

# **In-Work Poverty and ECEC Take-Up in Italy: A Multi-Level Analysis of Inequalities**

*Giovanni Amerigo Giuliani (Università di Bologna), Nicola De Luigi (Università di Bologna), Claudia Colombaroli (Università di Bologna)*

The present paper investigates the extent to which poor working households (i.e., households with at least one worker) take up early childhood education and care (ECEC) services. More specifically, by focusing on the Italian case study and relying on data provided by EU-Silc, the article answers three research questions:

1. Do poor working households have fewer chances of using ECEC vis-à-vis non-poor working households in Italy? In other words, do they experience a penalization in the ECEC take-up? To what extent does this relate to the number of households income earner (male breadwinner vs. dual-earners)?
2. Is this penalization affected by the degree of urbanization – with poor vis-à-vis non-poor working households living in suburbs, and rural areas showing lower access to childcare services than those living in cities?
3. Does this territorial-driven penalization (urban vs. not urban) occur in all the Italian macro-areas (North, Centre, and South), or is it visible predominately in the Southern regions?

The contribution of the article is both theoretical and empirical.

Theoretically, it expands the knowledge concerning in-work poverty (IWP) by analyzing the extent to which a specific policy, the ECEC, is currently an effective tool for countering this new social risk.

There is a broad and well-informed literature regarding the rising of IWP in advanced economies (e.g., Filandri & Struffolino, 2018; Lohmann and Marx, 2018; Peña-Casas et al., 2019; Polizzi et al., 2022). A growing number of studies have focused on assessing which, and to what extent, social and labor market policy programs may counteract such a new social risk (e.g., Bennet, 2014; Peña-Casas and Ghailani, 2020). In this regard, ECEC system has been increasingly depicted as a potential tool to hinder IWP (Andreß and Lohmann, 2008; Fraser et al., 2011; Cantillon and

Vandenbroucke, 2014; Lohmann and Marx, 2018; De Luigi and Giuliani, 2022). On the one hand, childcare services de-familialize caring tasks, thus boosting female employment and facilitating the shift from the male breadwinner to the dual-earner household model (Leitner, 2003; Saraceno, 2022). As demonstrated by the comparative literature, dual-earner households have a lower probability of being at risk of IWP than households where only one parent is employed (Ponthieux, 2018; Van Lancker and Horemans, 2018). On the other hand, ECEC acts as a social investment (SI) instrument which triggers ex-ante prevention (Häusermann, 2010). Given the high intergenerational transmission of poverty and the fact that poor workers often have low qualifications, access to an education system from the earliest months of life allows children from the most economically disadvantaged social classes - and with lower economic and social capital – to reach an egalitarian development of knowledge (Morgan, 2012; 2022).

Our paper, therefore, advances the knowledge on IWP and ECEC services by adopting a multidimensional perspective, according to which inequalities in access to childcare services occur in several interconnected dimensions. Prior studies have shown that the effectiveness of ECEC as a tool against IWP is not automatic but depends on the degree to which in-work poor households actually make use of these services. In general, ECEC take-up is influenced by three interlinked factors, which our paper investigates.

First, household income is increasingly depicted as a predictor of households' use of childcare services (Ghysels & Van Lancker, 2011; Lancker & Ghysels, 2012), with children from higher-income households being more likely to be enrolled in childcare facilities than children from lower-income households (Abrassart & Bonoli, 2015), thus triggering a Matthew effect (Pavolini and Van Lancker, 2018) – the income dimension of the ECEC.

This income dimension is likely to play a role beyond the household labour configuration, with non-poor male breadwinner income households that are more likely to use ECEC services than their poor counterparts – the household dimension of the ECEC.

Moreover, the availability of the services is not always homogenous nationwide, with suburbs, and rural areas being generally more disadvantaged rather than cities, and, more in general, with some regions showing a higher development of ECEC compared to other ones – the territorial dimension of ECEC (Fargion, 2000; Bucaite-Vilke, 2021).

Finally, the article advances prior literature empirically, by focusing on an “adverse” case study, Italy, where IWP and ECEC have a strong geographical characterization, thus facilitating increasing household inequalities. To this end, it draws on 2011-2021 data of the EU-SILC survey, which is the one generally used to investigate IWP in Italy due to its rich information on household income and individual employment experiences.