

Extended abstract

*The Geographical Study of Depopulation in Rural
Areas of Spain: State of the Art (1980-2023)*



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Highlights:

1. Increase in research on depopulation in Spain since the year 2000.
2. Predominance of case studies in specific regions such as Castilla y León and Aragón.
3. Lack of research on public perceptions and activism.
4. Little attention to the landscape and territorial effects of rural abandonment.
5. Need to address depopulation in a comprehensive and interdisciplinary manner.

Abstract: This study conducts a bibliometric analysis of scientific research on rural depopulation in Spain between 1980 and 2023, a phenomenon increasingly relevant in the context of the so-called "Empty Spain". The objective is to identify trends, information gaps, and emerging approaches in the published literature to provide a comprehensive overview of the current state of the field and guide future research. To this end, 127 articles published in geography journals relevant to the national context were selected, applying a bibliometric approach that considered temporal evolution, geographical scope, authorship, citation counts, and the main topics addressed. The results reveal a significant increase in scientific production since the year 2000, with a predominance of studies conducted in autonomous communities such as Castilla y León and provinces such as Valencia. However, important shortcomings were identified, including the scarcity of comparative studies with European countries, the limited attention to the landscape impacts of rural abandonment, and the lack of interdisciplinary approaches. In conclusion, the article highlights the need to expand research towards sociocultural, environmental, and spatial planning dimensions to develop more comprehensive and effective strategies for addressing depopulation in Spain.

Keywords: Depopulation in Spain; rural areas; geographical studies; bibliometric analysis.

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1. Introduction and justification

Rural depopulation in Spain has gained increasing relevance in academic research, especially in the field of Geography, due to its profound social, economic and territorial implications. Since the mid-20th century, this phenomenon has affected rural areas in Spain and other developed countries, primarily through a sustained decline in rural populations. This has led to challenges such as population ageing, the reduction or disappearance of essential services, and the deterioration of cultural and territorial heritage.

The present study addresses the pressing need for an updated and comprehensive understanding of how the phenomenon of rural depopulation has been approached in Spanish academic literature. Despite the recent proliferation of studies on depopulation, no previous research had conducted a bibliometric review of geographical literature over an extended time frame. This work fills that gap by systematically reviewing articles published from 1980 to 2023 in key Spanish geography journals. The choice of 1980 as the starting point is justified by the consolidation of editorial lines in the selected journals from that decade onward.

Rural areas in Spain have historically been a cornerstone of the country's cultural identity and geographical diversity. However, they are now undergoing an accelerated process of depopulation that threatens their long-term viability. The phenomenon not only affects remote rural areas but also undermines regional development and national social cohesion. In this context, this bibliometric review offers a detailed and structured synthesis of academic production and aims to inform future research directions by identifying thematic, geographical and disciplinary gaps.

2. Objectives, methodology and sources

The general objective of this research is to analyse the scientific production on rural depopulation in Spain between 1980 and 2023, identifying the main trends, methodological approaches and topics addressed by geographical research.

Specific objectives include:

- Identifying and cataloguing relevant academic articles.
- Analysing the temporal evolution of publications over four decades.
- Determining the geographical focus of the studies.
- Synthesising the conclusions and challenges highlighted in the literature.
- Offering an integrated overview to serve as a reference for future research and public policy.

Methodologically, the study applies a structured bibliometric review based on Domínguez's (2011) five-phase model. Sixteen Spanish geography journals were selected for their academic relevance, subject focus, and geographic coverage. Only those journals that had published at least one article on rural depopulation during the study period were ultimately included, 13 in total.

Search criteria included the use of keywords in Spanish, such as "despoblación", "despoblamiento", "vaciamiento", and "vacío demográfico". Given the existence of publications in languages such as English and Catalan in some Spanish geography journals, the search for these keywords was also conducted in their translated forms in those languages. A PRISMA flow diagram structured the selection process into identification, filtering, eligibility, and inclusion stages. A final sample of 127 articles was selected for in-depth analysis.

Each article was examined according to multiple dimensions:

- Temporal distribution
- Geographical scale
- Authorship, institutional affiliation and number of citations (via Google Scholar)
- Thematic classification across ten major topics: demographic challenge, case studies, rural exodus, future scenarios, heritage, revitalisation strategies, theoretical contributions, gender, activism, and public perception.

3. Results

The analysis revealed a significant increase in research output on rural depopulation from 2000 onwards. The journal *Cuadernos Geográficos* stands out with

the highest number of articles (26), followed closely by *Ager* (24), despite it beginning publication only in 2001. Other journals with moderate contributions include *Papeles de Geografía*, *Ería*, and *Estudios Geográficos*.

In terms of geographical scope, most studies focus on Castilla y León (11 articles), followed by regions such as Murcia, Andalusia, Castilla-La Mancha and Aragón. At the provincial level, the provinces of Valencia and Teruel were notably represented. National-scale studies were also relatively common (16 articles), although cross-national comparisons were rare.

Thematically, territorial case studies dominate the field, accounting for 69 of the 127 articles. Most of these focus on regional (27) or county-level (18) scales, with fewer studies on local, national or supramunicipal contexts. Theoretical analyses, demographic challenges, and scenario planning are also well represented. Conversely, topics such as gender (1 article), activism (1), and public perception (3) remain marginal.

In terms of authorship, a total of 178 authors contributed to the corpus. However, only 32 had authored more than one article. Four researchers authored four articles each: Carmen Bell Adell, Carolina del Valle Ramos, Luis Carlos Martínez Fernández, and José María Delgado Urrecho. The analysis also shows that 84 % of the articles were co-authored, indicating strong collaborative dynamics, often within the same institution. About 30 % of the publications were linked to public research funding, and the most cited articles—many of them published in *Ager*—focus on public policy, historical trends, and theoretical frameworks.

4. Discussion

The growing academic production on rural depopulation in Spain, especially since the 2000s, reflects increasing awareness of the socio-territorial challenges facing rural areas. This trend aligns with broader European and global dynamics, as noted by Brezzi & Veneri (2017), Labianca & Navarro (2019), and Czibere et al. (2021), who highlight how rural decline is a widespread and long-standing issue across Europe and beyond.

The bibliometric analysis confirms a concentration of studies on specific regions, such as Castilla y León, Aragón and Murcia (Recaño, 2023), while other affected areas like Galicia or Catalonia remain underrepresented (Pinilla & Sáez, 2017). This geographical imbalance may hinder a more equitable development of policy

responses. Additionally, the predominance of case studies limits broader, comparative analyses that could contribute to understanding depopulation as a shared European phenomenon (Vaishar et al., 2020).

Although demographic challenges and future scenarios are relatively well covered, other key themes—such as activism (1 article) and public perceptions (3 articles)—are scarcely addressed. This lack is significant, considering the cultural and social transformations associated with rural decline, which affect community identity and cohesion (Camarero & Oliva, 2021). Moreover, public policies often neglect these dimensions, as shown by the limited presence of communication and participation strategies in regional and national frameworks (Galletero-Campos & Saiz-Echezarreta, 2024).

Another relevant gap is the scarce attention to territorial and landscape impacts. As Esparcia (2022) suggests, land abandonment and changing rural functions should be addressed through spatial planning, turning challenges into opportunities for sustainable development. Farinós (2023) further emphasises the role of territorial governance in rebalancing affected regions.

Finally, although the study reveals strong academic interest, it also points to a concentration of authorship in a few institutions. This reinforces the need to expand interdisciplinary collaboration and diversify institutional participation, as advocated by Collantes & Pinilla (2011).

5. Conclusions

This study presents the first systematic bibliometric analysis of rural depopulation research in Spain from a geographical perspective, covering more than four decades of academic production. The findings show a clear increase in scholarly interest since the early 2000s, with a growing number of studies published in specialised journals, especially *Cuadernos Geográficos* and *Ager*.

The dominant research approach is territorially focused, often using regional case studies to analyse demographic change, ageing, and socio-economic decline. Despite the richness of this literature, the study highlights several persistent gaps: lack of interdisciplinary work, limited attention to landscape and sociocultural impacts, underexplored social and gender dimensions, and insufficient geographical balance.

The research also identifies a set of highly cited articles that have shaped the field, many of which stem from funded projects and collaborative efforts. These findings underscore the importance of institutional support and academic networks in advancing knowledge on rural depopulation.

6. Next steps

This study has focused exclusively on 16 Spanish geography journals, without including articles published in other journals, books, or international sources. Therefore, to obtain a complete and more representative overview of the scientific corpus on rural depopulation in Spain, future research should broaden the scope of bibliometric analysis to include doctoral theses, research projects, conference proceedings, and international collaborations.

It would also be highly relevant to examine outputs from European projects and their associated publications, which are often disseminated through different academic channels. Incorporating such materials would allow researchers to adopt a more global and interdisciplinary perspective on rural depopulation, placing the Spanish case in dialogue with other European and international experiences.

In addition, future studies should:

- * Deepen interdisciplinary approaches that integrate geographical analysis with sociological, environmental, political, and cultural perspectives.
- * Address currently underexplored themes such as public perceptions, gender, civic activism, and community resilience in depopulated areas.
- * Broaden the geographical scope of case studies to include less frequently analysed regions and ensure balanced territorial coverage.
- * Investigate the landscape and environmental transformations associated with rural abandonment, particularly in relation to ecological planning and territorial identity.
- * Promote comparative studies with other countries facing similar demographic challenges, to contribute to international debates and foster mutual learning.

By addressing these directions, future research can provide a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of rural depopulation, informing more effective, inclusive, and territorially adapted public policies.