

Extended abstract

*Has the COVID-19 Pandemic been
a Driver of Demographic Change
in Spain's Rural Areas?*



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Highlights:

1. The demography of rural areas is benefiting from the pandemic on an interim basis.
2. The demographic impact of the pandemic on the territory is uneven.
3. Rural municipalities experience a change in growth trend in 2020 due to internal immigration.

Abstract: The outbreak of COVID-19 implied a reversal of the dominant migratory trends in Spain's rural areas. In the years of the pandemic, rural areas were characterised by the retention of local residents and the arrival of immigrants from the cities. These changes augured a future demographic renaissance in these areas. However, the heterogeneity that characterises the Spanish countryside suggests that the impact of COVID-19 may have had a diverse demographic response. The aim of this article is to analyse the effects of the pandemic on rural demography. Using microdata from the Natural Movement, the Residential Variation Statistics and the Continuous Register for the period 2016-2021, we have created different categories of demographic behaviour, collecting the possible combinations of growth according to their components and subsequently applying a typology of municipalities developed by Goerlich. The results show an increase in municipalities with positive growth during the pandemic period due to the increase in internal immigrants. However, a detailed territorial analysis reveals a conjunctural demographic response to the pandemic and qualifies the dominant impression that rural areas benefited in a similar way from the outflows from urban centres.

Keywords: Rural demography, demographic typologies, population growth, territory and migration.

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Extended Abstract

1. Introduction and justification

Concern about the demographic decline in rural areas has grown significantly within the academic community in recent years (Rodríguez Soler et. al, 2020; Recaño, 2023b). Structural effects of migratory exodus, such as the shortage of young people and the increased mortality due to aging, have driven population loss in rural regions during the first decades of the 21st century. However, not all rural areas are subject to these conditions; some enjoy a more solid demographic health (Recaño, 2017; De Cos and Reques, 2019). To understand these differences, it is important to recognise that Spain is a country of strong demographic contrasts, where territorial imbalances are the result of demographic evolution, shaped by the uneven impact of internal migrations throughout the 20th century (Camarero, 1993; Collantes and Pinilla, 2011; García Barbancho, 1967; Ródenas, 1994; Silvestre, 2010), as well as the influx and redistribution of foreign immigrants in the late 20th and early 21st centuries (Collantes et al., 2014; Recaño, 2016; González Leonardo et al., 2023; Recaño, 2023a). The only rural areas that have escape these trends are the municipalities near to urban centers, where the proximity and accessibility to this hubs are two crucial factors driving their development and demographic dynamism (Gutiérrez et al., 2020; Gil-Alonso et al., 2023; Beltrán Tapia et al., 2021).

In this context, the uncertainty caused by the unexpected outbreak of COVID-19 led certain areas of academia, the media, and political sectors to hastily propose hypotheses on the effects of the pandemic during the initial months of the health crisis, such as rural the potential for rural revival and/or urban exodus. The publications published so far have only been provided limited insights into the demographic effects of COVID-19 at the onset of the health crisis. This has made it challenging to draw definitive conclusions about its impact on population behaviour and to determine whether the observed changes in demographic dynamics are merely cyclical changes (Fielding and Ishikawa, 2021; Whitaker, 2021; Rowe et al., 2023) or represent a transition to new demographic trends (Nathan and Owerman, 2020).

2. Objectives, methodology and sources, areas of study

The primary hypothesis anticipates significant changes in demographic behaviour between the pre-pandemic period (2016-2019) and the years most affected by the pandemic (2020 and 2021). The secondary hypothesis recognizes that the effects of COVID-19 on local demographics are likely to vary depending on the specific rural context. Therefore, the objectives of this article are: (i) to analyse the effects of COVID-19 on the demographic dynamics of rural areas in Spain, and (ii) to examine territorial changes and the diversity of demographic responses.

For achieve these goals, the study utilizes microdata from the Continuous Register as of January 1 of each year, as well as microdata from the Natural Population Movement, and the Residential Variations Statistics. The information from these statistical sources was standardised to align with the municipalities in the 2011 census for the calculation of gross rates of each demographic component.

The results of the demographic indicators were classified into a typology with 17 categories, grouped in three major classifications based on real population growth: positive growth, negative growth and stable growth. This classification was applied to two typologies of rural spaces, as defined by Goerlich et al. (2016): Remote Rural, characterised by being at least 45 minutes away from urban services, and Accessible Rural, where travel times are shorter.

3. Results

3.1. Evolution of the demographic components of rural typologies.

The temporal evolution of natural increase, net internal migration, and net external migration in the Remote Rural and Accessible Rural areas show similar trends. The key distinction is the higher intensity of both net internal and external migration in the Accessible Rural areas, which also experience a less regressive natural increase compared to Remote Rural areas. resulting in higher demographic growth for the former. Both categories showed a clear contraction in net internal and external migration in 2021, probably anticipating a return to pre-pandemic norms.

3.2. Changes in the demographic dynamics of rural areas in Spanish regions

Although the demographic dynamics of the Remote Rural vary significantly between regions, the evolution of natural increase, net migration, and real growth rates follow a similar pattern across most regions, with notable disparities in intensity.

In Accessible Rural Areas, a clear distinction emerges between the dynamics of the first and second periods. The shift is marked by a decline in natural increase, a significant rise in net migration, and an overall improvement in real growth rates, driven primarily by this increase in migration.

3.3. Growth typologies: distribution, associated resident population, and geographic location.

In the first period, most Remote Rural and Accessible Rural municipalities experienced population losses. The most common growth model during this stage is J2, characterised by both negative natural increase and a negative migratory balance, with the former being more pronounced than the latter. The municipalities that follow this growth typology are located between the northwest and the interior of the peninsula, coinciding with the less dynamic regions.

During the pandemic, changes in demographic behaviour, driven by the arrival of migrants, led to population growth in most Accessible Rural areas. However, in remote rural areas, the trend of population decline persisted. Despite this, the most common growth pattern in both rural categories was typology C, where positive net migration temporarily offset the negative results of natural decrease. This growth typology is found in provinces near Madrid and Barcelona, the Canary Islands, the Balearic Islands and the more economically dynamic areas of the Pyrenees.

3.4. Variations in growth typologies

During the pandemic period, 78.5 % of Remote Rural territories and 71.3 % of the Accessible Rural territories were classified into different growth typologies. Most of the municipalities that changed their growth pattern shifted into typologies C (CR+; CN-; SM+), H (CR-; CN-; SM+), J1 (CR-; CN- > SM-) and J2 (CR-; CN- < SM-). These changes affected 65.1 % of the inhabitants in Rural Remote areas and 45.6 % in Accessible Rural areas.

Among the four typologies with the greatest impact, pattern C (CR+; CN-; SM+), emerged as the most common transformation across rural areas.

4. Discussion

During the pandemic period, Spanish demographics experienced several significant changes (Gil-Alonso et al., 2023; González et al., 2022). The number of

deaths increased, not only due to the direct and indirect effects of COVID-19 but also as a result of an aging population. Additionally, a decrease in fertility rates was observed, contrary to expectations (Esteve et al., 2021).

In terms of migration, there was a decline in emigration rates and an increase in immigration rates. Rural areas, particularly those far from urban areas, became attractive destinations. Retention population in rural areas was a direct effect of mobility restriction policies, such as preventive border closures and home confinement (Arango et al., 2021; Fanjul, 2021). The rise in immigration was encouraged by the search for greater freedom of movement and the fear of contagion. Factors such as teleworking, online learning, digital commerce (Serrano and Fajardo, 2023), accessibility to services and the availability of second homes (López-Colás; Módenes, 2004; Delgado Viñas, 2023) facilitated residential mobility during the 2020-2021 period.

The demographic differences between Remote and Accessible Rural areas are primarily explained by the latter's greater proximity to urban areas (González Leonardo et al., 2022; Reynaud et al., 2020; Gutiérrez et al., 2022; Delgado Viñas, 2023). This proximity has a significant influence on the population structure of rural areas. Accessible rural areas tend to have a younger demographic structure due to the influx of migrants, while Remote Rural areas, with more limited immigration and a less favourable demographic trajectory, have an older population (Recaño, 2023b).

5. Conclusions

During the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a conjunctural change in the demographic behaviour of the rural population. This changed is reflected in the increase of municipalities with positive growth patterns in both Remote and Accessible Rural areas. The increase in immigration has been the key factor driving this shift in demographic growth trends.

Despite this, discrepancies still persist in the demographic patterns between remote and accessible rural areas. The arrival of migrants to the remote rural area has not been intense enough to modify its demographic trend of population loss.

The areas that have benefited most from these changes are the accessible rural environments of Madrid, Barcelona, Valencia and the neighbouring provinces, confirming that proximity to urban centers plays a relevant role in the dynamism and demographic behaviour of rural areas.

In summary, in response to the question posed in the title: the pandemic has acted as a catalyst for demographic change in Spanish rural areas, especially in the more accessible areas. However, this change has not been uniform across the territory. Moreover, the trend observed in 2021 suggest a likely return to pre-pandemic demographic patterns.

6. Next steps

One of the proposed approaches for continuing the study of the pandemic's demographic effects in Spanish rural areas is to incorporate migration and residential changes statistics for the year 2022. This would provide a complete statistical overview of the pandemic period and open new avenues for examining post-pandemic effects on rural demography in Spain.

Another future perspective is the analysis of the sociodemographic profile of emigrants during the pandemic. This would involve using data from the annual registers and censuses, such as sex, age or educational attainment, alongside migration and residential changes statistics.