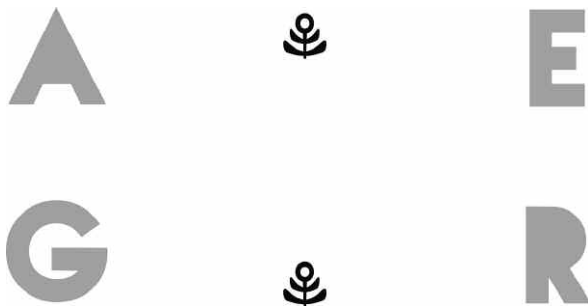


Extended abstract

*Incidence of COVID-19 on the Social and
Territorial Dynamics of Castilla y León
and its Reflection in Contrasting Cases
of Las Merindades (Burgos) and Tierra
de Campos*



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Highlights:

1. Strong demand for open spaces due to COVID-19, with the movement of urban inhabitants to rural areas.
2. General rural population growth due to the flow of city dwellers and the increase in teleworking.
3. The only territorial area that has benefited has been the peri-urban, established as a recipient of national and foreign migrants.
4. Both Tierra de Campos and Las Merindades continue to lose population, with temporary gains and overall losses in Castilla y León.

Abstract: The pandemic caused by COVID-19 and its consequences of forced confinement for the population highlighted the problems generated by the lack of quality open spaces in most dwellings in concentrated urban spaces. The desire for gardens and open spaces and the need to get out of these conditions generated, from the very beginning, a significant movement of interest in low-density spaces, especially peri-urban edges and rural areas, as a housing alternative. It seemed that this phenomenon was going to bring about a drastic change in the behaviour of the population and could reverse, or at least alleviate, the progressive depopulation of our rural areas. With a certain perspective, we can now analyse whether these movements have indeed meant a change in trend or whether they have been a temporary movement that has already been exhausted, as well as their real impact on the dynamics of their population. As an example of low-density rural areas, but with very different economic and physical characteristics, we will analyse this process in the regions of Las Merindades and Tierra de Campos, both significant examples of the rural areas of Castilla y León.

Keywords: COVID-19; residential variations; Castilla y León; rural areas; Merindades; Tierra de Campos.

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Extended Abstract

1. Introduction and justification

The restrictions on movement during the COVID-19 lockdown did not prevent the flow of urban dwellers to nearby rural areas, even though they were prohibited; they were even encouraged by the circumstantial registration of many urban citizens in rural villages where they had secondary residences. This is what happened in many towns in Castilla y León and in the cases of Las Merindades (north of Burgos) and Tierra de Campos in the central-northern region. Both synthesize the general situation and highlight the contrasts between the rural and urban worlds of the region, whose population distribution is shown in Figure 1 at the municipal level. This autonomous community, the largest and least populated in Spain, is characterized by an absolutely predominant rural world, and during 2020 and 2021, it was very sensitive to movements between the countryside and the city.

The lockdown decree (RD 463/2020, of March 14) prohibited people from moving outside their municipalities. However, it allowed for "Travel to the workplace to carry out labor, professional, or business activities" (Article 7c) and the "Return to the place of habitual residence" (Article 7d), in addition to other movements. Consequently, exceeding municipal, provincial, or regional limits was permitted for these reasons, so one way to leave a city was to register in the municipality where one had a secondary residence or buy a house in a village, although some locals opposed these movements of urban people.

However, due to the ease of virus spread in dense and polluted urban areas, there was a surge in interest in rural living, generating a unique demographic flow that is quantified and evaluated here, along with teleworking. The authors have observed this phenomenon with some intensity in Las Merindades and to a lesser extent in Tierra de Campos, but it was widespread throughout Spain.

These flows are analyzed in Las Merindades, an extensive mountainous region (2,900 km² and 23,000 inhabitants) in the area of influence of Bilbao, and in Tierra de Campos, a vast region of 6,000 km² (and 54,000 inhabitants), sparsely populated, aged, and with an undiversified economy. These flows are studied in the Spanish context by analyzing what happened in the Residential Variations of the 8,131 Spanish municipalities during 2020 and 2021.

2. Objectives, methodology and sources

The work is based on the analysis of demographic statistical sources – Continuous Register Statistics, Natural Population Movement, Residential Variation Statistics, and Migration and Residence Change Statistics from the INE, complemented by the SIE (Statistical Information System of the Junta de Castilla y León)—and socioeconomic sources—Social Security Affiliation Register by municipality, sector, and category in 2007, 2015, 2020, 2021, 2022, and 2023—accompanied by fieldwork: a survey conducted among economic agents in the territory in the first half of 2021, sent to entrepreneurs from each region and responded to by 15 % of them, supplemented by in-depth interviews. The results do not allow for definitive conclusions because the two-year period (2020 and 2021, following the lockdown) is too short to draw conclusions; additionally, the INE's Residential Variation Statistics are published with considerable delay (the latest available year is currently 2021), although they have been supplemented with the Migration and Residence Change Statistics data for 2022. And although the purchase of rural homes by urbanites in 2020 and 2021 experienced some growth, in the end, they are only used as secondary residences, as was previously the case.

In Spain, there was a tendency to register in the municipalities where one had a secondary residence, but these movements only affected 0.97 % net of the country's inhabitants. Settlements (municipalities) in Castilla y León have been classified into five types: urban and peri-urban on one side, and dynamic and progressive rural areas (densities >25 inhabitants/km² and growing); ambivalent or stagnant rural areas, and regressive rural areas on the other.

In addition to the demographic results, the economic data has been evaluated through Social Security Affiliation data by municipality and year, classified at two digits, reflecting the dynamism or stagnation of the most inaccessible mountain areas in Las Merindades, as well as the plain areas of Campos further from urban centers.

3. Results

Castilla y León, Las Merindades, and Tierra de Campos have followed the demographic and socio-territorial patterns of the rest of rural inland Spain during the 20th and 21st centuries. As a whole, the region has lost population and continues to lose it, both in cities (not in peri-urban areas) and in the countryside. Castilla y León

is one of the best examples of the limited incidence of the return to the countryside, despite the fact that a considerable number of village houses have been sold to urban buyers, consolidating the long-standing trend in rural areas: inhabitants are lost, but not houses. In 2020/2022, there was a very small demographic rebound related to the consequences of COVID-19, but the natural population growth has continued to be negative, with annual losses not offset by migratory balances.

Residential variation balances for Spaniards and foreigners by population type in Castilla y León were positive in 2020 and 2021 in all municipalities except urban ones. The vegetative balance was negative in all cases, but in Las Merindades, it was compensated by a positive migratory balance that allowed the region to grow, especially in the central strip municipalities. Tierra de Campos continued to lose population, although about a dozen municipalities gained it, especially those in the peri-urban area of Palencia and some regional capitals. Additionally, it is noteworthy that Residential Variations are relatively larger in smaller villages. There seems to be a change in trend, however minimal, although migrations do not compensate for strong vegetative losses.

4. Discussion

These interesting balances can be interpreted as the dawn of a new recovery or as a simple tactical move to avoid the 2020 lockdown. In any case, they indicate a certain positive change as alternative living spaces, especially those close to cities or where telework can be developed or, in some cases, new economic activities started. Indeed, a clear difference is observed between Las Merindades and Tierra de Campos. In the former, its proximity to Bilbao favors the take-off of the central strip, along with the Mena Valley, although the mountainous areas to the north and south of this strip are clearly losing inhabitants. In Tierra de Campos, only the peri-urban municipalities of Palencia (Grijota, Villalobón, Husillos) grow, along with the mentioned regional capitals. The final result will be seen when the INE publishes the 2024 data, but even with the positive migratory balances expected, the vegetative balances will become more negative as the aging rate progressively increases. However, the number of jobs does not decrease and even increases in many municipalities, but employment growth is insufficient to retain the population while rural rejection persists, which seems to have decreased after the lockdown.

5. Conclusions

The apparently intense changes brought about by COVID-19 led to the belief in a permanent turning point in Spain's population distribution model, which could slow the strong urban concentration of the last seven decades. In Castilla y León, the flows towards rural areas are only confirmed in a few vocational cases, unable to reverse the negative trend in most of the territory. Retired individuals who returned to their village homes during the pandemic do not stay either, as they prefer urban registration in the homes of children or relatives, which better meets their healthcare needs. Moreover, they leave the villages in autumn because winters are especially harsh, particularly in mountainous areas. The departure of urbanites to the countryside is losing strength and even reversing. And although COVID-19 prompted a move to rural areas, it seems it has not been consolidated, although it has opened a door to appreciation and valuation of all things rural.

6. Future research

It is necessary to delve deeper into the composition of migratory balances: are they young or adult people? Are they retirees or active individuals? Are they women of working age? The answers to these questions will help foresee the future of the rural towns and villages in Castilla y León.