

Extended abstract

*The Socioeconomic and Territorial
Impact of COVID-19 on the (Foreign)
Population in Rural Areas of Aragon:
Demographic Revitalization?*



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Highlights:

1. The population did not increase in rural areas during the pandemic.
2. The volume of registered foreigners grew in many rural municipalities during the pandemic.
3. After the pandemic, the patterns of population distribution in the territory have not significantly changed.
4. After the COVID-19 crisis, there is no evidence of demographic revitalization in rural areas.
5. Long-term research must be developed to better analyze the socio-territorial impacts of COVID-19.

Abstract: The hypothesis of a "rural reactivation" has been present since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, and whether this crisis was going to imply a structural change in the demographic evolution of rural areas. This contribution analyzes the influence that the pandemic has had on the demographic dynamics of rural areas in Aragón, in a national context; specifically, in the evolution and distribution of the total population, and also of immigrants of foreign origin, including TCNs (foreigners from countries outside the EU). It analyzes how the pandemic has affected the evolution and distribution of these population groups by municipality size (rural, semi-rural and urban). Subsequently, attention will be paid to the evolution of some economic variables to understand how the pandemic has affected the foreign population group. For this, the statistical sources used are the Population Register and the Economically Active Population Survey (EPA) (INE). The results indicate that there has been no increase in registrations in the rural areas of Aragón and Spain, but there has been an increase in foreigners and also TCNs, although this statement can be qualified depending on the territories. Despite some growth of some groups in certain rural areas, results seems to indicate that the COVID-19 crisis has not led to a significant transformation in the face of the long-awaited "rural renaissance".

Keywords: Impacts, distribution, revitalization, foreign population, COVID-19.

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Extended Abstract

1. Introduction and Justification

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly altered socioeconomic and demographic dynamics on a global scale. In particular, mobility restrictions and social distancing measures imposed during 2020 and 2021 profoundly impacted population mobility. There was much discussion about the potential demographic revival of rural areas due to a supposed urban exodus, especially of young people and families moving to rural municipalities in search of a safer and more spacious environment.

In Spain, the media reported an increase in demand for rural homes with gardens and open spaces, similar to trends observed in other countries. However, it is necessary to evaluate whether these temporary changes have contributed to overcoming the continuous population decline in rural areas. Additionally, the socioeconomic situation of the immigrant population in these areas, who often face more vulnerable living conditions, also deserves special attention.

The main objective of this article is to analyze how the COVID-19 crisis has influenced the demographic and economic situation of the general population and particularly the immigrant population in the rural areas of Aragón, Spain. This region, where only 14 of its 731 municipalities are urban (with more than 10,000 inhabitants), represents an ideal territory to analyze the impact of the pandemic in rural areas with fewer than 2,000 inhabitants. The choice of Aragón is justified by the high presence of foreign population in these areas, making it a suitable laboratory to analyze how COVID-19 has affected this population in demographic and economic terms.

The article reviews existing literature on the demographic effects of the pandemic, examines demographic trends and population distribution in Aragón between 2019 and 2021, and evaluates the economic and labor impact on the foreign population during this period. Finally, the findings are discussed and guidelines for future research are offered.

2. Urban-Rural Exodus During the Pandemic

During the COVID-19 pandemic, terms such as "return to the countryside" and "rural revival" were recurrent in media discourse. In the early stages of the pandemic, there was evidence of increased residential moves from urban to rural areas. The latter, with lower population density, were seen as safer refuges with lower virus incidence and more opportunities to enjoy larger homes and open spaces.

For example, in the United States, major cities experienced historic population loss rates in 2021, and a large proportion of major urban counties recorded population declines. Similarly, countries like the United Kingdom, France, and Japan saw increases in rural property purchases and searches. In Japan, Tokyo experienced population losses due to increased emigration and decreased immigration. Rural areas near cities and tourist regions gained population due to internal migration.

In Europe, research conducted in Sweden, Great Britain, and Germany detected significant counter-urbanization flows during the pandemic. In Germany, increased net losses in major cities were observed, caused by fewer young adults moving in and sustained family departures. However, evidence suggests that these movements may have been temporary and not significant enough to alter long-term demographic patterns.

3. Methodology

This article utilizes data from the Continuous Register (Padrón continuo) and the Labour Force Survey (EPA) of the National Institute of Statistics (INE). The analysis focused on the total population, the foreign population, and Third Country Nationals (TCNs; immigrants from non-EU countries) between 2019 and 2021. Despite recognizing the data reliability limitations during the pandemic, the records provide valuable insights into changes in the registered population.

4. Results

During the pandemic, from a demographic perspective, there was an increase in the registered population in some rural areas, reflecting a possible temporary shift from

urban to rural residences. However, this increase does not necessarily indicate a permanent change in migration patterns. The "rural revival" observed during this period does not seem sufficient to overcome the long-term trend of rural depopulation.

Regarding the foreign population in Aragón, especially TCNs, significant increases were observed during the pandemic. Despite an increase in registered population, immigrants faced greater economic and labor challenges, reflecting vulnerabilities exacerbated by the pandemic.

The COVID-19 crisis had a significant impact on the economic and labor situation of the immigrant population in rural areas of Aragón. Mobility restrictions and vulnerable living conditions of many immigrants hindered their economic situation, although the overall balance has been an improvement in their situation (in terms of economic activity, activity rates, unemployment, etc.) compared to the total population.

5. Discussion

The hypothesis of a rural demographic revival due to the pandemic has been questioned by several factors. Although there was an increase in demand for rural housing and a temporary population shift, these changes do not seem consistent enough to permanently alter the population distribution patterns in Aragón. Various studies indicate that the shifts were largely a temporary response to the restrictions and exceptional conditions imposed by the pandemic.

Data analysis in Aragón shows that while there was an increase in the registered population in rural areas during the pandemic, this phenomenon may be partly due to changes in registration without an intention of permanent residence. This suggests that the observed demographic revival may be more attributable to the pandemic's exceptional circumstances than a structural change in migration and residence patterns.

6. Conclusions

The COVID-19 pandemic has been an unprecedented event that has challenged socioeconomic and demographic dynamics worldwide. In Aragón, it has highlighted both the opportunities and vulnerabilities of rural areas. Although the temporary

increase in registered population suggests a possible demographic revival, it is crucial to distinguish between temporary changes and long-term trends.

The work underscores the need to consider the pandemic as a disruptive event that has had significant but potentially temporary impacts on the demography and economy of rural areas. For the foreign population in Aragón, the pandemic accentuated existing vulnerabilities, highlighting the importance of policies that address these inequalities and support immigrant communities.

To capitalize on lessons learned during the pandemic, it is essential to adopt a proactive, data-driven approach to develop policies and strategies that support the sustainable development of rural areas and the effective integration of the immigrant population. Only through continuous commitment and rigorous data evaluation can we fully understand the pandemic's impact and develop solutions that promote long-term resilience for all communities.

7. Future Directions

In the future, it will be necessary to evaluate the long-term effects of the pandemic on the population of rural areas and the immigrant population and determine whether the changes observed during the pandemic persist and whether they have altered rural depopulation trends.

Not only considering the total population but particularly immigrants, policies that improve living conditions and economic opportunities for the immigrant population in rural areas are needed to promote their effective and sustainable integration into these areas.

Additionally, infrastructure and service improvements in rural areas are essential to make them more attractive and sustainable in the long term; addressing issues such as internet connectivity and the availability of basic services, including housing, is crucial for the permanent residence of any population in rural areas.