



# The impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on the Immigrant Population in Spain

POLICY BRIEF | Jul 2023

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**This Policy Brief presents an overview of the situation of the immigrant population in Spain during Covid-19 Pandemic, as well as the political measures taken at different governance levels in order to address it. Analysis of data from the Spanish Institute of Statistics shows the Covid-19 Pandemic severely affected the physical and mental health, as well as the economic situation of immigrants living in Spain. The policy of protection based on "regular work" adopted by the Spanish government left many immigrants, especially the most vulnerable, unprotected.**

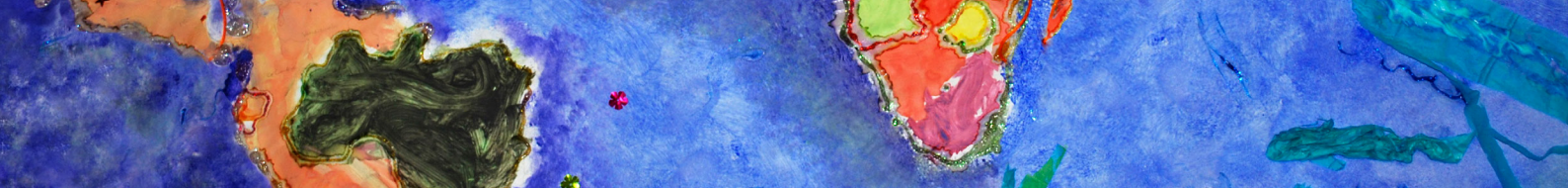
The immigrant population residing in Spain<sup>1</sup> stands at 7.5 million people, according to Statistics data from the 2021 Continuous Register (Table 1). This figure refers to the number of people born abroad and accounts for 15.8% of the total population. The most distinguishing characteristics of Spain's migration model are the increase in arrivals at the beginning of the 21st century (up until the Great Recession of 2008), the high incidence of immigration from Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC), and the large presence of female migration.



In fact, LAC accounts for 43.8% of all immigrants residing in the country. The immigrant population originating from Europe represents 30.0%, while African immigrants make up nearly 18.0%. The countries with the most significant presence in Spain are: Morocco (13.0%), Romania (7.6%), Colombia (7.4%), Ecuador (5.7%) and Venezuela (5.7%). The total percentage of female immigrants is 52.6%, while the figure reaches 57.3% for female immigrants originating from LAC.

Over the last decade, an increasing number of immigrants have acquired Spanish nationality, resulting in the settlement and integration of this group all over the country. At present, a total of 34.1% of immigrants have citizenship. However, this settlement process coexists simultaneously with the presence of a large foreign-born population, i.e., persons who have been unable to obtain Spanish nationality. Notably, Spain is home to 5.5 million people who do not have citizenship. Of these, 2.3 million have obtained residence permits under the General Regime according to Spanish legislation, intended for non-EU citizens, which is the group that is most likely to experience higher levels of precariousness and social vulnerability due to the difficulty they encounter accessing social rights. (For example, they are not allowed

<sup>1</sup> Immigrant population: this includes all persons who have not been born in Spain. Foreign population: this includes all persons who do not have Spanish nationality. Both concepts are used to analyse international movements.



to vote and are obliged to hold a formal job in order to renew their Residence Permits). Data from the Ministry of Inclusion, Social Security and Migration indicate that, in 2021, citizens from Morocco and China make up 42.0% of foreigners with this type of documentation. This situation may be explained by the fact that for non-EU or LAC citizens, access to Spanish citizenship is extremely complex. While citizens from EU or LAC countries require two years of continuous residence in Spain to obtain nationality, for people with other territorial origins, this requirement jumps to ten years.

A total of 77.0% of the residence permits are long-term and, as a result, settlement in Spain has been widely consolidated. Therefore 23.0% of all foreigners are temporary residents. Temporary residence granted for reasons of family reunification stands at 22.0%. This is not a very high ratio since, in Spain it is quite common to find informal regrouping processes i.e., entering the country irregularly or on a tourist visa (Martínez-Buján, 2019)<sup>2</sup>.

The immigrant population faces difficulties entering the labour market and achieving integration (Table 1). In 2021 the unemployment rate was 21.6% for this group, while for the Spanish-born population it was down to 13.1%. The temporary employment rate and the underemployment rate were also higher in the immigrant population. In fact, the temporary employment rate for this group was 28.1%, versus 19.6% for the Spanish population. The underemployment rate, which refers to the percentage of the employed population who would like to work more hours, was 15.4% for the immigrant population and fell by half, 8.0%, in the Spanish population.

In addition, there are many niches of activity that are delegated almost exclusively to the immigrant population. These include agriculture, the hotel and restaurant industry, domestic service and commerce. The activity concentrating the largest number of immigrant workers is "Restaurants and food stalls", where 9.9% of this population works (compared to 3.3% of the Spanish-born population employed in this activity). It is followed by "Activities in households employing domestic personnel" (9.7%, compared to 1.3% of the Spanish-born population), "Building construction", accounting for 4.9% of the employed immigrant population and "Cleaning services", which represents 3.7% of this workforce.

In short, the immigrant population in Spain has become settled and is obtaining Spanish nationality, especially in the case of persons originating from LAC. However, in terms of labour integration, the situation for this population is precarious, since they are employed in activities with lower social status and poor working conditions or where the underground economy is more prevalent (as is the case of domestic service, construction and the hotel and catering industry). Social exclusion indicators help to show this situation of social vulnerability. In 2018, just before the outbreak of the pandemic, 6.6% of people of Spanish origin were in a situation of severe social exclusion. However, this figure reached nearly 26.3% in the foreign-born population. These data have been taken from the EINSFOESSA 2018 Survey (Maillo, 2019)<sup>3</sup> which foresaw a situation where the level of poverty and vulnerability in the pre-pandemic social and economic context would not favour a panorama that would be able to cope with the COVID-19 crisis in the immigrant population.

**TABLE 1. Summary of basic indicators of the immigrant population in Spain, 2021**

<b>TOTAL POPULATION</b>	<b>47,432.8</b>
<b>Immigrant Population (a)</b>	<b>7366.6</b>
% of total population	15.5%
Immigrant Population with nationality	2515.0
% of total immigrant population	34.1%
Female Immigrant Population	3871.8
% of total immigrant population	52.6%
<b>Foreign-born Population (b)</b>	<b>5440.1</b>
With Residence Permit (RP) General Regime	2345.9
With Long-term RP	1810.9
% of total foreign population, general regime	77.0%
With Temporary RP	535.0
% of total foreign population, general regime	22.8%
With Temporary RP for reasons of family reunification	118.1
% of total foreign population with Temporary RP	22.0%
<b>Unemployment rate (c)</b>	<b>21.6%</b>
<b>Temporary employment rate (d)</b>	<b>28.1%</b>
<b>Underemployment rate (e)</b>	<b>15.4%</b>

Source: (a) National Statistics Institute (INE), Continuous Census Register; (b) Ministry of Inclusion, Social Security and Migration; (c) INE, Active Population Survey.

2 Martínez-Buján, R. (2019). "Here or there? Gendered return migration to Bolivia from Spain during economic crisis and fluctuating migration policies". *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 45(16): 3105-3122.

3 Maillo, G. (2019). VIII Informe sobre exclusión y desarrollo social en España. Madrid: Fundación Foessa.

## International mobility during the pandemic

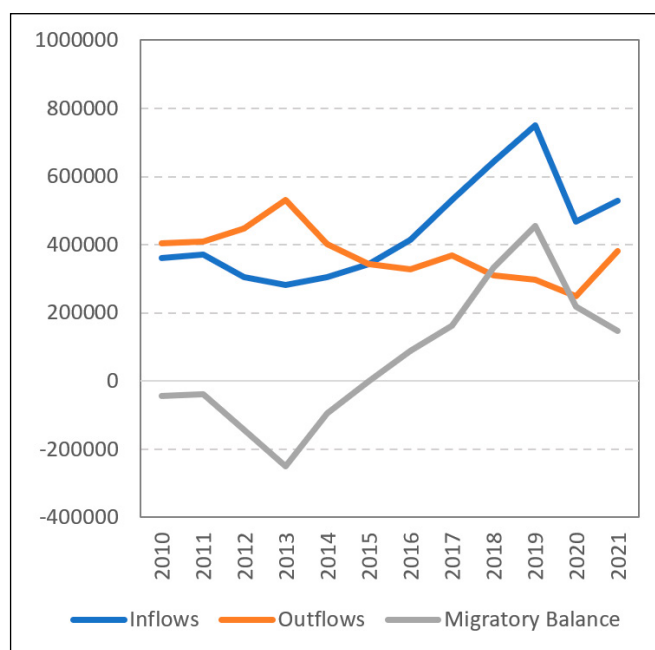
The Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 resulted in an unprecedented restriction of population movements. Domestic mobility restrictions were also accompanied by control measures applied to international movements, limiting the reasons for entry and exit for health reasons. Measures to limit the movement of people were applied in a number of different ways, particularly from March to June 2020. These included travel and tourism restrictions, bans on access to people from certain countries, recommendations not to travel, implementation of quarantine periods and additional restrictions such as the required presentation of medical certificates, test reports, etc.

The impact of these measures on the immigrant population has been significant. People who had intended to migrate have had to postpone their plans, while others have been unable to return to their countries of origin, or to move to a third country. Moreover, the immigrant population has not been able to cope with the consequences of the economic crisis associated with the pandemic by moving to other regions. Nor have they been able to attend to family members living in other countries who required their care or physically establish themselves in their transnational support network. This lack of mobility has added to the vulnerability of the immigrant population at this time since processes of family reunification also came to a halt.

This situation has led to a significant decrease in the number of immigrants entering Spain<sup>4</sup>. Graph 1 shows the evolution of arrivals, departures and total migration balance of the foreign-born population to and from foreign countries over the last decade. As can be seen from the graph, the sealing of land borders and areas in 2020 halted population movements, which, in 2019 had reached their highest cycle in 10 years. In any case, in 2021, the arrival of immigrants from abroad came close to reaching pre-pandemic levels: in 2021, 496,000 thousand people entered Spain and in 2019 the figure stood at 714,000.

4 Only people whose country of birth is not Spain are included.

**GRAPH 1. Arrivals, departures and migration balance of the foreign-born population in Spain, 2010-2021**

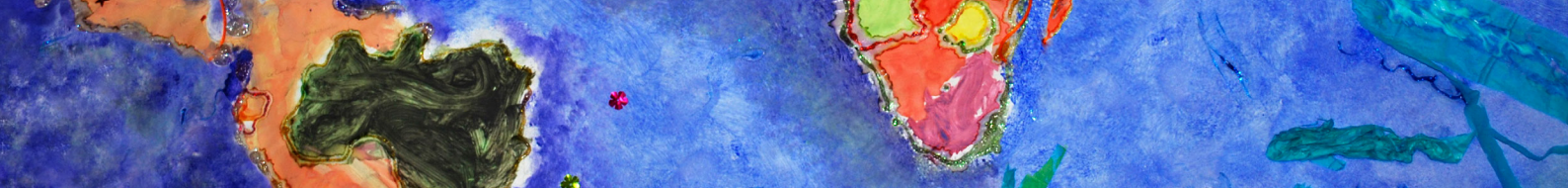


Source: INE, Migration Survey.

The main mode of entry for foreigners to Spain is primarily by air. Over the last decade, the acquisition of nationality and the attainment of long-term residence permits have favoured the settlement of this group, as discussed in the previous section. However, we should not overlook the fact that the maritime route to Spain continues to be a means of irregular entry into the country. In fact, the arrival of boats to the Spanish coasts increased considerably in 2020. The number of people arriving by sea in 2020 totalled 41,000 compared to 26,000 in 2019. This increase may be attributed to the reactivation of the Atlantic route via the Canary Islands. It is one of the consequences of the mobility restrictions during the pandemic, which poses a humanitarian and social challenge of enormous relevance (Arango, Garcés, Mahía and Moya, 2020)<sup>5</sup>.

Similarly, population outflows began an upward cycle in 2021. Graph 1 shows the increase in this population movement. In order to overcome the health crisis and its economic consequences, new migrations are likely to take place, mostly to other European countries. Therefore, immigrant families will probably be separating again, thereby stepping up transnationality between a number of different countries.

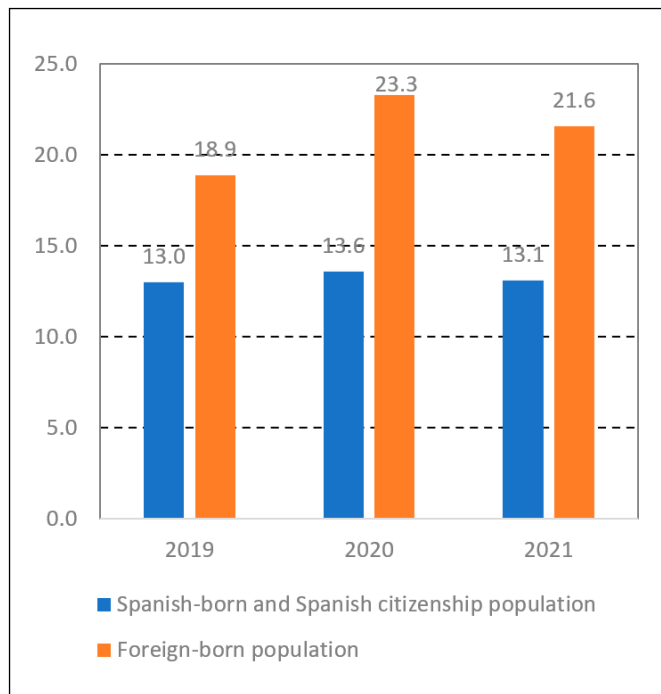
5 Arango, J., Garcés, B., Mahía, R. and Moya, D. (2020). "Inmigración y movilidad humana en tiempos del coronavirus". Anuario CIDOB de la Inmigración, 14-29.



## The impact of Covid-19 on employment and poverty levels

The declining economy due to the pandemic has had a strong impact across the board, affecting all sectors of the population, but the immigrant population has been particularly hard hit. Since this group is more likely to experience vulnerability in the labour market owing to the fact that they work largely in informal economic activities and have temporary contracts and less seniority, this situation has created differential risks compared to the native population. Job loss is the main source of inequality in this regard (Figure 2). If we consider the 2019-2020 period to compare these impacts, the unemployment rate among the immigrant population rose from 18.9% in 2019 to 23.3% in 2020. The Spanish-born population also suffered a similar decline, but has maintained greater job security. In fact, their unemployment rate ranged roughly from 13.0% in 2019 to 13.6% in 2020. Job recovery is also slowing among the immigrant population. The unemployment rate in 2021 was 21.6% in this group, while in the Spanish-born population it had already reached 13.1%, a figure similar to pre-pandemic levels.

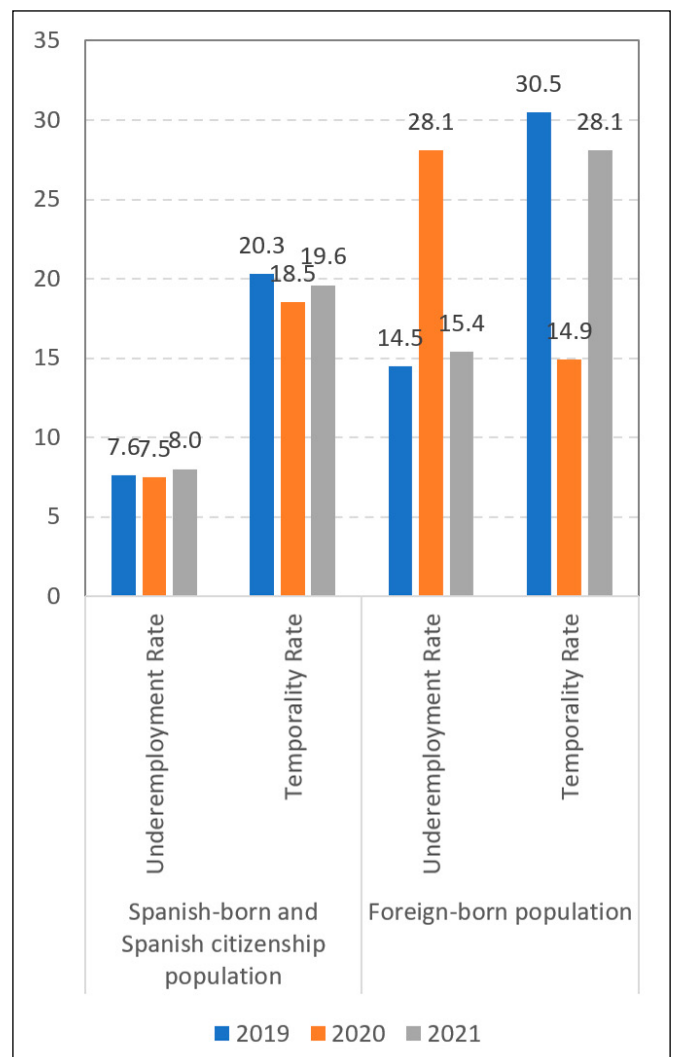
**GRAPH 2. Unemployment rate in the Spanish and immigrant populations, 2019-2021**



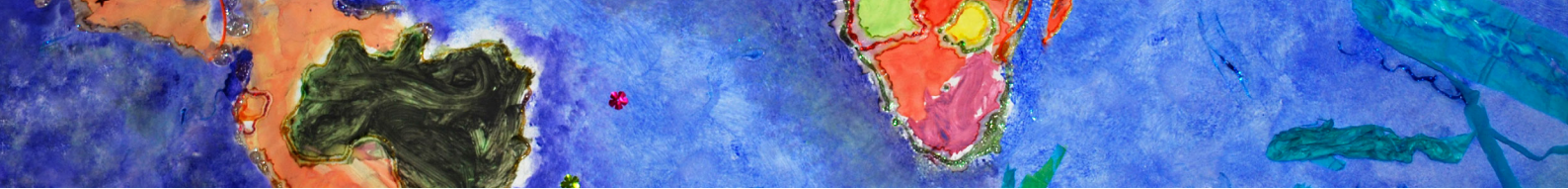
Source: INE, Active Population Survey, annual average for each year.

In this sense, the evolution of the figures, in terms of both temporality rate (percentage of people with part-time contracts) and underemployment rate (percentage of people who would like to work more hours), can be used to show the effects the pandemic has had. Figure 3 presents these consequences: the underemployment rate of the Spanish-born population during the 2019-2021 period, remains practically unchanged, standing at 8.0% at present. However, in the immigrant population, underemployment reached 28.1% in 2020. The temporality rate, on the other hand, has also maintained similar levels over the last three years in the Spanish population. In the immigrant group, however, it dropped by half in 2020: from 30.5% in 2019 to 14.9% in 2020. This decrease may be due to the loss of employment by immigrants with temporary contracts, as opposed to immigrants with fixed-term contracts who have kept their jobs. In fact, in 2021, the levels recorded in 2019 have already been reached.

**GRAPH 3. Evolution of underemployment and temporality rates, 2019-2021**



Source: INE, Active Population Survey, annual average for each year.



Paradoxically, while immigrant workers have been the hardest hit by the health crisis, this very crisis has also highlighted the Spanish economy's need for immigrant labour in key economic sectors. Two examples of this are agriculture and cleaning services. According to data from the Active Population Survey, although there has been a widespread loss of employment among immigrant workers, the agricultural sector absorbed a large part of this workforce in 2020. In fact, the number of workers in this activity tripled in just one year. Cleaning-related activities also increased significantly. Job losses in "Households employing domestic staff" and in "Restaurants and food stalls" were still in the recovery phase in 2021.

**TABLE 2. Employed immigrant population by sector of activity, 2019-2021**

	2019	2020	2021	VARIATION 2019-2020 (%)
<b>Agriculture, forestry, livestock raising and fishing</b>	200.8	648.0	222.9	223.4
<b>Construction buildings</b>	140.8	130.0	174.9	-7.4
<b>Cleaning services</b>	110.9	118.5	131.7	6.8
<b>Restaurants and food stalls</b>	402.6	354.7	364.4	-11.9
<b>Households employing domestic staff</b>	358.0	315.3	344.3	-11.9
<b>Total</b>	<b>3,486.5</b>	<b>3,402.4</b>	<b>3,567.3</b>	<b>-2,4</b>

Source: INE, Active Population Survey, annual average for each year.

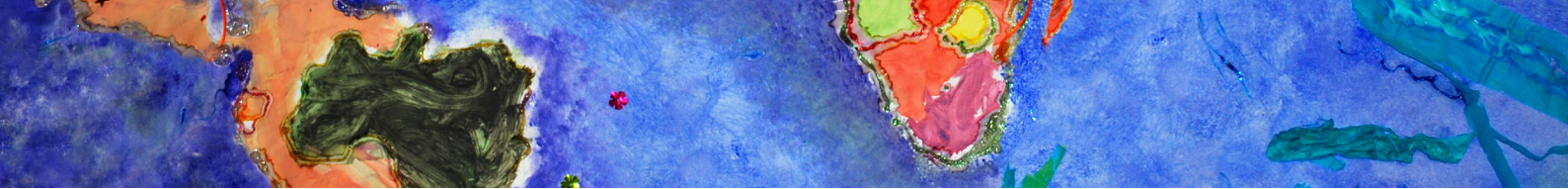
The effects of labour vulnerability in terms of exclusion are very striking. The EINSFOESSA 2021 Survey (Fundación Foessa, 2022)<sup>6</sup> estimates that, in 2021, Spanish people who are at risk of extreme social exclusion totalled 10.4%. Immigrants in the same situation represent 32.5%. In the period prior to the pandemic, data from EINSFOESSA 2018, found that 6.6 of the Spanish population was affected by extreme exclusion, while the figure jumped to 26.3% in the foreign population, as discussed above. Situations of social disadvantage among the immigrant population already existed previously, but the pandemic has exacerbated this. According to the same data source, 39.6% of the foreign population report that their economic situation had greatly worsened compared to the situation immediately prior to the pandemic, versus 19.2% of the Spanish population. Their vulnerable position in the labour market is also important to note. A total of 5.7% of immigrant workers said that they would be dismissed if they reported having had close contact with someone diagnosed with Covid-19. In contrast, only 1.9% of the Spanish population reported similar negative consequences. The drop in remittances sent by immigrants and the growing numbers in irregular situations due to job loss are some of the effects caused by Covid-19 on the immigrant population in Spain. Thus, the repercussions of the pandemic are related not only to the increase in poverty, but also to increased social inequality.

## Political solutions

The mitigation of the impact of Covid-19 on economic and social vulnerability has required specific government intervention that has put into motion a process of governance on three levels at the very least. First of all, the European Union launched a policy of economic and fiscal stimulus to deal with the impact of the pandemic by relaxing the rules of the Stability and Growth Pact, implementing policies to mitigate its repercussions on employment and allowing more flexibility for accessing cohesion funds. Subsequently, in order to find a solution to the crisis, the EU approved the Next Generation EU program, supported by a historic investment; namely, Plans for Reconstruction, Resilience and Transformation, the implementation of which was launched in the summer of 2021 (Vanhercke, Spasova and Fronteddu, 2021)<sup>7</sup>.

6 Fundación Foessa (2022). Evolución de la cohesión social y consecuencias de la Covid-19 en España. Madrid: Fundación Foessa.

7 Vanhercke B., Spasova S. y Fronteddu B. (eds.) (2021). Social policy in the Euro-pean Union: state of play 2020. Facing the pandemic. Brussels: European Trade Union Institute and European Social Observatory.



Secondly, from March 2020 to October 2021, the Government of Spain implemented a number of programs to mitigate the social and economic impact of the pandemic. The suspension of business and productive activities not considered essential was one of the greatest repercussions of Covid-19 on the population as a whole. In this sense, the concept of the Temporary Redundancy Plan (ERTE)<sup>8</sup> has been a fundamental tool for protecting the productive network and the income of salaried workers. The ERTEs allowed companies to adjust labour costs for "economic, technical, organizational and production" reasons related to COVID-19 (ERTE-ETOP), resulting from force majeure (such as the declaration of a state of alarm that restricts or prevents activities or the appearance of a new outbreak) (ERTE-FM). To safeguard employment, companies under ERTE have been subject to certain commitments: they are not allowed to dismiss an employee or terminate his or her labour contract and the computation of the duration of temporary contracts is suspended (Royal Decree RDL 9/2020); they are required to maintain the employee's job (up to six months after business is resumed) (Royal Decree-Law (RDL) 8/2020) and they are not allowed to require overtime work or initiate new outsourcing or hiring (RDL 24/2020).

To provide social protection for workers affected by an ERTE, a number of extraordinary measures were established based on access to benefits from the first day of temporary unemployment regardless of how long the employee had contributed previously. These benefits represented 70% of the base salary. In this context, 22.8% of the foreign population was affected by an ERTE in 2020, 6.3 points higher than for the national population (Table 3). This situation is directly related to the type of employment carried out by the foreign-born population which is over-represented in low-level positions on the occupational scale, i.e. in jobs which, to a large extent, are not suitable for remote work or teleworking<sup>9</sup>. However, although the number of foreign workers affected by ERTEs is higher percentage-wise than that of the national population, the buffering effect of these ERTEs in terms of curbing unemployment has targeted mainly the Spanish population (Laparra, Zugasti and García-Lautre, 2021<sup>10</sup>). In fact, the percentage of foreigners who have lost their jobs is twice as high as that of the Spanish population (16.9% compared to 8.5%).

8 Administrative procedure by which the employer can temporarily suspend or reduce the employment contract of its workers.

9 Zugasti, N. (2022). "El impacto de la crisis en la población extranjera". En F. Foessa (eds.), *Evolución de la cohesión social y consecuencias de la Covid-19 en España*. Madrid: Fundación Foessa, 329-344.

**TABLE 3. Population affected by different work circumstances, 2021 (%)**

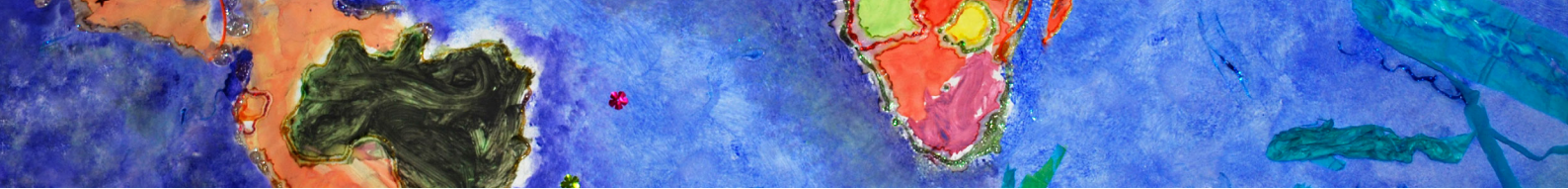
	<b>SPANISH POPULATION</b>	<b>FOREIGN POPULATION</b>
<b>ERTE<sup>8</sup></b>	16.5	22.8
<b>ERE<sup>11</sup></b>	0.4	0.7
<b>Dismissal (employed by others)</b>	8.5	16.9
<b>Permanent cessation of activity (Self-employed)</b>	2.8	3.5
<b>Substantial Cessation of activity (Self-employed)</b>	2.4	1.2
<b>Teleworking or remote work</b>	12.7	5.7
<b>Reduction of normal working hours</b>	4.1	5.1
<b>Inability to telework or work remotely</b>	2.0	2.4

Source: EINSFOESSA 2021 (Fundación Foessa, 2021).

Despite the expansion of protection measures to include the working population, the population that did not have stable work in the formal sector were left unprotected. Thus, although prior to the health crisis the Autonomous Communities provided different levels of social welfare protection, such as the Minimum Insertion Income, during the pandemic it became clear that these resources were not sufficient. To a large extent this was because these programs were implemented differently in each autonomous community, which therefore created a considerable lack of coherence in accessing these services. For this reason, the Spanish government proposed the introduction of an urgent state benefit for people who did not have formal employment. Thus, in June 2020, the central government introduced the Minimum Vital Income (IMV) as a "subjective right" to a non-contributory economic benefit from the Social Security system (RDL 20/2020) which would guarantee a level of income to households in a situation of economic vulnerability. Moreover, while initial estimates pointed to a beneficiary population of some 850,000 households, only 160,000

10 Laparra, M., Zugasti, N. and García-Lautre, I. (2021). "The multidimensional conception of social exclusion and the aggregation dilemma: a solution proposal based on multiple correspondence analysis". *Social Indicators Research*, 158(2): 637-666.

11 Collective and definitive dismissal of workers of a company due to cessation of activity or selectively to a department or area.



had received the benefit by 2020. We do not have access to data providing information on whether these are households which include members who do not have Spanish nationality. Although this measure has not been fully implemented, it will surely mark a change of course in Spanish social policy if it continues in future years. It is important to note that foreigners in irregular situations cannot apply for this benefit.

Thirdly, during the health crisis, it has also been necessary to develop shared governance between the Autonomous Communities, the State and the third sector, in areas such as health (fighting the pandemic), education (making distance learning compatible with support for vulnerable groups), social services and care for dependent persons (care for extremely vulnerable groups, such as elderly and disabled people) and housing (measures against evictions and provision of rental subsidies) (Rodríguez and Arriba, 2022)<sup>12</sup>. Particularly noteworthy is the organization of the Third Sector and self-managed mutual aid groups that emerged specifically to support the most vulnerable populations. These associations, known as "resistance funds" have been very successful. They provided economic aid by collecting voluntary donations and distributing the money collected to the most socially vulnerable persons. (Jiménez and Ruberte, 2021)<sup>13</sup>.

## Methodological note

The labour market data in this document were taken from the authors' own analysis of the data from the Active Population Survey. The demographic data were collected from the Continuous Register Statistics and the figures on international population movements are part of the Migration Statistics. These three data sources have been prepared by the Spanish Institute of Statistics. The interpretation of this quantitative information has also been enhanced by the reflections, suggestions and comments made by the Advisory Board which is part of the research team in Spain.

<sup>12</sup> Rodríguez, G. and Arriba, A. (2022). "Políticas de protección social y de lucha contra la exclusión laboral y social durante la crisis de la Covid-19". En F. Foessa (eds.), *Evolución de la cohesión social y consecuencias de la Covid-19 en España*. Madrid: Fundación Foessa, 345-371.

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

This Policy Brief (also available in Spanish) was produced by Raquel Martínez Buján and ESOMI (Research Team on Societies in Movement), University of A Coruña (UDC) as part of the research project, *Care, Inequality and Wellbeing in Transnational Families in Europe: a comparative, intergenerational study in Spain, France, Sweden and UK*, led by Professor Ruth Evans, University of Reading and Dr. Rosa Mas Giralt, University of Leeds, UK.

The project is funded by the Joint Programming Initiative 'More Years Better Lives' (UK Research and Innovation - Economic and Social Research Council, Agencia Estatal de Investigación, Spain, Agence Nationale de la Recherche, France and FORTE, Sweden).

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**Read more:** <https://research.reading.ac.uk/transnational-families/>

<sup>13</sup> Jiménez, S. and M. Ruberte. "Pandemia y cuidados: respuestas desde la autoorganización de las trabajadoras de hogar y cuidados". *Migraciones*, 53: 171-198.

