded, and the related population was considered as “scattered”, and only the “agglomerate” and “scattered” categories were used while the concept of “centre” was maintained. In the 1931 census municipalities were required for the first time to draw up a topographical plan, while the 1936 census required this plan to indicate the position of localities and their names. Some types of agglomerates (rural houses, small inhabited areas, wide spread houses, etc.) have therefore undergone significant changes in their conceptual and effective definitions, while the definition of localities has, maintained substantially comparable features ever since the 1861 census.

Main modifications in Italian administrative structure:

- In 1861 the Kingdom of Italy did not include the territories that roughly correspond to the modern-day regions of Veneto, Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Trentino-Alto Adige/*Südtirol* and Lazio.
- In 1866 the Veneto region (which then also included a province in the modern-day Friuli-

Venezia Giulia known as the Province of Friuli) and Mantua were annexed to the Kingdom of Italy.

- In 1870 Rome and part of the modern-day region of Lazio (the Province of Rieti, the Sora and Gaeta districts and the Pontine Islands had already been annexed in 1860) were annexed to the newly-constituted Kingdom of Italy.
- In 1919 Trentino, Alto Adige, Gorizia and eastern Friuli, Istria, Trieste, Zara and the islands of Carnaro, Lagosta, Cazza and Pelagosa were annexed to the Kingdom of Italy, followed by Sazan Island in 1920 and Fiume in 1924.
- In 1921 the territories of Venezia Giulia (then including the provinces of Trieste, Gorizia, Pola and Fiume), Venezia Tridentina (approximately corresponding to the modern-day autonomous provinces of Trento and Bolzano/*Bozen*) were annexed to the Kingdom of Italy.
- In 1947, Istria, Fiume, Dalmatia (with the islands of Pelagosa, Lagosta and Cazza), annexed during the Second World War, were ceded to the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, while Sazan Island was ceded to Albania.
- In 1951 the Valle d'Aosta region was separated from the Piedmont region.
- In 1963 the Molise region was formed and, separately from the Abruzzi and Molise region, became the twentieth region of Italy (Constitutional Law no. 3 of 27 December 1963).