

## **CHANGING FAMILY MODELS THE CASE OF THE PUGLIA REGION<sup>1</sup>**

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**Abstract.** Profound demographic and social transformations have affected our country, triggering a gradual reduction in family size. In Italy, the increasing number of families<sup>2</sup> has corresponded to a progressive decrease in their size, with an increase in single-person households and a contraction of larger ones.

Southern Italy stands out for having experienced a more rapid reduction in the number of family members compared to other parts of the peninsula, as it has gone from 2.7 to 2.5 members per family in the last ten years. Therefore, it was considered essential to investigate this phenomenon, with a focus on Puglia as it represents the typical region in that geographical area.

The analysis is based on Istat data, which allow for the reconstruction of the framework of this study, drawing from a wealth of information on individuals, families, and territorial data for Italian regions. However, the complexity of interpreting demographic and social phenomena and their interplay has made it necessary to also utilize other comprehensive sources. This study observes the demographic trend related to the aging of the population within the realm of family size and structure in Puglia, through a retrospective analysis of the past ten years (2013-2022) and a prospective analysis for the next twenty years (2021-2041). The longitudinal observation pays particular attention to the phenomenon of increasing families with at least one member over the age of 60.

Furthermore, the comparison between the population in 2021 and the projected population in 2041 shows the demographic and social changes expected in the next twenty years, including models of single-person households with a predominantly female connotation.

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<sup>1</sup> Although the contribution is the joint responsibility of the authors, sections 1 and 2 is attributed to Arjeta Veshi, the sections 3-4-5 is attributed to Raffaella Rubino.

<sup>2</sup> A family can coincide with a nucleus, it can be formed by a nucleus plus other aggregated members, by multiple nuclei (with or without aggregated members), or by no nucleus (individuals living alone, families composed, for example, of two sisters, a parent with a separated, divorced, or widowed child, etc.). Quoted from 'LA VITA QUOTIDIANA. ANNO 2011'.

[Source: [https://www.istat.it/it/files/2012/07/glossario\\_.pdf](https://www.istat.it/it/files/2012/07/glossario_.pdf)]

## 1. Introduction

Social and cultural transformations initiated in the post-war period have led to profound changes in the processes of family formation. This process is influenced by the delay in milestones (leaving the family of origin, forming a union, arrival of the first child) and the emergence of new forms of family life. There is an increasing trend in incomplete trajectories and those characterized by free unions or periods of independent living, and as a result, family formation paths are more diversified than in the past.

Families, like the population, are essential for understanding the territory and serve as a reference variable for administrations. The key elements useful for defining the most appropriate intervention policies are represented by the characteristics of families in terms of size and type.

This study focuses on the gradual aging of the population in relation to family transformations in terms of size and type. The past decade marks a transition towards a significant increase in the number of single-person families composed of adults. The contraction of the number of family members, particularly evident in southern Italy, is a phenomenon worthy of further investigation. Puglia is the region of reference as it presents the average rates for the entire southern region.

The characteristics of families are also related to a range of economic, social, and cultural phenomena. Consider, for example, the changing intergenerational relationships that often lead to the splitting of family units or the dynamics of the housing market, which, reinforced by employment difficulties, have discouraged the formation of new households, and so on. The prospective analysis for geographical regions, with a particular focus on the Puglia region, aims to represent the possible future trends of the population, both in terms of the number of families and their age and gender structure.

## 2. Sources and method

The research aims to monitor the demographic trends related to the aging of the population within the context of family structure in Puglia, with a particular focus on the phenomenon of an increasing number of family units composed of individuals over the age of 60, using a longitudinal<sup>3</sup> and interdisciplinary methodology.

The Istat data allows us to reconstruct the framework of this study, leveraging the wealth of information available on individuals and families, as well as territorial

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<sup>3</sup> Thanks to the longitudinal methodology, also known as diachronic, it is possible to collect data related to the variation of one or more factors at different times in an individual's life.

reconstructions of Italian regions<sup>4</sup>. However, the complexity of interpreting demographic and social phenomena and their interplay has made it necessary to also utilize other comprehensive sources. The reference time spans from 2013 to 2041, with a retrospective analysis (2013-2021) and a prospective analysis (2021-2041).

This analysis is valuable for understanding the current situation and for better shaping scientific analysis and policy action. The goal is to provide the most comprehensive overview possible of the aging and transformation process of Italian families, with a specific focus on the Puglia region.

### 3. Retrospective analysis: Italy, geographical divisions, and Puglia

In Italy, as of December 31, 2021, there were 26,206,246 families, with an average size of 2.2 members compared to 2.6 members that constituted the family just twenty years ago.

This trend is consistent throughout the national territory, with the exception of the southern part of Italy – particularly the region of Puglia – which shows a greater contraction in the number of family members (table 1).

**Table 1** - Family members in Italy distributed by geographical division. Average years 2013-2022.

Years	Italy	North-west	North-east	Centre	South	Islands	Puglia
2013	2,4	2,3	2,4	2,4	2,7	2,5	2,7
2014	2,4	2,3	2,4	2,3	2,6	2,5	2,6
2015	2,4	2,3	2,4	2,3	2,6	2,5	2,6
2016	2,4	2,3	2,3	2,3	2,6	2,5	2,6
2017	2,4	2,2	2,3	2,3	2,6	2,5	2,5
2018	2,3	2,2	2,3	2,3	2,6	2,4	2,5
2019	2,3	2,2	2,3	2,3	2,6	2,4	2,5
2020	2,3	2,2	2,3	2,3	2,5	2,4	2,5
2021	2,3	2,2	2,3	2,3	2,5	2,4	2,5
2022	2,2	2,2	2,3	2,3	2,5	2,4	2,4

Source: Istat, Multipurpose survey "Aspetti della vita quotidiana"

In Puglia, as of December 31, 2021, there were 1,635,899 families, accounting for 6.2% of the national total, with an average size of 2.4 members, slightly higher than the national average (2.2 members). This distribution is consistent across the regional territory, except for the province of Barletta-Andria-Trani (2.5). As the

<sup>4</sup> Multiscopo on families: aspects of daily life.

number of family members progressively decreased, there was an increase in the number of families (table 2).

**Table 2 - Family members in Puglia distributed by geographical division. Biennial average 2021-2022.**

Territory	Number of families	Average family members
Italy	26.206.246	2,2
Puglia	1.635.899	2,4
Foggia	248.993	2,4
Bari	502.464	2,4
Taranto	237.027	2,3
Brindisi	162.002	2,3
Lecce	336.897	2,3
Barletta-Andria-Trani	148.516	2,5

Source: Istat, Multipurpose survey "Aspetti della vita quotidiana"

Single-person households, which now account for one-third of the total number of families (33.2%), have increased by almost 10 percentage points compared to the period 2001-2002 (24%). On the other hand, even large families - those with five or more members - which now represent just over 5% of the total, have shown a significant decline, decreasing from 7.1% in the 2001-2002 biennium to the current 5.1%.

**Table 3 - Family Types in Italy, Years 2013-2022. Absolute values.**

Tipology	2013	2016	2019	2022
<i>Families without a nucleus</i>	7981	8552	9154	8979
Individuals living alone	7474	8016	8562	8363
<i>Families with a nucleus</i>	16455	16466	16165	15951
A nucleus without other individuals	15607	15646	15303	15164
- Childless couples	4820	4928	4791	4861
- Couples with children	8573	8442	8114	7828
- Single parents with children	2214	2276	2397	2475
A nucleus with other individuals	848	820	863	788
- Childless couples	258	266	261	252
- Couples with children	391	365	382	314
- Single parents with children	198	189	220	221
<i>Families with two or more nuclei</i>	360	368	396	333

Source: Istat, Multipurpose survey "Aspetti della vita quotidiana"

During the last decade, the share of single-person households has increased from 23.3% to nearly 30%. The share of couples without children has also increased. On the other hand, there has been a decrease in the percentage of households composed of parents with children, as well as in the percentage of families with more than 5

members and those composed of multiple households. Regarding family composition, on average in the biennium 2021-2022, nearly 1 in 3 families (28.7%) consists of individuals living alone, with a lower incidence compared to the national data.

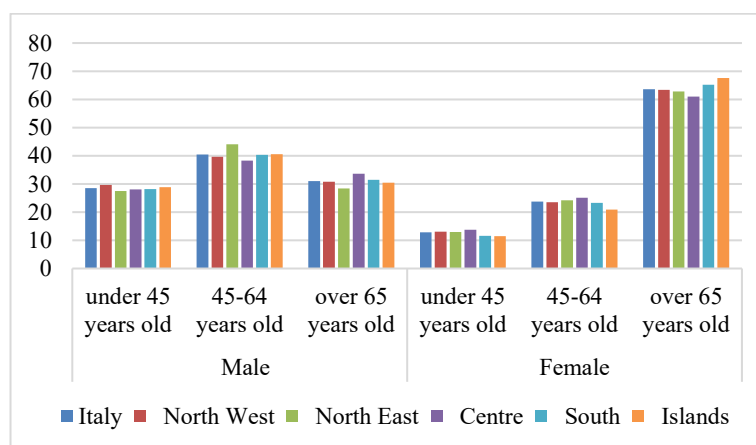
**Table 4** – Family Types in Puglia. Biennial average 2021-2022.

Tipology	Puglia	Italia
<i>Families without a nucleus</i>	30.7	35.5
- Individuals living alone	28.7	33.1
<i>Other families</i>	2.0	2.4
<i>Families with a nucleus</i>	67.7	63.1
- Single parents with children	10.0	10.7
- Couples with children	37.7	32.2
- Childless couples	20.0	20.2
<i>Families with two or more nuclei</i>	1.6	1.4
Total	100.0	100.0

Source: Istat, Multipurpose survey "Aspetti della vita quotidiana"

Single-person households, especially due to their age composition, have significant social implications: as individuals age, the number of people living alone increases. While there are no substantial changes in the proportions for men as they age, there is a significant increase in the percentage of women over 65 living alone throughout Italy. From a geographical perspective, the highest incidence of single-person households is observed in the South (Figure 1).

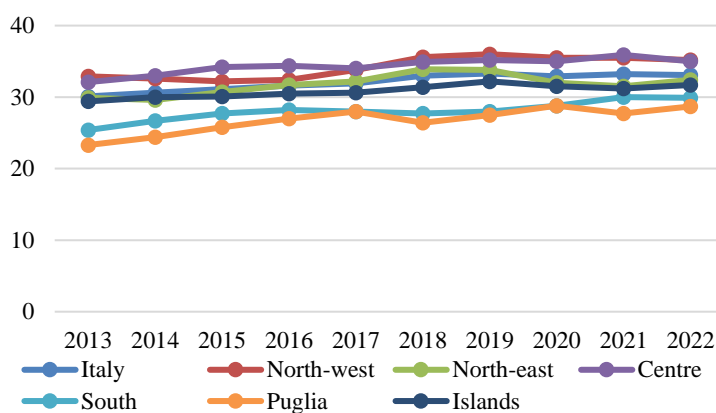
**Figure 1** - Single-person households in Italy distributed by geographical division, age group, and gender. Biennial average 2021-2022.



Source: Istat, Multipurpose survey "Aspetti della vita quotidiana"

During the last 10 years, there has been a particular increase in the proportion of individuals over 60 living alone in Puglia compared to the average of other Italian geographical divisions. Considering that the number of residents over 75 is also growing at a higher rate compared to the national average, families without a nucleus composed of elderly individuals represent a developing reality (figure 2).

**Figure 2** – *Single-person households over 60 distributed by geographical division. Average years 2013-2022.*



Source: Istat, Multipurpose survey "Aspetti della vita quotidiana"

The *Mezzogiorno* of Italy, including the islands, has the highest percentage of individuals over 60 living alone. Specifically, in the region of Puglia, 74.5% of this category consists of women, which is the highest proportion compared to the southern regions.

#### 4. Prospective analysis: Italy, geographical divisions, and Puglia

The family projections (based on January 1, 2021), developed through a semi-probabilistic approach, cover the period from January 1, 2021, to January 1, 2041. The results confirm the potential crisis scenario, as it is projected that the number of families will increase by approximately one million units in twenty years: from 25.3 million in 2021 to 26.3 million in 2041 (+3.8%). These families will be increasingly

smaller, characterized by greater fragmentation, with the average number of members decreasing from 2.3 in 2021 to 2.1 in 2041<sup>5</sup>.

Different family types respond to demographic dynamics and social behaviours that characterize different areas of the country, with more pronounced differences between the North and the South. In 2021, the proportion of families with at least one nucleus is lower in the North compared to the *Mezzogiorno*. By 2041, this type of family could constitute 58% of the total families in the North and 61% in the south, representing a reduction of 6 percentage points in both cases. In the centre, families with a nucleus would also experience a similar reduction, around 5 percentage points, constituting 57% of the total families.

**Table 5** – Family members and number of families distributed by geographical division. Average years 2021-2026-2031-2036-2041.

Year	Italy	North West	North East	Centre	South	Islands	Puglia
2021	2,32	2,22	2,32	2,26	2,49	2,4	2,49
2022	2,31	2,21	2,31	2,25	2,48	2,39	2,48
2023	2,3	2,2	2,3	2,25	2,47	2,38	2,46
2024	2,29	2,19	2,29	2,24	2,45	2,36	2,44
2025	2,28	2,18	2,28	2,23	2,44	2,35	2,43
2026	2,27	2,17	2,27	2,22	2,42	2,33	2,41
2027	2,26	2,16	2,26	2,21	2,4	2,32	2,4
2028	2,25	2,15	2,25	2,2	2,39	2,31	2,38
2029	2,24	2,15	2,24	2,19	2,37	2,29	2,36
2030	2,23	2,14	2,23	2,18	2,36	2,28	2,35
2031	2,22	2,13	2,23	2,17	2,34	2,26	2,33
2032	2,21	2,12	2,22	2,16	2,33	2,25	2,32
2033	2,2	2,11	2,21	2,16	2,31	2,24	2,3
2034	2,19	2,1	2,2	2,15	2,3	2,23	2,29
2035	2,17	2,09	2,19	2,14	2,28	2,21	2,27
2036	2,17	2,09	2,18	2,13	2,27	2,2	2,26
2037	2,16	2,08	2,17	2,12	2,26	2,19	2,25
2038	2,15	2,07	2,17	2,11	2,25	2,18	2,24
2039	2,14	2,07	2,16	2,11	2,24	2,17	2,22
2040	2,13	2,06	2,15	2,1	2,22	2,16	2,21
2041	2,12	2,05	2,14	2,09	2,21	2,15	2,2

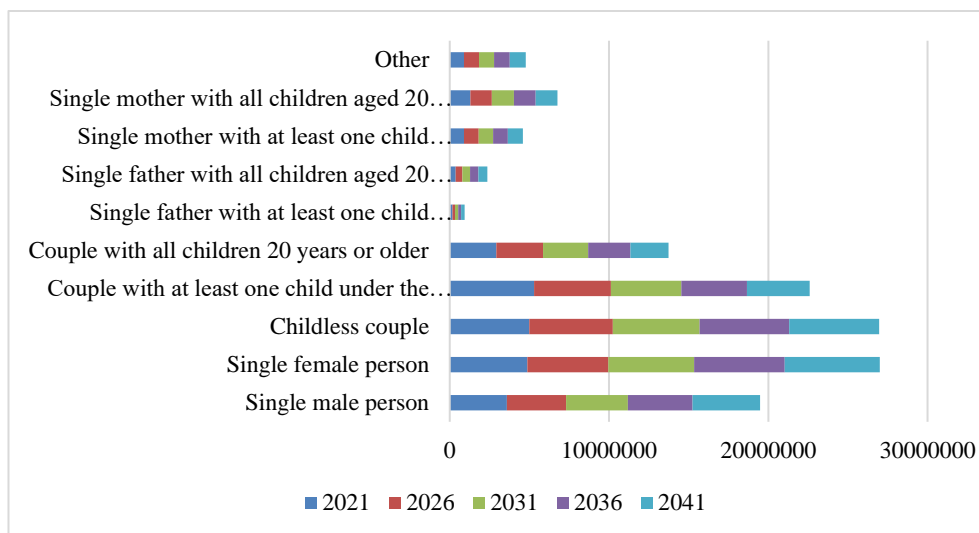
Source: Istat, Multipurpose survey "Aspetti della vita quotidiana"

The family type "couple with children" is expected to undergo the most significant change in the next twenty years. In the south of Italy, a decline of about nine percentage points is expected (from 37% in 2021 to 28% in 2041), while in the North (from 31% to 23%) and in the centre (from 30% to 22%), the decline is

<sup>5</sup> Istat (2022). *Previsioni della popolazione residente e delle famiglie – base 1.1.2021*. Statistiche Report, settembre 2022. [www.istat.it](http://www.istat.it).

approximately eight percentage points<sup>6</sup>. Therefore, the *Mezzogiorno* would still maintain a higher proportion of couples with children. Most of the reduction in the "couple with children" type of family is related to couples with at least one child under the age of 20, compared to couples with only adult children aged 20 and above. In the North, the former type decreases from 21% in 2021 to 16% in 2041 (a decrease of 5 percentage points out of the total 8 lost by couples with children, regardless of their children's ages), in the centre from 19% to 13% (a decrease of 6 out of 8 points overall). In the south of Italy, the projections indicate a broader demographic crisis. Here, couples with at least one child under the age of 20 would decrease by seven percentage points out of the total nine lost by couples with children. Therefore, there is a convergence process for couples with "young" children. However, the same cannot be said for couples with older children, where there is still a difference in favour of the *Mezzogiorno*, partly due to the longer time spent in the family of origin in this part of the country<sup>7</sup>. Single-person households (individuals living alone) will represent nearly 40% of the total families, increasing by approximately 7 percentage points compared to the current data (33.2%). The proportion of couples without children (21.5%) will also increase. Couples with children, on the other hand, will decline, while single parents with children will experience moderate growth, especially among males.

**Figure 3** – Family Types in Italy. Absolute values years 2021-2041.



Source: Istat, Multipurpose survey "Aspetti della vita quotidiana"

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem.*



In Puglia, along with the progressive contraction of the number of families, there is a decrease in the number of family members. Specifically, single parents, individuals living alone, and couples without children are increasing, while couples with at least one child are decreasing.

The comparison between the population in 2021 and the projected population in 2041 demonstrates that demographic and social changes will result in new family patterns over the next twenty years, characterized by single-person households, and a feminized connotation.

In Italy, if already in 2021, the proportion of individuals aged 65 and over living alone represents half of those living alone, by 2041 it would reach 60%. In absolute terms, the number of individuals living alone would reach 10.2 million (+20%), of which 6.1 million would be aged 65 and over (+44%)<sup>8</sup>.

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**Table 6** – Family Types in Puglia. Projection years 2021-2041 in percentage values.

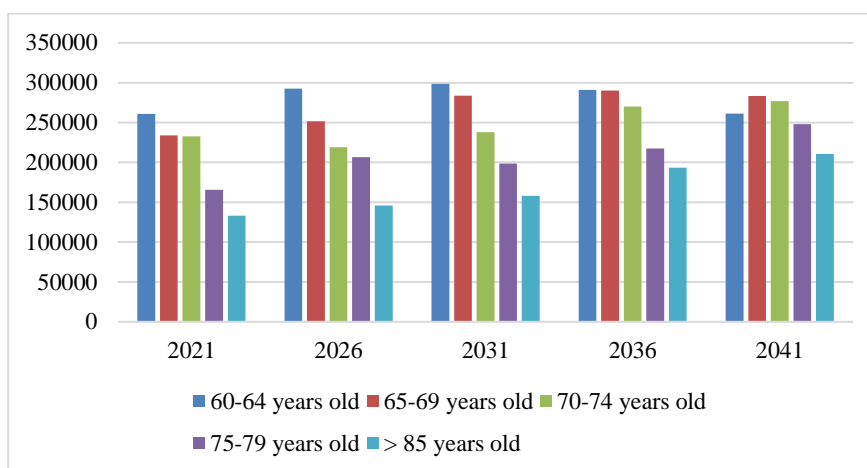
Tipology	2021	2026	2031	2036	2041
Individuals living alone	29,2	30,3	31,9	33,7	35,4
Childless couples	19,8	20,9	21,7	22,3	22,6
Couples with children	38,9	36,7	34,1	31,7	29,6
Single parents with children (father)	1,5	1,6	1,7	1,9	2
Single parents with children (mother)	7,9	8	8	7,9	7,9
Other	2,6	2,5	2,5	2,5	2,4

Source: Istat, Multipurpose survey "Aspetti della vita quotidiana"

In Puglia, by 2041, the average age will be 50.7 years compared to the current 45.4 years, and approximately 34.5% of the population will be composed of individuals aged 65 and over, of which 84.3% will be living alone. Among these individuals living alone, there is observed a growth over time, especially among those aged 70 and over and those aged 85 and over. Most of these individuals are women.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem.*

**Figure 4** – Projection of single-person households over 60 in Puglia by five-year age groups, 2021-2041.



Source: Istat, Multipurpose survey "Aspetti della vita quotidiana"

## 5. Final remarks

The exploratory nature of this study allows us to observe how population aging, increased life expectancy, declining fertility rates, and decreased birth rates have resulted in a higher number of individuals living alone as a long-term consequence of social, demographic, and economic dynamics.

The connection between family aging and the potential aging of society lies in the fact that phenomena and behaviours strongly vary with age: learning, producing, consuming, getting married, procreating, migrating, dying, etc.

It is, therefore, significant that the projected average age of the population by 2041 is 50 years, and there is an increasing trend in single-person households with a female connotation.

In the coming decades, we will not only witness a progressive increase in population aging (also influenced by the decrease in the population of Puglia in favour of the elderly population), but also a substantial decline in the working-age population and a progressive increase in single-person households with a female connotation. This aspect will highlight the issue of structural sustainability related to the increasing social and economic burden on the working-age population, which is responsible for supporting the non-active population.

In the future, it will be necessary to differentiate policies according to different territories. For example, particular attention could be given to social care services,

with an increasing focus on services for individuals over 85, at the expense of those designed for early childhood.

The future projects us into a society where family networks will become less numerous, and individuals will tend to live in solitude. Furthermore, the probability of living alone increases with age and affects females to a greater extent.

The loneliness of the elderly, which until a few years ago was considered a critical issue, now requires a positive reinterpretation. We must consider the needs of the growing elderly population, not only in terms of social protection policies but also as policies for activity, economic development, and cultural advancement.

This issue could have a positive impact on the quality of life of the elderly (psychologically and economically) and the family (psychologically and culturally), strengthening their bonds and relational values. The political mission should, therefore, focus on incentivizing the sustainability of the collective solidarity system through institutionalized forms.

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