

The Geography of Childcare Preferences and Availability in Italy

Pietro Dall'Osto¹, Elisa Brini¹, Raffaele Guetto¹, Daniele Vignoli¹

¹ University of Florence, Florence, Italy

Abstract. Despite extensive research on childcare supply, individual preferences regarding care provision remain underexplored. In Southern Europe, childcare is frequently organised within informal kin networks, a pattern reflecting the interplay between familistic norms and institutional constraints. This paper uses novel data from the 2025 Age-It Family Demography Survey to analyse childcare preferences among individuals living in Italy aged 18–45, augmented with administrative data to map the geography of the availability of authorized childcare places at the provincial level. Two main findings emerge. First, childcare preferences exhibit a mosaic North–South gradient, with stronger preferences for formal care in many northern provinces and more heterogeneous patterns in the South. Second, territorial supply does not always align with declared preferences: some high-provision areas exhibit surprisingly low preferences for formal care, while in other regions, a significant unmet demand for formal childcare persists. In all, with roughly two-thirds of respondents preferring formal arrangements, the results suggest a broad potential reach for family policies.

Keywords: Childcare, Family policy, Preferences, Italy.

1 Introduction

The reconciliation of paid work and family life is central to demographic debates and to social policies. The generalised increase in female labour force participation has created a rising need for childcare services, especially during the first years of a child's life when intensive care requirements clash with parental leave arrangements that are often too short or poorly paid to sustain continuous maternal employment [1, 2]. Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) for children below age three is widely recognized as a structural policy instrument to lower the opportunity costs of childbearing [3]. By facilitating the balance between paid work and parenthood, these services mitigate the opportunity costs of childbearing and support dual-earner family models [4]. Comparative literature shows that accessible and affordable ECEC services effectively support maternal employment [5, 6] and fertility [7–9].

Even with better access to formal care, however, families still often rely on informal care arrangements, particularly help from grandparents [10]. The preference for informal childcare is especially pronounced in Southern Europe, where intergenerational solidarity often compensates for limited public services and weak market alternatives

[1, 11, 12]. Several studies document persistent roles for grandparents and other informal networks even where formal services exist, or the coexistence of combined care strategies [13, 14].

The persistence of informal arrangements raises the key question of whether reliance on informal childcare reflects normative preferences or constitutes a necessity imposed by institutional scarcity. On the one hand, reliance on family-based childcare may reflect preferences rooted in care cultures and gender norms [15]. Within this perspective, families may favour informal solutions even when formal childcare is available – a phenomenon conceptualised in the literature as “family by choice”. On the other hand, reliance on informal care may represent an adaptive response to institutional scarcity – referred to as “familialism by default” [16].

Italy provides a strategic setting to investigate this distinction for at least two reasons. First, the Italian welfare state is characterized by strong intergenerational solidarity with an historically relevant role of the extended family network, particularly grandparents, in childcare [17]. Second, Italy is characterised by pronounced regional disparities in the availability of childcare services for children aged 0–2 [7, 18]. Although formal supply has expanded in recent decades, also in response to European targets and investment programmes aimed at increasing coverage, higher coverage rates in the Centre-North than in the South persist.

To examine stated childcare preferences and relate them to formal childcare coverage for children aged 0–2, the analysis is based on novel individual-level survey data linked to administrative data on formal childcare coverage, using the total number of authorized places per 100 children aged 0–2 in 2023 at the province (NUTS 3) level.

2 Data and methods

The analysis relies on the 2025 Age-It Family Demography Survey [19] (N = 9,004), a nationally representative sample of Italian residents aged 18–45. Data were collected via a mixed-mode design (CAPI, CATI, CAWI) stratified by age, gender, education, and area of residence. The sample adheres to planned quotas, ensuring population-level representativeness for the target cohort.

To account for local supply, survey records are linked to ISTAT administrative data from *Indagine su nidi e servizi integrativi*. We use the province-level indicator of authorized childcare places (public and private) per 100 children aged 0–2 (year 2023).

The key variable of interest is respondents’ declared childcare preference for a hypothetical child under three, operationalized as a binary indicator distinguishing between formal (public/private services) vs. informal (grandparents/relatives).

The empirical strategy adopts a descriptive spatial approach to identify geographical misalignments between childcare supply and childcare preferences. We employ choropleth mapping at the province level to juxtapose the ISTAT-based formal capacity with the survey’s respondents declared preferences. By visually contrasting these two distributions, we highlight areas where preference for informal care is likely a by-product of constrained local opportunities rather than a purely cultural choice. This comparison

serves to identify regional clusters where the “childcare services gap” is most pronounced.

3 Results

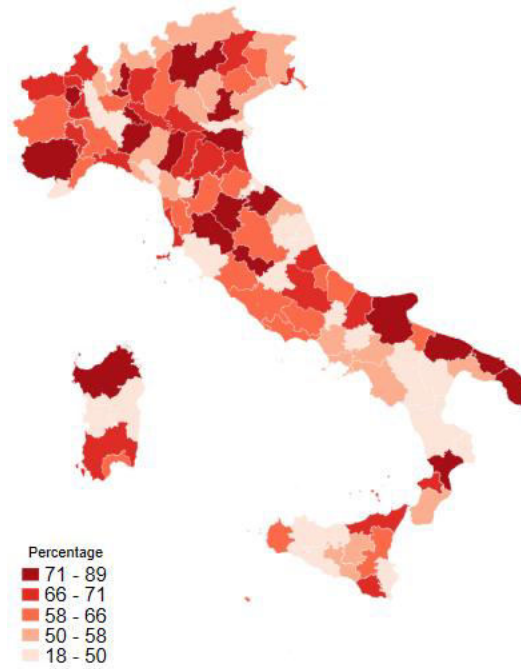


Fig. 1. Percentage of people aged 18-45 who state that they prefer formal childcare over informal childcare (2025 Age-It FDS).

Figure 1 reports the provincial share of respondents who declare a preference for formal childcare. A broad North–South gradient is discernible, yet the geography is better described as a mosaic: marked intra-regional heterogeneity produces numerous local exceptions to any simple macroscopic divide. The highest preference quintiles for formal services cluster in several provinces of Emilia-Romagna, Piedmont, Tuscany, Puglia and parts of Lombardy, Sardinia and Calabria. By contrast, the lowest quintile is more frequent across much of the Southern mainland and Sicily. Two spatial regularities are noteworthy. First, many provinces with relatively low preference for formal services are coastal, particularly along the central-Mediterranean shore, whereas provinces located along mountain chains (the Alps and the Apennines) show comparatively higher shares favouring formal provision. Second, within the South there is an apparent east–west split: Adriatic-facing provinces such as those in Puglia and Molise tend to display preference patterns more similar to northern areas, while other Mediterranean coastal

provinces are more oriented toward informal, family-based care. Overall, this pronounced local variability suggests that declared preferences cannot be reduced to a single regional culture but are instead largely heterogeneous.

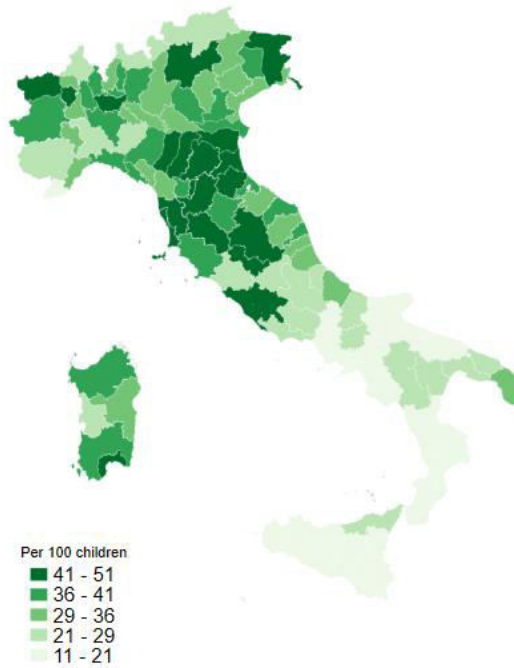


Fig. 2. Supply of formal childcare services at the provincial level (places per 100 children).

Figure 2 maps the provincial supply of formal childcare services, measured as authorised public and private places per 100 children aged 0–2. The spatial distribution shows a pronounced and geographically coherent North–South gradient. Coverage levels are consistently higher across most provinces in the Centre–North, with particularly dense provision in parts of the North-East and in several central regions, where formal childcare has historically been more developed and institutional capacity stronger. By contrast, substantially lower levels of provision characterise large portions of the Southern mainland and Sicily, where many provinces fall into the bottom supply quintiles. Sardinia occupies an intermediate position, with some provinces displaying moderate capacity relative to the broader Southern pattern. Overall, the map confirms the persistence of territorial inequalities in ECEC service availability, reflecting long-standing differences in welfare infrastructures and local policy implementation across Italian macro-areas.

4 Abridged conclusion

This paper provided a descriptive framework of how declared childcare preferences and the territorial distribution of formal childcare capacity align — or fail to align — across Italian provinces. Using data from the 2025 Age-It Family Demography Survey and ISTAT administrative indicators, the analysis documents two central findings. First, while preferences for formal care follow a general North-South gradient, they exhibit a mosaic-like heterogeneity with significant local variability even within Southern provinces. Second, substantial preferences for formal services coexist with limited provision, and especially so in Southern provinces, signalling clear unmet demand; conversely, in some high-coverage Northern areas, formal capacity exceeds the local share of respondents expressing a preference for formal care.

These descriptive findings carry two main implications. From a policy perspective, the diagnosis helps distinguish where supply expansion is likely to address an objective shortage and where supply increases may be ineffective because demand-side barriers or normative orientations. Areas with unmet demand are prime candidates for targeted capacity increases, whereas areas where provision outstrips preference likely require measures such as affordability subsidies, extended hours, or quality improvements. Research-wise, explicitly measuring individual preferences is crucial for future studies on labor market or fertility behavior, as it allows for the separation of structural constraints from motivational factors.

Future research should explore subgroup heterogeneity and combine preference measures with finer indicators of accessibility. Ultimately, identifying where preferences and provision converge or diverge is essential to understanding the complex dynamics of the Italian childcare market and to designing interventions that are truly responsive to the diverse needs of families across the country.

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