



The Enhancement of School Gyms to Combat the Social Exclusion of Minors

Ramona Cavalli

University of Verona, Italy

Abstract

The importance of sport, especially in children, has been mentioned many times by the WHO, especially with the latest Guidelines, which underline how a sedentary lifestyle causes damage to health, starting with the youngest.

The economic crisis caused by the pandemic has had significant effects on households, especially economic ones. Many of these women in Italy live in absolute poverty and, therefore, cannot allow their children to do extracurricular activities.

In this context, it may be appropriate to optimize the use of school gyms which, however, are not many in Italy compared to the number of students. In fact, it is precisely a better use of school gyms through agreements with associations and local authorities that could allow students to access low-cost sports courses, which become a factor of inclusion and partly avoid early school leaving.

Keywords: Gym, school, sedentary, lifestyle, sport, children

1. The Importance of Sport for Children

In the 2019 WHO Guidelines on Physical Activity, Sedentary Behaviour and Sleep for Children Under 5 [1], it was written that "*Children under five need to spend less time sitting around looking at screens, need to sleep better and have more time to play if they want to grow up healthy*".

These were developed by a panel of WHO experts, who assessed the effects on young children of inadequate sleep and time spent sitting looking at screens or sitting in highchairs and strollers. In addition, the benefits of increased physical activity levels were also examined.

Particularly serious is the fact that failure to comply with current recommendations on physical activity is responsible for more than 5 million deaths globally each year in all age groups. Currently, more than 23% of adults and 80% of adolescents are not physically active enough.

WHO notes that "*the pattern of overall activity over 24 hours is critical: replace prolonged screen time with more active or sedentary play, making sure young children get enough good quality sleep. Quality sedentary time spent in non-screen-based interactive activities with a caregiver, such as reading, storytelling, singing, and puzzles, is very important for the child's development.*"

Considering these recommendations, it is then possible to read the data from the Report on Equitable and Sustainable Wellbeing (BES), published by the Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT) in 2022 [2].

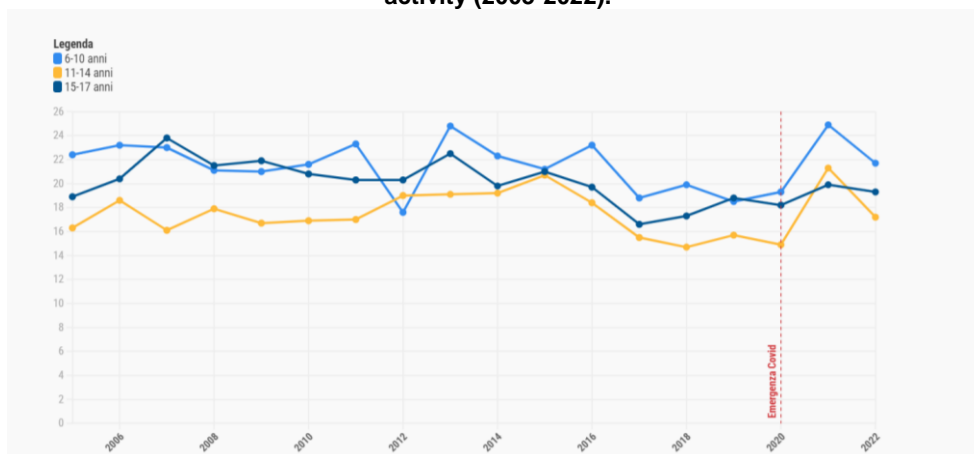
In particular, the Report analyses the trend over time and the comparison with the pre-pandemic period of various indicators in 12 areas in which people's "well-being" is articulated, including Sport and physical activity. As far as minors are concerned, compared to the past, the share of sedentary minors, who do not practice any sport or physical activity in their free time, is still high.

Between 2019 and 2021, in fact, the incidence of minors who do not practice sports grew from 18.5% to 24.9% between 6 and 10 years old, and from 15.7% to 21.3% between 11 and 14 years old. It is more stable among 15–17-year-olds, where it has nevertheless grown from 18.8% to 19.9%.

At the end of the pandemic, the share of sedentary people among minors began to decline. Except for children between 3 and 5 years old, who in one out of two cases do not participate in sports, the decline is visible in all other age groups. Sedentary people drop to 21.7% between 6 and 10 years old, 17.2% between 11 and 14, 19.3% between 15 and 17. However, even after the end of the pandemic, the share of children and young people who do not participate in sports remains close to one in five cases (Fig. 1).



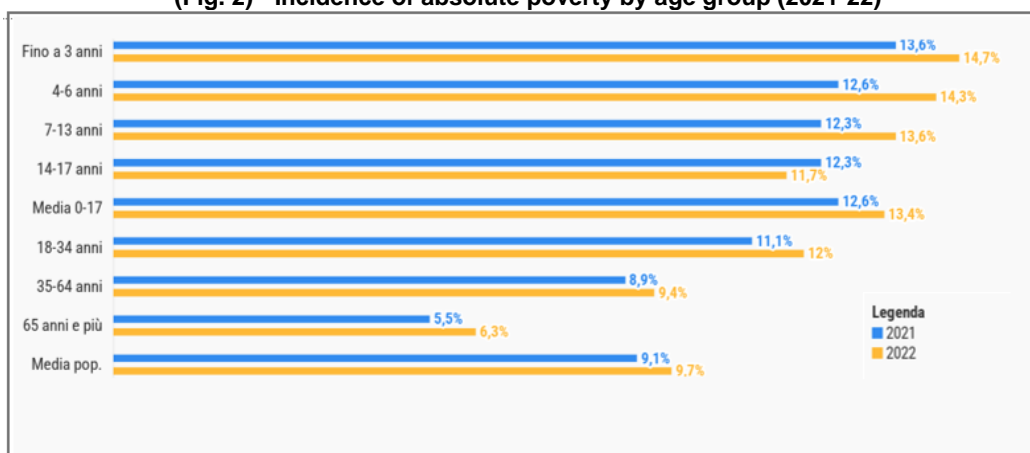
(Fig. 1) - Percentage of children in each age group who do not participate in any sport or physical activity (2005-2022).



Source: Istat, 2022.

For a more complete analysis, ISTAT also examined the variables related to the sedentary lifestyle of pupils based on 2022 Istat data, distinguished by age groups and family income disparities, and including the pandemic impact. In this way, ISTAT data from 2023 confirmed that those living in absolute poverty, i.e. in a family that cannot afford all the goods and services that, in the Italian context, are considered essential to maintain a minimally acceptable standard of living, are minors between 0 and 3 years old, who reach the maximum incidence: 14.7% of the youngest children live in absolute poverty (Fig. 2). In addition, the share also exceeds 14% between the ages of 4 and 6 (14.3%) and is slightly lower in the following one (13.6% between 7 and 13 years of age). Adolescents between 14 and 17 years old are also above average (11.7%) [3].

(Fig. 2) - Incidence of absolute poverty by age group (2021-22)



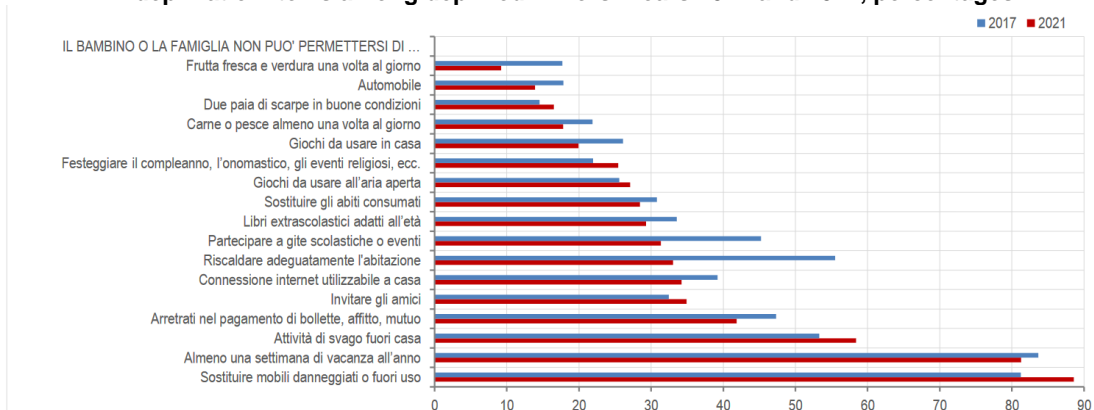
Source: Istat, 2023.

It is very striking that the inability to afford a paid leisure activity outside the home is one of the items of child deprivation most frequently mentioned in the responses to questionnaires on the living conditions of families [4]. It is indicated for almost one in 10 minors (9.1%); among those in deprivation, it was as high as 60% in 2021 (58.4%). In both cases, with values up compared to the previous pre-pandemic survey, in 2017 (Fig. 3).

In fact, one of the first aspects compromised for children who live in disadvantaged families is the possibility of practicing sports during the use of free time.



(Fig. 3) – Children and young people under the age of 16 due to material and social deprivation and deprivation items among deprived minors. Years 2017 and 2021, percentages.



Source: Istat, 2023.

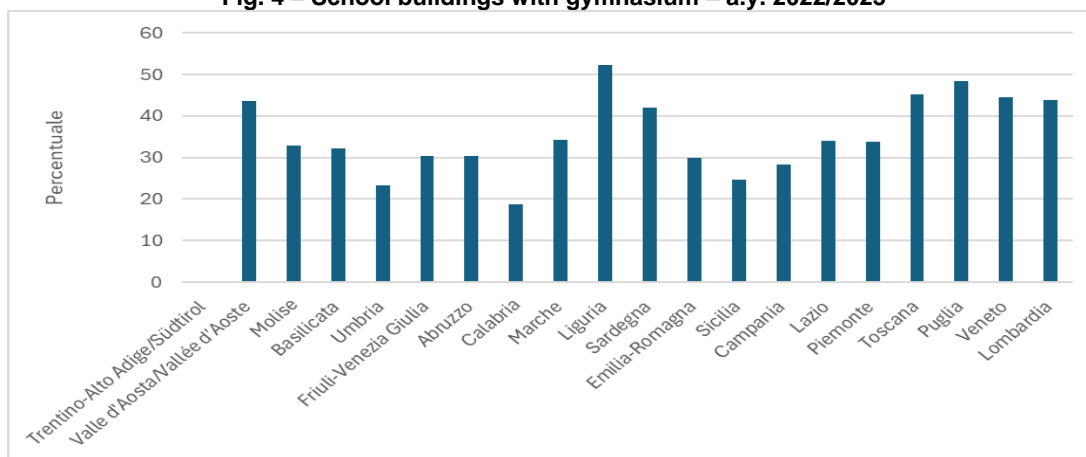
2. The Regional Gap in Italy Related to School Buildings Without Gymnasiums.

This important issue, which affects both physical and mental health, and affects both children and adolescents, could be at least partially solved through the enhancement of school gyms outside school hours, also to reduce obstacles related to cost.

In this sense, it was interesting to analyse, especially from a territorial point of view, the characteristics of Italian school offices according to the latest data published by the Ministry of Education.

In fact, it emerged that during the 2022/23 school year, a gym is available in 35.8% of school buildings in Italy. A share that exceeds 40% in the North-West (41.3%) and is a few points from this threshold in the North-East (37%) and Central Italy (36.7%). On the other hand, the South lags in terms of sports facilities in schools. In the South of the continent, 31.7% of buildings have gymnasiums, in the Islands 30.1%. Among the regions, however, after Liguria (52.4%), it is Puglia that shows the most widespread presence (48.4%), followed by Tuscany, Veneto and Lombardy (about 44-45%). At the bottom of the list, with less than one in 4 buildings equipped with a gym, are Sicily (24.6%), Umbria (23.3%) and Calabria (less than 20%). Data are not available for Trentino (Fig. 4).

Fig. 4 – School buildings with gymnasium – a.y. 2022/2023



Source: Ministry of Education, 2023.

However, to verify the diffusion of sports facilities in schools, it is not enough to limit ourselves to regional averages, but it is necessary to deepen the analysis through the regional comparison with the total number of students, i.e. kindergarten, primary, first and second grade school.

In fact, as can be seen from Fig. 5, in Italy there are about less than half of the number of school gyms in absolute terms of school buildings, according to data provided by the Ministry of Education in 2023.

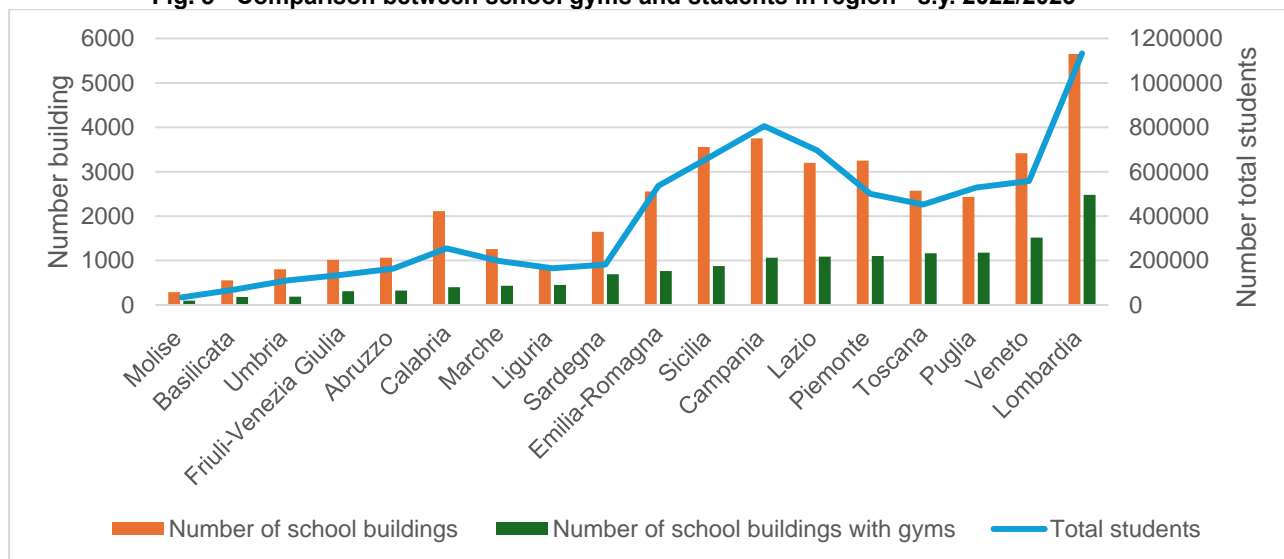


In particular, the data reveal an important regional gap with reference to the presence of gyms in school buildings, even between regions that have the same number of students, as between Umbria and Liguria, with the advantage of the latter.

On the other hand, for example, in Sardinia, Calabria, Piedmont and Veneto there is a higher number of school buildings than the number of pupils present, which could indicate a significant demographic gap.

In this context, in Sardinia, the number of school buildings with gymnasiums almost coincides with the total number of students, achieving a possible balance but in the face of a demographic gap.

Fig. 5 - Comparison between school gyms and students in region - s.y. 2022/2023



Source: Ministry of Education, September 2023.

3. Conclusions

Currently, in Italy, the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR) has allocated more than €300 million for the enhancement of school sports infrastructure.

With these funds, and others allocated by decree of the Minister of Education, 444 interventions will be financed at national level, 298 on existing structures and 146 for new constructions.

The four regions with the highest number of interventions financed are in the South: Campania (70), Sicily (54), Basilicata (48), Calabria (42).

The resources, distributed on a regional basis, must comply with the criterion that provides for at least 40% of the allocation allocated to the regions of the South: in fact, the Regions of the South have obtained more than 52% of the funds.

In general, it cannot be denied that physical activity at school is a tool to combat early school leaving. In fact, school gymnasiums are a safe place where children and adolescents can meet, so much so that school spaces could become a point of reference not only for teaching, but also for family and community life.

Therefore, the fight against child educational poverty using school sports facilities at controlled prices and agreed with local authorities, could be considered as an excellent investment in the demographic, social and economic future of the country.

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