
The divide between the rural and the urban world

**Collection
Social Divides**

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Contents

06	Trajectory of the urban and rural spheres: from the Age of Enlightenment to the present day
08	The depopulation of rural areas: a worldwide problem
10	The sociodemographic indicators of the depopulation of the rural environment in Spain
12	Rural areas, depopulation, ageing, and masculinisation
16	Depopulation is measured based on socioeconomic indicators
19	Living standards and conditions: index of quality of life and average income
21	Risk of poverty and social exclusion
23	The divide in services and basic resources: accessibility of economic activity centres, infrastructures and transport in rural areas
26	The healthcare and educational models must respond to the needs of the rural population
30	Access to information technologies, a fundamental factor for reducing the divide between rural and urban areas
33	The divide under debate: the impact of covid-19 on the rural/urban balance
36	Measures for achieving rural development and territorial cohesion

This issue forms part of the Collection “Social Divides”, which is made up of the following publications:

- **An Introduction**
- **The Divide between Rich and Poor**
- **The Divide between Men and Women**
- **The Divide between the Young and the Elderly**
- **The Divide between the Rural World and the Urban World**
- **The Divide between Turbocapitalism and Retrocapitalism**
- **The Divide between Analogical and Digital**

Key points

- 1** In Spain, the geographical specialisation of the economy is increasingly concentrating the creation of wealth and employment in certain areas (cities and coastal areas), with the growing risk of depopulation across large swathes of rural and interior areas.

- 2** As pointed out by the National Strategy to Combat the Demographic Challenge: by 2019, depopulation has become a generalised phenomenon in 50% of Spanish municipalities (fewer than 12.5 inhabitants/km²). This situation affects the smallest municipalities and the least populated areas most intensely. According to the data published in the Strategy, between 2001 and 2018 some 63% of municipalities lost population, although in the period 2011-2018, it became clear that over 80% of municipalities are now losing population.

- 3** In 2020, some 90% of the population was concentrated into just 30% of the territory, while 10% of the population was distributed across the remaining 70% of the territory. Around 61% of Spanish municipalities have fewer than 1,000 inhabitants, and are therefore facing the risk of extinction in the medium term. According to Eurostat, 19 Spanish provinces are some of the least dense in Europe. The lowest population density in the whole of Spain is in Castilla-La Mancha, with 25.69 inhabitants/km², followed by Castilla y León (25.97 inhabitants/km²), Extremadura (26.13 inhabitants/km²) and Aragón (27.42 inhabitants/km²).

- 4** The divide between the urban and rural spheres analysed in this report has important and varied consequences in social, economic, environmental and even political terms. This means that, added to the territorial tensions produced by the divide, there are consequences affecting demographics, social harmony, pressures on the welfare state, etc. Prominent among other consequences are the ageing of the population, with over 1,000 municipalities having no children aged under five years old, as well as the masculinisation of the territory. In 75% of Spanish municipalities there are more men than women, and this tendency is more pronounced in territories with a lower density.

- 5** There are notable effects of the territorial divide on the economic situation and vulnerability of households. The lower the income levels in the more depopulated and rural areas, the higher the poverty rates. The High Commissioner for the Fight Against Child Poverty stated in this respect in 2019: "Child poverty acquires specific overtones in non-urban contexts and, especially, in depopulated areas". Thus, in 2019, the child poverty rate exceeded 25.1% in very populated areas, 28.7% in intermediate areas, and up to 34.3% in sparsely populated areas.

- 6** This divide causes rural and interior areas to cease to be attractive for many citizens due to a lack of employment opportunities and of quality public services, especially for young people and women, two of the groups that find fewest opportunities in these areas.

- 7** Finding the balance between the urban and the rural, between inland and coastal areas, should be a political priority so that thousands of citizens do not find themselves forced to abandon their place of residence for reasons beyond their control. Spain presents a generation gap that is not only a problem in the present but also for our future as a society. On the one hand, it is important to mention the young people who grew up during the economic crisis and who are now facing major difficulties in developing their life projects. These were the group most jeopardised by the recession, and they are the great forgotten ones when it comes to sharing out the earnings

from recovery within a context marked by a climate of uncertainty, the digital revolution, and globalisation. At the opposite pole of the generational divide are the over-65s, a group essential for the maintenance of entire families, and the one that has best endured the effects of the crisis on its economy and wellbeing, despite the loss of purchasing power due to the insufficient rise in pensions.

8 At this moment in time we should add that covid-19 appears to be timidly influencing the rural/urban balance, although it is still very early to assess the size of its impact. Lockdown, which is resulting in part of the population wanting to live closer to nature; remote working, imposed upon a large part of the working population; cuts in income as a product of temporary layoffs (ERTE) or even the loss of their jobs have led people to head back towards rural villages, with the idea that these are places where they can enjoy greater freedom, a healthier environment, and a more economical lifestyle.

9 Whether this tendency will be a permanent effect or whether, to the contrary, once the pandemic has disappeared the tendency will revert still remains to be seen. The challenge of attracting people to rural areas is already progressing. The next challenge will be retaining this population and, to do so, there can be no other route than closing the divide in the basic services and employment opportunities offered by rural environments.

Key figures

1%

In 2020, just 1% of municipalities, classed as major cities with over 100,000 inhabitants, were home to 40% of the total population in Spain.

18%

In 2020, in the most depopulated provinces, the unemployment rate grew by 18% with respect to the year 2019.

42 points

The average total disposable income in 2018 was 22,634 euros, but between that of the smallest municipalities, with fewer than 1,000 inhabitants, and the largest, with over 500,000, a divide exists of 42 points.

29%

In the year 2000, some 29% of inhabitants of rural municipalities were aged over 65, whereas the state average was situated at 17%.

50%

Nearly 50% of the rural population has a low level of education.

25%

Nearly 25% of households in rural areas do not have any type of computer in the home.

1/3

One out of every three people at risk of poverty or social exclusion lives in a rural or sparsely populated area.

34 points

The divide between rural and urban environments with regard to connectivity in telecommunications, especially connection to very-high-speed internet, reaches 34 percentage points.

Note: 2020 data.

1

Trajectory of the urban and rural spheres: from the Age of Enlightenment to the present day

When, in 1792, Francisco Cabarrús wrote a letter to Gaspar Melchor de Jovellanos saying that “Nature did not make us to be piled up in big cities”, Madrid had 50,000 inhabitants. Today it has close to 3.5 million. Beyond whether the opinion of the enlightened minister was correct or not, three major processes of change have occurred over the last two hundred years and they explain the new reality of population accumulation in the big cities. Firstly, in around two hundred years, the number of inhabitants on the planet has increased spectacularly. Secondly, the outbreak of industrialisation, in the 19th century, and the generalisation of the capitalist economic system based on maximising private profit, demanded that all human relations be reconsidered. This affected the concepts of localization and housing which started to be considered from the viewpoint of economic profitability. The hegemonic values around which the whole of society was organised for two centuries were facing a complete break with what had previously predominated in the social structure. Finally, it is important to mention the appearance of certain technological advances, such as the application of steel and the development of the hydroelectric industry, as well as inventions such as the elevator and the car, which enabled a new concept, that of the megacity, to emerge.

Industrialisation in the 19th century was,
undoubtedly, the trigger
for a true urban revolution

Industrialisation in the 19th century was, undoubtedly, the trigger for a true urban revolution. It could be affirmed that the economic logic of industrial capitalism generated the first mass wave of migration from the countryside to the cities. Furthermore, the mechanisation of agriculture and subsequent application of fertilisers quickly increased productivity in the countryside and the living conditions of those who remained in rural areas improved. In this phase, the advantages associated with the advance of urbanisation were transferred, partially, to the rural areas.

Later, problems arose associated with the major urban metropolises and the high demographic density characterising them. It was then that it started to become fashionable to “flee the city” and a new urban outline started to be generated, ranging from garden cities to housing estates on the outskirts.

Subsequently, a gradual abandoning of the rural environment took place. The urban sphere took over once more, as cities offered better ranges of public services than rural areas, with greater opportunities for the development of professional careers, a varied range of leisure options and a great capacity for attracting talent.

However, the definitive blow came from the hand of globalisation, the opening of the worldwide markets and the permanent demand from inhabitants of the cities for more varied and ever cheaper food products. This would be the framework of the current situation: in the rural setting, agricultural activity is currently increasingly less profitable and the countryside presents a growing number of expanding depopulated areas. In parallel, cities are seeing their numbers of inhabitants grow, within an increasingly more diverse and global economy.

The divide between the rural and urban spheres must be analysed from a logic of equal rights

This situation has led to a profound discontent, indignation, and rebellions in society; examples that could be cited include movements such as the yellow vests, which originated in France. Also worthy of mention is the coining of the term *Emptied Spain*, referring to areas that in the 1950s and 1960s suffered a rural exodus towards the cities (regarding this, see the essay *La España vacía*, by Sergio del Molino, Turner, 2020). Approaching, then, the rural/urban divide only from the perspective of the economic logic of profitability would be an error that would lead to failure. The divide between the rural and urban spheres must be analysed from a logic of equal rights and, simultaneously, from that of democratic public policies that guarantee all citizens the freedom to live where they wish, without that having to mean that they see their rights undermined.

Furthermore, society is currently entering a new phase in the rural-urban relationship. It should be taken into account that increasing numbers of people work, relate with each other and entertain themselves online. This means that the place where a person lives depends more on individual preferences than on the social and employment situation, providing that there is equality of access to public and telematic services.

2

The depopulation of rural areas: a worldwide problem

Before going on to quantify and analyse the depopulation phenomenon, in this report the aim is to define what the rural sphere means. The European Commission considers that “The concepts of the countryside or of rural society are by no means merely geographic in scope, since economic and social life outside our towns and cities is of great complexity, embracing a wide range of activities”. Within the European Union, no consensus exists regarding what is and what is not rural. For some countries, such as Germany, Spain, France, Ireland, or Italy, the main factor when defining an area as rural is its population.

Eurostat and the OECD use demographic density criteria: 150 inhabitants/km² and 100 inhabitants/km², respectively, are the criteria used by these two bodies to define rural spaces. The thresholds used to delimit rural spaces from urban ones can be very different according to the country; thus, the maximum limit on inhabitants for a rural municipality varies from 200 inhabitants/km² in Iceland, passing through 2,000 inhabitants/km² in Spain and France, to 30,000 inhabitants/km² in Japan.

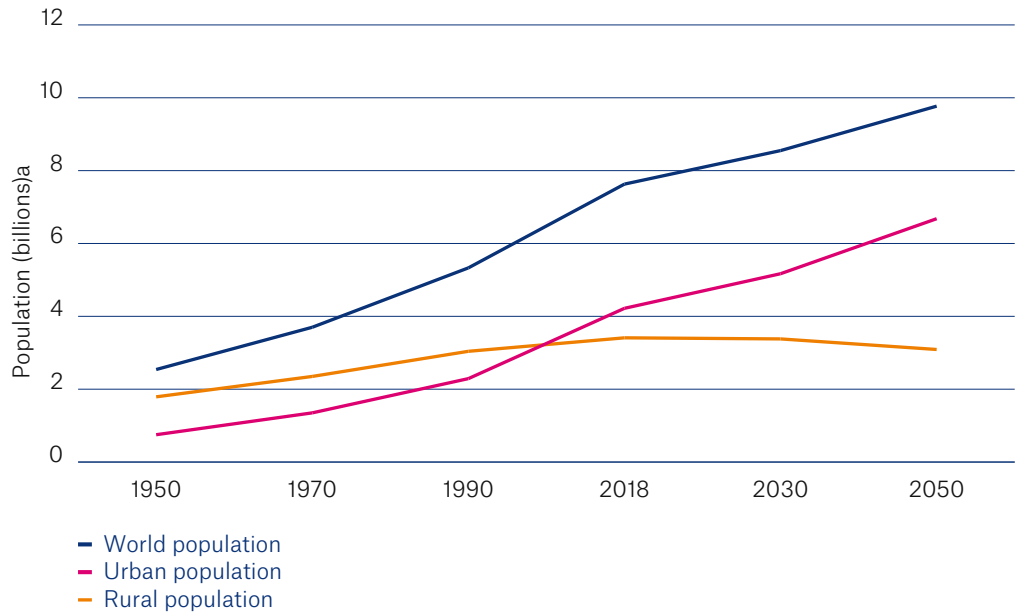
More people in the world
are living in urban areas
than those living in rural areas

In the second half of the last century, massive growth of the world population was recorded. In 1950, the population stood at around 2.5 billion inhabitants. Four decades later, in 1990, it had exceeded 5 billion and by 2018 the world population had reached approximately 7.6 billion people. According to a report by the United Nations, *World Urbanization Prospects* (New York, 2019), the world population will continue to grow and, by 2050, the inhabitants of the planet will number around 10 billion people.

However, on a global scale there are two unstoppable tendencies: on the one hand, the concentration of the population in urban areas and the proliferation of so called megacities (those that have more than 10 million inhabitants) and, on the other hand, the depopulation of rural areas. Today, more people in the world are living in urban areas than those living in rural areas.

Figure 1. **Since 1950 and until the middle of this century, the urban population will maintain its tendency towards growth, versus the reduction in the rural population**

World population, urban and rural. 1950-2050



Source: United Nations, *World Urbanization Prospects*, 2018.

3

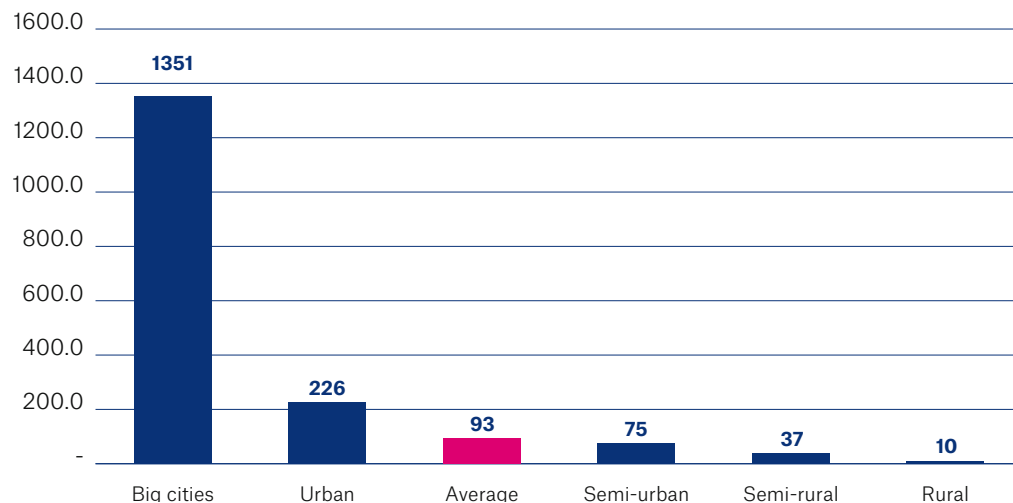
The sociodemographic indicators of the depopulation of the rural environment in Spain

Depopulation is an effect of the vulnerability of rural areas, not its cause. Demographic imbalances are measured based on four variables, all of them intrinsically linked: population density, which represents a risk of territorial polarisation; tendency in the number of inhabitants; the tendency of the age pyramid and, finally, the masculinisation of the population.

On a world scale, Spain occupies position 88 in the classification of population densities of different countries. With a figure of 93 inhabitants/km², its population density is moderate. Spain is the fourth most populated country in the European Union according to Eurostat statistics. However, its population density puts it in 17th place in the classification of the EU-27.

Figure 2. **Big cities concentrate the majority of the population**

Population density by type of municipality, in inhabitants/km²



Source: Register of Local Organisations of the Ministry for Territorial Policy and Public Function.

The European Union situates risk of depopulation at a density of 12.5 inhabitants/km², and Spain's rural areas fall broadly within this parameter. The number of Spanish municipalities with a population density equal to or lower than 12.5, is 3,939 municipalities, in other words, 48% of the total. The problem, therefore, affects approximately 1.3 million inhabitants.

The risk of depopulation is not distributed equally between the different autonomous communities

The risk of depopulation is not distributed equally between the different autonomous communities. The most densely populated autonomous community is Madrid, a long way ahead of the second, the Basque Country. There is an enormous concentration of population in the coastal communities: the Mediterranean and the islands present density indexes greater than double the Spanish average. The communities of Cantabria and Galicia are approximately in line with the Spanish average. Aragón, Extremadura and the two Castillas have a population density lower than a third of the average density.

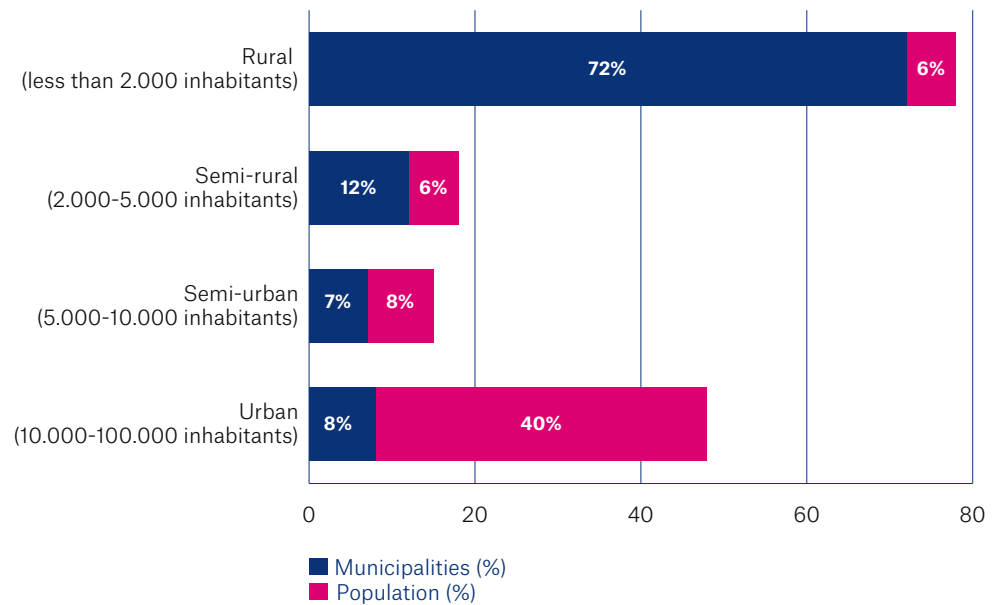
4

Rural areas, depopulation, ageing, and masculinisation

At present Spain has a total of 8,131 municipalities. If these are classified by population size, fewer than 1% of the municipalities, classed in this report as large cities with more than 100,000 inhabitants, are home to 40% of the total population. Rural municipalities with fewer than 2,000 inhabitants represent 72% of the total of municipalities, although the population resident in them does not reach 6% of the country's total.

Figure 3. **Some 6% of the country's total population live in 72% of its municipalities**

Distribution of the population by type of municipality



Source: compiled by the author based on data from the Spanish National Statistics Institute (INE), 2020.

Rural municipalities with fewer than 2,000 inhabitants represent 72% of the total of municipalities, although the population resident in them does not reach 6% of the country's total

What has come to be called the *emptying* of the rural environment has continued inexorably in the last decade. Since 2010, over 110,000 people have emigrated towards areas with more employment opportunities and options for life development. Municipalities with fewer than 2,000 inhabitants, which in the year 2000 represented 7.5% of the Spanish population, today do not reach 5.7%. The municipalities that we call *semi-rural* (between 5,000 and 2,000 inhabitants) have not fared any better and, in the last ten years, have lost nearly 6% of their population.

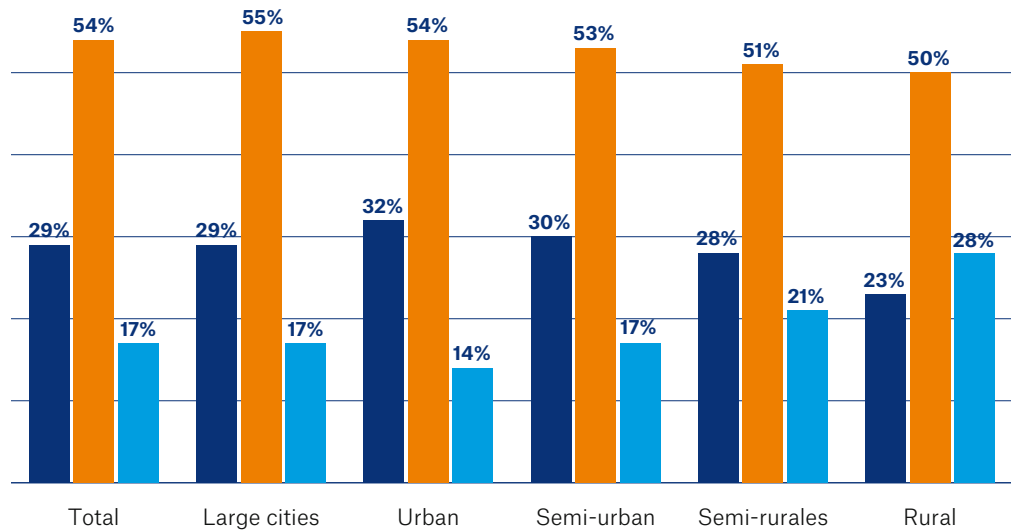
The whole of Spain – and it could even be affirmed that the whole of the Western world – is suffering a process of progressive natural ageing due, on the one hand, to increased life expectancy and, on the other, to low birth rates. Life expectancy is now 83.33 years, according to data from the INE, which situates Spain as the country with the third highest life expectancy in the world, second only to Japan and Switzerland.

On the other hand, with regard to the average age of the population, Spain occupies thirteenth position in the world classification and tenth place among the countries of the European Union. The average age of the Spanish population in 2019 was 44 years.

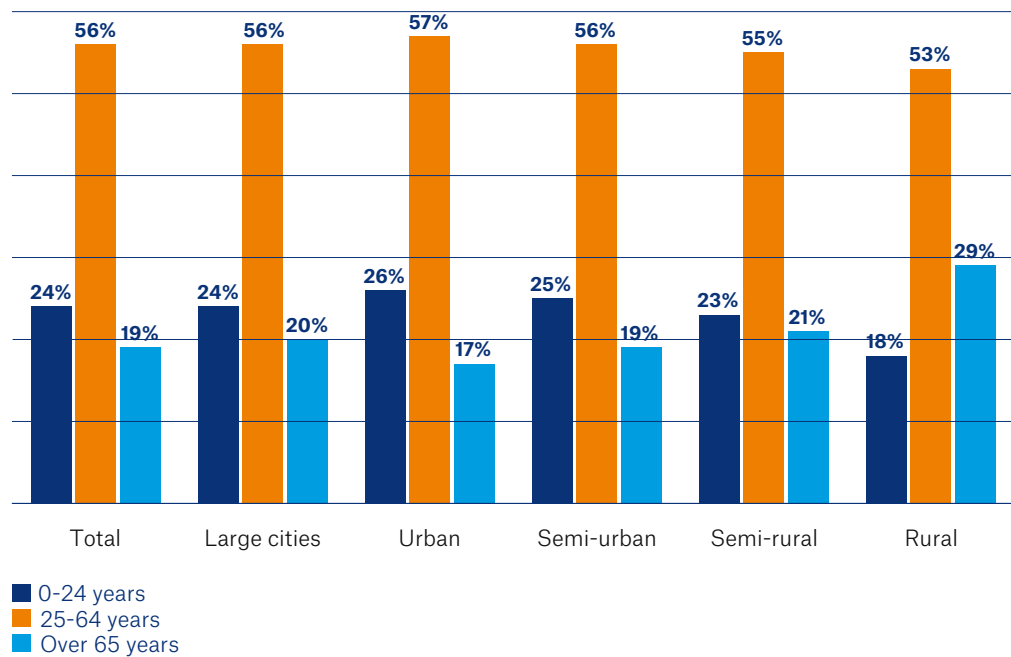
In the rural environment, to this natural ageing must be added the migratory ageing produced by the departure of young people towards urban areas. In the year 2000, some 28% of the inhabitants of rural municipalities were aged over 65, while the national average was situated at 17%. In 2019, this percentage rose to 29%, but ageing also affected the total population, where over 65s represent 19% of the population.

Figure 4. **Rural areas have an older population**

Distribution of population in Spain, 2000



Distribution of population in Spain, 2019



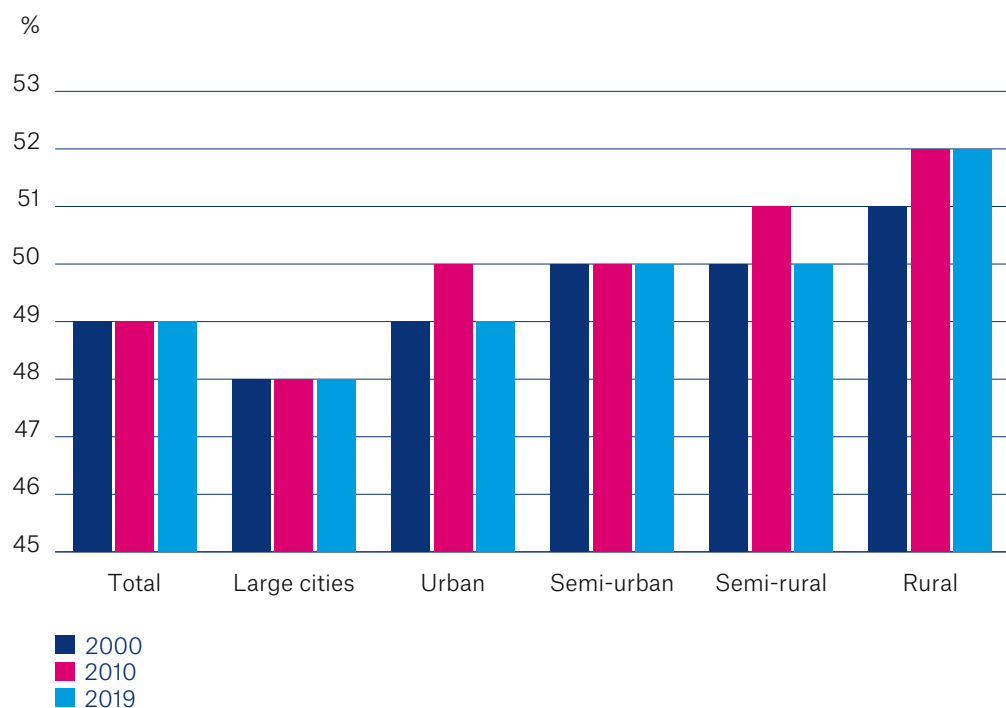
Source: compiled by the author based on data from the INE, 2000 and 2019.

Another of the effects associated with emigration from the countryside to the city has been masculinisation of rural areas. In an eminently agricultural economy, the role of the woman has traditionally been relegated to domestic and care work. The development of the services sector in the cities provided a very attractive niche for the labour integration of women and their social mobility.

Rural municipalities have a male population accounting for some 52% of their population, versus 49% of the national total or 48% in the big cities. Furthermore, they are the only type of municipalities where masculinisation has systematically grown in the last two decades.

Figure 5. **Rural areas are masculinised**

Masculinisation by type of municipality: 2000, 2010 and 2019 (%)



Source: compiled by the author based on data from the INE, 2019.

The ageing and masculinization of the population in rural areas have only aggravated the in-depth transformation process in the structure of households in Spain from 2013 to 2019. The total number of households in Spain grew by 2.2% until it reached the figure of 18.6 million homes. In that same period, the number of single-person households with people aged over 65 grew by 11.3%, although in rural areas these types of households represented 14.6%.

5

Depopulation is measured based on socioeconomic indicators

In the debate on inequality, in recent years focuses on territorial inequalities have gained importance to the detriment of personal inequalities.

For this report, the national territory has been divided into three groups, based on the criteria established by Eduardo Bandrés and Vanessa Azón ([La despoblación de la España interior](#), Funcas, 2021): provinces that make up the so-called *depopulation hard core* (11 provinces), provinces that make up the so-called *depopulation soft core* (12 provinces) and rest of provinces, which in this report are called populated provinces (27 provinces).

Covid-19 is having a devastating impact on employment across the whole country. In 2020, a substantial fall in the activity level of the three groups analysed was observed. The effects of the pandemic have been greater on the hard core than the soft core, which has defended itself much better from the crisis caused by covid-19. Populated provinces, many of them coastal and, therefore, very dependent on tourism, have suffered a similar fall, although slightly milder than those of the hard core.

If the labour problem of emptied Spain is analysed from the viewpoint of employment, the data obtained up to 2019 are devastating. The hard core depopulation provinces present an employment rate that is systematically lower than the rates corresponding to the soft core and the populated provinces. In 2002, the employment rate of the hard core was situated over six points below the populated provinces and three points below the soft core. In 2019, this distance of the provinces from the hard core was cut to two points in relation to populated Spain, and nearly equal to the figure for the soft core provinces.

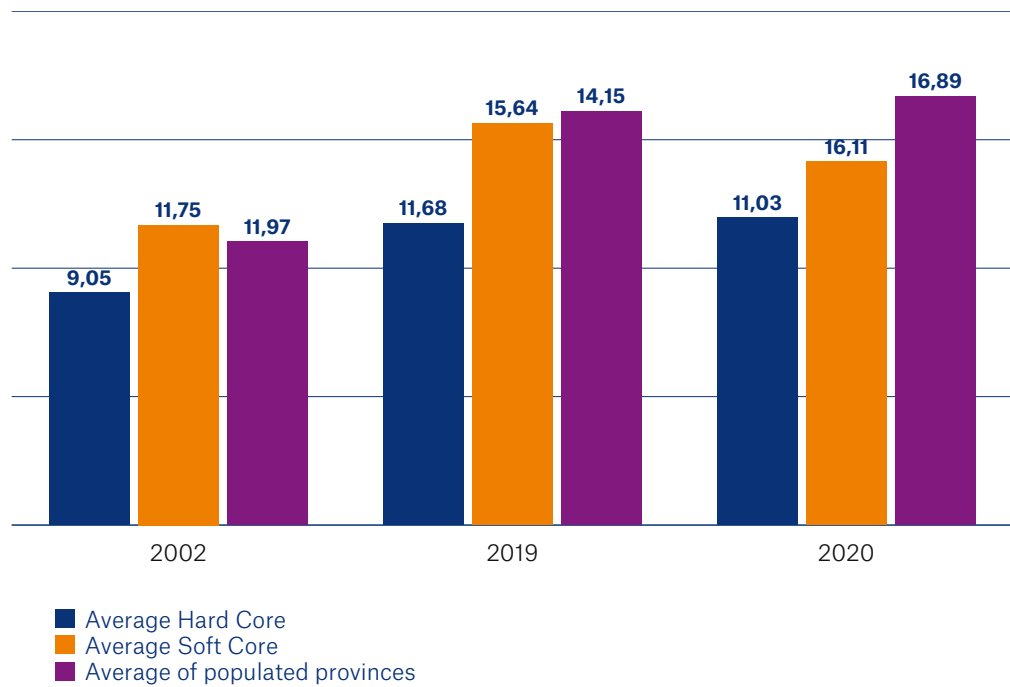
The greatest impact on employment has hit the populated provinces more dependent on tourism, and the hotel and catering sector

As has been noted previously, the greatest impact on employment has hit the populated provinces more dependent on tourism, and the hotel and catering sector, with a fall in relative terms of their employment rate of 4.28%, much greater than the fall of the soft core (1.43%) and that of the hard core, which presents the best relative behaviour of the three groups analysed (0.79%).

The unemployment rate has punished the soft core provinces more harshly than the hard core ones. In 2019, populated areas dependent on the services sector presented the highest figure of the three groups: among their active population there were 15.64% of people unemployed and unemployment rose by more than a point in 2020. The hard core provinces, which in 2002 presented the lowest figure in the series (9.05%), saw how their unemployment increased to 11.68% in the period that elapsed until 2019. However, in 2020 they managed to reduce their unemployment rate by half a point in absolute terms and by 5.58% in relative terms.

Figure 6. **Higher unemployment in the soft core provinces of depopulation**

Unemployment rate in Spain. Fourth quarter, years 2002, 2019 and 2020



Source: compiled by the author based on the INE Active Population Survey, data from 2002-2020.

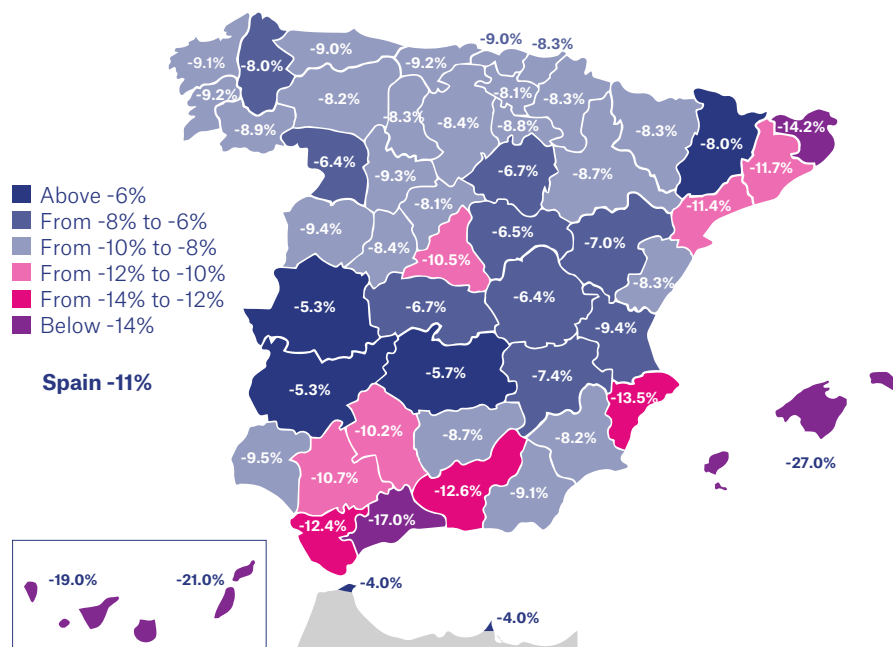
Once more, we see how the provinces of populated Spain are those that are suffering most in terms of unemployment. Their unemployment rate has grown by somewhat more than one point in 2020 in absolute terms, which represents growth of 18% in relative terms in relation to the rate for 2019.

Per capita GDP in 2018 (latest data published by the INE in the Regional Accounts for Spain on a provincial scale) rose to 25,770 euros. The difference between the emptied Spain (hard and soft cores) and the populated Spain is abysmal. The hard core is situated 13 points below the national average and at a distance of 16 points with respect to the group of provinces of populated Spain. The soft core presents a very similar snapshot to that of the hard core, being situated 11 points from the national average and 14 points from the populated provinces.

The fall of 11 points in the GDP suffered in Spain in 2020 as a consequence of covid-19 has affected the different provinces in a very unequal way. According to an article recently published by the Bank of Spain ("[La evolución de la actividad en las provincias españolas a lo largo de 2020 y sus determinantes](#)"), the greatest falls in GDP in 2020 had been concentrated into a group of provinces located in Spain's Mediterranean arc and the Canary Islands.

Figure 7. **The fall in GDP has affected Spanish provinces unequally**

Estimate of interannual variation of GDP by province, 2020



Source: Ministry of Inclusion, Social Security and Migration, INE, and Bank of Spain, 2021.

These smaller falls in GDP in the provinces of depopulated Spain will reduce the differences between the three areas in the GDP per capita in coming years but, once more, there is a risk that they will occur again in the medium term if there is no change in the economic model with active rural development policies.

6

Living standards and conditions: index of quality of life and average income

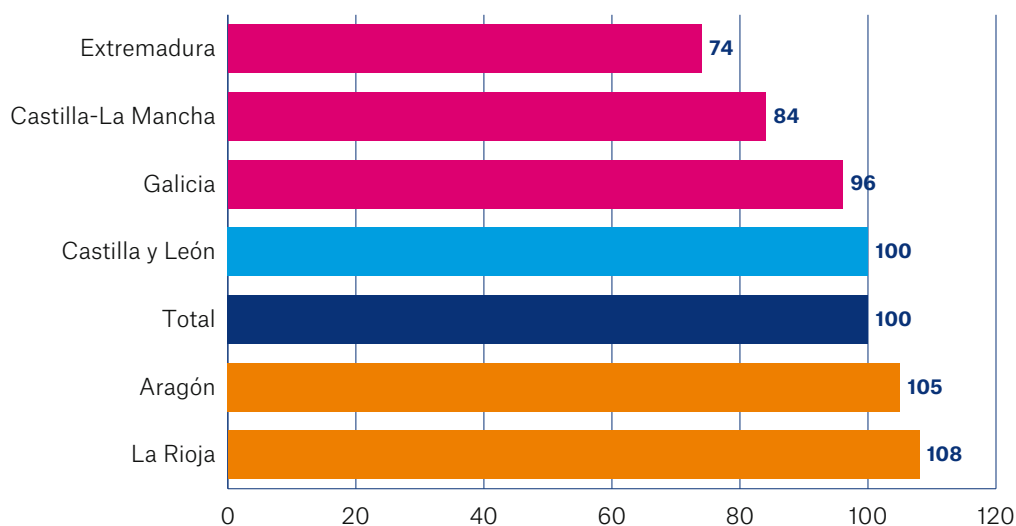
Quality of life and population level do not have a direct relationship: certain autonomous communities in Spain suffering from the depopulation phenomenon have a quality of life index higher than the national average, as is the case of La Rioja and Aragón (much higher than the national average) and of Castilla-La Mancha (in line with the average). In contrast, Castilla y León, Extremadura and Galicia present values clearly below the average, with Galicia being the community with the worst index of the group.

Maintaining social wellbeing requires work to achieve a more equitable society. The national average income per consumption unit in 2019 was 17,287 euros, which represented growth of 7% with respect to 2008. This growth was lower in three depopulated communities that were particularly disadvantaged: Castilla-La Mancha, Extremadura and Galicia, which, furthermore, present notably lower values in their income levels.

The average total disposable income in 2018 stood at 22,634 euros, but between the smaller municipalities, of fewer than one thousand inhabitants, and the larger ones, of over fifty thousand inhabitants, a divide exists of 42 points. To put it another way, the average income of the smallest municipalities represents only 58% of that of the largest. Almost without exception, income decreases as the size of the municipality decreases.

Figure 8. **The divide between communities in depopulated Spain is shown in household average income**

Average net income per unit of consumption by autonomous communities, 2019
Spain (total) = 100



Source: compiled by the author based on data from the Spanish National Statistics Institute (INE).

With the disposable income indexes, taking the national total as the base 100, it is observed that the average national income is adjusted to that of municipalities between 100,000 and 500,000 inhabitants, and only those with 50,000 to 100,000 exceed the average income. For the rest of the municipality sizes, the decrease is systematic and progressive.

Between Madrid and Extremadura, the economies with the highest and lowest purchasing power parity respectively, there is a difference of nearly 30 percentage points. If the classification is analysed with respect to the level of average prices, the six communities of depopulated Spain are found in the lower part of the table, although with major differences. Aragón, La Rioja and Castilla y León (those with the highest incomes within this sub-group) are between 2 and 5 points below the average. Galicia, Castilla-La Mancha and Extremadura (those with the lowest income) present greater differences: Galicia, 6 percentage points; Castilla-La Mancha, 10 percentage points; and Extremadura, 14 percentage points.

7

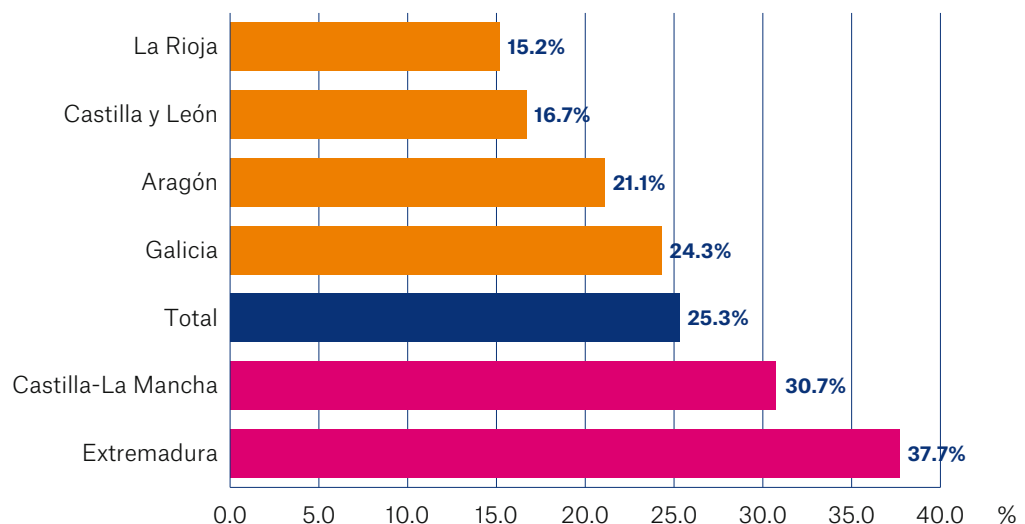
Risk of poverty and social exclusion

According to the report *El estado de la pobreza* by the European Network for the Fight against Poverty and Social Exclusion of Spain (2020), in the year 2019, some 25.3% of the Spanish population was at risk of poverty or social exclusion. Of the people affected, one in every three lives in a rural or sparsely populated area, a percentage much higher than the share that would correspond if poverty were distributed equally among the different zones.

In the year 2019, some 25.3% of the Spanish population was at risk of poverty or social exclusion. Of the people affected, one in every three lives in a rural or sparsely populated area

Figure 9. **The poverty or social exclusion rate affects rural and depopulated areas more**

AROPE rate of risk poverty or social exclusion (%), 2019



Note: the AROPE rate is the rate of risk of poverty or social exclusion used within the framework of the Europa 2020 strategy. For more information on this indicator, see *Riesgo de pobreza y/o exclusión social (estrategia Europa 2020)*. [Indicador AROPE](#).

Source: *El estado de la pobreza*, European Network for the Fight against Poverty and Social Exclusion of Spain, 2020.

In other words, and according to the report, the poorer population seeks more economical areas to compensate its lower income and lives in a higher proportion in rural areas where, paradoxically, there are fewer resources at its disposal. Furthermore, poor people who live in less populated areas have the most difficulties in travelling to other areas with more resources, which puts them in a vicious circle from which it is difficult for them to extricate themselves.

Poor people who live in less populated areas
have the most difficulties in travelling to other areas
with more resources

The size of the population of a certain territory does not have a direct relationship with poverty, but if this population size is combined with other economic and social factors , it does generate a correlation between depopulated areas and high indexes of inequality and social exclusion. In Castilla-La Mancha and Extremadura, depopulation and poverty go hand in hand.

8

The divide in services and basic resources: accessibility of economic activity centres, infrastructures and transport in rural areas

One cannot speak about a population's quality of life and social wellbeing if it cannot adequately access the public and basic services that the different administrations offer. The lack of profitability and high cost of providing these services in more depopulated areas influences the strong imbalance between territories.

The BBVA Foundation carried out an analysis in 2016 to quantify the time necessary to travel, via road, from the most remote municipalities to the cities or centres of economic, commercial and leisure activity. For this, it took as a starting point different rural municipalities and produced an accessibility by road indicator. Through this indicator, it divided the rural municipalities into two categories: accessible municipalities and remote municipalities. According to the indicator, remote municipalities are those that have an average journey time exceeding 45 minutes to reach urban centres. The result is that, on a national scale, some 58% of rural municipalities are accessible and some 42% are remote.

This result worsens greatly when analysed by provinces. Many of the provinces in demographic decline have a percentage of rural population that lives in remote municipalities exceeding 50%. The most striking cases are Soria and Teruel, with percentages of 100%:

Tabla 1. **Accessibility to centres for economic activity and leisure, determining factors of the quality of life of municipalities**

Rural population in remote municipalities (%), 2016

Province	Rural municipalities	Remote municipalities	Rural population in remote municipalities (%)
Soria	180	180	100
Teruel	233	231	99.6
Cáceres	209	145	66.8
Huesca	195	155	65.6
Cuenca	231	142	62.4
Badajoz	141	86	59.8
Segovia	202	129	56.9

Source: compiled by the author based on the indicator on delimitation of rural and urban areas on a local scale of the BBVA Foundation.

Inland transport in Spain is characterised by extensive road, railway and airports and ports networks. In areas with a low population, the traditional modes of public transport (railway and bus lines, fundamentally) are not efficient either economically nor environmentally, nor are they adapted to user needs due to their low frequency, or the distance of homes from the stops or stations.

On many occasions, in the rural environment, private vehicles are the only viable alternative for travel. The roads that interconnect the rural environment represent 41% of the total kilometres and only bear 5.3% of the traffic.

However, transport via road on a bus or coach is key for guaranteeing both sustainable and economic mobility and capillarity, in other words, the capacity to reach the entire territory. The Spanish model, characterised by public-private cooperation, makes the bus the collective transport with the greatest level of cover in the territory, since it connects approximately eight thousand villages in Spain. It is very possible that the bus is the best transport method to respond to this challenge.

According to the Railway Observatory of Spain, if the data for the Spanish railway network are compared with those of other European countries, the network is under-dimensioned in length with respect to the surface area and number of inhabitants. However, it is positioned very much higher in the average number of travellers per kilometre of network.

Only 8% of the total was invested
in the narrow-gauge railway network,
despite it carrying 30%
of the annual passenger traffic

Some 90% of the traffic is concentrated in the local networks and narrow-gauge tracks, in other words, the networks that interconnect the rural environment, while the AVE (high-speed trains) and the medium-distance trains carry less than 10% of the total traffic. In 2019, some 2,407 million euros were invested, with approximately half going to the AVE. Only 8% of the total was invested in the narrow-gauge railway network, despite it carrying 30% of the annual passenger traffic.

9

The healthcare and educational models must respond to the needs of the rural population

Healthcare is an essential service that has suffered a progressive deterioration in the rural environment in recent decades, for reasons of scale due to the low density and isolation.

In terms of the number of active medical staff per autonomous community, with the exception of Catalonia and Galicia, which are below the average, a map could be drawn that would divide Spain in two: north, with more doctors than average, and south, with fewer.

Healthcare is an essential service
that has suffered a progressive deterioration
in the rural environment

It is usually considered that primary healthcare is the main axis of the health system. However, there seems to be a consensus that this is what needs greater reinforcement in the rural environment to be able to cater locally for a scattered and aged population. Between 2015 and 2019, the public healthcare spend has grown by 14%, but when disaggregating by type of expenditure, it is observable that primary healthcare has grown less (11%), while hospital and specialist care is in line with total growth.

Table 2. **Hospital and specialist services have accounted for more investment than primary healthcare**

Healthcare spending in Spain, in millions of euros, 2015 and 2019

Healthcare spending (millions of euros)	2015	2019	Increase
Hospital and specialist services	41,101	46,631	13%
Primary healthcare	9,330	10,387	11%
Others	15,297	18,007	18%
Total	65,728	75,025	14%

Source: compiled by the author based on the Statistics on Public Healthcare Spending, Ministry of Health, 2019.

The average spend per inhabitant in 2019 was 1,489 euros, but it was highly variable between communities. The Basque Country is the community that spends most on health per capita: 1,873 euros, some 26% more than the average. At the other extreme is Andalucía, with a spend of 1,262 euros, some 15% less than the national average.

Furthermore, the majority of the healthcare staff that have been hired in Spain work in hospital and specialist care. Primary healthcare only employs 27% of doctors and 20% of nursing staff.

The problem with the family and community medicine speciality in rural areas has two aspects: firstly, the forecast retirement of some 16,000 doctors in this speciality in the next ten years according to the Spanish College of Physicians (OMC); secondly, the lack of attractiveness of exercising medicine in these areas. One positive measure would be to promote rural medicine with material resources that offer younger healthcare staff the possibility of professional development, through better employment conditions and economic incentives for junior doctors who complete the family and community medicine speciality.

This care model, which affects the over 8,000 towns and villages with fewer than 15,000 inhabitants that exist in Spain, has found in new technologies and the internet a new ally and a way of progressing, but there is still undoubtedly a long way to go. The health departments are very aware of this problem. However, it is possible to envisage that the healthcare crisis unleashed by the covid-19 pandemic will cause the institutions responsible to consider a new healthcare model, which should not leave the rural communities out.

In the rural mindset,
the closing of a school means
the death of a village

Education is the basic pillar that enables the growth of society and development as a country. In general, Spain spends very little on education or, at least, less than the European average.

In the rural mindset, the closing of a school means the death of a village. Where no educational services exist, the younger population cannot establish itself, which leaves the municipalities affected facing uncertain circumstances.

For infant and primary education, the organisational model of educational attention in municipalities with small school populations is their grouping at the so-called Grouped Rural Schools (CRA). In the academic year 2017-2018, in Spain there was a total of 723 CRAs, which catered for 2,182 localities and served 72,953 students. Furthermore, the autonomous communities that have suffered the greatest rural depopulation have, in all cases, a higher ratio of localities per CRA, with Galicia presenting the highest ratio of all (more than double the national average).

Early school leaving is accentuated
in rural areas, where it is more than two points higher
than the Spanish average.

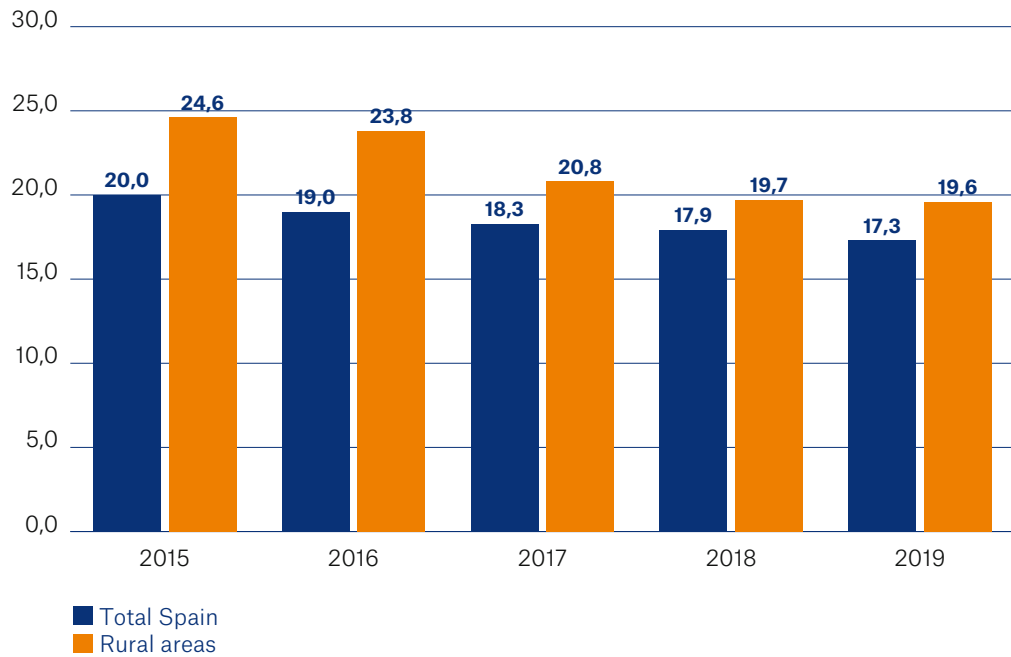
However, the problem of education in the rural environment is not simply resolved with more schools, but it is necessary to find a balance between the number of schools and their accessibility. The problem of accessibility is manifested fundamentally in secondary education. In the document *Las cifras de la educación en España. Curso 2018-2019*, by the Ministry of Education (2020), it is mentioned that, according to the diagnosis of the rural environment produced by the Sustainable Rural Development Programme (2010-2014), only 50% of the Spanish population have access to a secondary school in their municipality.

However, the divide is also produced by other socioeconomic factors, such as skilled employment opportunities, direct and indirect costs of continuing with training or the higher educational levels of parents in more urban areas, among others.

Perhaps the best indicator of the divide between the rural and the urban is the rate of early leaving from education and training. Early school leaving is accentuated in rural areas, where it is more than two points higher than the Spanish average.

Figure 10. **Early school leaving affects rural areas to a greater extent**

Rate of early leaving from education and training, 2015-2019



Source: compiled by the author based on Eurostat, 2020.

Another indicator that highlights the divide is the educational level reached by the population of working age. The differences between the educational levels reached in the cities and rural areas are overwhelming: at the lower level of education, the rural population weighs 17 percentage points more, whereas in the upper level the urban population weighs 15 points more. Nearly 50% of the rural population has a low level of education and, however, their figures for intermediate and higher training are almost the same.

10 Access to information technologies, a fundamental factor for reducing the divide between rural and urban areas

The communications infrastructure and competitive connectivity are probably not enough to put a stop to depopulation but they are absolutely necessary, and more so if the internet – as is the case here – reduces people’s dependence on public infrastructures. In July 2020, the Government presented the Spain Digital 2025 Agenda. Among its goals, the agenda contemplates “guaranteeing a digital connectivity adequate for 100% of the population, promoting the disappearance of the digital divide between rural and urban areas”.

The digital divide has a dual origin: firstly, it is conditioned by price, by the knowledge needed to use information and communication technologies, and by the cultural level of users. The second element that conditions the divide is the communications infrastructure, which has its origin in the commitment of the EU and the Government of Spain to the liberalisation of telecommunications and the defence of competition in the sector.

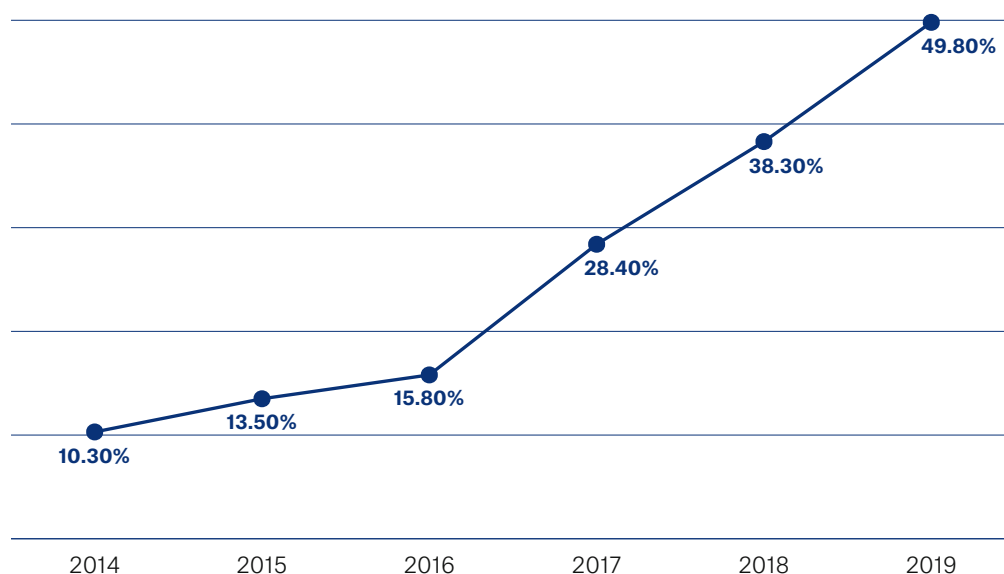
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According to the Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI) of 2020, in the two main indicators that differ in speed of transmissions, >30 Mbps and >100 Mbps, the divide is observed that exists between the rural environment and the state average, especially in very high speed Internet, where the divide reaches 34 percentage points.

Despite these data, from 2018 to 2019, the divide in the cover of >30Mbps was reduced by nearly 33 percentage points. In June 2019, the cover reached 86.6% of the population, approximately more than 7 million people who lived in municipalities whose population density was below 100 inhabitants/km², nearly 3 million more than in 2018. The divide in the cover of ultra-fast networks, of over 100 Mbps, has also been reduced, although to a lesser extent. The increase in the cover of 100 Mbps in rural areas has been of twelve percentage points, from 38% to 49.8%. Since 2014, this cover has passed from being practically non-existent to covering, in 2019, nearly half of the rural population.

Figure 11. **The divide has been reduced in the cover of very high-speed networks**

Coverage of 100 Mbps in rural areas (%), 2014-2019
Population density less than 100 inhabitants/km²



Source: *Informe anual sobre la cobertura poblacional de la banda ancha en España*, Ministry of Economy and Enterprise, 2020.

However, the cover is not sufficient. The digital divide between the rural and the urban environment is also explained by the indicator for the implementation of broadband, measured as the percentage of homes that contract services for connecting to the network.

For this indicator, the most current data, which come from the INE's Survey on the Equipment and use of Information and Communication Technologies in Households (2020), reflect that 95.3% of the households surveyed have a broadband connection.

In recent years the divide has been reduced in terms of households with a connection to the Internet. In the year 2020, the divide was 3 points when we compared these municipalities with the total and just over 4 points if we compared them with urban municipalities. However, if we are talking about fixed broadband connections, the divide expands to over 8 points with respect to the total and nearly 12 with respect to urban municipalities. In rural areas, the percentage of households with only a mobile broadband connection is 18.6%, 5 points above the total and 8 points above the urban sphere.

The divide is also manifested in the smaller amount of technological products in households in rural areas. In this case, the divide is of 6 points with respect to the national average and 10 points when compared with urban municipalities. In Spain in 2020, some 81.4% of households had some kind of computer, 5 points more than in 2015. However, in municipalities with fewer than 10,000 inhabitants, the figure is of 75.3% of households, 5.5 points less than the total, but it has increased since 2015 by 6.3 points, in other words, it has grown faster than the average.

11

The divide under debate: the impact of covid-19 on the rural/urban balance

There are clear signs that covid-19 and the life changes it has imposed are impacting on the rural/urban balance, as we know it. However, it is still very early to evaluate the extension of this impact. The pandemic has shown how human concentration can cause the rapid spread of diseases. Living close to nature, with less risk of contagion and a more economical way of living, has become an option that some have already taken and that others are evaluating.

covid-19 and the life changes
it has imposed are impacting
on the rural/urban balance

Another effect of the current pandemic is the growth of remote working. According to the article titled «[El teletrabajo en España](#)», written by Brindusa Anghel, Marianela Cozzolino and Aitor Lacuesta for the Bank of Spain (2020), the country, in 2019, was still at the back of the queue in the European Union in the implementation of remote working. The year 2020 completely changed this scenario. According to a press release from Randstad on 17 September 2020, regarding the evolution of remote working, in relation with the previous year («[Tres millones de españoles teletrabajan de manera habitual, el triple que el año pasado](#)»), some 16,2% of the total of those occupied were working more than half of the days from their homes, which represents 11.4 points more than in the year 2019. The study highlighted the fact that 3,015,200 occupied people worked remotely on a habitual basis, i.e., over half of the days that they worked, they did so from their homes. This volume is 216.8% higher than the number registered in 2019.

Organisations and workers had to adapt very quickly to a way of working that was not very well established in our society. They have done so, and the advantages for both organisations (lesser needs for physical space) and for workers (greater capacity for reconciliation between working life and personal life) have become clear. However the advantages derived from remote working have also been accompanied by inequalities, such as the greater conciliation load for women.

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Remote working creates a new segment of professionals that can decide to displace their main residence to areas that are quieter and cheaper than the big city, with all the advantages that this may involve for them and their families, and travel to the city once or twice per week, when work so requires them to do so.

In March 2021, in an article published in *20 Minutos*, titled “La pandemia repuebla la España rural”, Pablo Roderó analysed how the new employment context had led many young people to abandon the big cities, which had given new life to the countryside. The article explained the case of various young people who had abandoned the city because, with the money they were being paid while temporarily laid off, they could not afford to live in it. That same month, L. Núñez explained in *El Diario de Burgos* that different town councils were tackling the renovation of houses due to greater demand for housing, and reported on 29 villages in the Ribera del Duero area where the number of inhabitants was increasing. To respond to the demand for housing generated in the last year, numerous municipalities in the county were offering plots of land for sale.

In January 2021, the RTVE programme *Comando Actualidad* presented the report *Pueblos que reviven: ¿la solución a la España más vaciada?* This chronicle explained that the option of going to live in the countryside had increased by 30% during the crisis, that the census of small towns and villages had grown due to the pandemic, remote working and the need for open spaces, and that some villages had even reopened their schools. But it also considered whether we are looking at a change of model or whether this new path has an expiry date.

En septiembre del 2020, un artículo de Núria Segura Insa publicado en *El Nacional*, titulado «La magnitud de la migració de la ciutat al poble per la Covid-19», aportaba datos de pequeños municipios y de iniciativas que están propiciando el incremento de su población. Este es el caso de Riner, un municipio del Solsonès de 200 habitantes donde se han empadronado 30 nuevas personas, o de Gósol, en el Berguedà, que ha tenido un incremento considerable de nuevos niños inscritos en su escuela. El interés también lo han notado en la Asociación de Micropueblos de Cataluña, donde se ha incrementado exponencialmente el número de correos electrónicos que reciben de personas interesadas en abrir nuevos proyectos en el mundo rural.

Also in September of 2020, Lucía Caballero, writing for the Agency SINC, asked herself whether the population would be going to live in the countryside within the context of the pandemic. The journalist was not very sure of the answer and recalled that not all is idyllic in the rural environment. The lack of high-speed connectivity, among other basic services, puts the dampers on this desire of the population. However, the author provided the data published by idealista.com, on the increased interest in purchasing a dwelling (up 13.2% from January to August 2020) in a locality with fewer than 5,000 inhabitants.

In June of 2020, an article by Julio Núñez published in *El País* looked at how ruralisation had taken force as a condition to start up a business. The consolidation of remote working, the growth of electronic commerce and the momentum of the logistics sector mean that opening a business outside of the major cities is an opportunity that is more profitable than it was before the pandemic. As proof of this, he pointed to the hundreds of consultations received by the Association of Self-Employed Workers during the last month: “Last week, for example, we received 93 telephone calls from people who wanted to take the option of receiving their unemployment benefit in one lump sum in order to set up a business in their home village. It is clear that a very big crisis is coming, and as happened in 2008, it is easier to create your own job than to find one”.

It is worth asking whether this recent “exodus” from the cities to the countryside will be a permanent effect or whether, to the contrary, once the pandemic has disappeared, the people who have left for the countryside will return to the city.

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The challenge of attracting the population to rural areas is already underway. The following challenge will be to get that population to put down roots there and, for this, there is no other way than that of closing the divide in the basic services and employment opportunities offered by the rural environment.

12 Measures for achieving rural development and territorial cohesion

The most notorious background incident in the fight to vindicate the rural world dates back to 1999, with the constitution of the citizens' platform Teruel Existe. The platform was set up to highlight the lack of attention on the part of the Administration with regard to the most acute needs of the province: improving infrastructures, new hospitals, better subsidies for farming, a bigger educational offering or measures to generate employment, among others.

Not many of these demands have been achieved, but the platform has helped, a great deal, with the visibility of the “rural problem”. Today there are 160 platforms in the 25 provinces of emptied Spain, and Teruel Existe has had representation in the Congress of Deputies since the general elections of 2019.

However, undoubtedly, the majority of citizens became aware of the problem and this entered the public debating arena with force in 2016, with the publishing success of the essay *La España vacía*, by Sergio del Molino. The strength of the movement against the depopulation of rural areas is such that in January 2017, the Conference of Presidents approved the drafting of the National Strategy against the Demographic Challenge.

Today, there are a large number of funds and policies envisaged to ensure the social cohesion and development of rural areas. These originate, firstly, from the rural development programmes of the Ministry of Agriculture, Fishing and Food, which receive funding from the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD); and secondly from the Ministry for Territorial Policy and Public Function, through its National Strategy against the Demographic Challenge; and finally, the Ministry for Ecological Transition and the Demographic Challenge, with [Next Generation EU](#) funds. There are also various autonomous communities that are approving measures to compensate the rural areas affected by depopulation.

Rural development policies and programmes are set up by the European Commission through contributions from the common agricultural policy to the rural development goals of the EU, and funded by the EAFRD. The [EAFRD budget for the period 2021-2027](#) totals 95.5 billion euros, which includes an injection of 8.1 billion euros from Next Generation EU, the recovery instrument for tackling the challenges posed by the covid-19 pandemic. To join this programme, each Member State draws up its rural development programme (RDP) and can select, when designing its strategies, between a series of general political measures that fulfil one or more of the EAFRD priorities.

In Spain, it is the Ministry of Agriculture, Fishing and Food that, through the Agriculture and Rural Development Sectorial Conference, produces the RDPs periodically. The new RDP for the period 2021-2026 is in the process of development and must be adjusted to the proposal for reform of the CAP of the European Commission of June 2018.

The National Strategy against the Demographic Challenge, drawn up by the Government Commission against the Demographic Challenge (Ministry of Territorial Policy and Public Function) was approved at the Council of Ministers in March 2019. The strategy is of a global and cross-cutting nature and incorporates a multidisciplinary and demographic perspective in the analysis of sectorial actions. Its directives focus on three demographic questions agreed at the Conference of Presidents: depopulation, ageing and effects of the floating population.

Finally, it is worth pointing out that, as a result of the health and economic crisis generated by covid-19, the European Council of 21 July 2020 approved a contribution of 750 billion euros for the Next Generation EU recovery fund. This fund, whose goal is to help the member countries to recover from the crisis, does not substitute the structural funds. Spain is set to receive 150 billion euros from these funds. For the distribution of part of these funds, the Government has drawn up the Recovery, Transformation and Resilience Plan, which will guide the execution of 72 billion euros from European funds until 2023 and in the next three years will mobilise 50% of the resources that Spain has thanks to the Next Generation EU instrument. The plan is structured around four keystones, one of these being territorial cohesion.

In March of 2021, the Spanish Government approved 130 measures for the demographic challenge, aligned with the Agenda 2030 of Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations. The measures are articulated around the following ten pillars:

- ▶ Promotion of the ecological transition.
- ▶ Digital transition and full connectivity (especially, through 5G).
- ▶ Development and innovation in the territory.
- ▶ Promotion of sustainable tourism.
- ▶ Equality of rights and opportunities.
- ▶ Encouragement of enterprise.
- ▶ Reinforcement of public services and advancement of decentralisation.
- ▶ Social welfare and care economy.

- ▶ Promotion of culture.
- ▶ Regulatory and institutional reforms to incorporate the demographic perspective into the decision-making process in the administrations.

This is a plan that commits the investment of up to 10 billion euros in the period 2021-2023, channelling a part of the European Next Generation EU funds, which also incorporate this new sensitivity.

Finally, it is worth mentioning, for their interest, different public-private social innovation initiatives in the rural environment:

Labean.

This project, promoted by the Basque Government and the Hazi Foundation for Añana, Montaña Alavesa and Enkarterri, aims to contribute to the generation and consolidation of economic and employment activities, to improving the wellbeing of rural society, the settling of the population in the territory and the transformation of it. The aim of its actions is to take advantage of the opportunities existing in each district. For this, new business models are conceived, already existing projects are promoted and local resources are enhanced, making local organisations participants in the dynamism and territorial cohesion. Also, the project can promote different collaborations between the public spheres and help to conceive new forms of governance.

Navarra Rural Social Innovation Lab.

This initiative, promoted by the Government of Navarra and managed by the social enterprise El Hueco, pursues a structural change in the models of collaboration and innovation in rural environments. The initiative has the labour of local organisations and the agents from the local sphere, with the aim of achieving social innovation and increasing the quality of life of citizens and territorial cohesion.

Holapueblo.

This platform, promoted by Correos (the post office), the Red Eléctrica group and Almanatura, aims to put into contact small municipalities in Spain that want to host entrepreneurs with people who are seeking a location to settle and set up their small business, which must be innovative, with a social impact and sustainable.

Pastoreo enRED.

This pilot project, promoted by the Red Eléctrica group and Agrovidar, aims to combine extensive livestock farming with maintaining electricity infrastructures and introduce data management into sheep grazing tasks. All of this has the aim of preserving the value of the environment's ecosystems and with special attention to the protection of local breeds in danger of extinction.

CTIC RuralTech.

A project promoted by CTIC Foundation in the Valle de Peón (Asturias). Based on the concept of connected villages, and on the basis of technology, it aims to bring innovation into agro-livestock farming and the initial processing industry, attracting new settlers, promoting niche tourism based on the environment's resources and strengthening local services.



"la Caixa" Foundation