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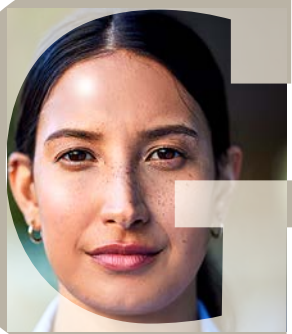
STATE OF IMMIGRANT INTEGRATION






State of Immigrant Integration – **Italy**

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State of Immigrant Integration: **ITALY**

With more than 6.4 million immigrants – 10% of the total population – Italy is a major destination country for migrants in the European Union. In recent decades Italy has become a country of sustained immigration, and, against a backdrop of accelerating demographic decline, the integration of these migrants has become a key policy issue. Yet, integration outcomes in Italy remain mixed, and structural barriers continue to limit the full participation of Italy's immigrants in both society and the economy. Low returns to education, limited labour market mobility, and significant gender disparities all contribute to a mismatch between immigrant potential and observed outcomes. At the same time, the persistence of poverty and poor housing conditions among immigrant households points to broader gaps in social inclusion.

The fourth in a new series, this report – *the State of Immigrant Integration: Italy* – highlights the main characteristics of the immigrant population and the primary integration issues in the country (see **Box 1)**. Comparative analysis with other major European OECD migrant destinations provides a benchmark for identifying barriers and enablers to integration in Italy.[1] The OECD Secretariat would like to thank the Italian Ministry of Labour and its in-house agency, *Sviluppo Lavoro Italia s.p.a.,* for supporting this report.

This report is based on the joint OECD-EU indicators of immigrant integration report (see OECD/European Commission [2023[1]]) and other comparative information by the OECD, notably the OECD chapters in the annual report on foreigners in the Italian labour market published by the Italian Ministry of Labour (see *Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali* [2025[2]]). Additional analyses were conducted using cross-national surveys such as the EU Labour Force Survey (EU-LFS), the EU Statistics of Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC), the European Social Survey (ESS) and the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA).

Box 1 **Definition of the immigrant population**

This report defines immigrants as individuals born outside of Italy, regardless of whether they hold Italian citizenship. People born in Italy are referred to as native-born. This definition recognises that while citizenship can change over time, birthplace does not. Additionally, the conditions for obtaining host country citizenship vary across countries, making international comparisons based on this criterion difficult. Consequently, the results presented in this report may differ from those usually published in the annual report published by the Italian Ministry of Labour and those presented by the Ministry of Education and Merit – both of which cover only foreigners without Italian citizenship and thus present a more negative picture, since those who have naturalised tend to be better integrated.

This report avoids the term "immigration background" or "immigration history" – which is often employed to refer to both immigrants and their native-born offspring (i.e. native-born children with two immigrant parents) – and analyses the integration outcomes of these two groups separately. Indeed, the challenges faced by persons born abroad, especially those who immigrated as adults, differ from those of their children who were born and raised in the host country.

1. The countries referred to as "major destinations" in this report are Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Greece, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain and Switzerland.

Contents

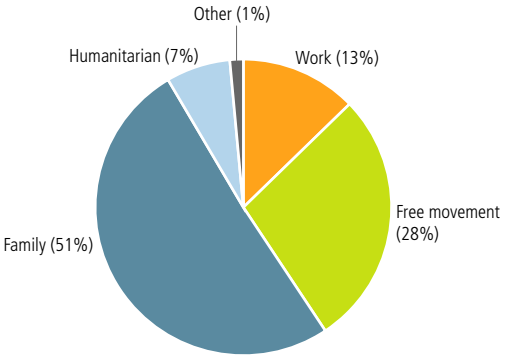
In Brief

- **Italy hosts one of the largest immigrant populations in the EU in absolute terms, although the recent growth rate has been modest.** While 6.4 million immigrants live in Italy, making up 10% of the population, this share has grown only 13% in a decade – much less than in Germany, Spain, or France. Family migration accounted for half of all permanent arrivals between 2013 and 2023 – more than in any other comparison country.
- **Immigrants are overwhelmingly of working age, helping counterbalance decline of the working age population in Italy**. Nine in ten immigrants are aged 15-64, compared to just 60% of the native-born. Less than 40% of immigrants reside in densely populated areas.
- **Labour market integration outcomes are mixed, with relatively high employment rates among immigrants but limited returns on education and underutilisation of skills, especially among women.** One in four immigrants works in a lower-skilled job than before migrating. Among highly educated non-EU migrants, only 69% are employed – a rate far below peers in other European OECD countries.
- **Low levels of education and training limit economic mobility, despite improvements in the educational profile of recent arrivals.** Around 50% of non-EU born immigrants in Italy have not completed more than lower secondary education, among the highest shares in the OECD. Although the educational level of new arrivals has improved significantly over the past decade, upskilling pathways are limited, and few immigrants pursue formal education after arrival.
- **High rates of poverty, housing overcrowding, and low naturalisation reflect persistent structural barriers to social integration.** One in three of Italy's foreign-born lives in poverty. In-work poverty is among the highest in the OECD (22%). Indeed, while the foreign-born account for 15% of the employed population in Italy, they represent 31% of those affected by in-work poverty. While housing costs appear moderate, this reflects significant overcrowding and often substandard living conditions. Naturalisation remains a challenge for many, and only 40% of foreign-born with ten years of residence have acquired citizenship.
- **The children of immigrants show promising educational outcomes but face challenges in social inclusion and labour market integration.** Participation in early childhood education among children with migrant mothers is higher than among children with native-born mothers – an uncommon pattern in OECD countries. By age 15, native-born children with immigrant parents demonstrate strong reading proficiency, with one of the smallest achievement gaps compared to peers with native-born parents. Yet, a significant share report feeling socially excluded at school, and early vocational tracking may disproportionately divert them into less promising educational pathways. Young people with immigrant parents experience poor employment outcomes – only 54% are employed and inactivity is high.
- **Humanitarian migrants in Italy achieve relatively strong labour market outcomes over time, but systemic barriers in reception and early integration limit their potential.** Employment rates among humanitarian migrants surpass those of family migrants and even of the native-born after five years in the country. However, access to language training and early labour market entry remains constrained by limited reception centre capacity and procedural delays. Despite minimal formal support, language proficiency improves markedly within five years of arrival. These outcomes likely reflect both self-reliance and economic necessity, given Italy's limited benefits for asylum seekers. Nonetheless, the reliance on emergency reception centres and informal settlements raises concerns about long-term integration and social cohesion.

Key facts and figures

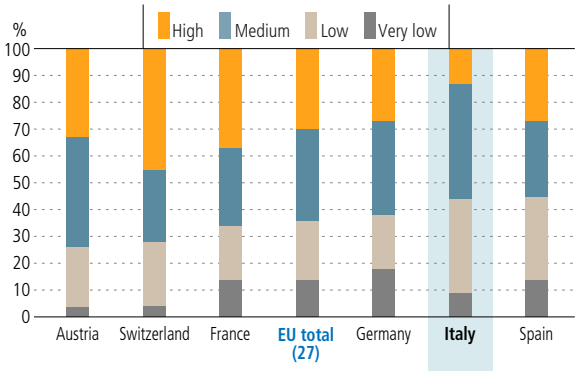
Family migrants account for the largest category of migration to Italy

Composition of permanent immigrant inflows to Italy, by category of entry, all ages, 2013-2023



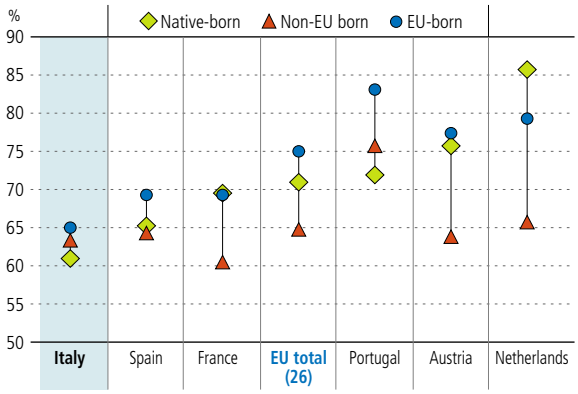
More than two in five immigrants in Italy have completed no more than lower secondary education

Educational attainment of immigrants, ages 15-64, not in education, 2023



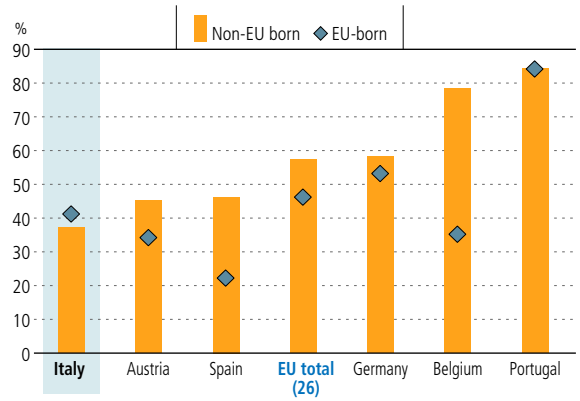
Immigrants are employed at higher rates than the native-born, but overall employment rates are low

Employment rates, ages 15-64, 2023



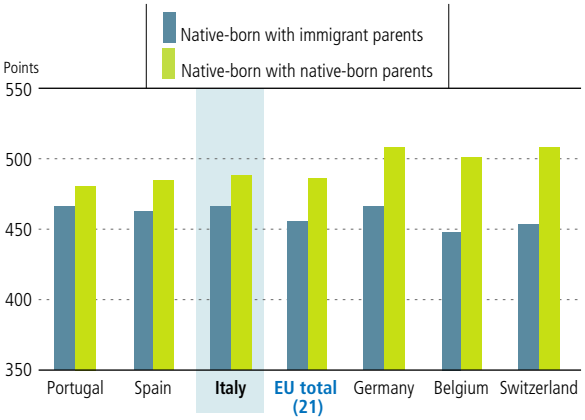
Only two out of five immigrants with more than ten years of residence are Italian nationals

Host-country nationals among immigrants with at least ten years of residence, ages 15 and above, 2023



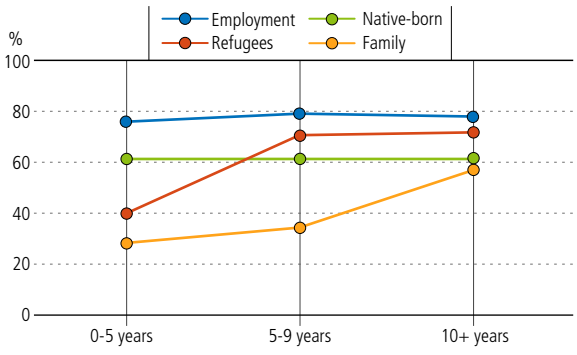
The reading gap between native-born pupils with immigrant and native-born parents is low in international comparison

Mean PISA reading scores, ages 15-16, 2022



Self-reported humanitarian migrants achieve good employment outcomes, especially those who have been in the country for more than five years

Employment rates by reason for migration and years of residence in Italy, ages 15-64, 2023



The context for immigrant integration

Key takeaways

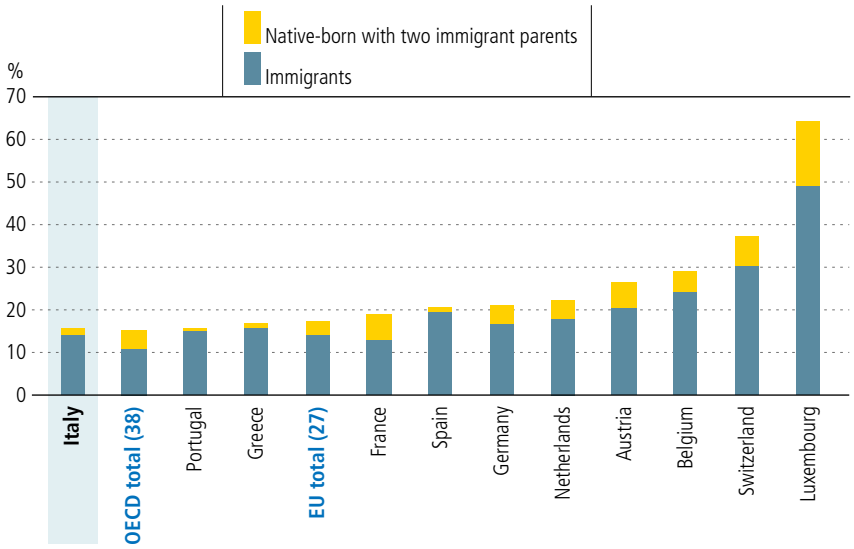
- Italy hosts one of the largest immigrant populations in the EU in absolute terms (6.4 million), but recent growth has been modest compared with other major destination countries, reflecting a mature phase of immigration.
- Immigrants are overwhelmingly of working age and play a key role in mitigating demographic decline, although they are less concentrated in dense urban areas than in many peer countries.
- Family migration dominates recent inflows, shaping the demographic and socio-economic profile of immigrants and creating specific integration challenges linked to labour market entry and skills activation.

In 2023, there were 6.4 million immigrants living in Italy. A large number in absolute terms – the fourth largest among EU countries – this accounts for just over a tenth of the total population (see **Figure 1**). This marks a 13% increase in the immigrant population since 2013. The share of immigrants among the total population and the growth rate over the past decade are among the lowest in the comparison group. In several countries, the migrant population has grown much faster during this period, such as in France by 18%, in Spain by 33% and in Germany by 51%. In addition, the country is home to more than 300 000 native-born individuals with two immigrant parents, the majority of whom are between 15- and 34-years-old.

Figure 1

Immigrants account for about one tenth of the Italian population

Share of immigrants and native-born with two immigrant parents among the total population, all ages, 2021 or latest year available



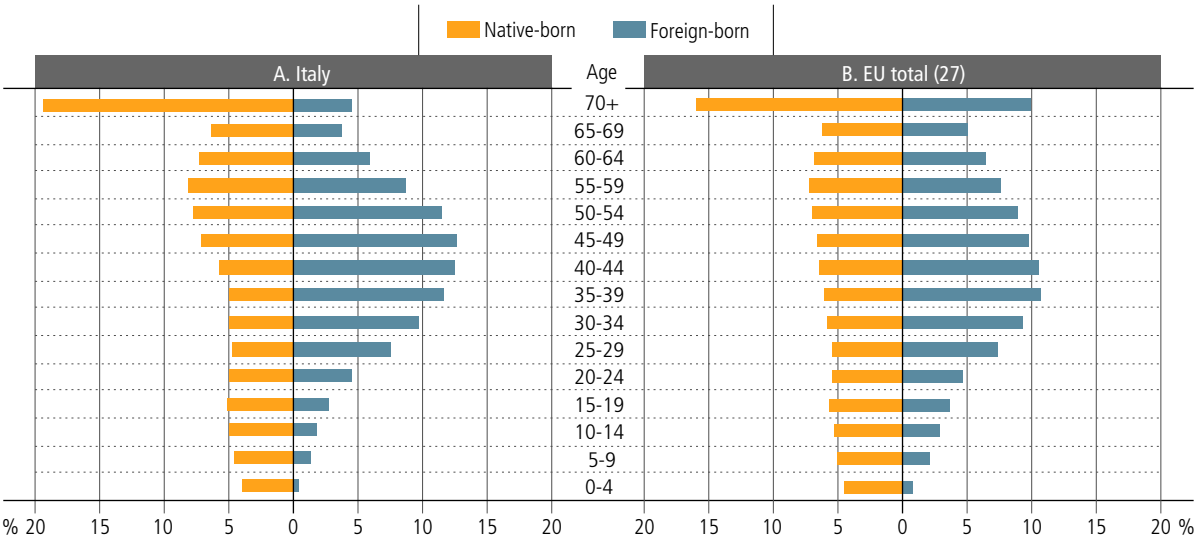
Source: See Figure 1.1 of OECD/European Commission (2023[1]).

In a time of rapid demographic change and a growing dependent population, Italy's foreign-born population makes an important contribution to the labour market by mitigating labour shortages in various sectors.[2] Indeed, nine in every ten of Italy's foreign-born population is of working-age (15-64 years of age), compared to about 60% of the native-born population (see **Figure 2**). More than two-thirds are of prime working age (25-54), which is almost double the share of native-born Italians in the same category. The distribution of immigrants varies across the country, with the highest concentration in northern and central Italy, where they make up around 17% of the working-age population, and about half as many in the south (8%) (see OECD [2014[3]] for a further discussion).

Figure 2

Nine out of ten immigrants in Italy are of working-age

Age distribution of native-born and foreign-born in Italy, 2023



Source: European Union Labour Force Survey (EU-LFS) 2023.

Most immigrants in Italy settle in the north of the country (58%). Like the native-born population, a relatively small share of immigrants lives in densely populated urban centres, with fewer than two in five settling in these areas.[3] The geographic pattern of settlement – rural or urban – can significantly influence integration outcomes. Urban areas typically offer greater access to employment opportunities, language training, and other integration services. However, rural locations may offer more affordable housing. The tendency to live outside urban areas among immigrants in Italy, however, depends to a degree on their country of origin, with non-EU born immigrants being more likely to reside in urban areas than EU-born immigrants.

The majority of immigrants (53%) come from Europe, primarily Romania and Albania. Other large immigrant groups originate from Africa (19%), particularly Morocco, and Asia (17%), with substantial populations from Bangladesh, Pakistan, and India. The country of origin of immigrants in Italy is strongly related to the date at which they arrived, with migration waves in the 1970's largely comprising of migrants from North Africa and from Italy's former colonies, while many of those arriving from Eastern Europe have a shorter duration of stay – particularly those from Romania and Poland (see **Box 2**). Nonetheless, four in five foreign-born have been in Italy for more than ten years, 13% for five to nine years and 7% for less than five years.

2. The old-age population has grown dramatically in Italy and will continue to do so. Consequently, the old-age dependency ratio, defined as the ratio of the seniors to the working-age population, reached over 40% in 2023 (among the highest in the OECD) and is projected to increase further to over 75% by 2060 (OECD, 2025[4]).

3. The measurement unit is a grid cell of one square kilometre. A densely populated area (or city) is defined as an area with a population density of at least 1,500 inhabitants per square kilometre and a minimum population of 50,000 inhabitants in a cluster of contiguous grid cells.

Box 2 **A short history of immigration to Italy**

Historically a country of emigration, Italy only became a net recipient of immigrants in the 1970s. The first significant immigrant flows were driven by tightening immigration restrictions in neighbouring countries and the demand for labour in Italy's industrial centres. The country's large informal economy and small enterprises provided employment opportunities for undocumented workers, who often obtained residence permits through ad hoc regularisation programs. These programs remained the primary legal pathway for undocumented immigrants until 2012, when Italy largely ended its regularisation measures for immigrants, leaving legal immigration pathways limited primarily to a restrictive labour migration channel, family migration and migration from EU Member States.[4] In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Italy launched a new regularisation program in June 2020, targeting irregular migrants in agriculture and domestic work, but with the number of permits issued lower than in most previous regularisations.

Italy's geographical position in the Mediterranean influences migration patterns. The first major immigrant groups in the 1970s came from Morocco, Tunisia, and former Italian colonies such as Ethiopia, Somalia, and Eritrea. In the early 1990s, Italy became a primary destination for humanitarian migrants, particularly Albanians fleeing political turmoil and humanitarian migrants from the Yugoslav Wars. Migration from Eastern Europe increased in the late 1990s, particularly from former Eastern Bloc states. The accession of Romania and Bulgaria to the EU in 2007 led to a significant rise in migration from these countries, in particular from Romania, as their citizens gained the right to move and work freely within the EU. The last major wave of migration began in 2011 with the Arab Spring, but regular immigration flows declined throughout the 2010s. Although, this trend reversed in 2021, with permanent migration rising again, a shift that continued into 2022, albeit at a slower pace.

Sources: OECD (2014[3]), Colombo and Dalla-Zuanna (2019[5]), ASGI (2024[6]), Colucci (2018[7]).

Over the last decade, the majority of migration to Italy has been family migration (50%), followed by free movement from other EU countries (28%) and labour migration from non-EU countries (13%) (see **Figure 3**). Despite the proximity to conflict-affected areas, the share of humanitarian immigrants is low in international comparison (7%), although Italy remains a primary transit country. Nonetheless, by May of 2025, Italy was host to over 175 000 Ukrainian humanitarian migrants fleeing Russia's war of aggression on Ukraine (UNHCR, 2025[8]). This makes Italy the largest recipient of Ukrainian humanitarian migrants in the comparison group after Spain (242 000) and Germany (1 222 000).

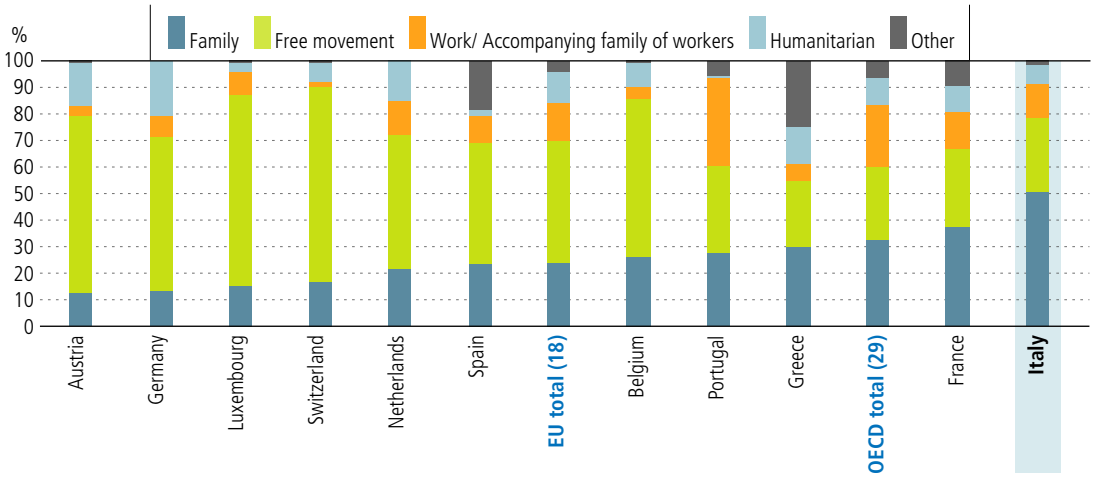
The share of family migrants arriving in Italy between 2013 and 2023 is the highest among comparison countries. More than half of all immigrants in Italy are women, among family migrants this figure stands at two-thirds – the highest proportion in international comparison aside from Greece. Over half of all family migrants are between the ages of 25 and 49 and approximately four in five have low or medium levels of educational attainment. Regarding regional origins, 54% of family migrants in Italy come from Europe, followed by 16% from Africa, 15% from Asia, 12% from Latin America, and 2% from the United States, Canada and Oceania. This strong prevalence of family migrants is a relatively recent phenomenon, with earlier migrants often arriving through work or regularisation channels. The shift towards family migration is related to both lower work migration quotas and the difficulty of using the long and uncertain work permit procedure, and to the effect of earlier pioneer labour migrants reuniting with family members.

4. Between 2000 and 2010, over one million individuals were regularised, but in the following decade, this number dropped to just over 150 000 (Colombo and Dalla-Zuanna, 2019[5]).

Figure 3

Family migrants account for the largest category of migration to Italy

Composition of permanent immigrant inflows, by category of entry, all ages, 2013-2023



Note: The OECD collects and standardises administrative data by category of residence permit from OECD countries. Permanent immigrants are foreign nationals of any age who received a residence permit that, under normal circumstances, grants them the right to stay permanently in the host country. This includes foreigners who obtain a permanent residence permit upon entry, those who have an initial temporary residence permit routinely and indefinitely renewed or transformed into permanent residence, and free movement migrants (excluding those on short-term stays). Temporary immigrants who become permanent-type residents following a change in their status are also included, such as students taking up employment after completing their studies.

Source: OECD Statistics – International Migration Database (IMD) 2013-2023.

Since December 2024, a new law (No. 187/2024) introduces two new amendments that are expected to extend the process of applying for family unification. In the first place, foreign nationals applying for family reunification must now demonstrate an uninterrupted period of legal residence in Italy of at least two years.[5] The second amendment revises the assessment criteria for the adequacy of housing. In addition to existing requirements for sufficient income and sanitary conditions, authorities must now verify compliance with specific occupancy and space standards. Given that the responsibility for verifying the number of occupants and minimum living space lies with municipal offices – and that existing verifications in many municipalities already take over six months to process – in practice this may lead to long delays.

5. Minor children, and those granted residence permits on the grounds of international protection, are exempt from this.

II Labour market integration

Key takeaways

- Immigrants in Italy display relatively high employment rates compared with the native-born, yet overall employment remains low in international comparison and masks substantial job-quality gaps.
- Educational attainment among immigrants is low, particularly for non-EU born, and participation in adult education, training, and language courses is among the lowest in the OECD. Despite this, language acquisition is strong in early years and the majority of those arriving with beginners Italian achieve an advanced level within 5 years.
- Skills underutilisation is widespread: immigrants are heavily concentrated in elementary occupations, face limited access to high-skilled jobs, and experience high rates of occupational downgrading.
- Gender disparities are pronounced, with migrant women facing particularly weak labour market attachment, high inactivity, and significant barriers to using their qualifications.

II.1. Education and skills

Educational attainment in Italy is relatively low by international comparison, for both the foreign-born and native-born population. Approximately one-third of both EU-born immigrants and the native-born population have completed no more than lower secondary education (see **Figure 4**). This figure rises to 50% among non-EU born immigrants. In international comparison, these are among the highest rates of very low and low educational attainment for both native-born and immigrant individuals, with only Spain reporting higher rates of low-educated native-born and the Netherlands and Spain reporting higher rates among EU-born immigrants. Regional variation in Italy reflects the patterns of the native-born: at 52%, immigrants in southern Italy are more likely to have completed no more than lower secondary education than immigrants in northern (43%) and central (41%) Italy. The share is particularly high among non-EU born immigrants in southern Italy, where almost three out of five immigrants are very low or low educated.

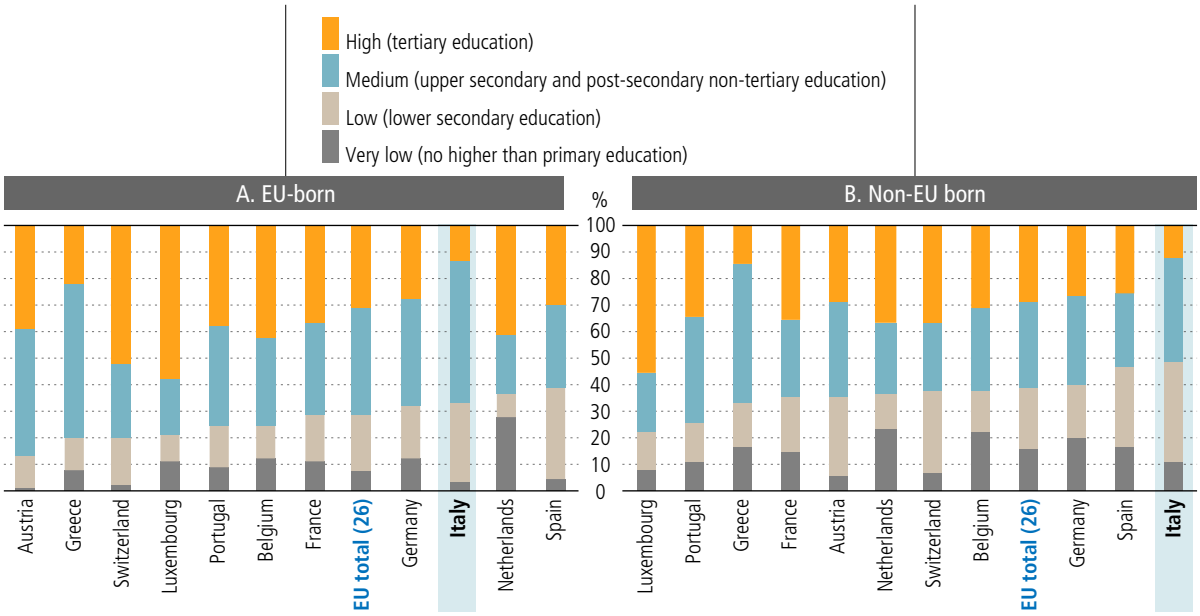
Conversely, Italy also has the lowest proportion of highly educated immigrants among major destination countries. This trend holds true for both immigrant women and, particularly, immigrant men. Just 16% of immigrant women and 9% of immigrant men hold a tertiary degree. Rates of high educational attainment are also low, in an international context, among Italy's native-born population. Native-born men are, nevertheless, twice as likely as foreign-born men to have completed higher education.

The share of immigrants who hold a very low or low level of education has decreased in Italy over the past decade. Among EU-born recent arrivals (with less than five years of residence) the proportion of new arrivals holding at most a lower secondary education fell by 6 percentage points (p.p.) from 38% in 2013 to 32% in 2023. Among recent arrivals born outside the EU the share fell by almost 10 p.p. from 56% to 47%. While the decline was even greater in other comparison countries, particularly in Portugal and Greece, the fall in low-educated arrivals in Italy has been among the highest. At the same time, the proportion of highly educated recent immigrants has risen in Italy, by 6 p.p. among the non-EU born and 9 p.p. among the EU-born.

Figure 4

Half of non-EU born migrants have completed no more than lower secondary education

Educational attainment, ages 15-64, not in education, 2023



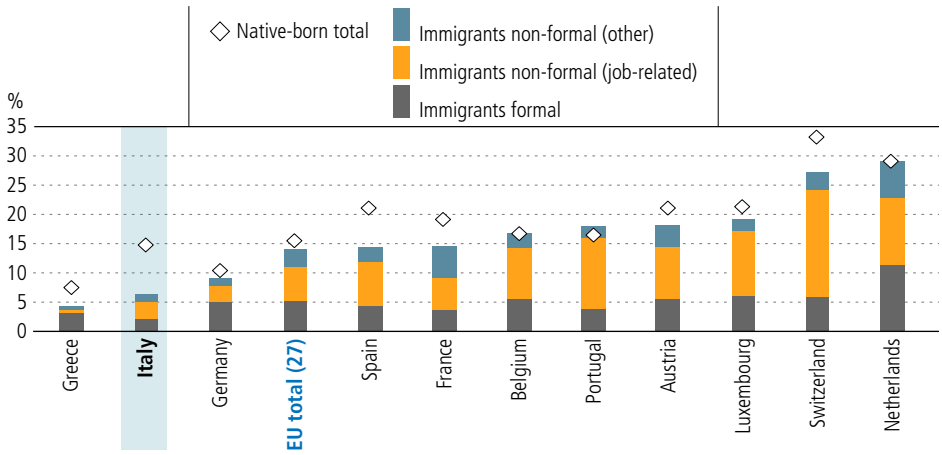
Source: European Union Labour Force Survey (EU-LFS) 2023.

Few immigrants in Italy pursue further education after arrival. In fact, Italy has one of the lowest rates of immigrant enrolment in adult education and training among major destination countries, with 2% participating in formal and 4% in non-formal education (see **Figure 5**). Although enrolment is low among the native-born as well, they are more than twice as likely to be enrolled in adult education and training. Participation remains limited across the country for both education and training: according to the OECD's 2023 survey of adult skills (PIAAC), only 8% of all low educated individuals in Italy are enrolled in adult learning, which is less than half of the OECD average of approximately 19%. In contrast, countries such as Sweden and Norway, who actively encourage low-educated newcomers to pursue further formal education, Italy – which sees a stronger demand for low-skilled labour than in Nordic labour markets – has taken a relatively hands-off approach to further education and bridging programmes among the low-educated immigrant population.

Figure 5

Participation in adult education and training is low in Italy

Self-reported participation in adult education and training in the four weeks preceding the survey, ages 25-54, 2023



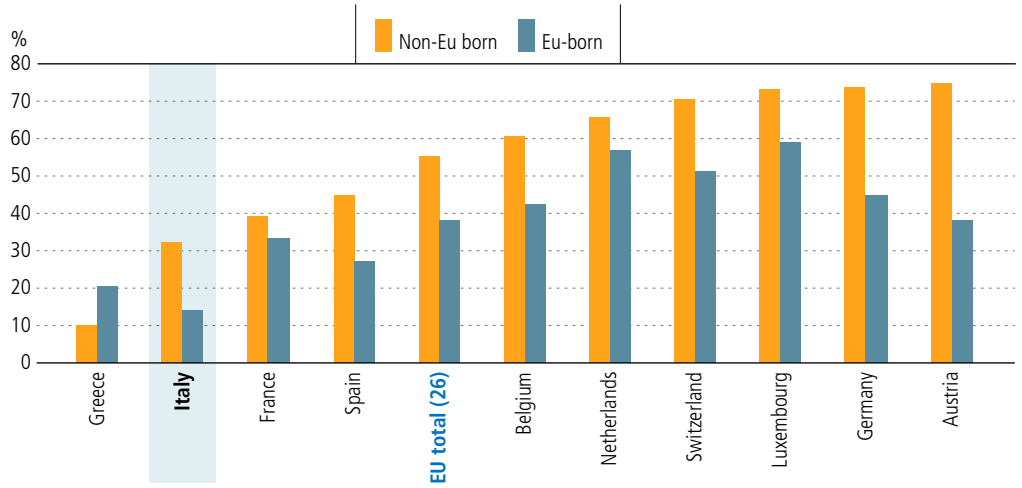
Source: European Union Labour Force Survey (EU-LFS) 2023.

According to data from the European Labour Force Survey, the enrolment of immigrants in languages courses is also low in Italy – among the lowest among all major destination countries (see **Figure 6**). Only around 30% of non-EU born and around half as many EU-born immigrants who have lived in Italy for fewer than ten years have taken part in a language course since their migration. Italy's language policy for migrants is structured around the Integration Agreement (*Accordo di integrazione*), which requires non-EU migrants aged 16 and above to achieve at least A2-level proficiency in spoken Italian within two years of their arrival (extendable to three).[6] This language requirement is a core element of the 30-point integration credit system: passing an A2 exam provides up to 24 credits, making it essential for maintaining legal residency (see **Box 3**).

Figure 6

Very few immigrants participate in language courses in Italy

Self-reported participation in language courses among immigrants who arrived less than ten years ago, excluding native speakers, ages 15-64, 2021



Source: European Union Labour Force Survey (EU-LFS) 2021.

Box 3 **The Evolution of Italy's 2012 Integration Agreement**

Introduced in 2012, the Integration Agreement is a formal commitment between the Italian State and newly arrived non-EU nationals to support integration through civic participation and language acquisition. It applies to third-country nationals aged 16 and above applying for a residence permit of at least one year.

Core Features

- **Mandatory upon first arrival**: Signed at the One-Stop Shop for Immigration or police headquarters when applying for a residence permit.
- **Points-based**: Migrants receive 16 initial credits and must earn a total of 30 credits within two years, through: Participation in civic orientation sessions; Attainment of Italian language proficiency at A2 level; Engagement in work, training, or health and housing services.
- **Monitoring and sanctions**: In cases of insufficient credits, migrants may receive a one-year extension; if no progress is made, residence permits may be revoked.
- **Exemptions**: Applies only to adults; exceptions include minors, trafficking victims, and persons with disabilities.

...

6. Certification must be obtained from authorized institutions.

This core structure of the integration agreement has remained largely intact since its introduction. However, recent updates have aimed to improve flexibility, reduce administrative barriers, and better align integration requirements with labour market needs. These updates include:

- Partial fulfilment: A 2023 Interior Ministry directive allows authorities to recognise "partial non-fulfilment," avoiding automatic denial of residence renewal in some cases. However, "partial nonfulfilment" remains an administrative interpretation and is not codified in law or regulation. As a result, practice varies regionally with some provinces issuing internal procedural guidance allowing migrants to renew permits even with shortfalls.
- Digitalisation of submission: As of July 2025, integration agreements and residence contracts must be submitted digitally within 8 days of arrival via the ALI portal. This replaces manual procedures at local offices.

Source: Italian Ministry of Interior.

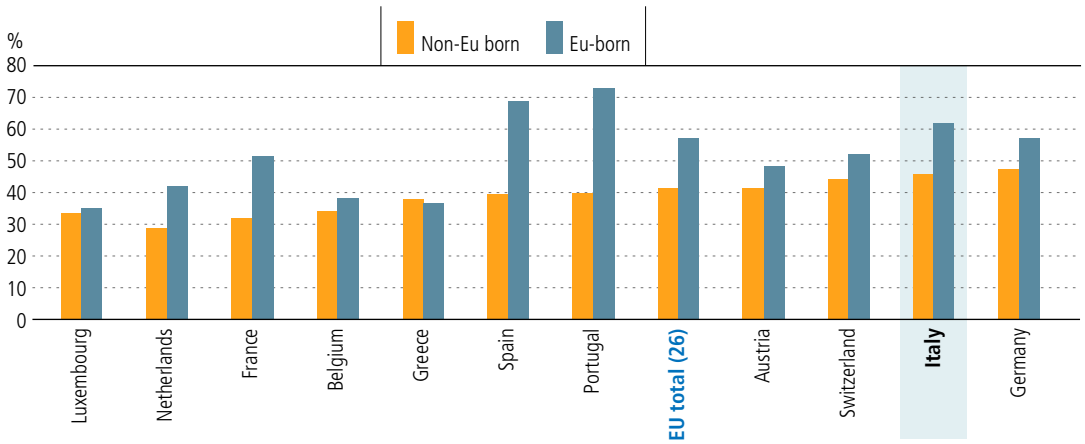
If documentation is lacking, migrants may take a state-administered language and civic knowledge test. Free courses and exam preparation are available through publicly funded adult education centres *(Centri Provinciali per l'Istruzione degli Adulti [CPIA])*. As such, the participation rate among non-EU born immigrants in Italy, at less than half that seen in peer countries such as the Netherlands, Switzerland, Luxembourg, Germany and Austria, is somewhat surprising.

Nonetheless, almost half of non-EU born migrants and more than three-fifths of EU-born migrants who arrived with a beginner's level (CEFR level A1) or less achieve advanced (CEFR level C1) or higher language proficiency after at least five years in the country (see **Figure 7**). This figure is high in international comparison, surpassed only by Germany for the non-EU born and Spain and Portugal for the EU-born. The share is even higher among those who arrived in Italy with intermediate language proficiency (CEFR level B1): 84% of EU-born migrants and 79% of non-EU born migrants reach fluency after having been in the country for five or more years.

Figure 7

Almost half of non-EU born migrants reach advanced or higher language proficiency after five years

Share of immigrants who arrived with a beginner's level (CEFR A1) or less and reached advanced (CEFR C1) or higher language proficiency after at least five years in the host country, ages 15-64



Source: European Union Labour Force Survey (EU-LFS) 2021.

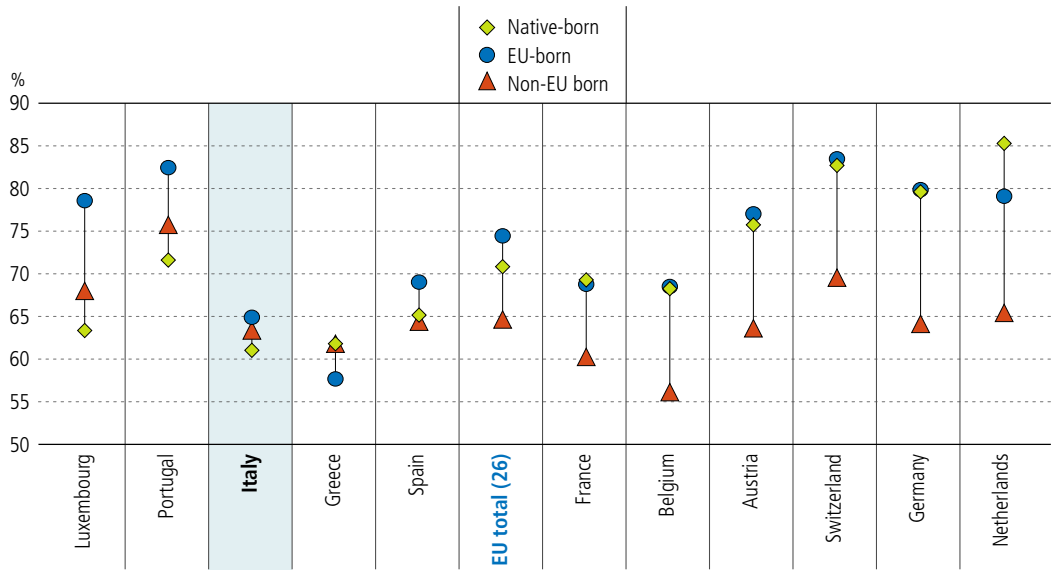
II.2. Employment

At 65% among EU-born migrants, and 63% among non-EU born migrants, Italy's immigrant population are more likely to be working than their native-born counterparts (see **Figure 8**). While it is not unusual for EU-born migrants to see relatively high employment rates, the disparity between those born outside the EU and the native-born is unique among the major destinations examined here.[7] These low levels, nevertheless, represent a strong increase since the depth of the Covid-19 crisis, from which immigrant employment recovered faster and stronger than that of the native-born population. Immigrants achieve particularly high employment rates in the North of Italy (68%), where they are slightly below those of the native-born (70%). Employment rates in the South are considerably lower at 52% but, nevertheless, exceed those of their native-born peers (48%). At the same time, the labour force participation rate is 5 p.p. higher among immigrants (71%) than among native-born Italians (66%), similar to Greece, Spain and Portugal. This is due to the higher employment rates among immigrants, but also the slightly higher unemployment rates (10% among foreign-born compared to 7% among native-born).

Figure 8

Immigrants are employed at higher rates than the native-born, but overall employment rates are low

Employment rates, ages 15-64, 2023



Note: This figure is sorted by gaps between the native-born and non-EU born immigrants.

Source: European Union Labour Force Survey (EU-LFS) 2023.

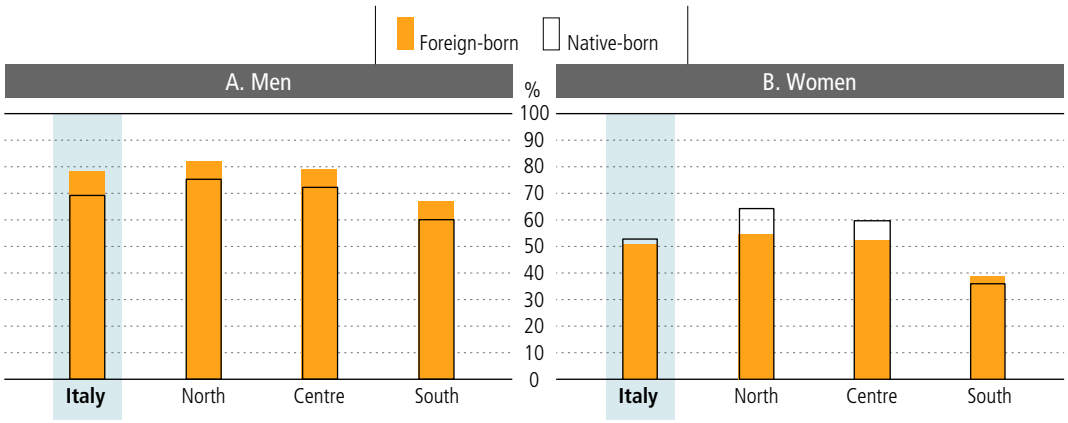
Employment rates among migrants in Italy are particularly high for men. Across Italy as a whole, the employment rate for foreign-born men is 8 p.p. higher than for native-born men (see **Figure 9**). Migrant men also achieve higher employment rates than native-born men in the different Italian regions, especially in the north of the country where the majority of job opportunities is concentrated. By contrast, migrant women have slightly lower employment rates than native-born women, particularly in the north and centre of the country, where the gap amounts to 9 p.p. and 7 p.p. respectively. In the south, however, migrant women have slightly higher employment rates than native-born women (by 3 p.p.), but the overall employment level in the region is very low, with rates below 40%.

7. The employment rates reported here differ from those published in the Ministry of Labour's 2024 Annual Report. This is because the two sources use different definitions when referring to "immigrants" (see **Box 1**). Consequently, the Ministry's Annual Report finds higher employment rates among Italian citizens (61.5%) than among non-EU citizens (60.7%), while this report shows higher employment rates among non-EU born immigrants (63.3%) than among the native-born (61.1%).

Figure 9

Migrant men in Italy have higher employment rates than their native-born counterparts, while migrant women have lower rates

Employment rates by gender and region in Italy, 15-64, 2023



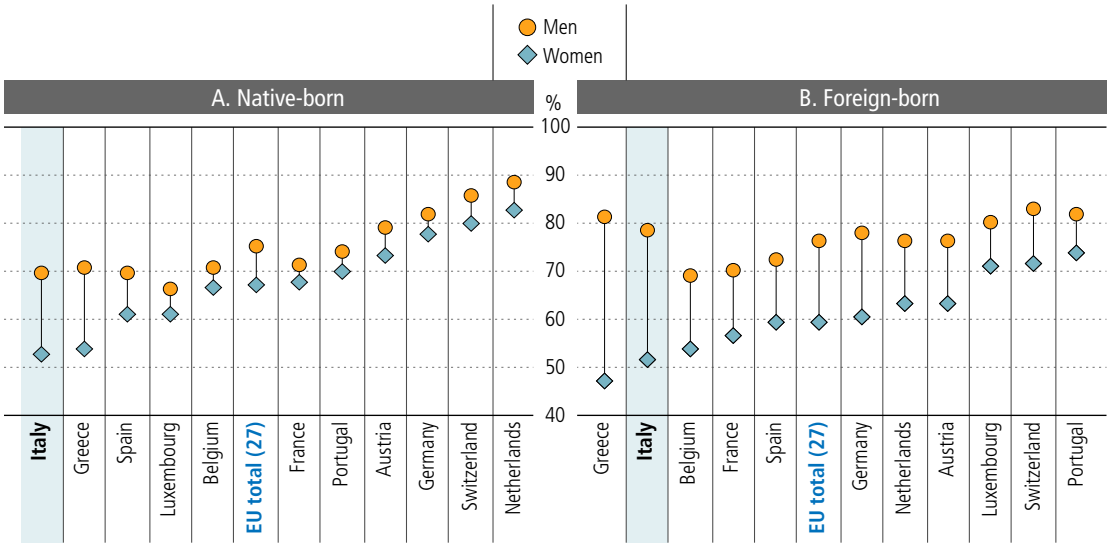
Source: European Union Labour Force Survey (EU-LFS) 2023.

Gender gaps in employment are large, reaching almost 30 p.p. among the foreign-born. Indeed, while gender gaps among Italy's native-born population are already the largest of the comparison countries at 16 p.p., they are twice as large among the foreign-born population (see **Figure 10**). Gender differences in inactivity rates in Italy are also the largest in the comparison group and are similar in magnitude to the gaps in employment rates (17 p.p. among the native-born and 27 p.p. among the foreign-born). Around two in five women in Italy are inactive, regardless of their origin. Care and family responsibilities are the main reason for the inactivity of 40% of inactive native-born women and 60% of inactive foreign-born women.

Figure 10

Gender gaps among the foreign-born in Italy reach almost 30 percentage points

Employment rates by gender, 15-64, 2023



Source: European Union Labour Force Survey (EU-LFS) 2023.

Migrant women are a large and diverse group whose potential is often underutilised. In Italy, four out of five migrant women of working age (15-64) have been living in the country for more than ten years – mostly in the North (58%). The majority have come via family migration (61%) and have a limited initial link with the labour market – only 20% of female family migrants who have been living in Italy for less than five years are employed.

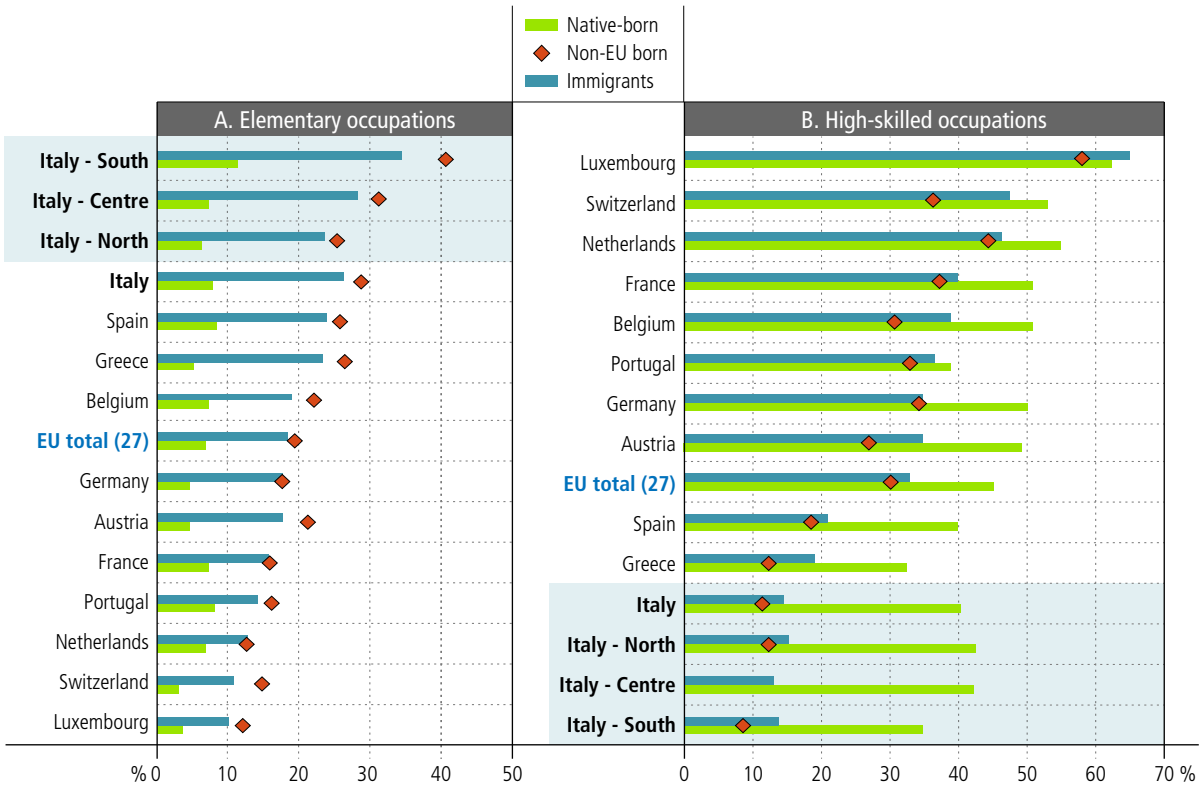
This link must be built through effective integration policy. This may include flexible integration policies, access to childcare solutions, as well as outreach – through neighbourhood initiatives, intercultural mediators from the local community and "second chance" programmes (OECD, 2020[9]).

Relatively strong employment rates among the foreign-born population are driven by those working in elementary occupations – particularly among those born outside the EU. More than one in four of Italy's immigrants work in elementary occupations, reaching over 29% – nearly one in three – of workers born outside the EU (see **Figure 11**). In the south, this proportion is even higher, at 35% among the foreign-born and 41% among the non-EU born. Such elementary occupations – which in Italy are largely concentrated in activities of households as employers of domestic personnel (27%), agriculture, forestry and fishing (15%), and administrative and support service activities (14%) – tend to be associated with little career progression or on-the-job learning. In contrast, a relatively small proportion of immigrant workers are able to access high-skilled occupations, which account for just 14% of immigrant employment, reaching as low as 10% among non-EU born in the south of Italy. These levels are the lowest seen in the major destination countries in Europe and immigrants fare significantly worse than native-born Italians, 40% of whom are employed in high-skilled occupations.

Figure 11

Immigrants are overrepresented in elementary occupations

Share of employed individuals working in low- and high-skilled occupations, ages 15-64, 2023



Note: The International Standard Classification of Occupations (ISCO) describes those who hold high-skilled jobs as senior managers, professionals, technicians and associate professionals (ISCO Levels 1-3). Elementary occupations require simple, routine tasks and, often, physical effort (ISCO 9).

Source: European Union Labour Force Survey (EU-LFS) 2023.

Beyond the heavy concentration in elementary work, informality and labour exploitation remain a serious concern. The disproportionate concentration of migrants in sectors such as agriculture and domestic/care work – which are challenging to regulate and enforce standards – and the irregular legal status of many migrants – that renders them more vulnerable to unlawful recruitment and undeclared work – combine to ensure that informality is rife (International Labour Organization, 2023[10]). Recent efforts to address exploitation include provisions within the law No 187/2024 to allow exploited foreign workers who collaborate with judicial authorities to

obtain a special residence permit valid for 6 months and renewable for up to 1 year or longer. The permit grants access to social services, education, and the labour market, facilitating integration into the formal economy, and should eventually be convertible into a permit for labour reasons. Beyond this, the new law increases funding for the implementation of individualised assistance programmes for victims, focusing on vocational training and social integration, including programmes supporting individuals to transition from exploitative conditions to formal employment.

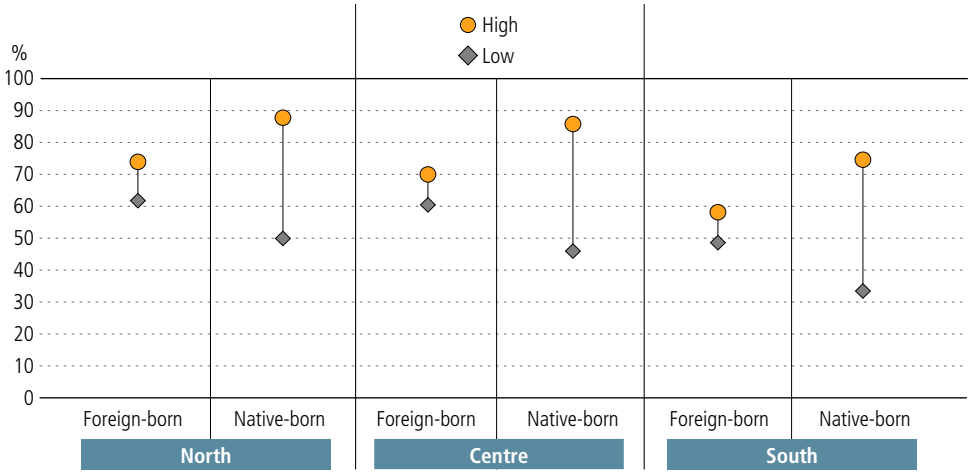
With an employment rate of just 72% among highly educated foreign-born, 16 p.p. lower than among those born in Italy, migrants' skills could be further activated. Indeed, among highly educated migrants born outside of the EU employment rates stand even lower at 69%, the lowest among major European destination countries apart from Greece. This stands in stark contrast with employment rates among highly educated migrants in Switzerland and Luxembourg, where employment rates among highly educated migrants hover around 90%.

The gap in employment between native-born with high and low levels of education is wider than the gap of the foreign-born across all three macro-regions in Italy (between 38 p.p. and 41 p.p.), indicating that educational attainment has more impact on employment prospects for the native-born than the foreign-born in Italy (see **Figure 12**). In a country where 34% of high-skilled employment is concentrated in the public sector, exclusion from public sector employment (see OECD [2014[3]]) is also, likely playing a role.[8] The relatively narrow gap in employment by education among the foreign-born in Italy (between 9 p.p. and 12 p.p.) suggests that structural barriers, such as under-recognition of foreign qualification, discrimination, lack of networks, or occupational downgrading, limit the advantages for migrants conveyed by a tertiary education.

Figure 12

Employment gaps between the low and highly educated are smaller for immigrants

Employment rates by educational attainment and region in Italy, ages 15-64, 2023



Source: European Union Labour Force Survey (EU-LFS) 2023.

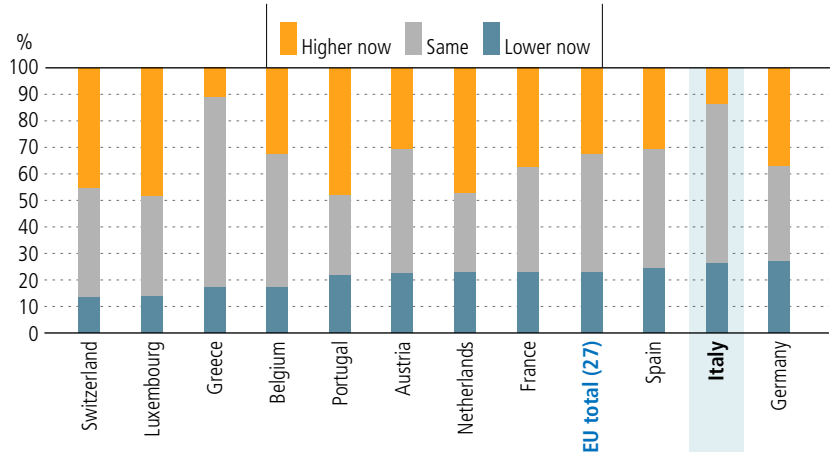
Many migrants in Italy also struggle to find jobs that match their skills. About one-fourth of immigrants work in a job that requires lower skills than the job they had before migrating (see **Figure 13**). This is the highest figure in the comparison group after Germany and 10 p.p. higher than in Switzerland, Luxembourg and Greece. Among highly educated foreign-born this figure rises to 42%. This is the highest share among the comparison countries and represents significant underutilisation of the potential of immigrants on the Italian labour market. Narrowing skill mismatch, through timely credential recognition, targeted training (including language training), anti-discrimination measures, and effective employment services will be a priority for Italy, not only to enhance productivity but also to support the well-being and integration of migrant workers.

8. The public sector encompasses jobs in public administration and defense, and compulsory social security (NACE Section O), education (NACE Section P), and human health and social work activities (NACE Section Q).

Figure 13

About one-fourth of immigrants work in a job that requires lower skills than the job they had before migrating

Skill equivalence between current job and last job before migrating among those immigrants who worked before migrating, ages 15-64, 2021



Note: The equivalence of skills is determined based on all the knowledge, abilities, competences and experience required for a person's last and current main job.

Source: European Union Labour Force Survey (EU-LFS) 2021.

Underutilisation of educational qualifications, however, goes beyond a situation in which individuals with tertiary education are employed in jobs that do not require their qualifications. It also extends to those whose skills remain unused due to barriers to labour market participation. This includes highly educated individuals who are unemployed, as well as those who are inactive – having become discouraged and exited the labour force, or whose time is taken by unpaid care responsibilities. This broader view of unutilised potential highlights the structural barriers – such as the importance of networks in finding high-skilled employment and insufficient targeted support for labour market entry – that prevent qualified individuals from contributing according to their potential.

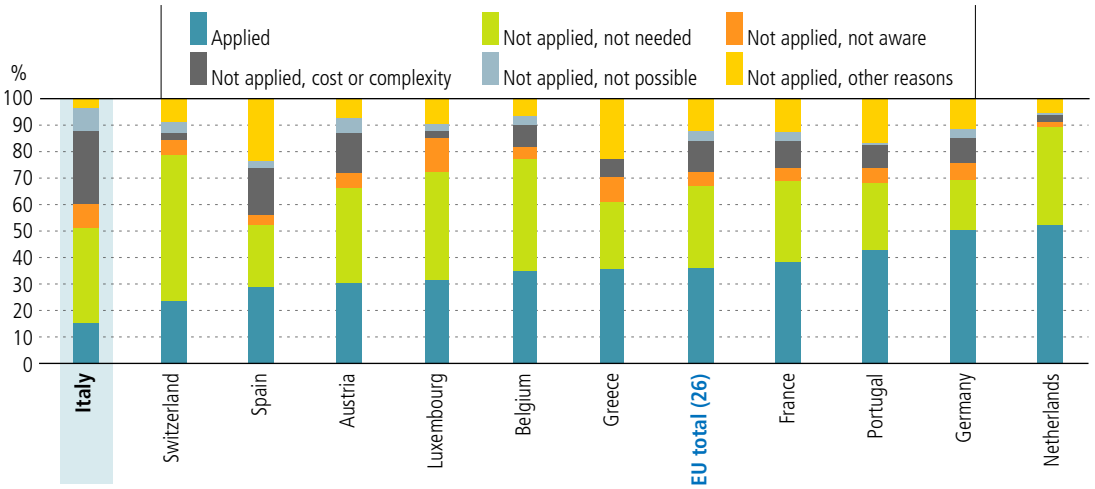
Alongside structural barriers highlighted above, recognition of foreign qualifications can often impede migrants from fully utilising qualification obtained abroad – particularly in regulated professions. Despite high levels of skills mismatch, however, only a minority of migrants in Italy – just 15% – apply to have their qualifications recognised (see **Figure 14**). This is the lowest among comparison countries. The majority of highly educated non-EU born migrants did not apply for recognition of their credentials because they felt either that recognition was not needed (36%) or because the process was costly or complex (28%). The latter, particularly, is stark in an international context and suggests strong scope for improvement in recognition policy. The application rate for recognition of qualifications is considerably higher among highly educated migrants with a degree in health (44%) (see **Figure 15 Panel A**). Of these, 36% had their qualifications recognised, 8% had not received recognition and less than 1% were still awaiting a decision. However, application rates in Italy were the lowest in the comparison group, being almost 30 p.p. below those in the Netherlands and Luxembourg. Among highly educated migrants with an engineering degree, application rates were slightly higher than in Switzerland and Greece, but at 15% still relatively low in international comparison (see **Figure 15 Panel B**).

Figure 16, below, illustrates the different aspects of underutilization of qualifications among foreign-born women (panel A) and men (panel B). The figure shows that a large proportion of highly educated migrants are either unemployed or, as is particularly the case for women, inactive. Indeed, in Italy, more than one in three highly qualified foreign-born women are unemployed or outside the labour force – a figure that rises to 45% in southern Italy. The gap with both men and with native-born women, underscores the extent to which many highly educated migrant women, particularly family migrants, are disconnected from the labour market (see OECD (2017[11]) for a further discussion).

Figure 14

Only 15% of highly educated non-EU born immigrants in Italy apply for foreign qualification recognition

Recognition of formal qualifications, applied or self-reported reason for not applying, highly educated non-EU born immigrants who obtained their highest formal qualification outside of their host country, ages 15-64, 2021



Source: European Union Labour Force Survey (EU-LFS) 2021.

Figure 15

A third of immigrants with a tertiary degree in health and a sixth of those with an engineering degree apply for recognition of their qualifications

Share of highly educated immigrants who have applied for recognition of their formal qualifications in health or engineering obtained abroad, ages 15-64, 2021

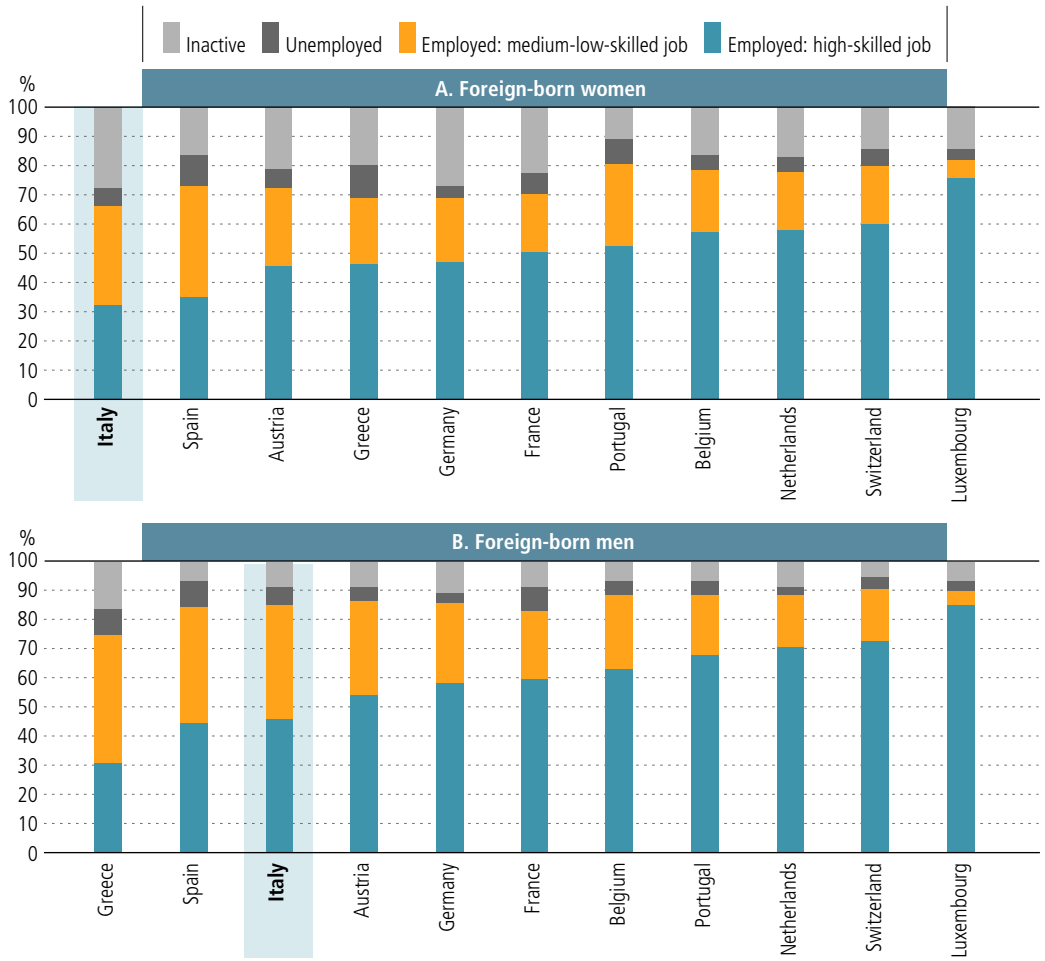
Note: The fields of study are based on the ISCED classification at the two-digit level. The field of study "health" corresponds to ISCED field 9 (health and welfare), while the field of study "engineering" corresponds to ISCED field 7 (engineering, manufacturing and construction).

Source: European Union Labour Force Survey (EU-LFS) 2021.

Figure 16

Highly educated migrants are not only working in low-skilled jobs, but are also inactive, particularly women

Share of highly educated immigrants by economic activity and sex, ages 15-64, 2023



Note: Countries are sorted in ascending order of the share of tertiary-educated employed in high-skilled jobs (well-matched).

Source: European Union Labour Force Survey (EU-LFS) 2023.

III Social integration

Key takeaways

- Relative poverty among immigrants in Italy is among the highest in the OECD, affecting around one-third of the foreign-born population and remaining prevalent even among those in employment.
- Housing cost overburden appears moderate, but this largely reflects severe overcrowding and substandard living conditions, with migrants more than twice as likely as the native-born to live in overcrowded dwellings.
- Migrants report relatively good overall health, yet unmet medical needs remain significantly higher than among the native-born, pointing to persistent barriers in effective access to healthcare.
- Low rates of naturalisation and limited political participation reflect restrictive citizenship rules and lengthy, uncertain pathways to nationality.

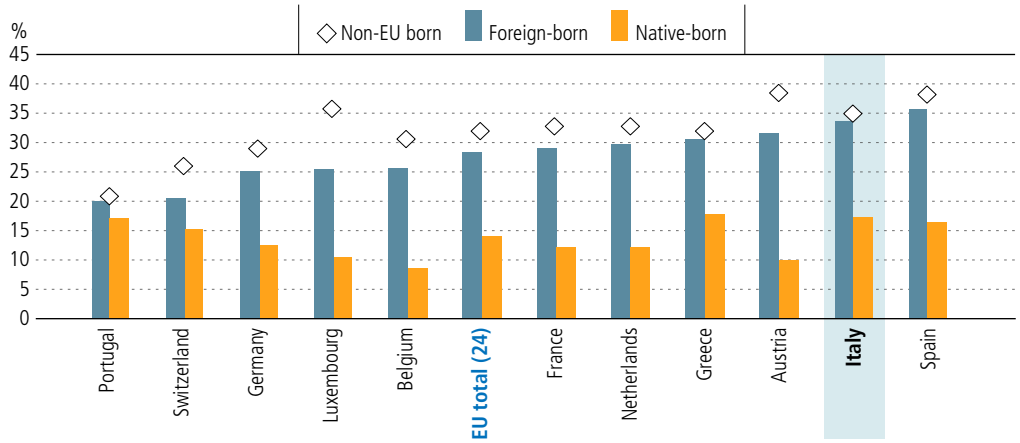
III.1. Relative poverty

Relative poverty rates among the foreign-born population in Italy are among the highest among comparable countries. Around one third of Italy's foreign-born population lives in relative poverty –double the rate observed among the native-born, which is already among the highest in the comparison group, surpassed only by Greece (see **Figure 17**). Relative poverty is defined as having an equivalised disposable household income below 60% of the national median equivalised disposable income.[9] This stark disparity points to persistent barriers faced by migrants in accessing stable, well-paying jobs and adequate social protection. Indeed, even among those who are employed, more than two in every five migrants in Italy are unable to climb out of relative poverty (see **Figure 18**).

Figure 17

Immigrants are twice as likely to experience relative poverty as the native-born

Relative poverty rates, ages 16 and above, 2023 or latest year available



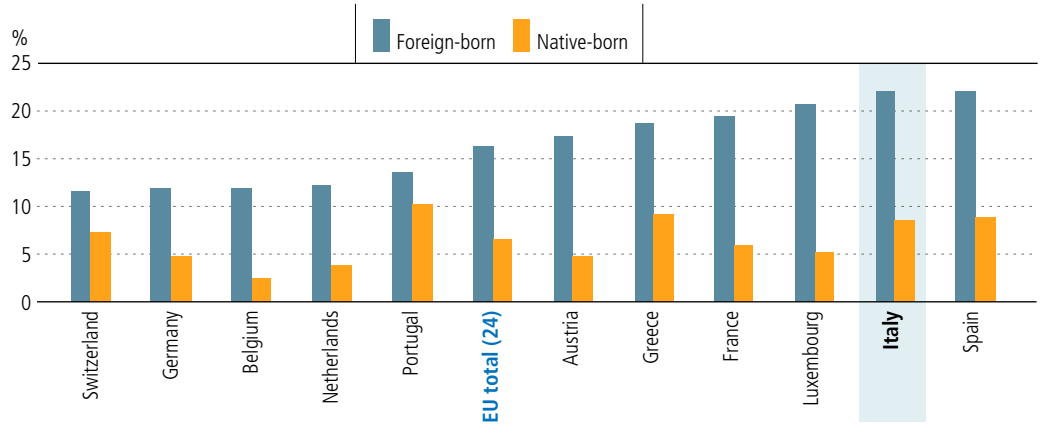
Source: European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) 2023 (2022 for Switzerland).

9. This differs from the measure used in the Ministry of Labour's annual report, which assesses absolute poverty. The measure of absolute poverty is based on the monetary cost of a basket of essential goods and services deemed necessary to avoid severe social exclusion.

Figure 18

Immigrants in employment are almost three times as likely to experience relative poverty as the native-born

Relative poverty rates among employed persons, ages 16 and above, 2023 or latest year available



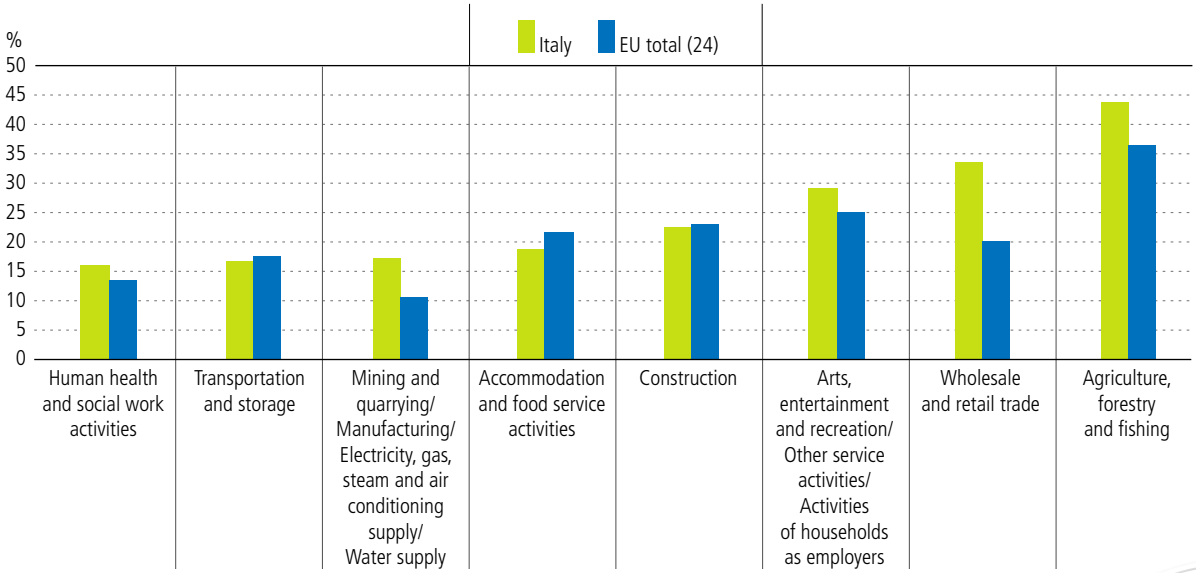
Source: European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) 2023 (2022 for Switzerland).

This puts in-work relative poverty 6 p.p. higher among Italy's migrants, than among those in the EU on average, and reflects the concentration of migrants in low-quality jobs. Migrants with fixed-term employment contracts are more affected by relative in-work poverty than those with permanent contracts, and poverty rates decrease with increasing length of residence in Italy. In-work poverty is particularly prevalent among migrants employed in agriculture, wholesale and retail trade, arts, other service activities and in private households (see **Figure 19**).

Figure 19

In-work poverty particularly affects migrants working in agriculture and wholesale and retail trade

Relative poverty rates among employed immigrants by sector, ages 16 and above, 2023 or latest year available



Source: European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) 2023 (2022 for Switzerland).

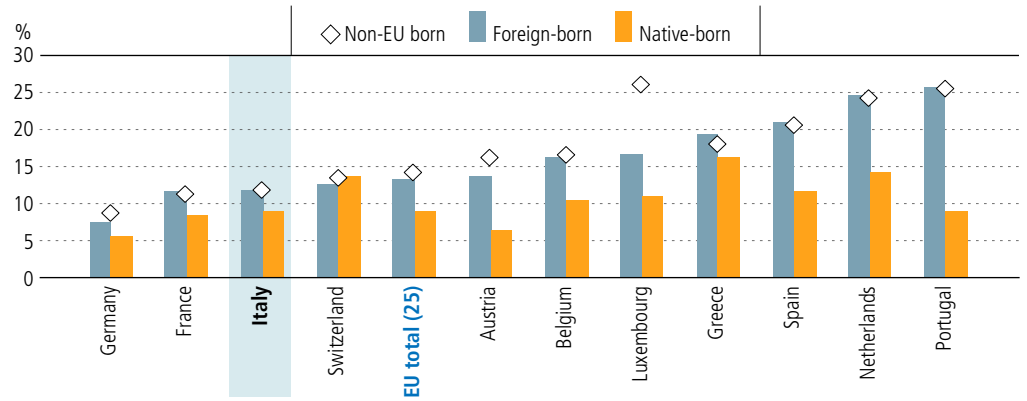
III.2. Housing

Access to adequate housing remains a key challenge for migrants in Italy, particularly in terms of overcrowding. Migrants in Italy face a lower housing cost overburden rate than the EU total and a more similar overburden rate than the native-born population —largely because they often live in poorer-quality housing and in overcrowded conditions (see **Figure 20**). In fact, 35% of foreign-born residents live in overcrowded dwellings – one of the highest rates among comparable OECD countries and more than twice the rate of the native-born population (see **Figure 21**). Furthermore, these figures are likely to be an underestimation of the housing difficulties facing migrants in Italy, as those living in some of the worst conditions in informal settlements are unlikely to be captured in the survey data.[10]

Figure 20

Relatively few immigrants in Italy are overburdened by housing costs

Housing cost overburden rates (percentage of households that spend over 40% of their disposable household income on rent), ages 16 and above, 2023 or latest year available

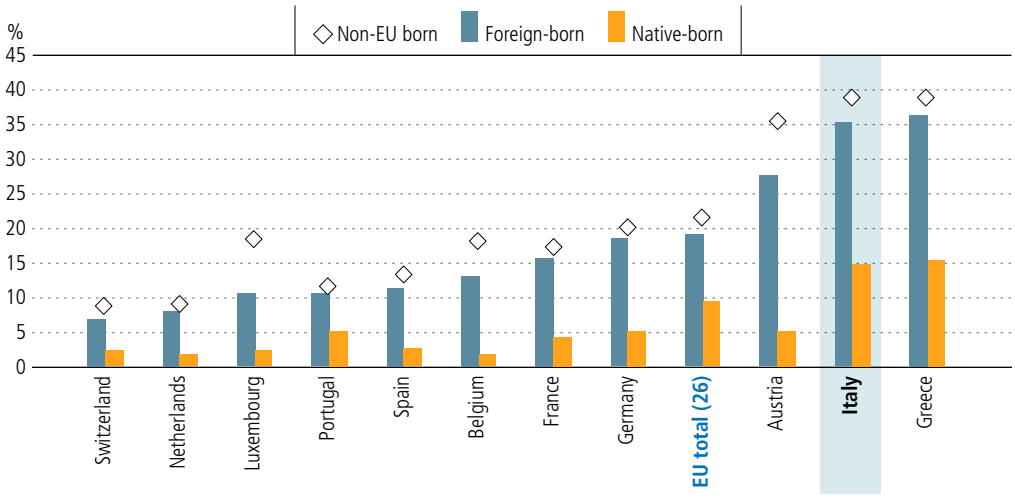


Source: European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) 2023 (2022 for Switzerland).

Figure 21

More than a third of immigrants live in overcrowded dwellings

Persons living in overcrowded dwellings, ages 16 and above, 2023 or latest year available



Source: European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) 2023 (2022 for Switzerland).

10. The EU-SILC focuses on persons residing in private households, i.e. it also doesn't cover persons residing in collective accommodation (e.g. many asylum seekers).

III.3. Health and access to healthcare

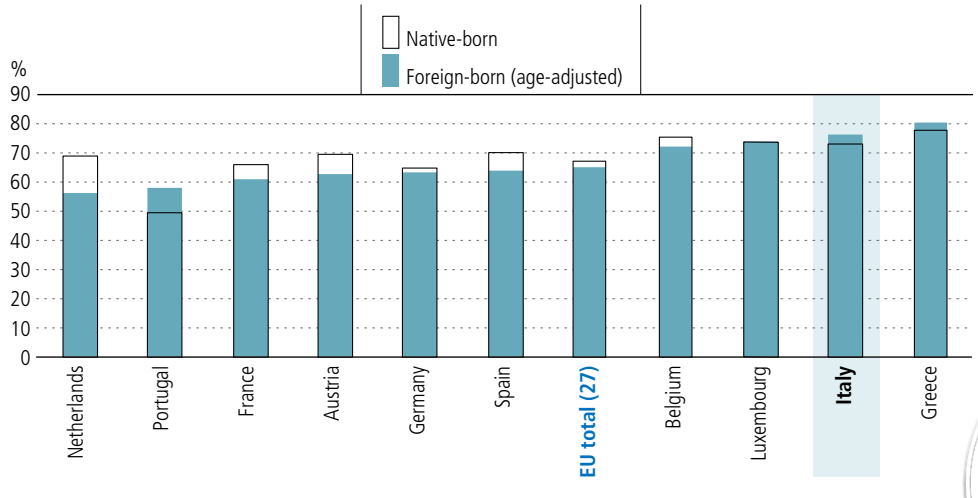
Health status is strongly related to age. As a result, migrant populations, who tend to be younger than the native-born population in their host countries, often report to be in relatively good health. However, socio-demographic factors, as well as precarious work and crowded living conditions can mean that migrants may face elevated exposure to infectious diseases (Devilla Nova, Colombo and Spada, 2020[12]) or occupational hazards. Mental health burdens are also often higher, especially among refugees, asylum-seekers, or migrants who experienced trauma, uncertain legal status or social isolation.

Self-reported health status among migrants exceeds that of native-born Italians. In many OECD countries, when differing age profiles are accounted for, self-reported health status among migrant populations tends to fall below that of their native-born counterparts (see **Figure 22**). Italy, however, is one of relatively few exceptions to this rule, with over 76% of migrants rating their health as good or better – 3 p.p. higher than the native-born populations. Indeed, while perceived health has increased among both foreign- and native-born in Italy over the last decade, the increase has been substantially larger among the (age-adjusted) foreign born (OECD, 2023[13]).

Figure 22

Self-reported health status among migrants exceeds that of native-born Italians

Persons reporting to be in good health, ages 16 and above, 2023



Source: European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) 2023.

Access to care is formally guaranteed for legal residents under the national health system. In Italy, legal foreign residents are covered by the *Servizio Sanitario Nazionale* (SSN) and, since 1998, undocumented immigrants have access to urgent and essential services. However, while formal entitlement exists, practical barriers such as those arising from language or knowledge gaps can undermine de facto access.

Indeed, the percentage of foreign-born with unmet medical needs in Italy, at 9%, is substantially higher – more than double – than among the native-born, 4%, even when differing age structures are accounted for. The magnitude of this disparity is among the largest in the European Union.

III.4. Political and social participation

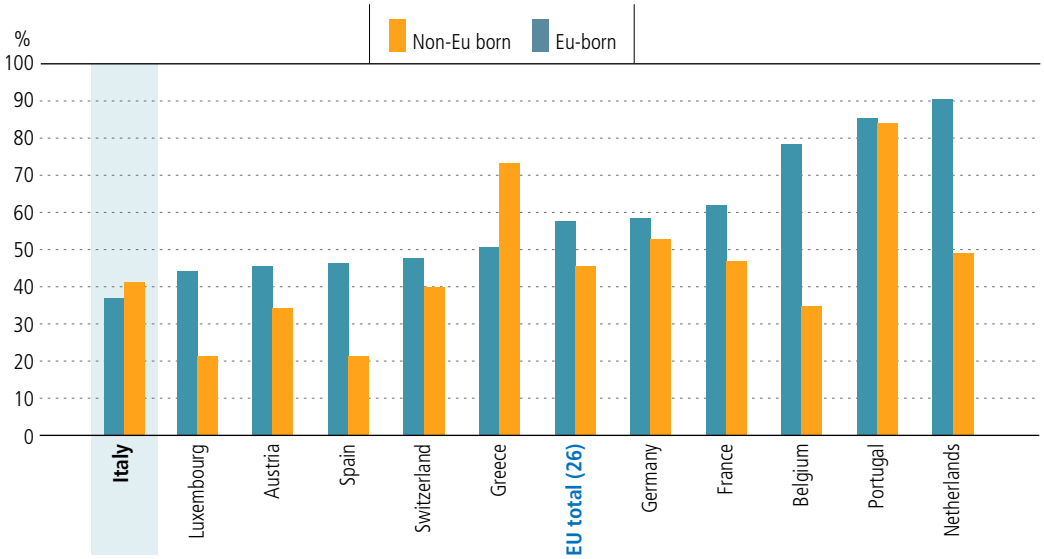
Italy's citizenship framework rooted in Law 91/1992, is based primarily on the principle of jus sanguinis, granting citizenship by descent to individuals with at least one Italian parent. The naturalization pathway, on the basis of residence, remains among the least inclusive in the OECD. For those without ancestral ties, the standard requirement is ten years of legal residence for naturalisation – double the five years required in the majority of OECD countries. The process is highly discretionary, and even eligible applicants face long delays,

uncertain outcomes, and strict documentation requirements. Indeed, even among immigrants with at least ten years of residence just two in every five migrants have obtained Italian nationality. This is substantially below the OECD total of three in every five, and the lowest of the comparison countries examined in this report (see **Figure 23**).

Figure 23

Only two out of five immigrants with more than ten years of residence are Italian nationals

Host-country nationals among immigrants with at least ten years of residence, ages 15 and above, 2023



Source: European Union Labour Force Survey (EU-LFS) 2023.

For decades, Italy's citizenship framework has posed challenges for the children of migrants, allowing only limited and delayed access to citizenship: children born in Italy to non-Italian parents could only apply for citizenship at age 18, and only if they had resided legally and continuously in the country since birth. The process required a formal declaration before their nineteenth birthday, creating a very narrow – and often missed – opportunity for legal recognition. This is also reflected in the data – almost two in five native-born young people (ages 15-34) with two foreign-born parents do not have Italian citizenship, which is the lowest share in the comparison group. For those who were not born in Italy even those who arrived at a young age and had spent most of their formative years in the country, the situation was even more restrictive. They were excluded from the provisions allowing acquisition of citizenship at 18 and were instead obliged to navigate the standard naturalisation process, which typically requires ten years of legal residence and is subject to discretionary approval. As a result, many young adults raised in Italy found themselves at legal risk upon turning 18, often needing to secure a residence permit for study or employment to maintain their legal status. In 2023, only 38% of young people (ages 15-34) born abroad who immigrated to Italy before the age of 15 had Italian citizenship.

IV Vulnerable groups

Key takeaways

- Native-born children of immigrants in Italy show relatively strong educational performance, with small reading gaps compared to peers with native-born parents, but many report feelings of social exclusion at school.
- Early participation in childcare among children with immigrant mothers is comparatively high, supporting early integration, yet later educational tracking may limit long-term opportunities.
- Young people with immigrant parents experience weak labour market outcomes, with low employment and high inactivity during the school-to-work transition.
- Humanitarian migrants achieve strong employment outcomes over time, often outperforming other migrant groups, but they remain heavily concentrated in manufacturing, accommodation and food services, and construction sectors.

This section highlights the integration outcomes of two vulnerable groups: the children of migrants and humanitarian migrants – that, while not inherently vulnerable, often face particular integration challenges.

IV.1. Native-born children of migrants

Ensuring the successful integration of the children of immigrants is essential not only for equity, but also for fostering inclusive growth. Migrant populations and their native-born children, who number more than 300 000 in Italy, make an important contribution to offsetting demographic decline in many ageing societies (OECD, 2025[4]). Well-integrated children of immigrants are more likely to contribute positively to their host societies – socially, economically, and civically – while poor integration outcomes risk perpetuating disadvantage and undermining public confidence in migration systems. Despite progress in some countries, children of immigrants continue to face persistent barriers in both education and the labour market and Italy is no exception in this regard.

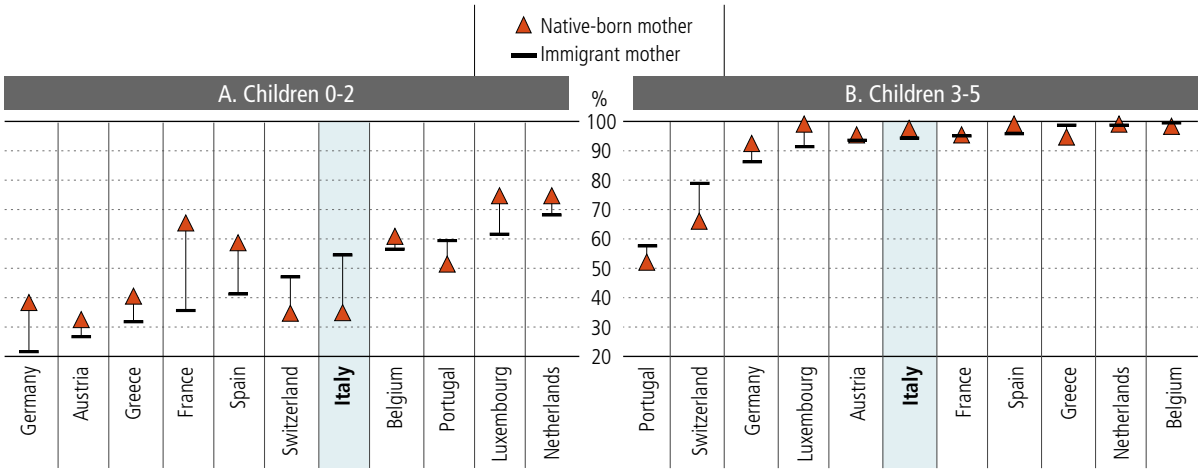
Early childhood education and care (ECEC) plays a critical role in promoting cognitive, linguistic, and social development, and is particularly important for children of migrants, as it supports early language acquisition, fosters integration, and helps level the playing field before formal schooling begins. In Italy, slightly more than half (54%) of children aged 0-2 with an immigrant mother participate in formal ECEC. This is in line with OECD comparison countries but – unusually in an OECD context – substantially higher than participation rates among children with an Italian-born mother (34%), who may be more able to rely on extended family networks. Indeed, enrolment in ECEC for young children with an Italian-born mother is among the lowest in international comparison (see **Figure 24**).[11] Relatively high enrolment rates among children with a foreign-born mother continue to be seen among children aged 3-5, at which point ECEC enrolment rises also among children with an Italian-born mother bringing it in line with other major OECD destination countries. However, compulsory schooling in Italy does not begin until the age of 6 and therefore cannot explain the increase in enrolment rates in this age group.

11. Alongside more limited access to childcare support from extended family, migrants – who tend to be poorer than their native-born counterparts - may be less likely to afford private childcare, less likely to be employed in positions opening access to maternity leave and more likely to rely on public means-tested ECEC.

Figure 24

Immigrants use formal childcare services at higher rates than the native-born

Use of formal childcare services by native-born and immigrant mothers, 2022 or latest year available



Note: Share of children enrolled in formal childcare during a typical week. Formal childcare services include preschool, compulsory school, centre-based services, day-care centres, and professional childminders. Data cover women of all ages.

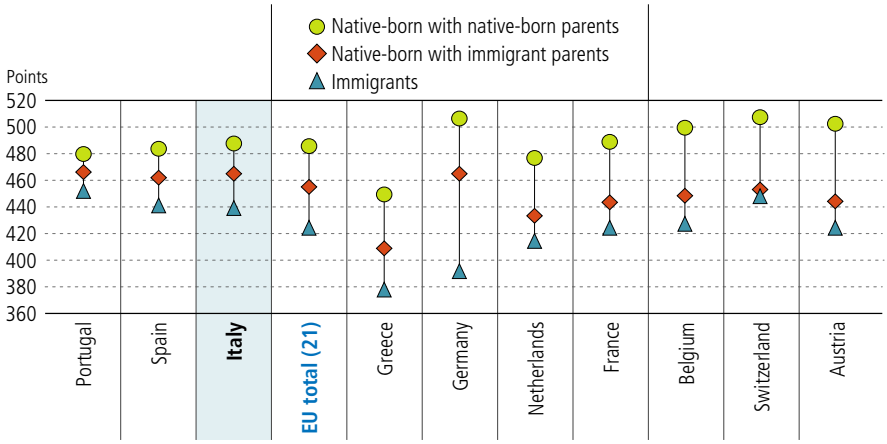
Source: European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) 2022 (2019 for Switzerland).

This relatively strong educational start among the children of migrants in Italy appears to translate into a relatively small penalty in literacy scores among the children of the foreign-born in Italy. Indeed, by the age of 15 children with foreign-born parents score just 22 points behind their peers with native-born parents on the PISA reading assessment. At just over the equivalent of a year of schooling,[12] this disparity is low by international standards – falling below the EU total, and less than half the disparity seen in France, Belgium, Switzerland and Austria where the difference ranges between the equivalent of two to three years of schooling (see **Figure 25**). Despite this, the children of migrants do not feel well integrated in school in Italy. Indeed, a full 20% report feeling awkward or out of place at school – over 5 p.p. higher than their peers with parents born in Italy (see **Figure 26**).

Figure 25

Native-born pupils with immigrant parents have high reading proficiency in international comparison

Mean PISA reading scores, ages 15-16, 2022



Note: This figure is sorted by gaps between native-born pupils with immigrant parents and native-born pupils with native-born parents. Caution is required when interpreting estimates for the Netherlands, because one or more PISA sampling standards were not met (see OECD (2023[14]) for more information).

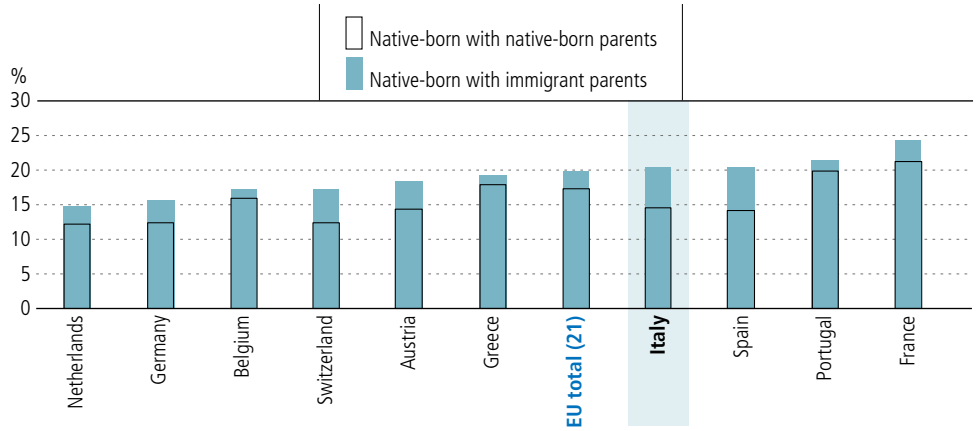
Source: OECD, PISA 2022 Database.

12. A recent publication estimates that the average yearly learning gain of students in reading based on PISA data is about one-fifth of a standard deviation or 20 score points (Avvisati and Givord, 2021[15]).

Figure 26

Two out of five pupils with immigrant parents feel awkward and out of place at school

Pupils who feel awkward and out of place at school, ages 15-16, 2022



Note: Caution is required when interpreting estimates for the Netherlands, because one or more PISA sampling standards were not met (see OECD (2023[14]) for more information).

Source: OECD, PISA 2022 Database.

The Italian school system has a strong and early academic-vocational tracking structure, more rigid than in many other OECD countries. Such early tracking tends to have a negative impact on foreign-born children, and native-born children of migrants. In the first place this is because tracking based on early school performance can disadvantage children who come to school with language and social deficits, a high proportion of whom come from migrant families. In the second place, this is because early educational choices are often heavily influenced by parents' knowledge of the school system, and confidence in their ability to provide the necessary economic support for choices that involve a longer educational pathway. Alongside more prevalent economic uncertainty, migrant parents tend to be less aware of the pathways available in the school system and to what kind of employment they give access to or prohibit. Indeed, a large proportion of those native-born children with migrant parents who continue their education beyond compulsory schooling enrol in vocational training, compared to a much smaller proportion of their peers with native-born parents (OECD, 2014[3]). Once they enter the labour market, fewer than one in every four of the children of immigrants works in high-skilled occupations – this is among the lowest shares among the comparison countries – and the disparity with children with native-born parents (12 p.p.) is among the largest in international comparison (see **Figure 27**).

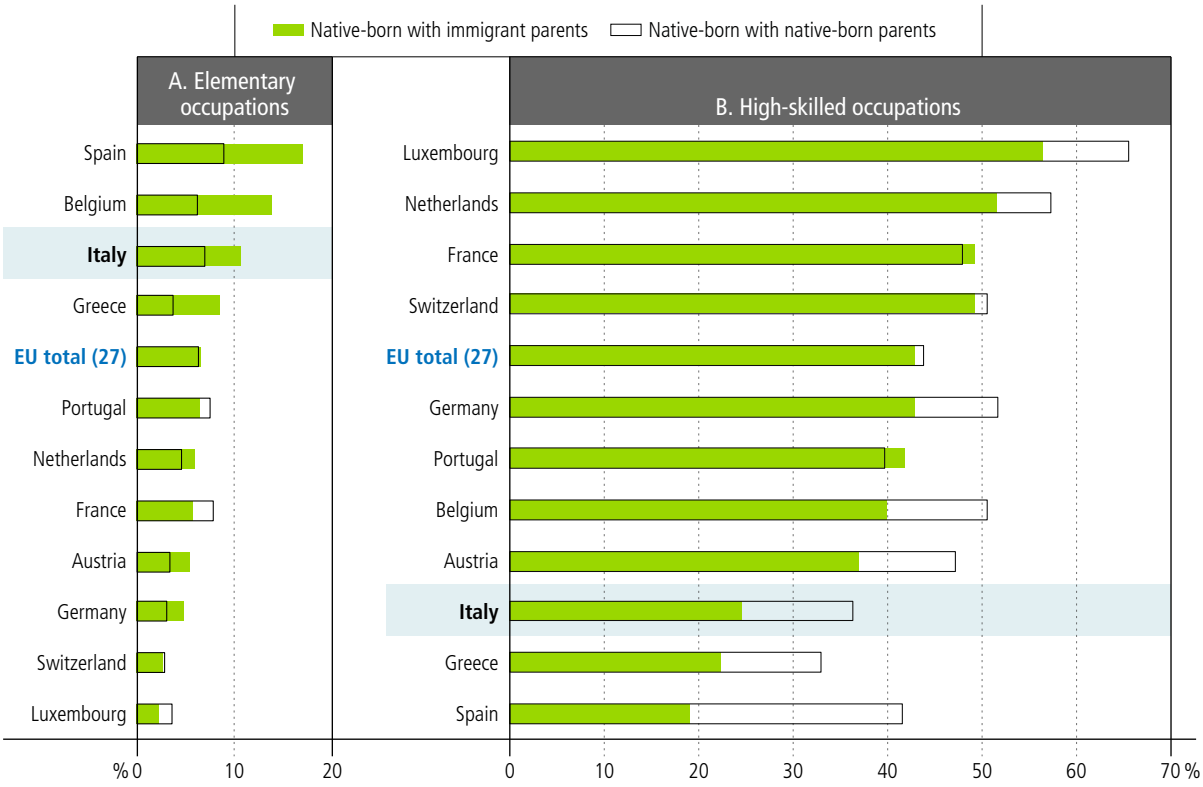
The challenges faced by children of migrants are also evident in their transition from school to work. Around one in ten young people born in Italy to migrant parents are not in formal education nor training and have not completed more than lower secondary education (see **Figure 28**). As such, children of immigrants are slightly more likely to leave school prematurely than their peers with native-born parents. However, at 2 p.p., the gap is not very large and is in line with the gap that can be observed in the EU as a whole. Among young people who have immigrated to Italy themselves, the dropout rate is considerably higher and stands at 16%, placing Italy third after Spain and Austria.

Disparities in employment rates are large with employment rates among native-born children of migrants falling substantially behind both those with native-born parents, and those who were born abroad (see **Figure 29**). Among youth (15-34) who are not in education, just over one in every two (54%) of those with foreign-born parents are employed. This falls nearly 20 p.p. behind the EU total for those with foreign-born parents, and 16 p.p. behind those who were born abroad or born in Italy to native-born parents. Young native-born women with immigrant parents have the lowest employment rates (46% among those with non-EU origins compared to 39% among those with EU origins). While the children of migrants who have obtained a high level of education see higher employment rates (77%) this remains the lowest among comparison countries and the disparity with children with native-born parents is larger than among the low-educated (see **Figure 30**).

Figure 27

Few native-born children with immigrant parents obtain jobs in high-skilled occupations

Share of employed young people working in low- and high-skilled occupations, ages 15-34, 2023



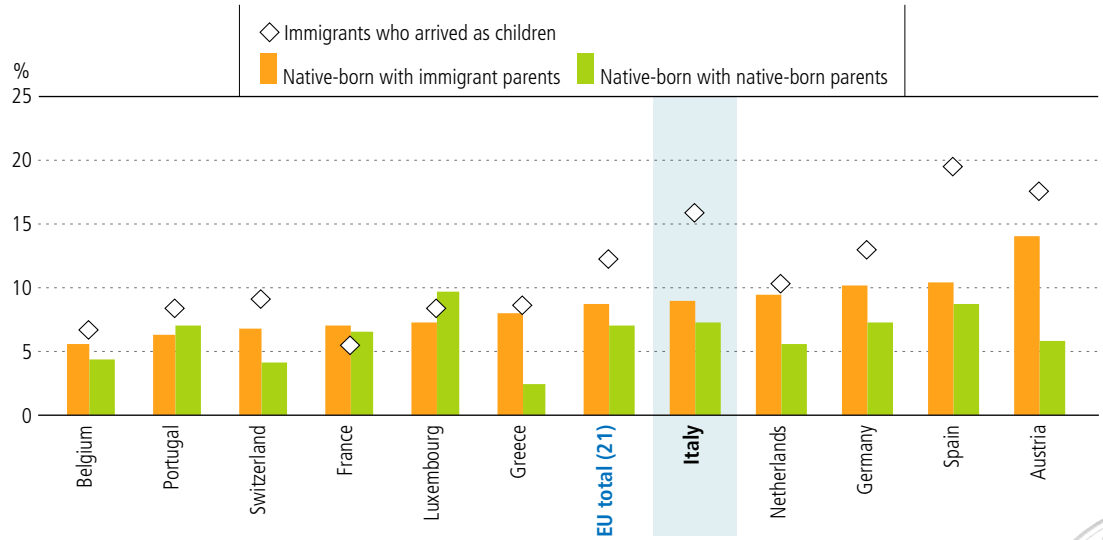
Note: The International Standard Classification of Occupations (ISCO) describes those who hold high-skilled jobs as senior managers, professionals, technicians and associate professionals (ISCO Levels 1-3). Elementary occupations require simple, routine tasks and, often, physical effort (ISCO 9).

Source: European Union Labour Force Survey (EU-LFS) 2023.

Figure 28

Almost one in ten children of immigrants leave school prematurely

Share of youth neither in education nor training, and who have gone no further than lower secondary school, ages 15-24, 2023

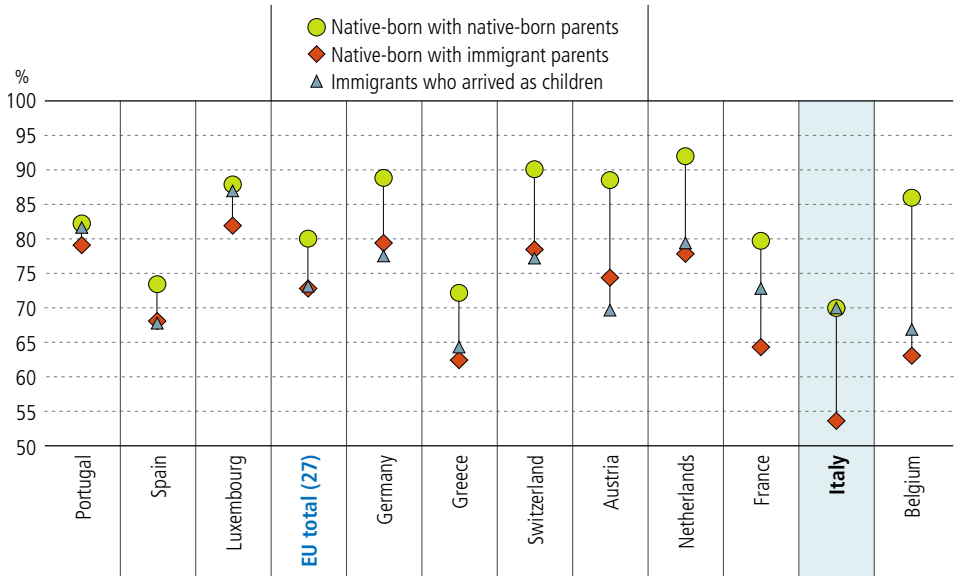


Source: European Union Labour Force Survey (EU-LFS) 2023.

Figure 29

Disparities in employment rates are large

Employment rates of young people, not in education, ages 15-34, 2023



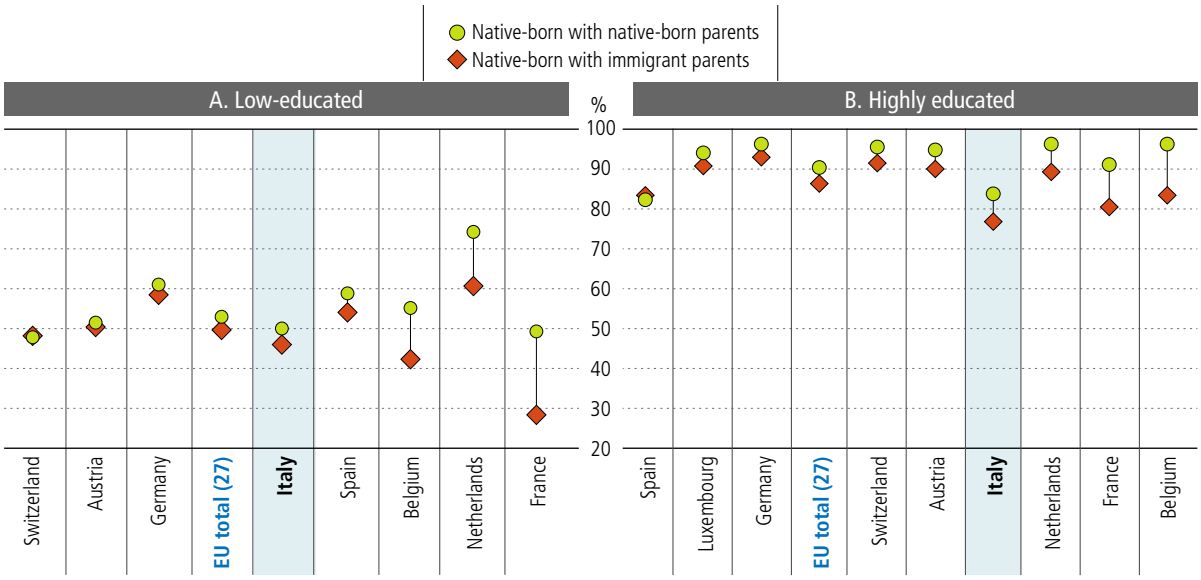
Note: This figure is sorted by gaps between native-born pupils with immigrant parents and native-born pupils with native-born parents.

Source: European Union Labour Force Survey (EU-LFS) 2023.

Figure 30

Employment rates are low among highly educated children of migrants in international comparison

Employment rates of young people by educational attainment, ages 15-34, not in education, 2023



Note: This figure is sorted by gaps between native-born pupils with immigrant parents and native-born pupils with native-born parents.

Source: European Union Labour Force Survey (EU-LFS) 2023.

IV.2. Humanitarian migrants

Italy has progressively become a destination for humanitarian migrants since the early 1990s, initially marked by a surge in arrivals following the Albanian revolution and during the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia (OECD, 2014[3]). Asylum applications rose in the mid-2010s, peaking between 2015 and 2017, before declining sharply towards the end of the decade. Nonetheless, a slight increase has been observed again since 2020.

Between 2013 and 2023, approximately 163 000 humanitarian residence permits were issued. Furthermore, as of May 2025, Italy has received over 175 000 individuals displaced by Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine (UNHCR, 2025[8]). Internationally comparable data on the integration outcomes of refugees is extremely limited and, for the moment is based-upon self-declared data from the European Labour Force Survey (EU-LFS). While these data may not be fully consistent with permit data, they represent the most reliable data source currently available for comparing the integration outcomes of humanitarian migrants across different EU-OECD countries (see **Box 4**).

Box 4 **Internationally comparable data on the integration of humanitarian migrants**

Data on humanitarian migrants is generally scarce. In most countries, administrative records are limited to flow-type data on the number of refugees and humanitarian migrants entering the country and receiving (or being denied) residence in a year. Census data are better suited to provide information on the size and characteristics of a population at a point in time and typically allow to identify immigrants via information on country of birth. However, information that would allow to identify humanitarian migrants (e.g. category of admission, or reason for migration) is rare. When available, country of birth and year of arrival may be used to proxy specific cohorts, but this remains a rough estimate as it assumes full refugee-recognition rates for certain origin groups and ignores potential prior migration history.

A third potential source of data is survey data. A key advantage of surveys is their flexibility, in that they may include questions allowing to clearly identify refugees or humanitarian migrants as well as a wide range of other relevant characteristics and integration-relevant outcomes. When harmonized across countries, cross-national surveys can also allow international comparisons of results using consistent definitions and methodology. Nevertheless, refugee populations can be difficult to capture in surveys, as refugees can be harder to reach than other migrants due to unstable or collective housing (which are excluded from most survey collections), privacy concerns, language barriers, and reluctance to self-identify because of stigma or mistrust. These challenges can result in higher non-response and underrepresentation in standard household surveys.

These limitations notwithstanding, the European Labour Force Survey (EU-LFS) provides some of the best available information for cross-national analyses of refugee integration. As the largest household survey in Europe, the regular EU-LFS delivers relatively large migrant samples compared to other cross-national surveys and non-specialized national surveys – even if subsamples for refugees can be limited, given the reasons above. Importantly, the bi-annual item "reason for migration" allows to identify self-reported humanitarian migrants who indicate "for purposes of international protection" as their reason for migration. Admittedly, this variable is not a perfect measure for legal refugee status, as respondents may underreport or misclassify their migration motive, and some refugees may have entered through family, work, or study channels rather than the asylum system. Nevertheless, even this imperfect proxy is a rare and valuable feature among large-scale cross-national surveys. The EU-LFS also includes a fair range of background variables and detailed labour market variables that are central to integration analysis. Despite its shortcomings, a crucial advantage of the EU-LFS over national or specialised surveys lies in its harmonised design across EU and EFTA countries, which makes it uniquely suited for the international comparisons and trend monitoring.

Sources: UNECE (2012[16]), Weitzman et al. (2024[17]), Eurostat (2025[18]), OECD/UNHCR (2025[19]).

According to the EU-LFS 2023, most humanitarian migrants living in Italy originate from African countries, while 31% come from European countries outside the EU/EFTA. A further 20% of humanitarian migrants were born in an Asian country. Around two thirds of humanitarian migrants in Italy have been living there for less than ten years. This relatively high proportion of recent arrivals places Italy at the upper end of the distribution, surpassed only by Germany (72%) and Spain (83%). Around three out of four humanitarian migrants are of prime working-age (25-54), which represents a great workforce potential and highlights the importance of their integration into the labour market. Over half of all humanitarian migrants in Italy reside in densely populated areas, while 34% of the native-born and 37% of the general foreign-born population live in densely populated areas.

More than 40% of humanitarian migrants in Italy have completed no more than lower secondary education. This is one of the highest shares of low-educated humanitarian migrants among major destination countries, surpassed only by the Netherlands (45%), Germany (50%) and Switzerland (55%). What is more, almost one in ten have completed only primary education. In contrast, the proportion of highly educated humanitarian migrants stands at 14%. The share of highly educated is especially high among humanitarian migrants who have arrived within the past ten years (19%) and is markedly lower among humanitarian migrants who have been in the country for more than ten years (8%).

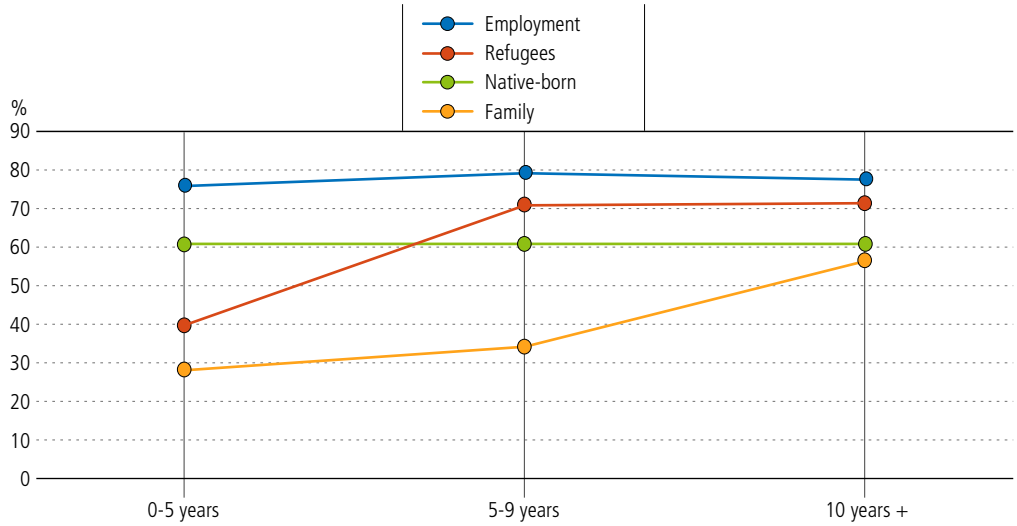
While nearly nine out of ten humanitarian migrants arrive in Italy with at most beginner level Italian, within five years, nine out of ten report at least intermediate level skills. This is the most significant progress among European destinations for which data is available.

In Italy, the employment rate of humanitarian migrants stands at 66%, which is the highest rate in the comparison group, apart from Portugal. The employment rate of humanitarian migrants in Italy is also higher than the employment rate of the native-born (61%) and the total foreign-born population (64%), but lower than for migrants who come to Italy for work (77%). This may be partially linked to the fact that most humanitarian migrants in Italy are men. In 2023, 68% of all humanitarian migrants were men, which is the highest share among comparison countries, with only Austria (62%) and Switzerland (61%) also surpassing 60%. This high share may result in higher overall employment rates as, on average, immigrant men are employed at higher rates than immigrant women.

Figure 31

Employment outcomes are substantially better among humanitarian migrants who have been in the country for over five years

Employment rates by reason for migration and years of residence in Italy, ages 15-64, 2023



Note: The categories are based on the self-declared reason for migration stated by respondents in the EU-LFS. Consequently, individuals identifying as humanitarian migrants may have entered Italy not only as asylum seekers but also through other legal channels.

Source: European Union Labour Force Survey (EU-LFS) 2023.

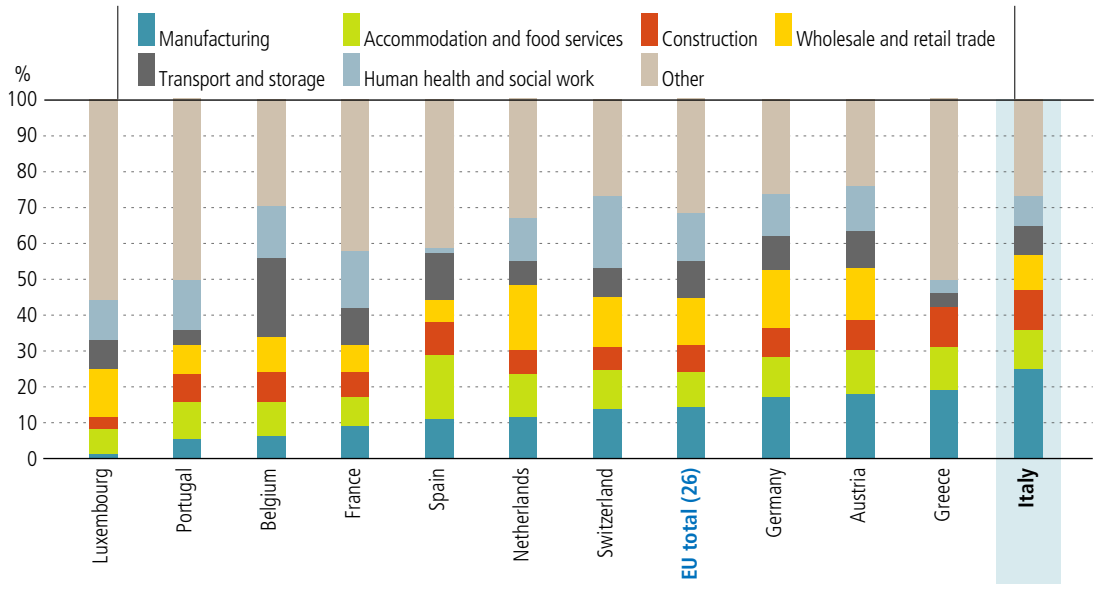
The employment rate of humanitarian migrants increases markedly with the length of time they have lived in the host country. Although it is not possible to follow individual humanitarian migrants over time using the EU-LFS, the data shows that those who have lived in Italy for more than five years have a higher employment rate than those who have arrived more recently (see **Figure 31**). The increase in the employment rate amounts to more than 30 p.p., which is substantially higher than that observed for family or labour migrants. However, it is not possible to determine the extent to which this increase is due to integration or a result of the different characteristics of different cohorts of humanitarian migrants.[13]

The lower level of education of humanitarian migrants is also reflected in the type of jobs they perform. Around one in four humanitarian migrants works in elementary occupations requiring a low skill level and around one in five works in service and sales occupations, requiring a medium skill level. Although the proportion of humanitarian migrants working in elementary occupations in Italy is relatively high, it is not the highest in the comparison group and is lower than in Belgium, Greece and Spain. Furthermore, humanitarian migrants' employment in Italy is concentrated in certain sectors (see **Figure 32**). Over half of all humanitarian migrants are employed in the manufacturing (25%), accommodation and food services (11%), construction (11%) and wholesale and retail trade (10%) sectors. Italy has the highest proportion of humanitarian migrants employed in the manufacturing sector in the comparison group, surpassing the EU total by 10 p.p.

Figure 32

Humanitarian migrants in Italy are mainly working in the manufacturing, accommodation and food services, and construction sectors

Main sectors of employment of humanitarian migrants, ages 15-64, 2023



Source: European Union Labour Force Survey (EU-LFS) 2023.

13. As it is cross-sectional data, the EU-LFS does not permit disentangling cohort composition or time related effects from duration of stay.

V Conclusion

While Italy has long been an important destination for migrants, its integration outcomes have not always kept pace with the potential of its immigrant population. This report highlights both the strengths and the persistent challenges that continue to shape the integration landscape. On the one hand, immigrants in Italy contribute meaningfully to the labour force. Recent arrivals are increasingly well-educated, and the children of immigrants are showing encouraging results in education, including relatively strong literacy performance by international standards. Humanitarian migrants, too, demonstrate strong labour market attachment over time.

On the other hand, returns to education among the migrant population are limited. Employment is often concentrated in low-skilled occupations – particularly the agriculture and care sectors – adult education and training remains limited, and returns to education are low. High levels of poverty and overcrowded housing among the foreign-born underscore the need for more inclusive social policies, while restrictive naturalisation rules continue to delay full civic inclusion for long-settled migrants and their children. As the country navigates demographic pressures and evolving labour market demands, effective integration policies will be critical to ensuring sustainable growth and an equitable society.

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Annex. Additional tables

Table 1

Employment rates by citizenship, ages 15-64, 2023

Percentages

	Citizens	EU citizens	Non-EU citizens
Italy	61	64	61
Greece	62	44	62
Luxembourg	65	78	65
Spain	66	67	60
Belgium	68	66	47
France	69	70	56
EU total (26)	71	74	60
Portugal	72	73	73
Austria	76	76	60
Germany	80	79	57
Switzerland	82	83	66
Netherlands	84	79	61

Source: European Union Labour Force Survey (EU-LFS) 2023.

Table 2

Share of employed individuals working in low- and high-skilled occupations, ages 15-64, 2023

Percentages

	Elementary occupations			High-skilled occupations		
	Citizens	EU citizens	Non-EU citizens	Citizens	EU citizens	Non-EU citizens
Switzerland	3	9	17	54	50	32
Luxembourg	4	10	12	65	64	62
Germany	5	20	20	50	30	33
Austria	5	15	24	49	40	26
Greece	5	31	34	32	13	7
EU total (26)	7	18	24	45	34	26
Netherlands	7	14	14	54	47	53
France	8	20	19	51	36	32
Italy	8	25	33	39	13	9
Portugal	8	7	21	39	50	24
Belgium	8	15	27	49	46	31
Spain	9	16	31	39	26	15

Source: European Union Labour Force Survey (EU-LFS) 2023.

Table 3

Relative poverty rates, ages 16 and above, 2023 or latest year available

Percentages

	Citizens	EU citizens	Non-EU citizens
Belgium	10	21	37
Austria	11	23	44
Luxembourg	12	26	33
Germany	13	19	34
France	13	19	45
Netherlands	14	22	38
EU total (24)	14	22	38
Switzerland	16	16	35
Spain	17	30	48
Portugal	17	13	27
Italy	18	30	39
Greece	18	19	33

Source: European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) 2023 (2022 for Switzerland).

Table 4

Relative poverty rates among employed persons, ages 16 and above, 2023 or latest year available

Percentages

	Citizens	EU citizens	Non-EU citizens
Belgium	3	9	19
Netherlands	4	4	24
Germany	5	11	16
Austria	5	11	28
Luxembourg	7	22	26
France	7	13	28
EU total (24)	7	13	22
Switzerland	8	7	23
Italy	9	20	25
Greece	9	9	20
Spain	9	18	31
Portugal	10	14	19

Source: European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) 2023 (2022 for Switzerland).

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