

***Extended abstract***

*Population Decline and Depopulation  
in Granada Province (Spain), 1991-2020*



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DOI: 10.4422/ager.2021.14

***ager***

Revista de Estudios sobre Despoblación y Desarrollo Rural  
Journal of Depopulation and Rural Development Studies

*Highlights:*

1. Granada is a province with strong population imbalances.
2. Its past as an emigration focus has determined the demographic present and future.
3. Much of the province loses population and suffers a serious depopulation process.
4. Aging and male sex ratio define the population structure of their rural environment.
5. Different factors (altitude, isolation, low density, dispersion, size of settlements) affect depopulation.

*Abstract:* Although in recent years the population of the province of Granada has increased slightly, most of its territory is characterized by the loss of inhabitants. This is a symptom of the strong contrasts existing in its interior between dynamic areas, basically the metropolitan crown and the coast, and the rest of the province, which is characterized by an accentuated demographic depletion due to vegetative wear and the low power of attraction for immigration flows. That have been happening. Discovering the distribution and intensity of the depopulation process and analysing the repercussions it has on demographic structures will also be one of the objectives of present work, that it pursues, as well, to see to what extent and what factors affect the depopulation of large sectors of the province. To carry out the analysis, the Population Gazette will be used, considering two dates: 2020, as the most current moment and 1991, as a milestone in the recent past, which will serve to analyse the evolution that occurred. The work scale is made up by the singular population entities.

*Keywords:* Population decrease, vegetative wear, structural imbalances, territorial disarticulation.

## ***1. Introduction and justification***

The terms "population decline" and "depopulation" are often used as synonyms, although in this study we will be using them to describe very different phenomena.

The term "population decline" is used to refer simply to a loss of population, which can have serious consequences for demographic structures, altering their composition by sex and age. This has forced many rural areas into a downward spiral which has now become chronic.

By contrast, "depopulation" refers to the territorial dimension of the problem, which is manifested in a deterioration in the occupation and use of the territory and in its progressive dismantling and abandonment.

Although the Province of Granada is affected by both these phenomena, the problem is often overlooked in that in overall terms, the population continues to rise, a situation that has excluded the province, together with many other parts of Andalusia, from the current debate on "Empty Spain" (España vacía).

In the case of Granada, the figures for the province as a whole conceal a territorial dichotomy in which very dynamic growth areas, such as the urban agglomeration around the city of Granada or the coastal region, contrast sharply with the rest of the province in which the tendency is clearly regressive.

Bearing this in mind, the main objective of this study is to draw attention to the real problems of population decline and depopulation in the Province of Granada and outline their specific characteristics.

## ***2. Objectives, methodology, sources and study areas***

In this research, we analyse the evolution of the population of the Province of Granada over the last 30 years, a period which in sociopolitical terms has been characterised by the consolidation of the democratic model established after the death of Franco in 1975. In economic terms, it has been marked by a succession of boom-and-bust cycles, and in demographic terms by the confluence of various phenomena such as: the slowing of the rural exodus, the slump in the fertility rate, the increase in life expectancy, the progressive ageing of the population, the arrival of large numbers of immigrants and the changes in the way people live together.

This analysis has been conducted at inframunicipal scale, whenever the data has enabled us to do so.

The main sources of data were the censuses and population records of the Spanish National Statistics Institute (INE) and the Demographic Information System. We also used various different cartographic databases from the National Geographic Institute (IGN) and the Andalusia Statistics and Cartography Institute (IECA).

In this research, four main issues have been examined: changes in the population, demographic trends, the structure by sex and age, and depopulation and the factors that drive it.

From a methodological point of view, the visual presentation of these phenomena in map form has been crucial, in that it has enabled us to establish various typologies.

### **3. Results**

The first question covered in this research is that of population decline. The maps drawn up to illustrate this problem show the enormous variations at municipal level where the intensity of the decline in many parts of the province is masked by the overall figures for the province as a whole, which shed very little light on real population decline.

There is also a strong contrast between the areas of growth and those of decline, with the urban agglomeration around the city of Granada and the coastal area behaving quite differently to other areas such as Los Montes, la Alpujarra Oriental and los Altiplanos.

In our analysis of the demographic dynamic, we noted that the prevailing situation across the province was one of 'exhaustion', as defined by negative balances in natural, migratory and real population growth. Another important characteristic was polarization, in that these areas undergoing severe decline are in sharp contrast with other very specific areas in which demographic growth tends to be concentrated. These do not include the city of Granada itself, which over the course of the study period has lost almost 25,000 inhabitants.

The drain caused by net out-migration has affected and continues to affect most parts of the province. This has resulted in huge structural imbalances in two senses, with a clear trend towards firstly, the ageing and secondly, the masculinization of the population in rural areas. The two processes coincide in many areas of the

province, with the most extreme cases in the Altiplano, la Alpujarra Oriental and los Montes Occidentales.

Depopulation is particularly severe in areas situated at high altitude and with poor access. Towns and villages with low population densities and scattered population centres are also vulnerable, as are small villages. The problem is considerably exacerbated in areas affected by more than one of these factors.

If we gather together all the variables analysed, i.e. the number of factors contributing to depopulation, the negative tendency and intensity of the changes in population and the resulting structural imbalances, we can establish a typology that synthesizes the demographic trends observed and allows us to make predictions regarding the future prospects of these areas.

The names given to some of these typologies eloquently describe the situations in which these areas are immersed. Examples include the areas considered to be in "terminal" state. These places have been exposed to various depopulation risk factors, have lost large swathes of their population in recent years and show totally imbalanced demographic structures. Most of these are in peripheral regions of the province and in particular in comarcas (sub-regions) such as los Montes Occidentales, la Alpujarra Oriental and los Altiplanos.

#### **4. Discussion**

When discussing population decline, it is clear that important differences within a particular region or territory can be obscured or revealed depending on the scale of analysis. This indicates that population decline is very sensitive to the territorial scale from which we approach it.

The dynamics of 'exhaustion' are prevalent in most of the municipalities in the province of Granada with a falling population, due to negative natural population growth and continuing out-migration.

The recent demographic history of the province has led in most of its territory to ageing, imbalanced population structures, such that many rural areas have a predominantly male population. This situation does not bode well for the economic and demographic recovery of many of these areas.

As regards depopulation, five factors driving this phenomenon have been identified: altitude, inaccessibility, low population densities, scattered centres of population and small size.

## **5. Conclusions**

With this perspective, one can conclude that population decline and depopulation are serious problems in many areas of the province of Granada. Solving or mitigating these problems is an important challenge for the future.

The response to this problem is marked, however, in many cases by the inaction of those directly affected by it, the indolence of politicians and managers, the lack of reaction of the areas in decline and, sadly, the irreversibility of many such situations.

This is, understandably, a complex multi-dimensional problem that requires accurate characterisation to enable the best possible diagnosis of the problem and the design and implementation of possible solutions. For these purposes, analysis at the micro level is fundamental as the detail provided by this scale of analysis guarantees more accurate identification and demarcation of its impact.

## **6. Next steps**

In order to explore this issue in greater depth, it is vital to access alternative and complementary sources of data to those traditionally assessed (Land Registry, Survey on Local Facilities and Infrastructure, etc). The possibilities offered by new technologies such as big data must also be explored.

Another interesting line of research would be to monitor the process of population decline in the province in order to obtain a detailed picture of how the rural exodus initially took form, and how it evolved over time in terms of differing rates and between territories.

The exploration of these new sources could give rise to various interesting future lines of research.