

“Lesser Citizens”: Poverty and Social Exclusion among the Juvenile Italian and European Population

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“Lesser Citizens”: Poverty and Social Exclusion among the Juvenile Italian and European Population

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Abstract

This article deals with the spread of poverty and social exclusion throughout the juvenile, Italian population, comparing it with its European counterparts. Besides the information concerning the distribution of income in families with children, the family units' living conditions will also be taken into consideration as well as the number of young people who are not enrolled at school, taking part on professional training courses and who are not even employed.

The juvenile, Italian situation is distinctly marked, as you will see, compared to the European one, by a greater spread of poverty, poor living conditions and the simultaneous lack of work or professional training.

If the families are foreign, the children's situation is even more precarious, in view of the fact that their salaries are – in spite of performing the same duties – lower, on average, for immigrant workers. Many social factors, connected with the labour market structure and economic policy choices all, undoubtedly, contribute to this, but the Italian Welfare State's set up is also extremely important in that it invests very little in the support of family units.

Keywords: poverty, minors, families.

Introduction¹

This article examines the spread of poverty and exclusion in the Italian population and, more particularly, in the juvenile segment, making a comparison with equivalent, European data. From a methodological point of view, it should be underlined that wages and salaries were taken into consideration as being the indicator of poverty, omitting, instead an examination of the global measures of wealth, such as, for example, real estate, income from shareholdings and capital gains (or rather, variations in value due to the performance of the price of assets). Said choice is due to two reasons:

a) there is generally a positive connection between perceived income generated through work and overall wealth. This means that the social classes with the highest salaries are generally those who possess a higher quota of financial and real estate wealth. In this context, the fact that approximately 80% of Italian families own their homes contributes to slightly mitigating a situation that continues to be characterised by high levels of inequality in wealth, which is much more pronounced than that of income.²

b) The trend in the decrease of wages and salaries, which already arose at the beginning of the 1980's, due to the success of the neoliberal model, has been underlined further to the economic

¹ Thanks to the anonymous referees from the Italian Sociological Review for their reviews of the preliminary version of this paper and suggested amendments, which have improved the resulting quality of the work.

² In fact, taking into consideration the latest data available, “in 2008, it was ascertained that the net wealth Gini coefficient was equivalent to approximately 0.63 compared to the 0.29 that is observed with reference to the equivalent income; ten percent of the richest families possess more than forty percent of the entire net wealth, whilst ten percent of the highest income families receives only twenty-seven percent of the overall income (D'Alessio G., 2012).

downturn that has struck the mainly industrialised economies over the last few years. In this context, the gap between he who only receives a salary and he who has real estate or financial wealth, has now increased further, with the spread of poverty even among the middle classes accompanied by the consequent, increased request to extend social assistance policies (Katja H., Elena G., 2011).

In view of the considerations that have already been made up to this point, it is clear that it is not just social policies with their direct and indirect public transfers (or rather the economic contributions made in favour of the family and tax deductions as a whole) that influence the economic conditions of families with children, who also depend upon the relationship of a number of factors, amongst which we should remember: - labour market conditions (the salary amount; job uncertainty; flexitime to be able to care of the family; etc.); - national, economic policy choices (taxation rates concerning wealth and wages and salaries); international, economic conditions and constraints (permitted debt levels and international economic crisis). However, the particular "family" social policy planning in Italy – with the extreme poverty of income support structures – has emphasised the lack of equality produced by our social, political and economic structure, leaving Italian families on their own to deal with their care responsibilities (Saraceno 2002, Di Nicola 2002, 2008).

With reference, instead, to the juvenile population and social exclusion indicators, two aspects have been taken into consideration: a) the overcrowded conditions of the homes of families with children and b) the percentage of minors who are not enrolled at school and/or taking part on professional training courses and who are not even employed. Overcrowding of the home is strictly linked to the family units' capacity to generate income but also to public construction policies that are underdeveloped in Italy in relation to the population's requirements. Instead, leaving school early and youth unemployment are phenomena that point out the high potential of being reduced to a condition of poverty as an adult. Income, home overcrowding, leaving school early and unemployment are some of the main indicators of poverty and social exclusion that have been taken into consideration by the European Commission through Eurostat and which have been evoked to outline the framework concerning the juvenile situation in Italy.

A brief summary concerning the increase in economic inequality and poverty in the West was set forth in the first paragraph, with reference to this contribution's structure. We shall undertake to prove, even if the overall wealth has considerably risen since the second half of the Twentieth Century, it has been distributed very unequally, thus, emphasising class differences. At the same time, Welfare policies have fallen into a state of crisis since the neoliberal economic model has been established and by the economy's financialisation, which makes it difficult for politicians to implement effective, redistribution policies, even if the Welfare States' systems struggle (with variable results) to lessen the economic inequalities produced by social dynamics.

The focus is concentrated on the poverty of families and minors in Europe and in Italy in the second paragraph. As we shall see, the poverty levels change according to the various Welfare systems in force. Social policies do not sustain family units in our country, thus producing juvenile poverty levels that are among the highest in Europe. Lastly, the problem of poverty in immigrant family units will also be touched on, in the third paragraph, as an issue that is rarely debated by the mass media, but which is exceptionally important for politicians and scholars. Besides poverty, the two aforementioned social inclusion/exclusion indicators will be taken into consideration: poor living conditions and overcrowding, both with reference to the native population as well as immigrants.

1. Poverty and inequality in western countries today

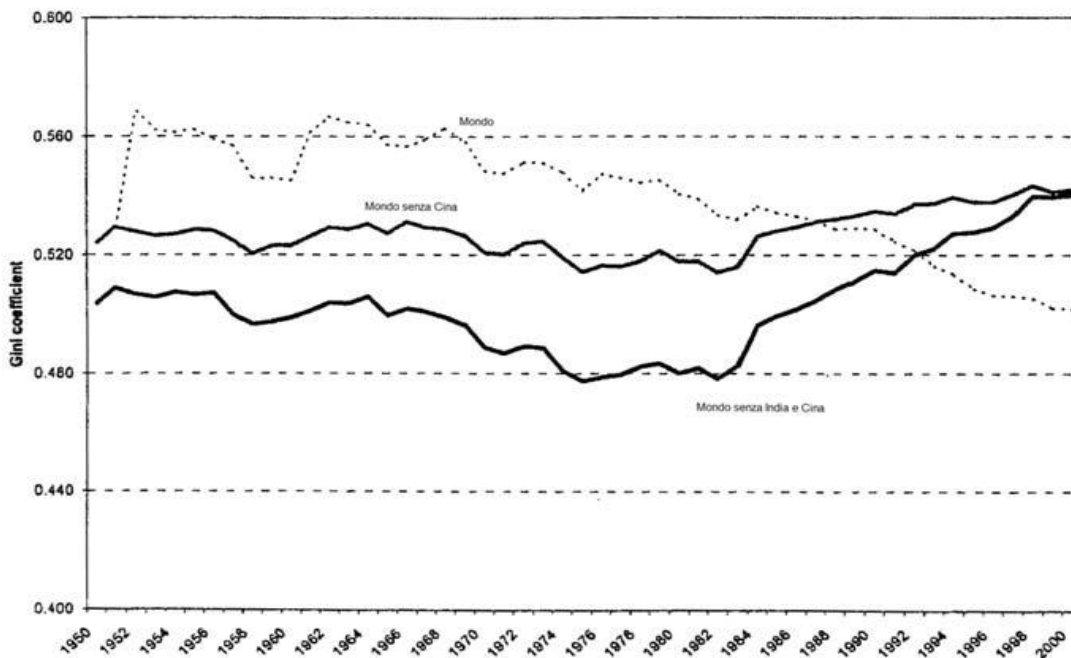
Starting about three decades ago, some significant worldwide changes profoundly changed the global economic and social framework. In particular, after the economic downturn of the 1970's, the capitalist economies began to progressively abandon Keynesian theories, replacing them with neoliberal ones (Handler 2004; Harvey 2005). The assumption that has remained dominant until the current economic and financial downturn is that the market is capable of self-regulating itself perfectly and that any misrepresentations and crises that have arisen are due to the improper interference of politics. The market is described as being the only true egalitarian and democratic system. In fact, it rewards those who are most deserving, those who have shown greater commitment at school and at work, whilst it punishes those who do not possess these characteristics. The political institutionalisation of neoliberalism took place through Ronald Reagan in the USA and Margaret Thatcher in Great Britain. The Welfare State for those two politicians, as confirmed by Pierson (1994:

4; Harvey 2005), or rather the mass of social, healthcare and welfare policies and intervention promoted by the State, is one of the main causes worsening economic downturns which recurrently strike capitalist economies.

More specifically, it has been sustained that public anticyclical costs lead to inflation, destabilising the economy. Furthermore, State income support for workers damages the market, inasmuch as they maintain salaries artificially high, thus destroying competition and producing structural unemployment. Consequently, there is a "Darwinist" vision of social inequality, which appears to be very similar to the punitive logic of the Elizabethan Poor Laws dating back to the XVII century. Neoliberal supporters have influenced elite policies with their ideas, which have also been applied in the healthcare, welfare and social security systems. For example, Shapiro (2007) sustained that the public healthcare system is unjust, since it places the same economic burden on those who live a healthy lifestyle and those who do not. The latter are no longer held responsible for the consequences of their actions, since it is the community that is liable for any problems that they might incur. Furthermore, public healthcare funding does not allow the market to choose the best clinics and doctors, thus rewarding inefficiency and clientele policies. Lastly, Shapiro sustains that the public system provides standardised services, which are calibrated on the needs of the middle classes, or rather, that part of the population that are generally taxpayers and are more politically influential, whilst it neglects problems of those groups who are poorer and politically weaker. If the State, instead of managing the healthcare system itself, as in Europe, was not to tax private healthcare premiums, everybody could be guaranteed the financial cover³ for healthcare within a moral society according to Shapiro. In short, healthcare problems are considered as being a resource to be managed in the dynamics of market supply and demand.

Besides confirmation of the neoliberal model in economics, there has been a considerable development in trade, labour and finance since the end of the 1980's. The neoliberal theorists agree in sustaining the idea that an overall increase in wealth is translated into greater availability for the most economically disadvantaged classes (the trickle down theory). Without entering into the theory's details, we can confirm, instead, that the level of global inequality, between the richest and poorest populations, measured using the Gini coefficient, has constantly increased since the beginning of the 1980's, after the reduction that took place between the end of the Second World War and the 1970's (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1 The international, non-weighted inequality trend 1950-1988.



Source: Milanovic (2003), in Acocella (2005).

³ The proposal would be that of not taxing the insurance premium at all for those who are worse off.

The disparity in income at a worldwide level overall, has decreased since India and China have grown economically, thus increasing the internal income level, but, if we exclude these two, large nations, we are witnessing an increase in worldwide income concentration in the richest groups and an impoverishment of the poorest ones. Many authors (Handler, 2004; Harvey, 2005; Dore, 2001) have sustained that the increase in inequality between the rich and the poor is connected, above all, to the economy's financialisation or rather, the passage from the use of profit to improve production factors, by reinforcing the company's competitive capacity and to capitalism that pursues short term profits, using them in financial speculation and eliminating them from the production factors. This has produced a weakening in Western companies, with a loss of competition and employment compared to the Eastern economies and, consequently, a decreased availability of tax resources for the Welfare System, according to these authors. This has been translated, in many circumstances, into a concentration of monetary transfers and services in favour of citizens accompanied by an expansion of poverty in the population. As we can see from Table 1 below, the increase in income was concentrated towards the 20% richest part of the population, whilst the poorest 20% found that their economic situation remained the same or, even, got worse in the decade running from the mid 1980's to the mid 1990's. It should be said that the economy's financialisation has been accompanied by a general reduction in the spending power of salaries. The capital depends ever less on the capacity of producing profits from the sales of products and ever more from the attraction that the companies are able to assert on the financial market. Those who are able to show that they are making profits on the short term and producing dividends are rewarded with financing and the easiest way of achieving this is by reducing labour costs, both dismissing workers as well as reducing their hourly rate. It is due to this reason that the real value of salaries has been reduced overall, whilst wealth grew and was accumulated extremely unequally (Handler, 2004) in the West over at least three decades. These dynamics have struck the mechanism that has been at the basis of the Welfare State's development, or rather, the compromise among the market (which supplied its workers with a reasonable income), the State (which redistributed a quota of the wealth to both workers and companies through taxation) and the Trade Unions (which waived exasperating social conflict).

Tab. 1. Variations in the distribution of income between the mid 1980's and mid 1990's in OECD countries.

	20% poorer	20% average	20% richer
Australia	=	=	=
Austria	=	=	=
Belgium	=	---	+++
Canada	=	=	=
Denmark	+	=	-
Finland	=	---	+++
France	=	-	+
Germany	-	=	+
Japan	-	=	+
Greece	=	=	=
Ireland	+	=	=
Italy	---	-	+++
Mexico	=	---	+++
Norway	-	-	+++
Netherlands	-	=	+
United Kingdom	-	-	+
U.S.A.	=	-	+
Sweden	-	=	+
Turkey	-	---	+++
Hungary	+	=	=
+++ : An increase in the quota of more than 1.5 points %			
--- : A reduction in the quota of more than 1.5 points %			

Source: Forster - Person (2002), quoted in Acocella et al. (2004).

Approximately thirty years of uninterrupted economic growth led to the creation of new jobs and, therefore, the income required to fuel consumption and pay taxes for Welfare State services. The reduction in the number of workers and the decrease in salaries have been two of the main factors in the crisis in the Welfare State.

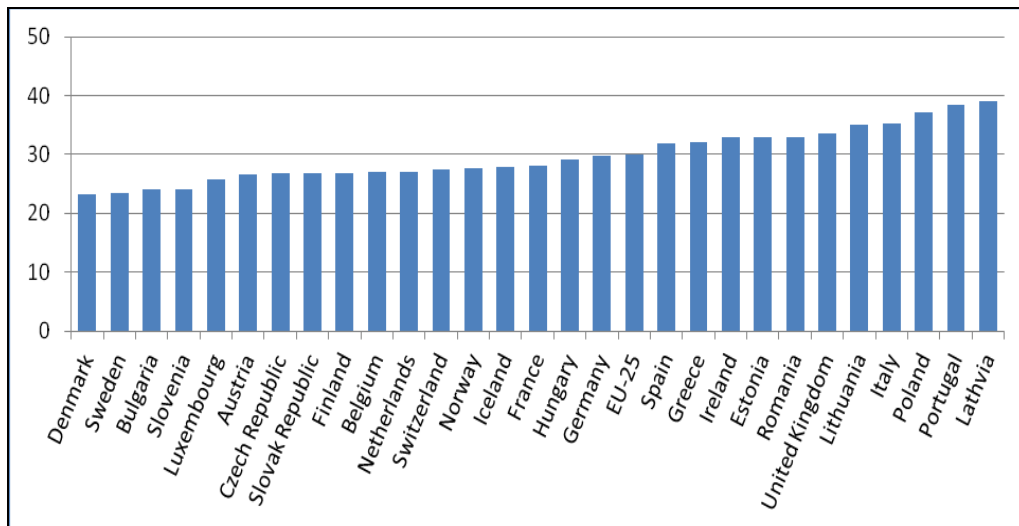
If available income is examined, or rather, the income that is at the population's disposal after taxation and public transfers, we can see how the inequality levels in Italy are the highest in Europe, in spite of the fact that these disparities are extremely important (38%), almost equivalent to France (42%) and Germany (41%) (Perri, 2011). In fact, "Wealth is distributed more unequally compared to income in Italy, according to the OECD (2008): the richest 10% possess approximately 42% of the total net value. In comparison, the richest 10% possess approximately 28% of the total, available income." This implies that there is a net gap between the incomes of the richest groups compared to the less well-off.

In fact, the average income of the poorest 10% of Italians is approximately 5,000 Dollars (bearing in mind purchasing power on equal terms), therefore, under the OECD average of 7,000 Dollars. The average income of the richest 10% is approximately 55,000 Dollars above the OECD average." (OECD, 2008)

The structure of economic inequality in Italy is deeply connected with a territorial identity. "Income and living conditions", as set forth in the most recent annual sampling survey, drawn up by the European Parliament and coordinated by Eurostat (2009), the Gini coefficient, which is equivalent to 0.315 and is one of the highest in Europe, is greatly affected by the internal income inequality of the Southern Regions, with the highest levels being found in Sicily (0.335) and Campania (0.327).

As can be seen from Fig. 2, besides Italy, the highest levels of economic inequality after taxation and State transfers can be found in the Mediterranean basin, in some countries in Eastern Europe and in two, liberal Welfare States (Great Britain and Ireland). In fact, Greece has an economic inequality coefficient of 0.331, Spain 0.323 and Portugal 0.354. These three countries are grouped together with Italy, in scientific literature, in a unique welfare model – the Mediterranean one – which is characterised by an enormous imbalance in transfers and services among citizens – a lot in favour of those employed by the public authorities and big companies, little or nothing in favour of the economically and politically weak marginal categories - and provides families with a large number of care commitments, without there being any alternative or support from the public sector (Ferrera 2006, 42 - 43). Within this context, in the absence of public mechanisms that redistribute an income quote, economic inequalities tend to continue and are handed down to the next generations.

Fig. 2. Income inequality as set forth in the Gini coefficient among European Countries during the - mid 2000.



Source: OECD Family Database, Child Poverty.

We can see that Denmark (0.232), Sweden (0.234), Bulgaria and Slovenia (0.24) and Finland (0.269) are among the countries that have the lowest Gini coefficient. Denmark, Sweden and Finland are associated with a common Welfare State model, which is based on the principles of Universalism

(services provided in favour of all their citizens regardless of their labour market position and, therefore, their capacity to contribute), a high level of income tax and the superior quality of their Welfare State services.

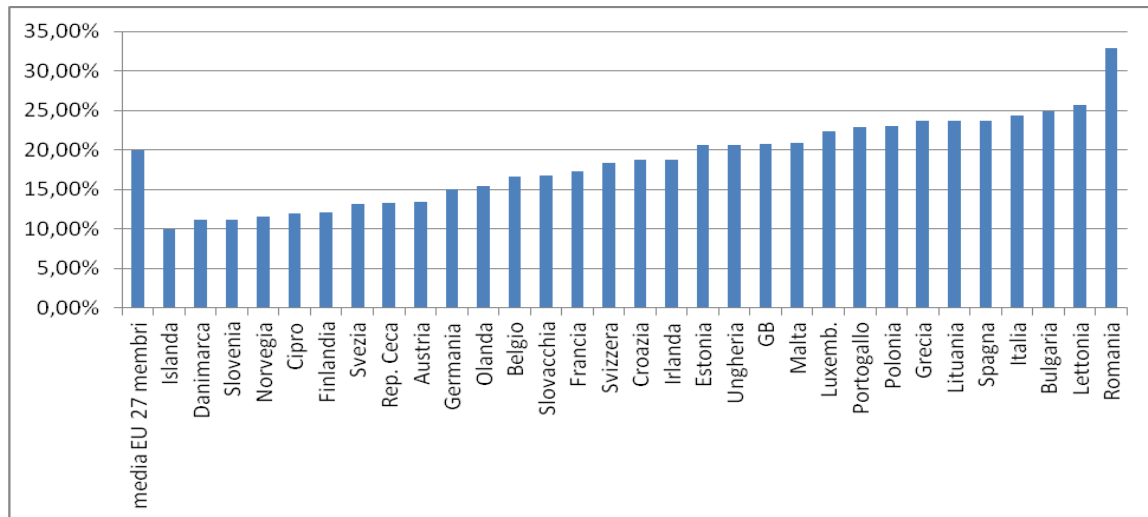
Let's now examine the poverty phenomenon in the juvenile segment in Europe and Italy.

2. Poverty and material wellbeing in the juvenile populations in Europe and Italy: income, home, education

As we have already seen, the diffusion of poverty is not an unknown occurrence in Europe. By taking into consideration poverty only in the under-18 population, we can establish three country groups that are associated with similar conditions of risk with reference to this occurrence.

The first group, as can be seen in Fig. 3, includes countries where there is the risk of minors having an available income below the poverty line, and which concerns 15% of the population under consideration, therefore, fully five percentage points below the European average. We also find here all the countries with a Universalistic Welfare State (Denmark, Norway, Finland, Sweden and – even if only partially – the Netherlands) and two representatives of continental Welfare, Austria and Germany among the other ones.

Fig. 3. The risk percentage of having an available income that is below the poverty line in the European juvenile population.

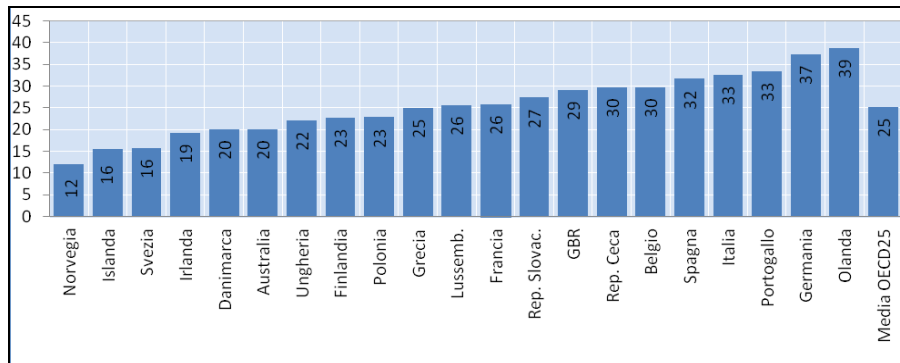


Source: Data processed by the European Commission, Eurostat, *Income, Social Inclusion and Living Conditions*, 2010

The second group (from Belgium to Malta) includes those countries whose risk level runs from 15% to a little above the European average of 20% and in which, amongst others, we can see, above all, the Continental Welfare State systems (Belgium, France, Switzerland) and Liberal Welfare States (Ireland and Great Britain) in which, besides public assistance programmes, the active policies concerning labour and access to work are important as a prerequisite to obtain a number of benefits. Lastly, we can define a third group of countries that are associated with the highest risk levels of juvenile poverty, which are higher than 20% (Luxemburg) to 25% (Latvia), with Rumania reaching almost 35%. We can see, here, all the Southern European Welfare systems, besides all the Eastern European countries, which represent the opposite pole of the Universalistic systems concerning child poverty levels. The possibility of finding children in a state of poverty in the Universalistic Welfare State systems is low, inasmuch as the State transfers provide all citizens with the income quota that is not supplied by the market. In Continental Welfare Systems, the transfers are much more connected to the type of occupation, but there are significant income support programmes for families. France and Germany spend respectively 3.8% and 2.9% of their GNP on families, against Italy's 1.2% (OECD,

2009).⁴ With reference to the other material, wellbeing indicators, we can see that Italy has been classified among the countries at the bottom of the graph, concerning the environmental conditions in which children live, as set forth in Fig. 4.

Fig. 4. Percentages of the juvenile population who were living in poor, environmental conditions in Europe, 2006.

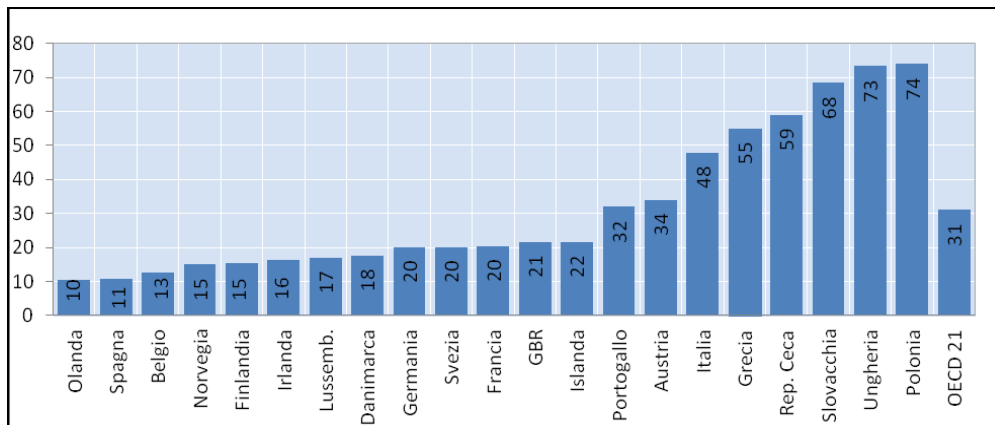


Source: Data processed by the European Commission, Eurostat, Income, Social Inclusion and Living Conditions, 2010.

Even if a number of social factors has to be taken into consideration, such as, the immigrant population's size and labour market dynamics, see Fig. 4, we can see, once again, how the Universalistic Welfare State systems of the countries in Northern Europe are grouped together on the left, whereas the Mediterranean Welfare States are all located on the right.

We also find a similar situation with reference to overcrowded homes (see Fig. 5), with Spain, however, situated among the Northern European countries, as those with less crowded homes.

Fig. 5. Percentages of the juvenile population who live in overcrowded homes in Europe, 2006.



Source: Data processed by the European Commission, Eurostat, Income, Social Inclusion and Living Conditions, 2010.

Lastly, the final material well-being indicator to be taken into consideration is the percentage of the juvenile population who are not enrolled at school and/or involved in professional training courses and who are not even employed (see Fig. 6) We can see two social exclusion processes here – more specifically, education and work – which are two of the Welfare State system's load bearing structure, inasmuch as they are upwardly mobile primary vehicles for the more disadvantaged classes.

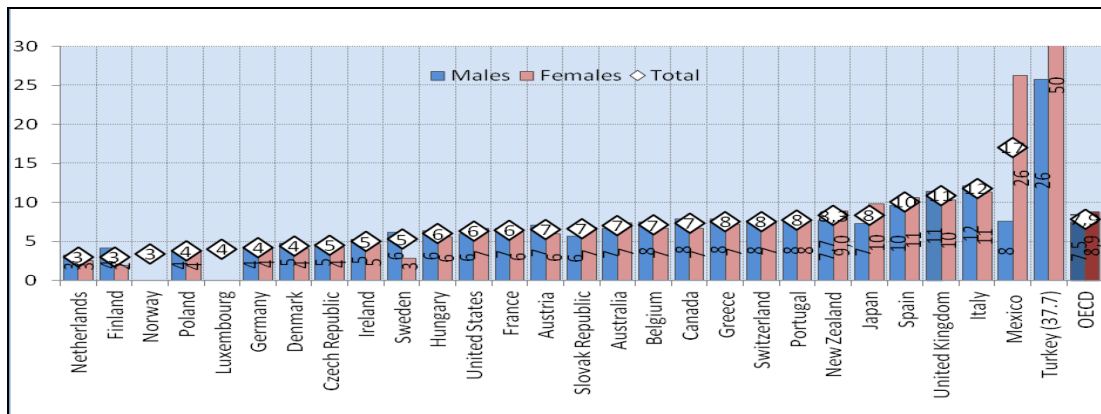
The graph outlined in Fig. 4 has been produced by using a number of social factors amongst which, for example, labour market dynamics are one of the most significant. It should be said, however, that

⁴ It should also be said that Rumania, in spite of such a high rate of poverty in the juvenile segment, spends more than 2% of its GDP in favour of families, using 14.1% of its social expenditure for this item, against the 4.3% of Italy's social expenditure (Compare, Moretti and Zelano, 2011).

even active labour policies play an important role in facilitating occupation in the active population (Ferrera 2006).

Italy is one of the countries with the least public support for occupation amongst the most industrialised economies and, consequently, the result is that we have one of the highest percentages of minors who are not enrolled at school/taking part in further education and employed in the labour market.

Fig. 6. Percentages of the juvenile population that are not enrolled at school/involved in professional training courses and who are also unemployed. Europe, 2006.

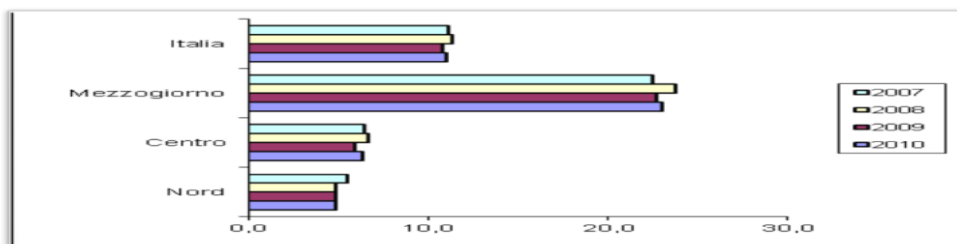


Source: Data processed by the European Commission, Eurostat, Income, Social Inclusion and Living Conditions, 2010.

This population, which in Italy concerns 1 minor in every 8 – is the one which has the lowest qualifications and salaries and is most exposed to unemployment in the case of economic downturn. Since, as we have previously said on many occasions, our Welfare State is not at all generous with the population who have not yet entered the labour market, we can easily understand how a large number of these young Italians will have to deal with poverty and social exclusion in the years to come.

The Mediterranean Welfare State system is therefore perceived as being less generous with minors and their families, especially if they are not employed or live in low income family units in relation to how many are in the family. All this is also confirmed with reference to Italy, where the poorest groups are represented by those who are not employed or rather by children of school age and their families, housewives and the elderly. If, in 2008, the average family income in Italy amounted to Euro 29,606 (approximately Euro 2,467 a month), a half of Italian families received less than Euro 24,309 (approximately Euro 2,026 a month). It is well-known that families living in southern Italy and the Islands, where the rate of unemployment is higher, are mostly represented by those who have the lowest incomes compared to central and northern Italy (respectively, 37.7% compared to 13% of families living in central Italy and 11% of families living in the north), as set forth in fig. 7 (Istat (the Italian Institute of Statistics) 2011).

Fig. 7 Territorial subdivision of the Italian population living in relative poverty, 2007 - 2010.



Source: Istat (2011)

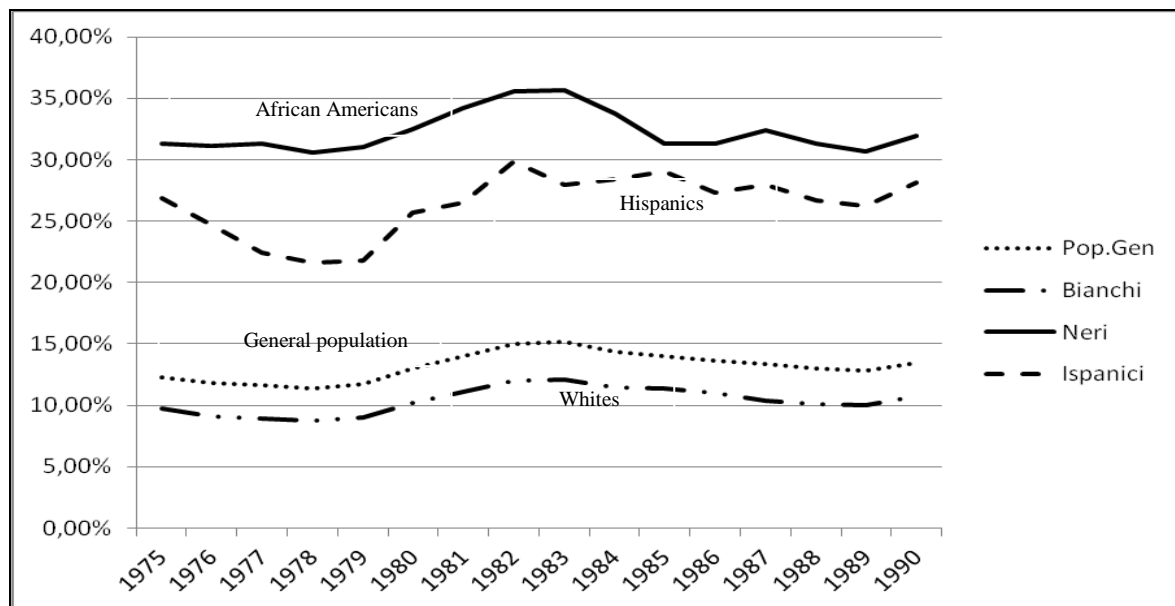
Almost one third of Italian families, with five or more members, is living in a situation of relative poverty, but the percentage rises to 42.1% of families who live in southern Italy. The more children

they have, the higher the possibility is of the family living in a state of poverty. If there are two children, the impact of poverty is 17.7%, with three children, 30.5%. 47.3% of families with three or more children is considered as being poor in the south (Istat, 2011).

3. Poverty and social exclusion in the immigrant child population

A significant phenomenon, which is not reported in public debates, is poverty in foreign origin families and children. In this we can perceive two disadvantages together: on one hand, the economic and social disadvantages that many immigrants have in common and, on the other hand, the difficult situations of life that immigrants find and that are not mitigated by public bodies providing intervention. If we consider the fact that a lot of immigrants receive a lower salary than Italians for doing the same job, which is represented by information obtained from research, it can easily be understood how foreigners living in Italy are in a situation of greater danger concerning poverty. In the Caritas social exclusion report on Lombardy, the Region with the strongest, national economy, for the year 2008 (2009), it was underlined that the number of immigrant families, who were undoubtedly poor, was 21.2% in 2008 compared to the 4.5% of native families. Further to a trend showing a decrease, which started with 25.8% of poor, immigrant families in 2005 to be certified at 19.5% in 2007, the percentage went up again – just as it did for Italian families – at the start of the worldwide economic downturn. If we consider the fact that immigrant women have almost twice as many children (2.23) as Italian women (1.31) (Istat 2011), it is clear that a significant number of children, who have immigrant parents, live in poverty. The economic disadvantage of ethnic minorities is a phenomenon that can be identified in other, national contexts. For example, the poverty level of African American and Hispanics is, on average, three times higher than that of the white population in the USA, as set forth in Fig. 8.

Fig. 8. Poverty distribution in the USA by ethnic groups, 1975 - 1990. The general population - Whites - African Americans and Hispanics

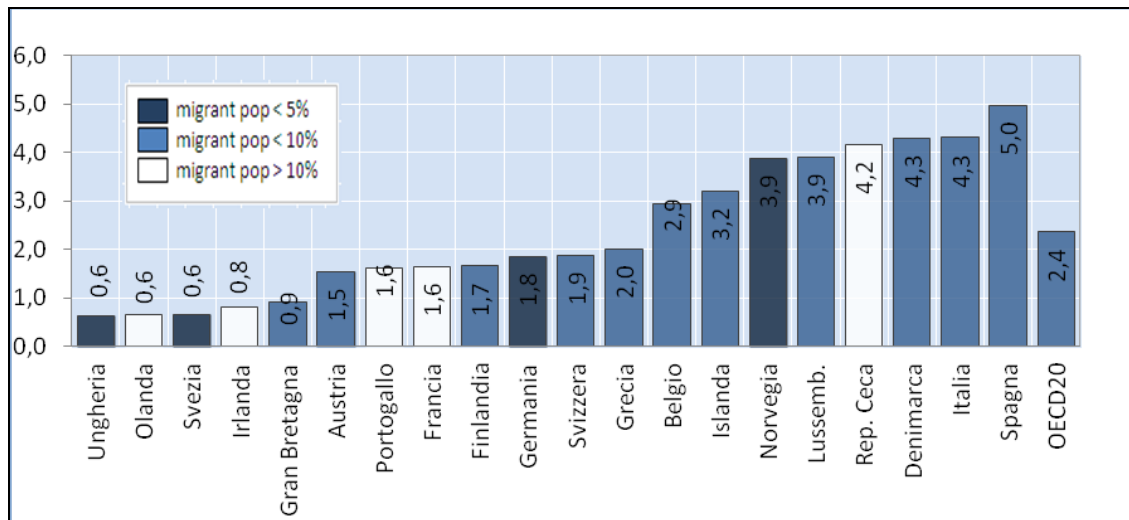


Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census data processing. Web: www.census.gov.

As we have seen, besides poverty, even the diverse relationship between immigrants' scholastic disadvantages compared to that of the native population is a valid indicator of social inclusion/exclusion. We can, in general, confirm that foreign minors are much more disadvantaged at school compared to their European peers. Furthermore, the countries with the highest immigrant populations compared to the resident population are those who incur more scholastic problems for the immigrant minors. For each native child who has scholastic disadvantages, there are 2.4 foreigners in Europe. This ratio is higher in Italy and rises to 4.3 foreigners for every Italian. We also have

confirmation that a part of the 12% of the child population, who is not employed and does not go to school, is made up of immigrant minors.

Fig. 9. The relationship between the scholastic disadvantages sustained by immigrant and native students in Europe.



Source, OECD Programme for International Student Assessment database 2006 (OECD, 2008).

Conclusions

Poverty in families and minors in Western countries is an occurrence that is strictly linked to the choice of economic policies, labour market dynamics and the level of Welfare Service system services and policies. Until the end of the 1970's, it was believed that social inclusion, asserted by the State, would have continued to guarantee ever more sections of the population with the right to avail themselves with greater citizenship rights. During the "Glorious Thirty Years", a considerable number of the population was able to improve their quality of life, by being able to access a social sphere (schooling; healthcare; culture and leisure time), which had previously been the exclusive prerogatives of the higher social classes. It is probably true that the birth of the public Welfare State's services was one of the greatest "inventions" in the history of humanity which enabled European society to live through a long period of peace and prosperity. This "Golden Age" (Hobsbawm, 1997) fell into a state of crisis further to the transition from Ford and Keynes capitalism – based on the factory and class antagonism – to the Neoliberal one, in which capital has no face and no territorial base. This has established a state of crisis on the bearing structures on which Welfare State models were supported. At the same time, deregulating the labour market and finance have profoundly changed the character of the business structure, accompanied by the negative fall out on salaries. Today, merely having a job is an insufficient guarantee of being protected against the dangers of poverty and this situation will get progressively worse for those who are not employed, as it does in Italy. Families and minors who are in this situation are particularly exposed to the dangers of impoverishment and the construction of a situation of permanent social disadvantages. Both labour market dynamics and the form undertaken by national Welfare State systems contribute to this. Overall, the Universalistic Welfare State systems have proved that they provide greater protection compared to the Continental and Mediterranean ones, even if the considerable differences that exist in the social structures of these countries and those in Continental and Southern Europe should be taken into consideration. This implies that the profound inequality found in Southern and Eastern Europe is accompanied by a general situation of greater vulnerability for minors and their families.

One of the most interesting features that has come out of this analysis is that the immigrant child population experiences – almost always more acutely – the same economic, educational and labour difficulties that have also struck a high number of young Europeans. From this point of view, immigration is a phenomenon which does not merely spread new problems, but also works as a "litmus test" to indicate changes in the general public's requirements, which the Welfare State's policies have not yet become aware of or have not yet dealt with.

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