



REP

Centro di Ricerca sugli Enti Pubblici Società di Fondazione Etica

EMPLOYEES IN PROVINCIAL CAPITAL MUNICIPALITIES

Too many and too expensive?

Myths to debunk

Introduction

Public attention toward provincial capital municipalities (CPs) is almost always focused on political dynamics, policy choices, or the most visible outcomes of administrative action, while far less frequently it considers the organizational conditions that make the implementation of public policies concretely possible. Yet without an adequate administrative structure, no intervention can be effectively designed, managed, or carried out. It is also for this reason that, for years, European institutions have emphasized the issue of administrative capacity, recognizing it as an essential condition for the quality of public action and for the resilience of administrations, especially at the territorial level.

From this perspective, the issue of personnel takes on central importance. The size and average age of the workforce, their ratio to the population served, and the weight of personnel expenditure represent key dimensions for understanding the structure and functioning of municipalities. These are not merely accounting or organizational variables, but factors that directly affect the ability of local authorities to ensure administrative continuity, oversight of functions, management of procedures, and delivery of services. For this reason, analyzing municipal personnel means examining a core component of local administrative capacity.

It is within this framework that the work of the Research Center on Public Entities (REP) is situated. Through the systematic collection and analysis of data that administrations are required to publish on their institutional websites in compliance with transparency obligations, REP produces each year a comparative mapping of the overall performance of public administrations, including provincial capital municipalities. This approach makes it

possible to observe the structure of these entities from a comparative perspective, to highlight patterns and deviations, and to identify elements that help interpret the strengths and potential weaknesses of individual administrations.

The analysis that follows focuses in particular on two closely intertwined dimensions: **personnel expenditure and workforce size**. The aim is not to determine abstractly what the appropriate level of spending or the optimal number of employees should be, but rather to empirically reconstruct the main configurations that emerge from comparisons among municipalities, thereby providing a more robust framework for interpreting their administrative structure. From this perspective, personnel are not considered merely as a cost item, but as a decisive lever of the administrative capacity of local authorities.

Public employees: how (not) to interpret the numbers

A key issue that emerges in the analysis of public employees concerns the absence of a regulatory benchmark or at least a shared criterion regarding what constitutes the optimal staffing level in a municipality, as well as in other types of public bodies.

In administrative and institutional debate, the topic of municipal personnel is in fact almost always addressed in terms of hiring constraints or expenditure containment, while it is far less frequently considered from the perspective of organizational adequacy. In other words, **the regulatory framework defines the financial limits within which a municipality may recruit**, or the extent to which personnel expenditure must remain compatible with budgetary balance, but it does not provide a general, uniform and directly applicable parameter that would make it possible to determine how many employees an authority “should” have in order to be adequately structured, nor, consequently, what the “appropriate” level of personnel expenditure should be.

The absence of a single official standard **is not merely a technical detail**, but an element that has a profound impact on the ability to interpret data. The guidelines for the preparation **of workforce planning documents clarify** that the definition of staffing needs **cannot be reduced to a purely replacement logic** or to a standardized count of units to be recruited, but must be developed in coherence with the overall planning of the administration, with the organization of offices, with work processes, and with the objectives to be pursued. The same approach therefore implicitly acknowledges that there is no simple and generalizable threshold applicable to all administrations, since actual staffing needs depend on the specific combination of functions, services, organizational structure, and territorial context

The current regulation on **the hiring capacity** of municipalities also confirms this approach. Legislative Decree of 17 March 2020, adopted in implementation of Article 33 of Decree Law 34/2019, introduced a system based on the **ratio between personnel expenditure and current revenues**, identifying threshold values that regulate the possibility of expanding or containing expenditure. However, this is a **criterion of economic and financial sustainability rather than one of organizational adequacy**. It makes it possible to determine whether an authority has hiring margins consistent with its financial equilibrium, but it does not allow one to state, strictly speaking, whether that municipality has a sufficient, insufficient, or optimal number of employees in relation to the functions it is required to perform and the citizens it must serve.

It is precisely because of this regulatory gap that the present work gains significance, with the aim of using comparative data from CP municipalities to highlight possible recurring configurations of municipal administrative structures based on demographic size and/or geographic dimension.

More employees for more inhabitants? Not always

To analyze the positioning of municipalities with respect to personnel management, the first indicator considered is **the number of permanent employees per 1,000 inhabitants**. This indicator therefore assesses the numerical size of the staff available to the authority in relation to the population served.

The results show a **wide gap between the two extremes of the ranking**. On one side, **Caserta and Catanzaro** operate with a workforce of fewer than 3 permanent employees per 1,000 inhabitants (2.8 and 2.9 respectively). On the other side, Trieste and Siena can rely on a workforce that is **four times larger** (12.1 and 11.5 respectively).

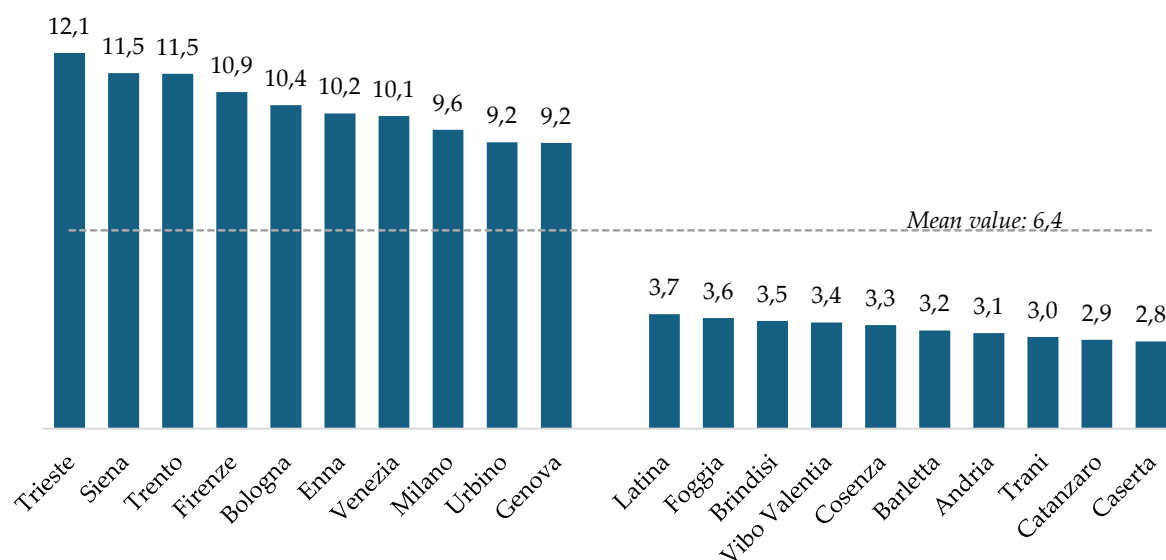
The resulting question is whether the number of employees in **Trieste and Siena** should be considered excessive, or whether those in Caserta and Catanzaro should be considered insufficient. As explained above, in the absence of pre-established benchmark values, it is only possible to report the data for each municipality, bearing in mind that prevailing public opinion tends to view administrations that spend less, and therefore have fewer employees, more favorably.

Beyond common assumptions, the only question we can address today is **whether Trieste and Siena, with larger workforces, perform better than Caserta and Catanzaro**. Against an average value of 6.4 permanent employees per 1,000 inhabitants, the indicator is less than half that level in Caserta and Catanzaro, while it is roughly double in Trieste and Siena, with what effects on administrative capacity?

The answer emerging from the analysis appears to show a correlation between the number of employees and the REP Administrative Capacity Index. Siena and Trieste, in fact, achieve an overall positive assessment (with an index of 63 and 51 out of 100 respectively), while Caserta and Catanzaro record an assessment below the passing threshold (with an index of 36 and 40 out of 100 respectively). This suggests that **a lower number of employees may negatively affect the overall performance of an administration**.

More generally, Figure 1 shows that the ten provincial capitals with **the lowest staffing levels are all located in Southern Italy, with the exception of Latina**. Conversely, **the capitals with the highest staffing levels are all in Central and Northern Italy, with the exception of Enna**. This is a fact that should be taken into account in the implementation of any public personnel strategy.

Figure 1 – Permanent staff per 1,000 inhabitants – Top & Bottom 10



Source: REP Administrative Capacity Index – elaboration based on MEF data (2023)

The tables below illustrate some examples of municipalities with **similar population sizes but a very different ratio of permanent employees per 1,000 inhabitants**, highlighting the need to intervene through hiring and other targeted measures in order to address such excessive and unjustified heterogeneity among administrations.

Often, municipalities in Central and Northern Italy have a higher number of employees relative to their population, but this is not a fixed rule.

Despite Isernia having a population burden 48% higher than Urbino, its staff size is 22% lower. Urbino maintains a staff density (9.2) almost twice that of the municipality in Molise (4.9).

Entity	Permanent staff	Population	Permanent staff per 1,000 inhabitants
Urbino	128	13.849	9,2
Isernia	100	20.616	4,9

With a comparable catchment population (around 30,000 inhabitants), Vibo Valentia operates with 106 employees and a ratio of 3.4 permanent employees per 1,000 inhabitants, one of the lowest values recorded in the sample, whereas Oristano has 190 permanent employees and a ratio of 6.3 per 1,000 inhabitants.

Entity	Permanent staff	Population	Permanent staff per 1,000 inhabitants
Oristano	190	30.007	6,3
Vibo Valentia	106	30.913	3,4

With a ratio of 8.8, Mantua has a professional workforce more than double that of Chieti (3.7), despite having a comparable number of inhabitants.

Entity	Permanent staff	Population	Permanent staff per 1,000 inhabitants
Chieti	180	48.434	3,7
Mantova	437	49.673	8,8

Although they serve almost identical populations, Pordenone employs 476 staff members compared to 202 in Avellino (a 135% difference). This gap can be attributed to the greater managerial autonomy typical of the Friuli context.

Entity	Permanent staff	Population	Permanent staff per 1,000 inhabitants
Avellino	202	51.910	3,9
Pordenone	476	52.371	9,1

Siena, with a slightly smaller population, has almost four times the staff of Trani. Siena's ratio (11.5) indicates a broad organizational structure, while Trani's value (3.0) points to a staffing level at the bare functional minimum.

Entity	Permanent staff	Population	Permanent staff per 1,000 inhabitants
Siena	608	52.991	11,5
Trani	162	54.751	3,0

Aosta and Gorizia show significantly higher ratios compared to Nuoro, although all three municipalities belong to Special Statute Regions.

Entity	Permanent staff	Population	Permanent staff per 1,000 inhabitants
Nuoro	202	33.106	6,1
Aosta	301	33.136	9,1
Gorizia	294	33.666	8,7

In this homogeneous demographic range (45,000 inhabitants), Ascoli Piceno stands out for its staffing density, while Lodi shows a highly lean model, with a difference of about 3 employees per 1,000 inhabitants compared to the capital of the Marche region.

Entity	Permanent staff	Population	Permanent staff per 1,000 inhabitants
Rieti	268	45.169	5,9
Ascoli Piceno	330	45.310	7,3
Lodi	184	45.349	4,1
Vercelli	231	45.978	5,0

With a population of around 92,000 inhabitants, the two northern municipalities, La Spezia and Alessandria, show a higher staffing density than the southern municipality of Barletta. In particular, La Spezia operates with almost twice the relative number of staff compared to Barletta.

Entity	Permanent staff	Population	Permanent staff per 1,000 inhabitants
Barletta	292	92.010	3,2
Alessandria	468	92.518	5,1
La Spezia	575	92.711	6,2

As mentioned above, Trieste stands out as an absolute outlier among the CP municipalities, with a workforce more than double that of Parma and almost three times that of Prato. This figure can presumably also be attributed to its status as a Special Statute Region.

Entity	Permanent staff	Population	Permanent staff per 1,000 inhabitants
Prato	898	198.326	4,5
Trieste	2.407	198.668	12,1
Parma	1.124	198.986	5,7

Regional focus: Tuscany

The analysis of Tuscan provincial capitals reveals a region characterized by an overall relatively strong staffing endowment, but with significant peaks in density.

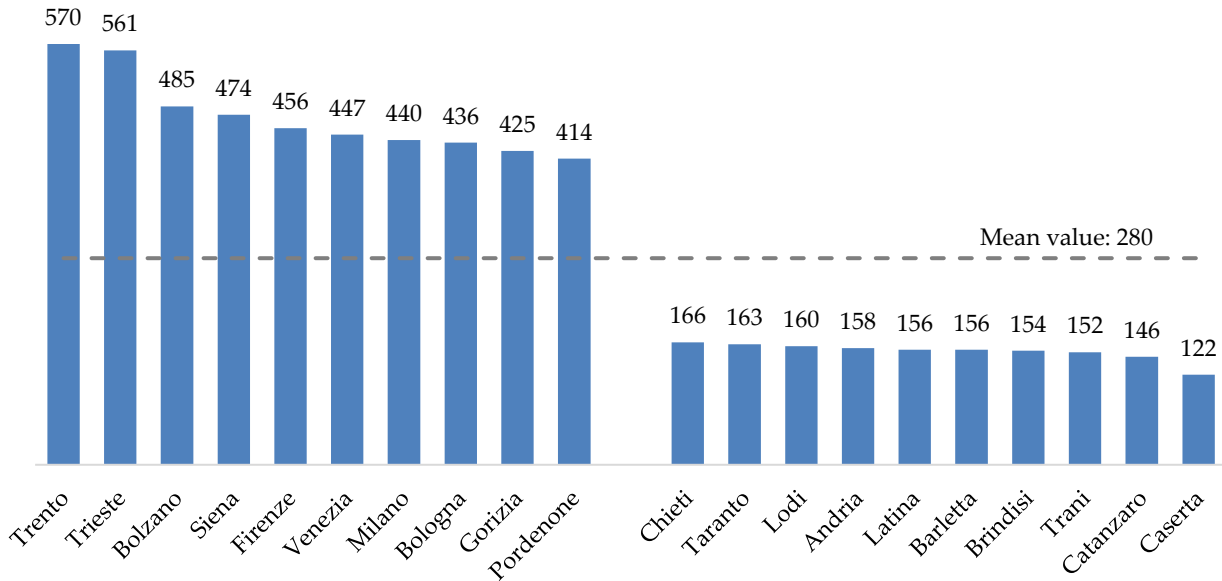
The most striking contrast is between Siena and Prato: despite having about a quarter of Prato's population, Siena has a permanent staff level (608 employees) not far from that of Prato (898). With a ratio of 11.5, Siena not only exceeds Prato's density (4.6) by 153%, but also surpasses even the regional capital Florence (10.9).

Entity	Permanent staff	Population	Permanent staff per 1,000 inhabitants
Siena	608	52.991	11,5
Carrara	327	59.699	5,5
Massa	379	65.801	5,8
Grosseto	502	81.412	6,2
Lucca	535	88.614	6,0
Pistoia	655	88.943	7,4
Pisa	645	89.450	7,2
Arezzo	528	96.527	5,5
Livorno	1.085	152.916	7,1
Prato	898	198.326	4,6
Firenze	3.935	362.353	10,9

Higher spending for more employees? Not always

To analyze municipalities’ positioning in terms of personnel management, an additional indicator was considered: per capita personnel expenditure, which shows a strong **territorial polarization**. Indeed, municipalities in the North tend to spend more, while those in the South spend less (see Figure 2).

Figure 2 – Per capita personnel expenditure – Top & Bottom 10 (euros per capita)



Source: REP Administrative Capacity Index – elaboration based on BDAP data (2024)

At the top of the ranking, Trento (570 euros per capita) and Trieste (561 euros per capita) stand out, well above the reference average of 280 euros per capita. The other municipalities also remain distant from the average value, indicating significantly higher per capita spending compared to the rest of the sample.

At the bottom of the ranking, all municipalities fall below the average, with Caserta (122 euros per capita) recording the lowest value, followed by Catanzaro (146 euros per capita) and Trani (152 euros per capita).

The gap with the leading municipalities is very large: there is a difference of 448 euros per capita between the highest and lowest values in the ranking. This points to a strong heterogeneity in personnel expenditure levels across provincial capitals.

The **correlation between the two indicators is predictably high**: it follows that higher expenditure is associated with greater staffing density, just as lower spending levels are linked to smaller staffing endowments. Nevertheless, **there are also more complex configurations** in which the relationship between spending and staffing is less linear.

On the one hand, Trieste, Trento, Florence, Bologna, Venice, and Milan rank high in both indicators, confirming the expected positive correlation between the two.

On the other hand, there are also significant discrepancies: among the municipalities with the highest number of permanent employees, Enna appears, but it is not included among those with the highest personnel expenditure, as is the case for Urbino and Genoa. This suggests that both staffing levels and costs are also

influenced by other variables, such as the composition of job categories and the impact of specific local characteristics.

Among the CP municipalities with the lowest spending levels, the overlaps are even more evident: Latina, Brindisi, Barletta, Andria, Trani, Catanzaro, and Caserta appear in both rankings, while Foggia, Vibo Valentia, and Cosenza appear only among the lowest values for staffing levels.