

## Mobility of the Innocents: Foundlings and their descendants in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Florence\*

There is a strong presumption among scholars that pre-modern Italy was not a mobile society. As summarised by Alfani (2021), inequality had continuously increased across the Peninsula from the 15<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. However, most existing studies have focused on the upper tail of the socio-economic status distribution, analysing persistence among the elites. This paper aims to contribute to the debate by using new archival evidence to explore social mobility patterns among a group of people who started their life at the bottom of the status distribution: foundling descendants in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century province of Florence, identified by means of the characteristic surname Innocenti. The use of surnames to study social mobility has increased in the past decade (Clark et al. 2015): the rarer the surname the tighter the link. Instead of using rare surnames, we use a common surname of certain linkage. Combining different sources, we build a novel dataset to estimate the Innocenti share in the population. We compute indirect estimates of the Innocenti social status, by comparing their frequency in well-defined status groups with that in the population. We find that during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries foundlings' descendants were overrepresented among prison inmates and underrepresented among top income taxpayers, inheritance taxpayers, and in city directories. Relative representation was regressing towards the average, but at different rates. Our estimates are considerably lower than Clark's near-universal persistence rate of 0.80 and than the long-run persistence found by Barone and Mocetti (2020). This view "from below" suggests surprising mobility for an economy that even in the 1930s was only semi-industrialised. Even if persistence was very high in the elite, in the rest of the distribution mobility was possible. However, looking at a direct measure of socio-economic status – income in 2005 –, we find persistence of lower social status in the very long run: Foundling descendants still lag behind the control group in income.

Alfani, G. 2021. "Economic Inequality in Preindustrial Times: Europe and Beyond." *Journal of Economic Literature* 59 (1): 3–44.

Barone, G., and S. Mocetti. 2020. "Intergenerational Mobility in the Very Long Run: Florence 1427–201." *Review of Economic Studies* 0: 29.

Clark, G., N. Cummins, Y. Hao, and D.D. Vidal. 2015. "Surnames: A New Source for the History of Social Mobility." *Explorations in Economic History* 55 (January): 3–24. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.eeh.2014.12.002>.

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