

Data gathering for elusive population. The case of foreigners during the XV Italian Census. A focus on Prato

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Abstract

The current XV census gives the opportunity to have a detailed population database, regarding several aspects of the population at the minimum level of spatial aggregation: the “census section”. This work aims at describing the data collection strategies for foreign population adopted by the National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT) and their potential effect at local level. The paper is divided in two main parts: the first one describes the legislative definition of foreigners and the strategies established both by ISTAT and Municipalities in order to promote foreigners response. The second one focuses its attention on the Municipality of Prato describing both the main demographic features of the foreign population and the local best practices used to increase the foreigners’ response.

1 Foreigner Population: main ISTAT census strategies

Several approaches could be followed to get a definition of “foreigner”, even if the most widely used is the legal one (also adopted in the XV Italian Census).

According to the Italian law, a foreigner is a person who has not an Italian citizenship. Currently, in Italy there is a huge debate about the issue of citizenship mainly due to the implications related to existence of the rule called *ius sanguinis*. This means that the main way to acquire the Italian citizenship is by blood line regardless of the place of birth. Other ways are marriage and naturalization (Italian Law n. 91/1992).

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Following the XV Italian Census Regulation, data gathering mainly concerns foreign “regular” population and not “irregular” migrants. Substantially, a regular foreigner is a person who has a qualification to stay in Italy: residence permit, residence card, or a special permit known as “nulla osta”.

ISTAT has been devoted a particular attention to empower the strategy for promoting the response of foreigners population. The main adopted tools are:

- *Translation of census material (questionnaire, letter of ISTAT president) in 19 languages;*
- *Mapping the presence of foreigners for the Municipalities having more than 50.000 inhabitants;*
- *Integration of different data sources: LIFA database.*

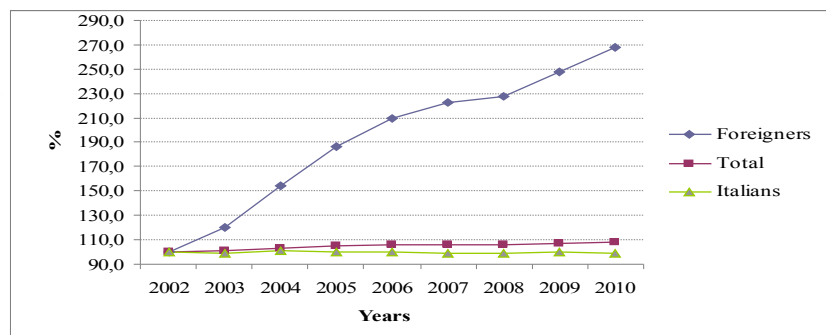
About the first point, even if the questionnaire has to be filled in Italian, Istat provides a translation (in 19 languages) of the main census materials: presentation letter, questionnaire, filling guide. To inform respondents about the existence of this translated material, a multilingual letter is enclosed to the questionnaire and sent to foreigners families. Second, for Municipalities having more than 50.000 inhabitants, Istat provides a file - a list of areas in which foreigners quota is particularly relevant - and a graduated map reporting the incidence of foreigners for each census section. Last, LIFA (supplemental list obtained from administrative sources) is a list built adopting a record linkage procedure on administrative databases: people present in administrative archives (such as the register of permits to stay) but absent in Register Office databases, are included in the LIFA. This archive should help Municipalities in finding “hidden” population. LIFA is part of a larger census program oriented to support both agricultural and population censuses with lists able to drive data collection². Istat also arranged others strategies, such as a communication campaign on national and ethnic media (TV, press, radio, web).

The field experience of Prato Municipality

The effectiveness of the above mentioned strategies have to be measured at a local level. Indeed, Municipalities are the main Census local actors: they operate through the so called UCC (Municipality Census Office). The Municipality of Prato has one of the highest quota of foreigners inhabitants in Tuscany, reaching more than 15% in 2010; for this reason it has been selected as a case study. Looking at Figure 1, it is interesting to note how the total population increase (+7,6%) is greatly caused by foreigners (+167%), which is able to contrast the Italian population decline (-1%). Indeed, from 2002 to 2010, the foreign population increased of about 25 times, while the Italian one slowly decreased³.

Due to the relevant amount of foreigner population, several strategies have been implemented by the Municipality staff (UCC), both at political and administrative level. At the political level, several meetings has been organized meetings, among others, by heads of the main foreigner communities leaders (China, Morocco, Nigeria), and heads of political departments and census staff (ISTAT, Prefecture, UCC staff).

Figure 1 – Index number of the increase of population (fixed base: 100=year 2002)



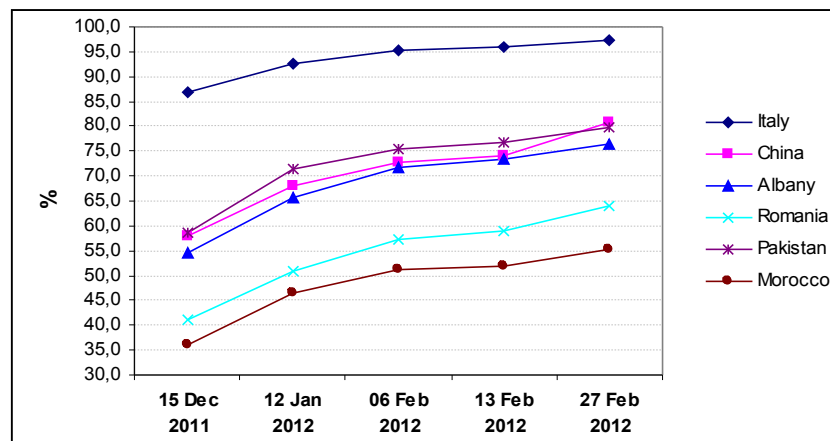
Source: our elaboration on ISTAT data

UCC staff drew particular attention to communication: press conferences, internet pages and relationships with local media (e.g. the site <http://censimenti.comune.prato.it>).

2 Some preliminary Census results in Prato Municipality

Beyond the institutional activities described before, the Prato UCC staff has monitored day by day the response rate, focusing particularly on foreigners. This rate has been calculated dividing the number of the respondents' households at different time periods by the amount of the households in the Register Office (Figure 2).

Figure 2 – Foreigners response rate by main nationalities (Municipality of Prato)



Source: our elaboration on UCC and Istat data

This rate might be around 100% at the end of Census operation: it could be over 100% if Census revealed more persons than the Register Office and vice versa it could be under 100%. Despite census operations are still in progress (the end is scheduled on the end of May), a graph can be obtained plotting response rates by Italians and by main foreign nationalities: China, Albany, Romania, Pakistan and Morocco.

Figure 2 highlights the difference between the Italians and foreigners response rates. At the end of February, almost the whole Italian population gave back the census questionnaire comparing to the markedly lower response rate of foreigners. In the latter population, we can observe two main behaviours: Pakistan, China and Albany communities show a higher propensity to reply to census questionnaires, while Romanians and Moroccans have a lower one.

This difference could be partially explained by a long stay in Prato for the first group (China, Albany and Pakistan people), while Romanians and Moroccans arrived more recently.

It is just reading this data, the UCC staff carried out focused initiatives to improve the response rate of each community. Further and specific actions has been carried out

after the mid of February, when Chinese Ambassador was asked to sensitize his countryman towards census operations. First results are visible in figure 2, where it is evident the increase of Chinese response rate (from 74% on 13/02 to 81% on 27/02). At the moment, UCC staff is studying actions aimed at increasing the response rate of Romanians, which have the highest growth rate in the last ten years, such as a direct mailing.

3 Main conclusions

Census operations are still in progress: most of the actions can be evaluated only at the end. Nevertheless, the daily monitoring of census operations allows the quality improvement of the official statistic, correcting weakness and enhancing values. This is of crucial importance in gathering data about an elusive population, such as the foreigner one. The case of Prato shows various best practices that would be shared among other Municipalities with a great incidence of foreigners.

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