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Survey finds more than half of Italians cut spending over rising living costs

Respondents put inflation at 13.3%, far above the official 5.4% rate, prompting cutbacks in wine, beer and other staples

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More than half of Italians have changed their spending habits this year as they deal with what they see as a much steeper rise in living costs than official data indicate, according to a survey released Monday, November 2.

The survey, conducted by Noto Sondaggi for Il Sole 24 Ore, found that perceived inflation in October reached 13.3%, compared with the 5.4% annual inflation rate measured by Italy's national statistics agency, Istat. The gap of 7.9 percentage points was wider than in October 2023, when perceived inflation stood at 11.4% and measured inflation was 5.3%.

The poll was carried out from October 14 to 19 on a national sample of 2,000 adults. It asked respondents how much prices had risen over the previous 12 months and compared those views with official inflation data. The findings suggest that many households still feel the effects of several years of accumulated price increases, even as measured inflation has slowed.

According to figures cited in the survey, prices rose a total of 7.5% between October 2023 and October. Compared with December 2021, the increase reached 20.1%. That broader rise appears to be shaping how consumers judge current prices, especially in areas tied to daily necessities.

The widest gaps between perceived and measured inflation were found in several routine spending categories. For transport goods and services, respondents estimated price increases at 19.3%, while Istat recorded 9.3%. In October 2023, the same category showed perceived inflation of 14.4% and measured inflation of 5.1%.

Food and nonalcoholic beverages were another major area of divergence. Consumers said prices in that category had risen 14.3%, compared with an official increase of 2.9%. In clothing and footwear, perceived inflation reached 14.5%, while the measured rate was 0.7%. For personal goods and services, the figures were 15.6% and 2.8%, respectively. In accommodation and restaurant services, consumers perceived inflation at 12.9%, against a measured 3.3%.

Housing, electricity and fuels were one of the few areas where perceptions were close to official data. Respondents put inflation in that category at 18.1%, while Istat measured 18.7%. The near alignment there contrasted with most other sectors, where households felt prices had risen much faster than the official numbers showed.

The same pattern appeared across other parts of family spending. For health and medical services, respondents reported perceived inflation of 11.1%, compared with a measured 1.3%. In alcoholic beverages and tobacco, perceived inflation reached 10%, while the official figure was 2.3%. For furniture, household articles and home services, the gap was 9.5% versus 2.3%. Recreation, entertainment and culture showed the same 9.5% perceived increase, compared with 1.4% measured. In education, the figures were 9.2% and 1.3%. Communications showed one of the smaller gaps, with perceived inflation at 7.4% and measured inflation at 4%.

The survey found that this sense of rising prices is already changing behavior. A total of 52% of respondents said they had altered their spending habits during the year, either by giving up some purchases or cutting consumption to cope with higher costs. Another 30% said they had not yet changed their behavior but believed they might in the coming months. The remaining 18% said they had not changed their habits and did not expect to do so.

Among those who reduced purchases, wine was the most frequently cut item, cited by 35% of respondents. Beer followed at 30%, then fruit juice at 29%. Fish and seafood were cut by 26%, chocolate by 23%, and butter, cured meats and sausages by 22%. Jam and honey were cited by 21%, and red meat by 20%. Reductions also affected mineral water, named by 15%, while sugar and white meat were each cited by 11%. Flour was mentioned by 9%, and bread, cheese, dairy products and milk by 8%.

That pattern could matter for beverage producers and retailers because it suggests that cost-of-living pressure may already be weighing on demand for wine, beer and other drink categories. If those pressures persist, companies may face stronger pressure to adjust pricing, pack sizes, promotions and product mix as consumers become more selective.

When asked which expenses weighed most heavily on the family budget, 76% of respondents pointed to energy. Fuels followed at 65%, and housing at 40%. Health was named by 30%, restaurant spending by 16%, leisure by 12%, clothing by 10%, communications by 7%, education by 5%, and culture and other items by 3%.

The survey also showed that worries about inflation remain high despite the slowdown in official data. A total of 65% of respondents said they expected inflation to rise further in the coming months, up from 54% in October 2023. The share expecting prices to remain broadly stable fell to 23% from 33% in 2023. Only 3% expected inflation to decline, up from 1% in 2023, while 9% said they did not know, down from 12%.

The results point to a clear disconnect between official inflation data and how Italian households experience prices in everyday life. Even where measured inflation has eased, many consumers appear to be responding to the cumulative effect of higher bills, food costs and transport expenses by cutting back on discretionary purchases and, increasingly, on products that had long been treated as routine parts of household consumption.