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Analysis of Aging in Spain: Contemporary Sociological and Demographic Implications

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Abstract: Aging, as a phenomenon of profound social significance, has important repercussions. In this work, which focuses on Spain, aging and population structure indicators are analyzed. This basis for demographic analysis becomes useful later in preparing a sociological essay on the most pressing challenges facing Spanish society concerning population aging. The methodology used, as is usual within the framework of the social sciences, involves a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches. Specifically, from an eminently quantitative perspective, the important methodological shift of the 2021 Population and Housing Census is considered. It is also considered how the Statistics on Migrations and Changes of Residence emerge with the intention of measuring the migratory phenomenon between two consecutive censuses, as this phenomenon is also of great social significance in our country. The work culminates with a brief sociological interpretation of the challenges facing Spanish society as a consequence of the population dynamics studied.

Keywords: demographics; aging; indicators; society; social repercussions

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1. Introduction

Population aging is a demographic phenomenon of deep social significance that is occurring a decade later in Spain than in the rest of Europe [1]. The reality of population aging has major socioeconomic implications, since, for example, pension expenditure will be higher, as has already been attested by doctrine [2,3]. Some authors have incorporated the analytical category of "pension demography" into their doctrine [4].

The socioeconomic precariousness of certain vulnerable social groups [5], the Leasing Law for older adults, the search for fruitful intergenerational equity, unwanted loneliness, pharmaceutical expenditure, the achievement of health [6,7], leisure linked to an active lifestyle [8], the measurement of per capita health expenditure, and lifelong training are of great relevance in this framework. In the case of Spain, it is necessary to add the existing difference between the rural and urban worlds because of demographic aging and depopulation [9,10].

As a consequence of the described reality, in the long term, the generation of a fourth age in terms of cohorts is evident [11], as already occurred with the third age [12], which emerged from the research of Laslett, among other authors. According to [13], the population included in this cohort has characteristics such as "biochemical alterations in the tissues, changes at the sensory level, at the functional level (mobility), physical deficit (...) psychological disorders and in the emotional or affective sphere (...)"; dependency [14]

is a problem affecting this age group [11], and this will have an impact not only on life trajectories, but also on the composition of households [15].

The challenge of dependency is, in fact, one of the factors to be considered as a priority within the framework of the European welfare states—above all, from the perspective of the efficient management of public policies [16], the financing of care [17], and, specifically, what concerns informal care [18].

The higher average life expectancy of women, a phenomenon observable in most countries, has significant implications for demographics and social structure, especially in contexts such as that of Spain. This fact gives rise to the feminization of later life, i.e., a higher proportion of women, which generates specific challenges. For example, the demand for health services and prolonged care intensifies as women tend to live longer, but there are greater risks of dependency in later life. In addition, this trend influences the composition of households and the social support network, where women play key roles as both caregivers and recipients of care. Despite its relevance, this topic is discussed surprisingly little in the sociological field, although it is crucial for analyzing the challenges of aging in Spain [18]. This approach allows for a better understanding of how female aging contributes to the most pressing demographic challenges and facilitates the preparation of sociological essays that address these issues.

The article presented here is a continuation of the work carried out by the authors of [15], who described the demographic factors that had a higher level of impact on the aging situation of the Spanish population. Using data from the National Institute of Statistics (INE) [5,10,11,18–21], quantitative evidence of the evolution of these data was generated while bringing them into the present and attempting to project them into the future to explain the possible sociological consequences. According to the data from demographic projections [22] and according to [10], within half a century, the Spanish population will consist of a larger, more socially diverse society and, due to the migratory phenomenon, will comprise different cultural backgrounds.

To conduct this research, demographic indicators were selected based on the models from [23]. To understand aging, age structure, fertility, and migration must be studied [24], and future projections must be established.

Definitions of Demographic Determinants of Aging

For the conceptual delimitation, we based our work on that of [10].

The birth rate refers to the births that occur in a specific population and is calculated using the formula for the crude birth rate:

$$TBN_t = \frac{N_t}{P_t} \cdot 1000$$

where

N_t = births registered during year t to mothers belonging to the study area;

P_t = average resident population in the study area in the year t.

Mortality is defined as the number of deaths that occurred in a specific territorial area in the period taken into consideration and is calculated using the TBM formula such that

$$TBM_t = \frac{D_t}{P_t} \cdot 1000$$

where

Dt represents the deaths recorded during the year under study, t.

The probability of death is obtained as follows:

$$q_x = \frac{\frac{1}{2} \cdot \left(D_x^z + D_x^{z+1}\right)}{P_x^z + \frac{1}{2} \cdot (D_x^z)}$$

where

$D_x{}^z$ represents the deaths that occurred in year z at age x;

$D_x{}^{z+1}$ represents the deaths that occurred in year z + 1 at age x;

$P_x{}^z$ is the population as of 31 December of the year under study with age x.

The probability of survival is configured as the complementary probability to that of death, represented in such a way that ($p_x = 1 - q_x$).

Another statistical measure that provides relevant information on the mortality rate is the so-called life expectancy at birth—also known as the average number of years that the inhabitants of the population will foreseeably live [20] according to the observed mortality pattern. Life expectancy is configured as one of the Sustainable Development Indicators developed by EUROSTAT within the framework of Objective 3: "Good health and well-being and the Eurostat Gender Equality Indicators" [25]. In Spain, the difference in life expectancy at birth in favor of women grew or maintained a trend until the mid-1990s, which was mainly due to higher male mortality [25].

In general terms, an essential factor in Spanish demographics in recent decades has been the increase in life expectancy in the population, both in the middle-age group and donein older age groups. The sustained and gradual reduction in mortality rates has increased the number of population members [11] due to, among other factors, improvements in health, active leisure, and the democratization of healthy habits for the bulk of the population.

Fertility refers to the frequency of births that occur in a specific population of child-bearing age. It is calculated using the "fertility rate", which is also known as the current fertility indicator.

This study considers the average number of children that a woman would have throughout her fertile life [11]. There is consensus in demographic doctrine that the female fertile life spans from 15 to 49 years of age, with the reduction in birth rates being a phenomenon that runs parallel to the delay in the age of motherhood. Considering the data, since 2016, there has been a 137% increase in the number of births to women who are 50 years old or over. At the same time, births to mothers between the ages of 45 and 49 have increased by almost 51%. According to [26], births to mothers over 45 have experienced a 55% increase since 2016.

Another statistical measure that provides relevant information on the mortality rate is the so-called life expectancy at birth—also known as the average number of years that the inhabitants of the population will foreseeably live [16] according to the observed mortality pattern. Life expectancy is configured as one of the Sustainable Development Indicators developed by EUROSTAT within the framework of Objective 3: "Good health and well-being and the Eurostat Gender Equality Indicators" [25]. In Spain, the difference in life expectancy at birth in favor of women grew or almost maintained a trend until the mid-1990s, which was mainly due to higher male mortality.

In general terms, an essential factor in Spanish demographics in recent decades has been the increase in life expectancy in the population, both in the middle-age group and in older age groups. The sustained and gradual reduction in mortality rates has increased the number of population members [16] due to, among other factors, improvements in health, active leisure, and the democratization of healthy habits for the bulk of the population.

Regarding migration—an essential factor in demographic relief—the main indicator for its analysis is the migration balance, which is calculated as the total net migration over time t per 1000 inhabitants according to the following formula:

$$TMN_t = \frac{I_t - E_T}{P_t} \cdot 1000$$

where

It = immigration from abroad, recorded during the year under consideration (t);

Et = emigration abroad, recorded during the year taken into consideration (t);

Pt = average resident population in the study area in the year taken into consideration (t).

Following [27], if a population maintains constant mortality, and migration is equal to zero, its demographics will depend on its fertility rate (which is directly related to the level of reproduction that it presents). For a description of the scenarios generated by the fertility rate, the reader is referred to the work of [10].

The publication of the Population and Housing Census for the year 2021 [11] represents an important methodological shift. The Migration and Change of Residence Statistics (EMCR) [10] intends to measure and account for the migratory phenomenon between two consecutive censuses. Until its creation, two statistics were computed to determine the variations in this phenomenon, namely, the Migration Statistics (EM) [10] and the Residential Variation Statistics (EVR) [12]. These were obtained through the exploitation and statistical analysis of the registrations and de-registrations recorded in the INE census database.

The new EMCR has a much more subtle level of territorial detail than the previous iterations and sheds light on changes in residence between neighborhoods in the same municipality. This information is highly relevant, not only statistically and demographically, but also sociologically, since, sometimes, very close neighborhoods, or even adjacent ones, show very different demographic profiles, which is an issue that needs to be further investigated. It also adds variables of an educational nature and those related to access to the labor market, which are essential for the design of public policies.

To calculate and design the data series for these statistics, the following are used as fundamental sources of information [11]: the Population and Housing Census (as of 1 January 2021), the Population Census (from 2022, for 1 January of each year), and administrative data (the Continuous Register). Finally, it should be mentioned that these statistics were published beginning in December 2023 on an annual basis, with the reference period of the figures being the immediately preceding calendar year.

In preparing this work, the Proposal for the Regulation of the European Parliament and the Council on European Population and Housing Statistics, amending Regulation (EC) No 862/2007 and repealing Regulations (EC) No 763/2008 and (EU) No 1260/2013 [5], was also consulted. These regulatory changes are a response to the EU's need to obtain complete, frequent, and standardized statistics on the migration phenomenon.

Major socioeconomic and political developments in Spain have significantly shaped its aging rates and population structure. The democratic transition (1975–1982) brought about social changes that lowered birth rates due to the greater incorporation of women into the labor market and access to contraceptive methods. Later, the economic crisis of 2008 aggravated this trend, delaying family formation due to youth unemployment. In addition, migratory flows during the 2000s partly compensated for the low birth rate, although the emigration of young Spaniards increased the proportion of older people. On the other hand, welfare policies and improvements in the healthcare system extended life expectancy, which intensified demographic aging. However, these advances have generated tensions in the pension system and in the sustainability of the welfare model.

In Spain, there are significant differences between men and women in relation to aging, which can be explained by biological, social, and historical aspects. Women have a higher life expectancy (around 86 years compared with 80 years for men) due to their less risky lifestyles and different working conditions. However, this greater longevity also generates specific challenges, such as a higher incidence of loneliness, widowhood, and economic dependence. Historically, women assumed caregiving roles that limited their access to the labor market and, consequently, to equitable pensions. This creates inequalities in the quality of life during old age. In addition, the phenomenon of the feminization of aging in Spain, where a large proportion of the elderly are women, reflects the impacts of unequal labor trajectories and changes in family structures. These factors show how historical gender dynamics continue to influence the current context.

2. Methodology and Methods

As is usual in the field of social sciences, a combination of quantitative and qualitative methodologies turned out to be the most appropriate path. Not in vain, the analysis of population dynamics is configured as one of the most defining elements of demographic analysis and is, perhaps, the most complete element, not only because of the difficulty in the methodological aspect—the rates and indexes are directly related to both the stock variables and the flow variables—but also in the eminently theoretical aspect of terminological definition. We agree with [12] when they point out that to the arithmetic of demography itself, it is necessary to add the various elements of social change, such as legislative change, economic change, cultural change, changes in values, and biological change.

The main gross rates included in this study are the gross birth rate (GBR), the gross mortality rate (GMR), and the vegetative growth rate. This last rate, as the authors of [26–28] point out, does not correspond to the so-called real growth rate, which is why migration is also added to the analysis.

As a result of this same difficulty, in demographic analyses, it is essential to establish distinctions between gross and specific rates, which led us to the analysis of the synthetic fertility index (which gives us the replacement index) and life expectancy at birth. These types of measures were included because they made the analysis more subtle.

The methodological shift in the 2021 Population and Housing Census [12] was considered. It was also considered how the Migration and Change of Residence Statistics (MCRS) [10] emerged with the intention of measuring the phenomenon of migration between two consecutive censuses.

3. Results

The GBR in 2022 was 6.878653 births per 1000 inhabitants. Analyzing the time cohort between 1975 and 2022 reveals that this rate shows a significant downward trend, but with a certain rebound during the 1999–2008 period, showing levels much lower than those shown at the beginning of the series. It should be noted, in line with the doctrine, that there was a birth crisis at the end of the 1970s, marked by a milestone in 1979, when the GBR began to decline—a demographic situation that would last until the end of the 1990s.

From 2008 onwards, the GBR began to decline again until reaching its lowest level in 2022. Measured in absolute terms, since 2008, when, with a GBR of 11.2759% and 519,779 births, a historical maximum in three decades was reached, the number of births decreased by 36.66%. In 2022, there were a total of 329,250 births, which is the lowest value recorded in the entire data series analyzed in this study [11].

If the GBR is low for the average population residing in a territory, it is because the number of births is lower (Figure 1).

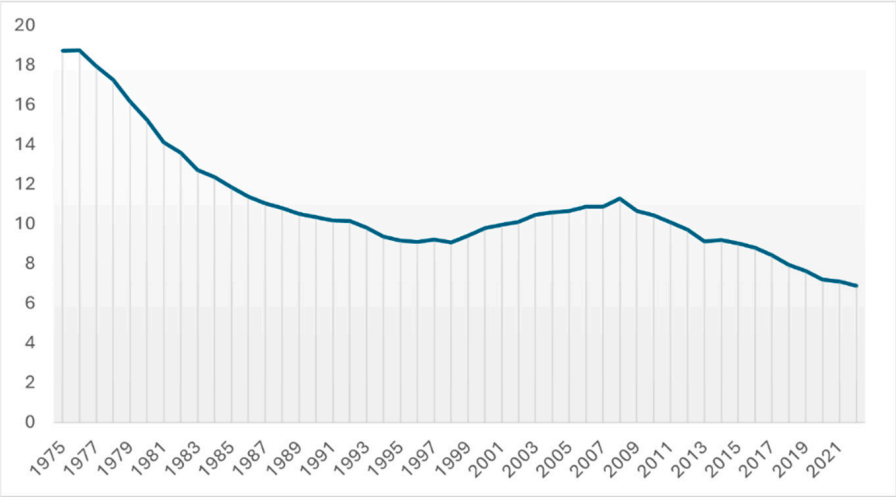


Figure 1. Spanish GBR (1975–2022). **Source:** National Institute of Statistics INE.

The annual relative variation in the GBR shows a completely oscillating behavior with a parabolic trend line. The average annual variation over the 46 years analyzed (1976–2022) was 2.106%, as observed in Figure 2.

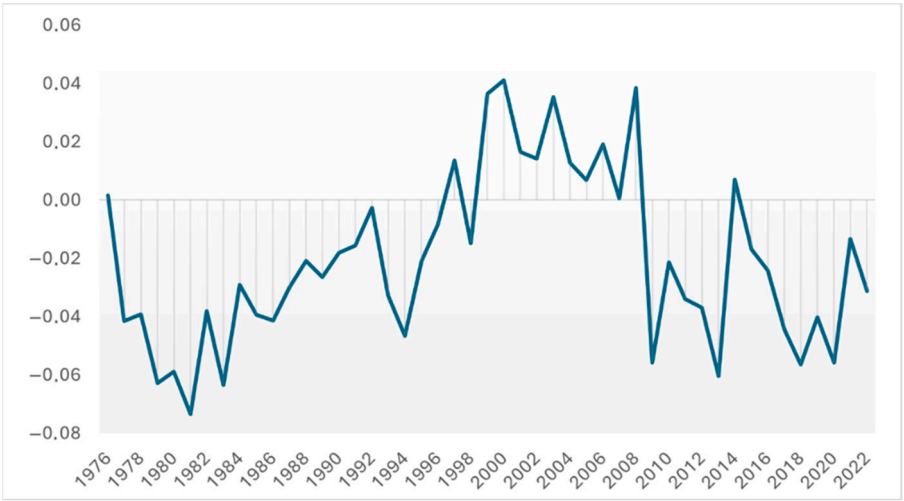


Figure 2. Annual relative variation in the Spanish GBR (1975–2022). **Source:** National Institute of Statistics INE.

Mortality, as can be seen in Figure 3, remained fairly stable over the period analyzed.

In 2022, the GMR rose to 9.66712 deaths per 1000 inhabitants, a figure slightly higher than that presented in 2021 (9.466965 deaths per 1000 inhabitants). However, this was at a level well below that of 2020, where the highest value of the entire series was recorded, reaching 10.401279 deaths per 1000 inhabitants.

For the period 1975–2022, the GMR in Spain shows a relatively flat profile with only small fluctuations.

The annual relative variation in the GMR shows a completely flat trend line, with the average annual variation for the 1976–2022 period being 0.400814%. This variation in the GMR (which, as can be seen, is practically zero), together with the decrease in the GMR, explains the progressive aging of the population in Spain caused fundamentally—although not only—by lower birth rates (Figure 4).

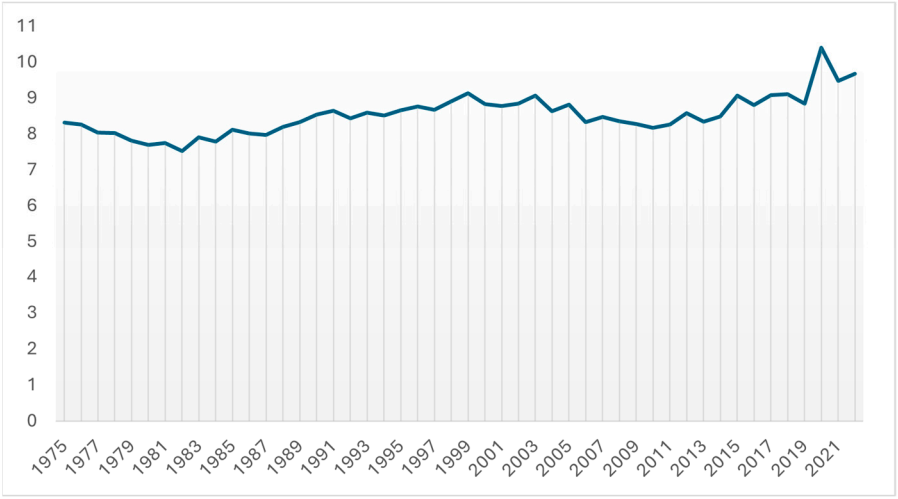


Figure 3. Spanish GMR (1975–2022). **Source:** National Institute of Statistics INE.

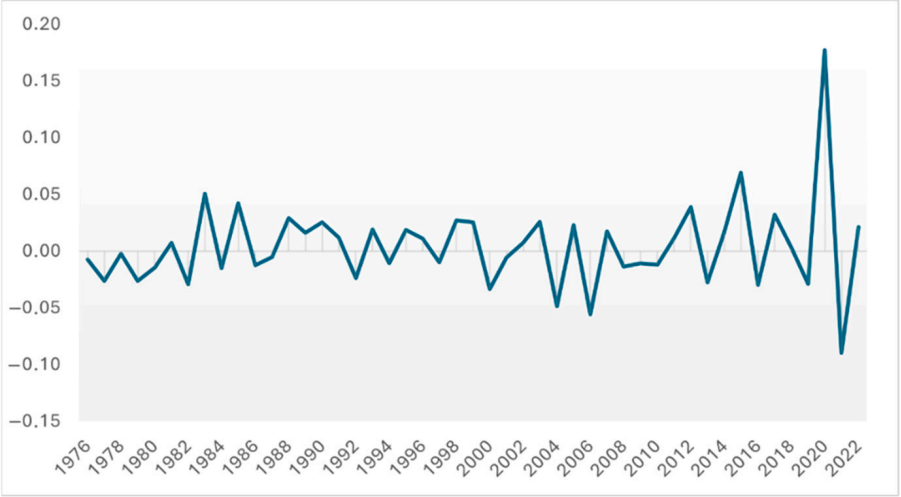


Figure 4. Annual relative variation in the Spanish GMR (1975–2022). **Source:** National Institute of Statistics INE.

The joint study of the evolution of these two measures(Figure 5)—the GBR and the GMR—shows a drastic fall in the birth rate beginning in 1975, when, according to the doctrine, it began to fall substantially until it reached, in 1999, the same level as the GMR indicator, which remained somewhat stable throughout the entire period. Subsequently, between 2000 and 2008, the GBR showed growth with respect to the GMR, and it fell again from that moment until 2015, when the GBR was below the GMR. This means that, for the first time in the years analyzed here and since annual data became available, the difference between births and deaths was negative.

In 2022, there were 329,251 births and 464,417 deaths; thus, 135,166 more people died than were born. Vegetative growth, which indicates the increase or decrease in a population as the difference between live births to mothers residing in Spain and deaths of residents in the same country, also had a negative character in 2022 and rose, specifically, to 133,250 population members.

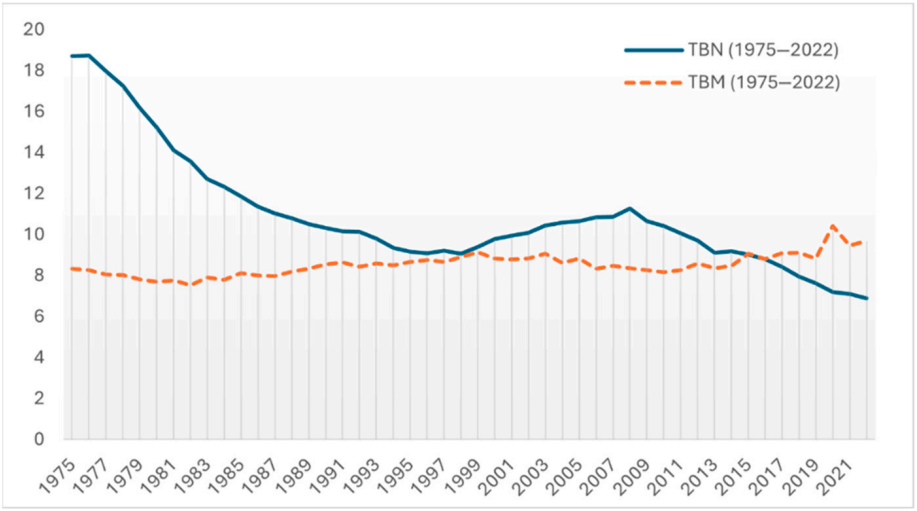


Figure 5. Evolution of the Spanish GBR and GMR (1975–2022). **Source:** National Institute of Statistics INE.

3.1. Life Expectancy at Birth

Life expectancy at birth is another indicator of mortality [6,11].

This measure has been growing since 1975 (Figure 6). According to the most recent publications and studies by the INE, between 2002 and 2022, life expectancy at birth in Spain increased from 76.4 to 80.4 for men and from 83.1 to 85.7 for women [10].

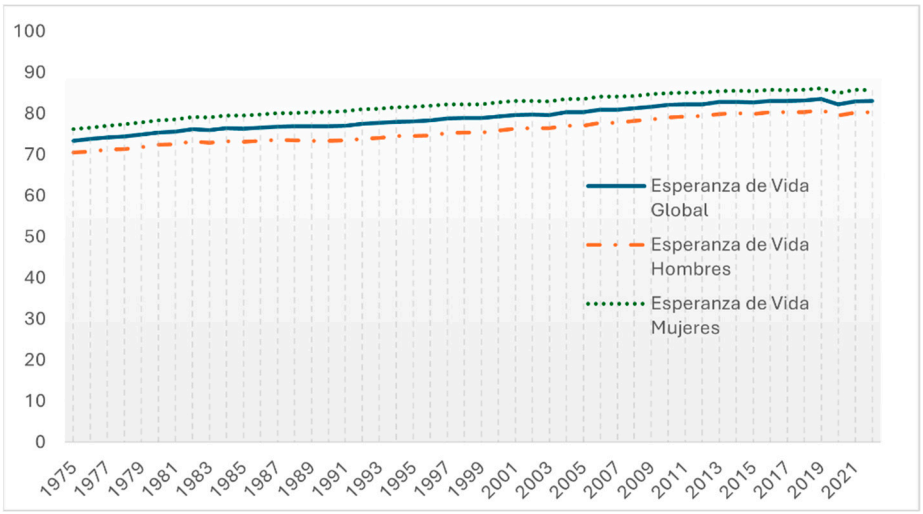


Figure 6. Life expectancy at birth in Spain (1975–2022). **Source:** National Institute of Statistics INE.

3.2. Fertility Rate and Fecundity Rate

The number of births is one of the most important input flows of a population. Its analysis is calculated through the fertility rate or current fecundity indicator, a measure that is defined as the average number of children that a woman between the ages of 15 and 49 (the fertile period in women) would have [1].

According to the most recent studies, this number has been decreasing from 2.77 (1975) to 1.16 (2022) (Figure 7), a decrease that coincides with that indicated for the GBR, as explained in the preceding section. Despite the slight increase experienced in 2008, when the fertility indicator did indeed show an increase to 1.44 after more than 20 years of decline, the figures associated with the last years of the series show a downward trend, moving away from the value of 2.1 children. This behavioral change recorded from 2008 onwards,

which coincides with the beginning of the economic crisis, is evident in the number of births and is reflected in sociological explanations from detailed studies of population dynamics.

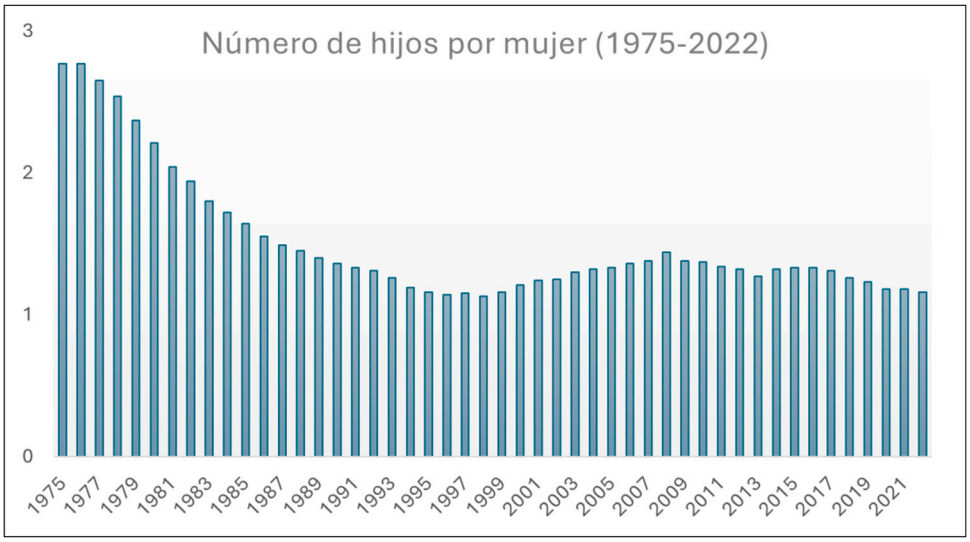


Figure 7. Spanish fertility rate (1975–2022). **Source:** National Institute of Statistics INE.

If we establish an analysis of fertility rates in Spain in comparison with those of the rest of the countries of the continent, we observe that Spain is one of the countries with the lowest fertility rates, as can be seen in the following map (Figure 8).

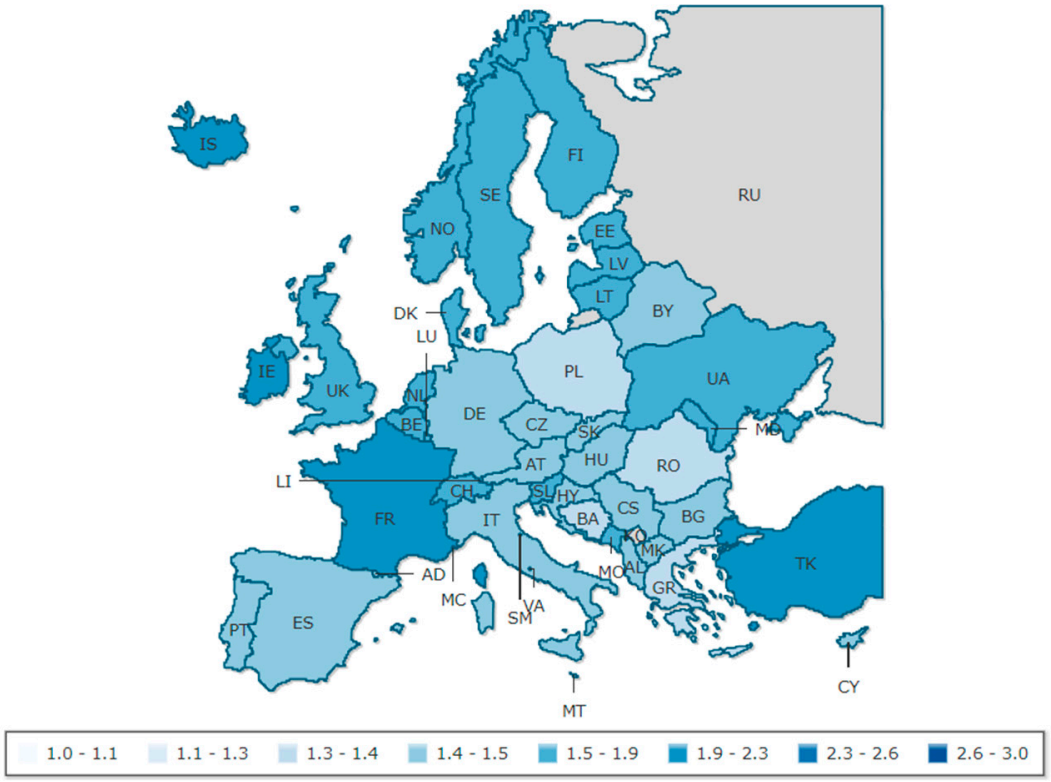


Figure 8. European fertility rates. **Source:** CIA World Factbook. http://www.indexmundi.com/map/?t=0&v=31&r=eu&l=es (accessed on 1 January 2020).

Regarding the number of births and following what was previously indicated, a downward trend since 1975 was also observed. Since 1975, the number of births has decreased by 50.8124%, from 669,378 to 329,251, which occurred in 2022. Only 2008 presents a historical maximum in three decades, with 519,779 children being born. From then until 2022, the registered decrease in the number of births was 36.6556% (Figure 9).

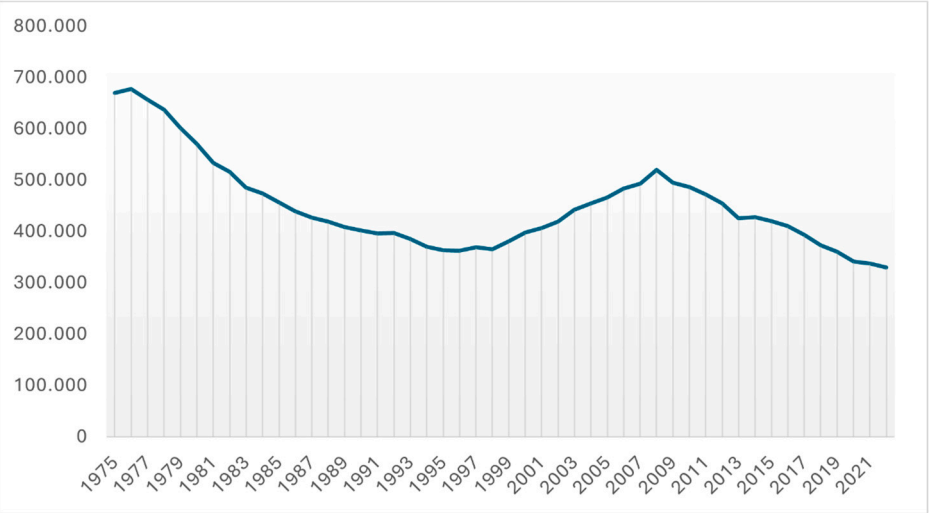


Figure 9. Number of births in Spain (1975–2022). **Source:** National Institute of Statistics INE.

The average age of having the first child increased from 29 years (28.85) in 1975 to almost 33 (32.61) in 2022 (Figure 10).

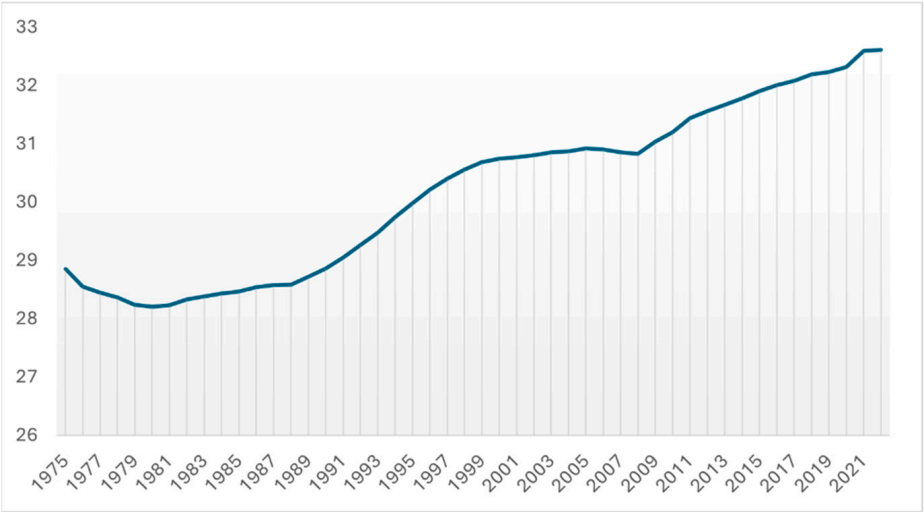


Figure 10. Average age of motherhood in Spain (1975–2022). **Source:** National Institute of Statistics INE.

The number of women in fertile cohorts increased until 2009 and, since then, has shown a downward trend (10.5 million in 2022 compared with 11.6 million in 2009). In addition, there is less immigration and more emigration abroad, so the migration balance is a decisive measure in the interpretation of these figures (Figures 11 and 12).

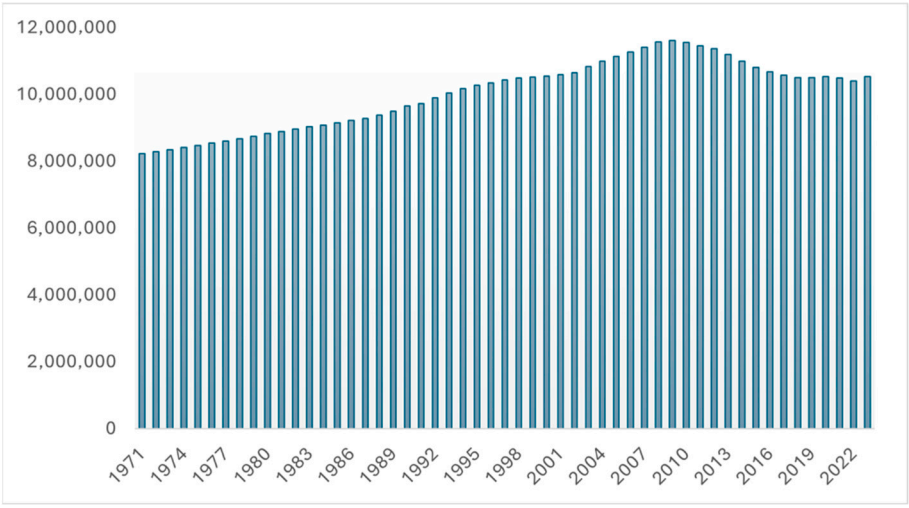


Figure 11. Women of childbearing age in Spain (1971–2023). **Source:** National Institute of Statistics INE.

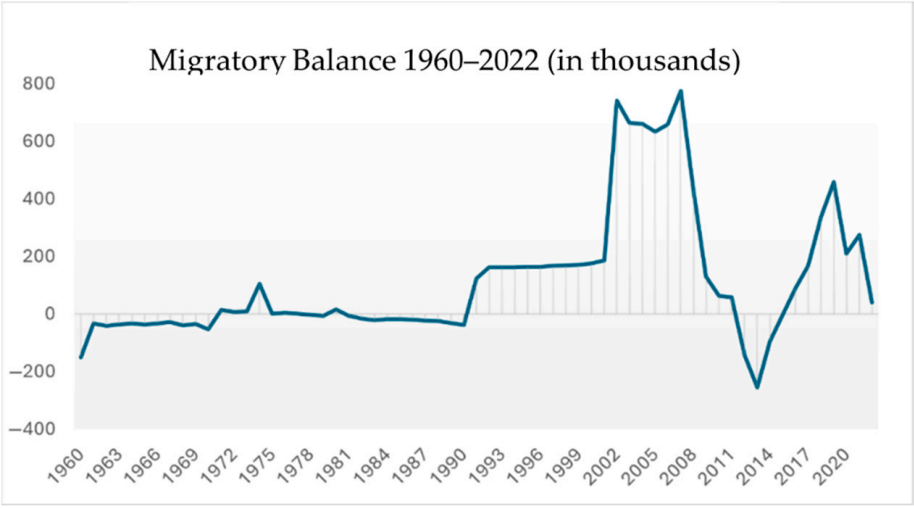


Figure 12. Migratory balance in Spain (1960–2022). **Source:** https://datos.bancomundial.org/indicator/SM.POP.NETM.

3.3. Migration Indicators

Spain went from being a country of emigrants until the 1980s to being a typical country for immigration. The migratory balance, defined as the difference between the numbers of immigrants and emigrants, went from taking negative values to growing intensely during the period of 2000–2008 and from 2014 to 2019 (Figure 12).

Figure 13 shows the decline in the number of immigrants and a similar increase in emigration starting in 2008, which indicates a negative SM from 2009 to 2015, an interval in which a certain economic boom occurred, and the departures abroad were reduced.

On 1 January 2020, the Spanish population was made up of 47,450,795 [11] inhabitants, of which 5,434,153 were people from other regions of the world (Figure 13). This figure represents an increase compared with the data recorded on 1 January of the previous year [6–11].

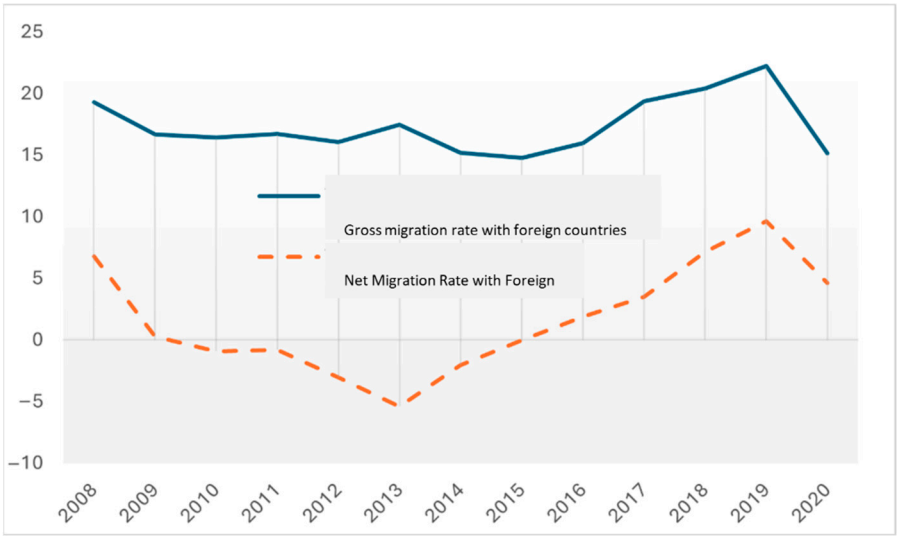


Figure 13. Gross and net migration rates in Spain (2008–2020). **Source:** National Institute of Statistics INE.

3.4. Average Age and Median Age

The average age of the population, together with the median age, are configured as explanatory indicators of the demographic population structure. The average age is the average age of individuals belonging to a certain geographical or territorial area as of 1 January 2020. The analysis of the evolution of this average age shows an absolute increase.

The median age is a measure for which the age distribution of the population as of 1 January 2020, is divided into two equal groups. Its behavior is similar to that shown by the average age. Comparing both measures for the entire time series under study, the values of the average are higher than the values given by the median, which indicates a concentration of age values to the right of the average values considered, another clear symptom of population aging [16].

3.5. Aging Index

To obtain the aging index, it is necessary to consider the percentage of individuals in a population who are over 64 years of age, since this is a measure of the relative proportion of older people in relation to the total population.

The aging rate indicates the percentage represented by the population over 64 years of age with respect to the population of 16 years of age and under at the beginning of t, providing information on the number of older adults per 100 inhabitants under 16 years of age. This index or measure shows the current aging and the future aging of the population [18].

As can be seen in Figure 14, this index shows a trend of growth over the years, mainly as a consequence of the increasingly high life expectancy, together with an improvement in people's quality of life. Currently, the index stands at 137.33%, which is 102.34% higher than in 1975, when, for every 100 people aged 16 years, there were 34.986730 people over 64 years of age.

According to INE reports, as of 1 January 2022, there were 9,479,010 older adults (65 years and older), which represented practically 20% (specifically, 19.96%) of the total population (47,475,420). Differentiating by gender, it should be noted that there were 4.50% more women (5,367,334) than men (4,111,676) of advanced age [10].

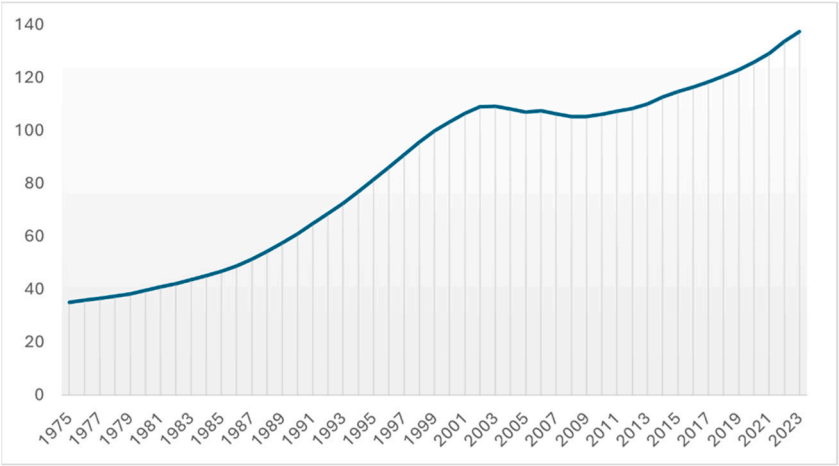


Figure 14. Aging index of the Spanish population (1975–2023). **Source:** National Institute of Statistics INE.

3.6. Dependency Rate of the Population over 64 Years of Age

The dependency rate of the population over 64 years of age indicates the relationship between the population over 64 years of age and the population in the cohort from 16 to 64 years of age, with both magnitudes referring to a certain territory at the beginning of the 20th century. In short, this index indicates the relationship that exists between the dependent population (that is, the population under 16 years of age and the population over 64 years of age) and the productive population on which the former depends (from 16 to 64 years of age). According to the time cohorts indicated, the dependency index can be broken down into the dependency index of young people (under 16 years of age) and older adults (over 64 years of age) (Ministry of Health, 2020). For the present work, the focus was on the dependency index of older adults (over 64 years of age).

Age dependency rates are, sociologically, very useful for studying the level of support and public policies aimed at younger and older people. Mathematically, these rates are expressed in terms of the relative sizes of the populations. An illustrative figure is that the dependency rate for older people in the EU-27 was 33.4% on 1 January 2023, which was 5.7% higher than the figure for the same measure on 1 January 2013, when it was 27.7% [29]. In Spain, the national dependency rate for 2018 was 54.2%, which, in sociological terms, meant that there was a greater potentially inactive population than the population of people of working age. This indicator has increased by almost 15% since 2008 [20].

The combination of the dependency rates of older people and young people gives rise to the statistical measure or variable known as the total age dependency rate (calculated as the ratio of dependent people, young and old, with respect to the population considered to be of working age) [30].

The dependency rate of those over 64 years of age showed a slight but constant and sustained rise, which was only interrupted from 2004 to 2010, having risen in global magnitudes by almost 60% between 1975 and 2023. This increase indicates or confirms the existence of a larger dependent population in this age segment, as indicated by the demographic variables, such as the reduction in the birth rate and the sustained increase in life expectancy, as explained at the beginning of this work. According to INE projections, in 2052, the population over 64 years of age will constitute or represent 37% of the total population, and the dependency rate will reach 68.2% in 2051 [14]. By 2023, the dependency rate will be, as can be seen in the graph below, 30.91% (Figure 15).

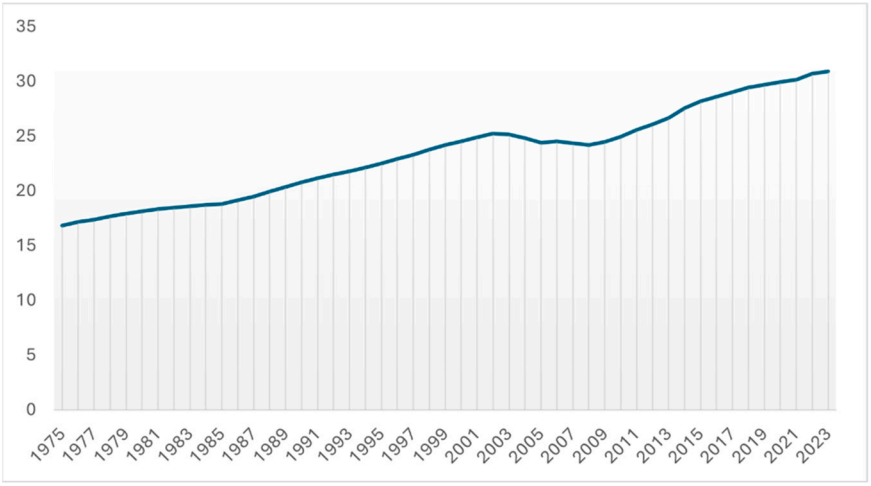


Figure 15. Dependency rate of the population over 64 years of age (1975–2023). **Source:** National Institute of Statistics INE.

In summary, the analysis carried out up to this point shows a clear and notable trend toward the aging of the Spanish population, driven, among many other factors—because this is a reality with multiple implications—by the decrease in the birth rate and the stability of the mortality rate, as was pointed out in the numerical sections of this work.

These realities of the demographics and population bring with them important challenges in terms of public policies and social planning for the increasing consideration of the demographic, economic, health, and well-being implications that come with population aging. For a detailed explanation of the public policies applied for those of old age, the reader is referred to the work of [5].

In Figure 16, we present an analysis of the data on births, deaths, natural balance, and migration balance during the period from 1975 to 2022. This graph clearly shows the sustained decline in the natural balance over time. The migratory balance, as an important source of demographic relief, has shown great variability throughout the period studied, depending on the different socioeconomic circumstances.

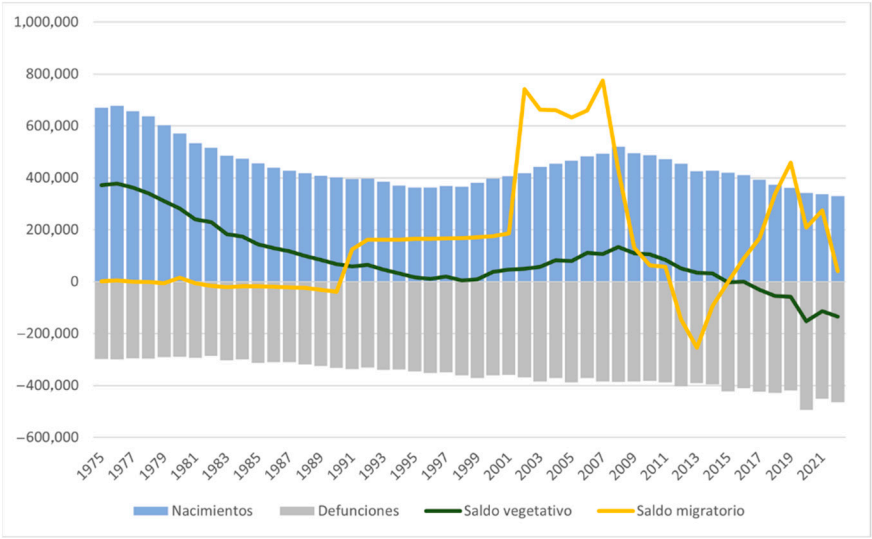


Figure 16. Summary of the different sociodemographic variables. **Source:** National Institute of Statistics INE.

As for births, a very significant downward trend is observed throughout the period taken into consideration, from 669,378 births in 1975—an illustrative year of the baby boom—to 329,251 in 2022. It should be noted that there was a slight increase between 2000 and 2008, but this figure was far from the values reached in the times of the boom in births. On the contrary, deaths showed an upward trend.

Demographically speaking, Spain has gone through different stages in recent decades, and its demographic profiles have been transformed. As mentioned, there was a move from a great "baby boom", which provided youth to the country and territory, to a demographic process of increasing hyper-aging, even considering the demographic relief brought about by migration. This is because immigrant families (especially those from certain origins) have a higher proportion of births at earlier ages. However, it is also true that, in times of great crisis, such as those recently suffered by Spanish society, they tend to return to their countries of origin.

Today, Spain has one of the lowest fertility rates in the European Union, which is partly due to the delay in the age of motherhood. It also has one of the highest life expectancies of the countries that make up the OECD, which has greatly transformed the structure of the Spanish population pyramid [26–30]. In addition to this reality, it should be noted that this progressive process of hyper-aging will continue until 2050, when, according to the authors of [7,31,32], the population dependency rate will practically double.

4. Discussion

4.1. Preliminary Issues

In a sociological analysis of aging, it is essential to consider a multiplicity of variables [32], and to adhere to demographic projections, which are very useful for drawing or outlining, even approximately, what the evolution of the magnitudes referring to the population of Spain will be, always taking the fulfillment of certain assumptions into consideration. These forecasts are essential because they allow, among other exercises, the simulation of what issues of deep social significance will entail, such as pension expenditure or the fluctuations that the GDP could foreseeably have [4].

If we analyze, based on these projections, what will happen with the demographic values studied in this work, such as fertility, mortality, and the migratory balance, we will be able to estimate what may happen with the total population and how the aging process—the subject of this article—will be shaped.

In the case of Spain, we have the projections prepared by the National Institute of Statistics (INE, various years), EUROSTAT (EUROSTAT, various years), and AIReF [25,29]. Following [26], the projections of these institutions cover the following periods: in the INE, the time frame goes from 2020 to 2070; in AIReF, the time frame goes from 2020 to 2050; finally, in Eurostat, the time frame goes from 2020 to a future year. It is important to understand that these institutions make their projections with different methodologies [4,33], an issue that must be considered when making comparisons.

On the other hand, the INE (various years) and the AIReF [29] considered the impact of COVID-19 on population profiles in their analyses. As the authors of [34] point out, the year 2050 is the most appropriate when establishing a point of comparison, since, in that year, the results are available for the three institutions analyzed.

4.2. Fecundity

In relation to the fecundity rate, the following graph shows a situation that is very far from the reference replacement value, as indicated in the previous sections of this work (Figure 17).

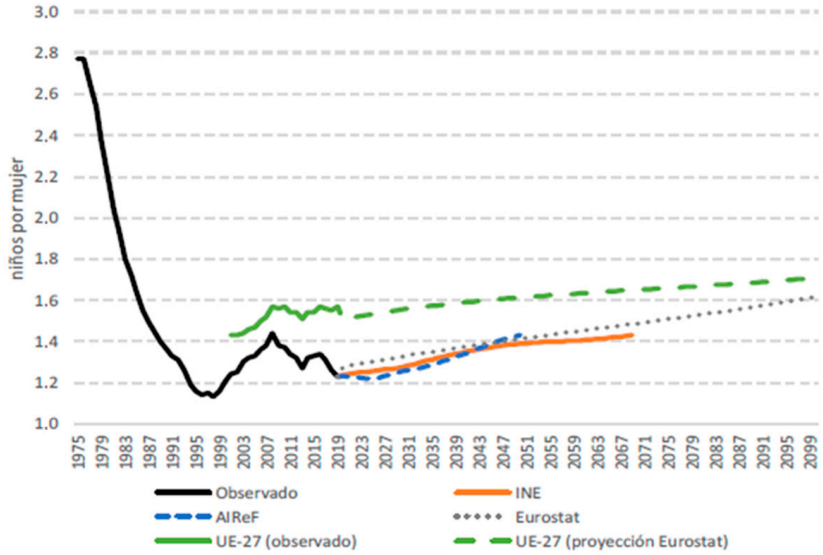


Figure 17. Fecundity rate projections. **Source:** Conde-Ruiz and González (2021) [26].

4.3. Mortality and Life Expectancy

For life expectancy at birth, the projections indicate a continued and sustained increase for both men and women. Both life expectancies are above the EU-27 average (Figure 18).

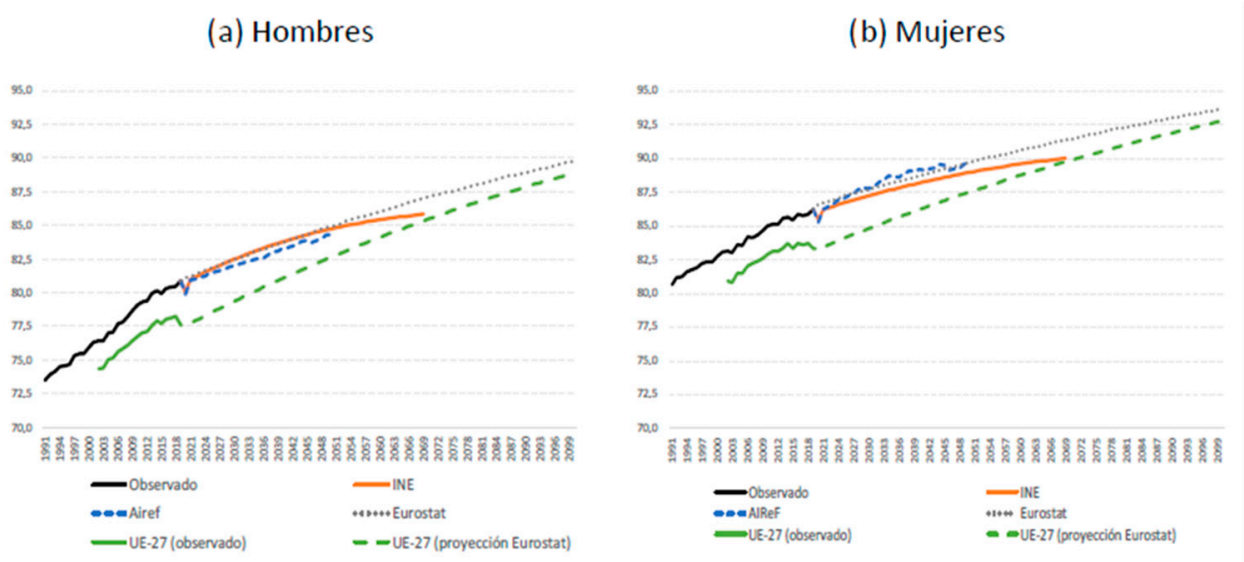


Figure 18. Projections of life expectancy at birth. **Source:** Conde-Ruiz and González (2021) [26].

4.4. Net Migration Flows

Regarding net migration flows, it should be noted that this is the variable in which the most significant differences are perceived among the three scenarios projected by the different institutions. As shown in the graph below, Spain would be, compared with the rest of the European countries, among the countries with the highest and most significant share of accumulated net migration flows until 2050 (Figure 19) [4,33].

The accumulated net migration flows for the period of 2020–2050 are presented in Figure 20 [4,33]. The case of Spain is in red colour.

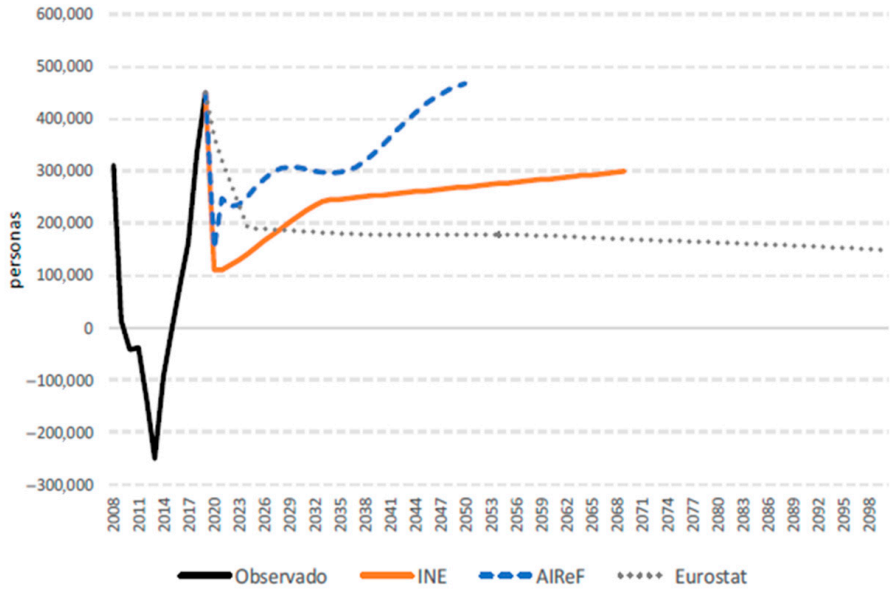


Figure 19. Projections of net migration flows. **Source:** Conde-Ruiz and González (2021) [26].

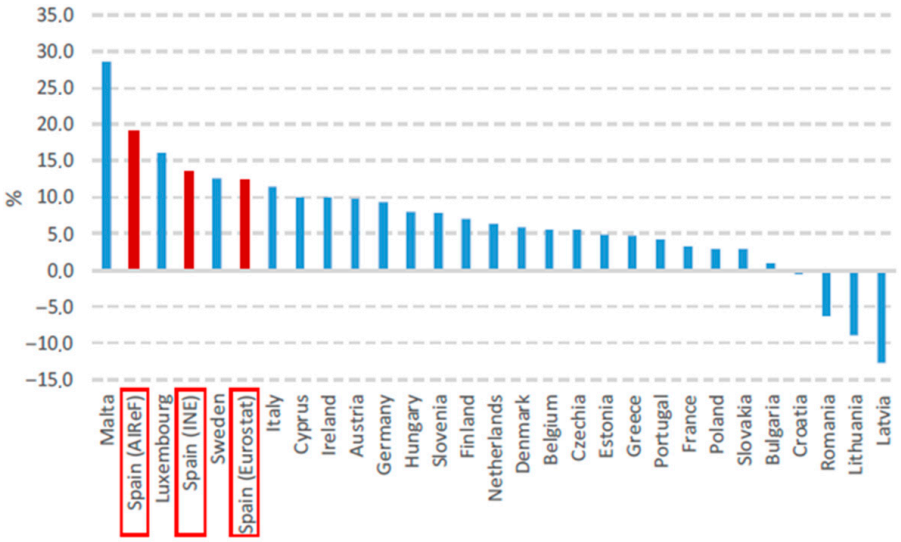


Figure 20. Cumulative net migration flow in 2020–2050 in relation to the population. In red is the spanish stimated figures in three diferent data bases. **Source:** Conde-Ruiz and González (2021) [26].

4.5. Projection of Total Population

Chart 21 below shows data on the evolution of births, deaths, and migration flows according to the projections made by the National Institute of Statistics (INE, various years) to observe what happens with the natural balance; births to non-resident mothers and deaths of non-residents were discounted for this calculation [18].

For 2023, the natural balance of the Spanish population was negative and remains at negative values throughout the projection period. Migratory flows offset the aforementioned balance (Figure 21). However, around the year 2060, considering prognostic studies, both balances would be balanced, which would mean low population growth [4,33].

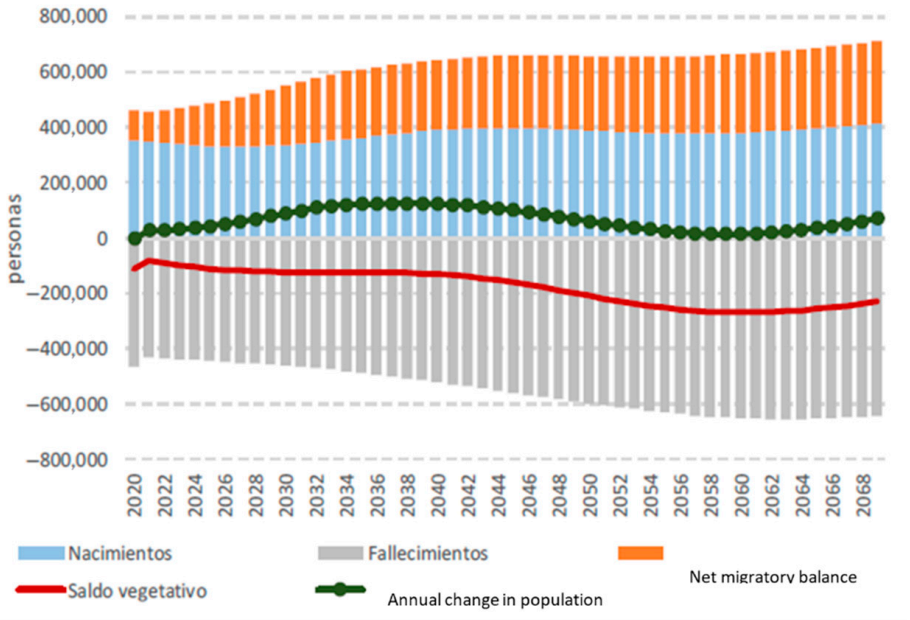


Figure 21. Births, deaths, net migration flow, and population between 2020 and 2069. **Source:** Conde-Ruiz and González (2021) [26].

4.6. Dependency Rate

Figure 22 shows the dependency rate per year in the interval 2023–2072.

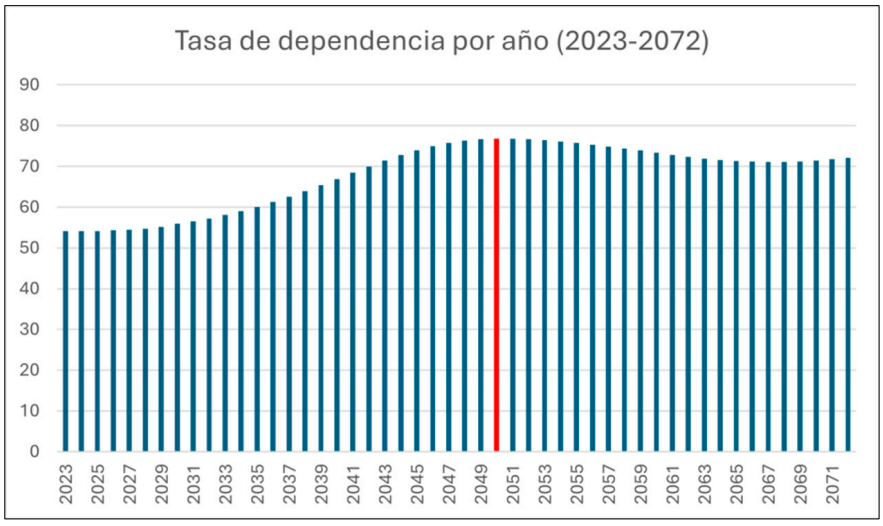


Figure 22. Dependency rate per year (2023–2072). The red line represent the maximun ratio. **Source:** National Institute of Statistics INE.

Analyzing by country, the older adult dependency ratio shows significant differences [30]. Figure 23 shows the older adult dependency ratio in four developed countries in the period of 1950–2050 in the form of a demographic projection [20,32].

In the case of Spain, the growth of the working-age population (20–64) and of the population of retirement age (65+) for the same period shows the following trend according to the source consulted [33] (Figure 24).

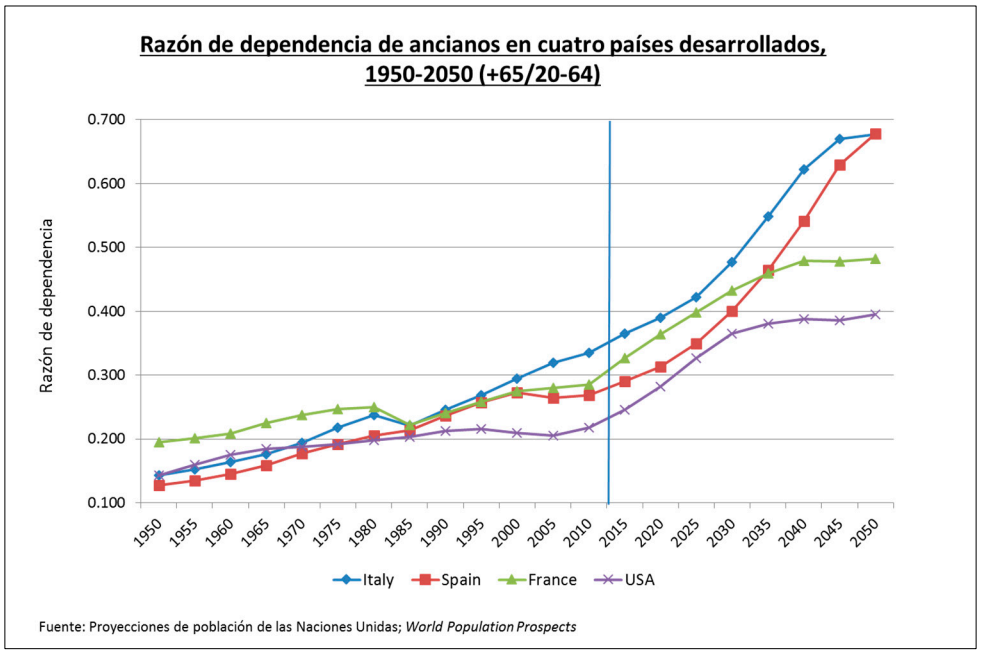


Figure 23. Dependency ratio of older adults in four developed countries for 1950–2050 (+65/20–64). The blue vertical border represents value for the year 2015. **Source:** United Nations population projections; World Population Prospects.

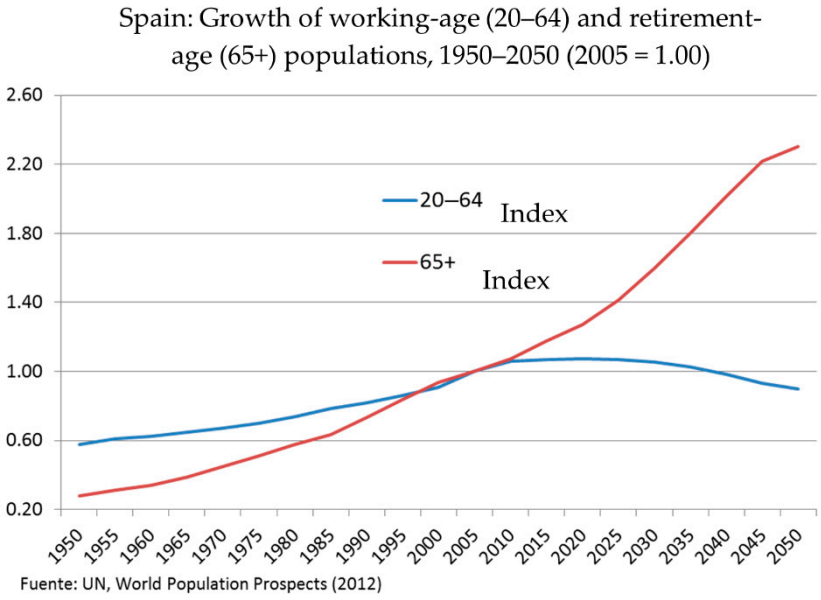


Figure 24. Spain: Growth of the working-age population (20–64) and of the population of retirement age (65+) for 1950–2050 (2005 = 1.00). **Source:** United Nations population projections; World Population Prospects.

4.7. Sociological Analysis of the Aging Process in Spain Today and in the Future

As sociological and demographic doctrine points out, in advanced societies, we find ourselves in the presence of an important historical milestone in terms of life expectancy, and the fall in mortality rates is one of the most important demographic phenomena of the last century [34]. Among the different demographic factors the population aging brings [34,35], the most important is the decrease in the birth rate, as has been shown in this study. An increase in the birth rate must always go hand in hand with specific plans for its promotion and conciliation.

It is worth mentioning that the Strategy for the Protection of Motherhood and Fatherhood and the Promotion of the Birth Rate and Conciliation in Plan 2022–2026 of the Community of Madrid, with fertility figures of 1.15, is very far from a figure that would guarantee population replacement [36] (Community of Madrid, 2022).

Now that the demographic figures have been explained in the applied part of this research and it is understood that the aging of the population is configured as a phenomenon with economic, social, and cultural implications of the first order, in this part of the discussion, we will focus on carrying out an applied sociological analysis. The increase in the years lived and the progress of longevity make it necessary to face one of the most important challenges of so-called long-lived societies such as the Spanish one, that is, to establish a basis for ensuring the quality of life of the entire population during its life cycle.

The sociological situation of old age can be analyzed following an interpretation of the Weberian analytical scheme, which distinguishes three possible spheres of influence: class, status, and power [32].

This implies considering pharmaceutical expenditure and health expenditure per capita, in line with the future increase in chronic diseases and, above all, favoring the factors that promote healthy aging [7]. The reader is referred to the work of [15,18] for a detailed explanation of the links between quality of life in older adults and active leisure.

According to [36], the evolution of social values and demographic, sociological, population, and economic variables will determine the status and power that older adults will have in the coming years [34], although it is necessary to consider the economic precariousness related to housing or energy poverty in certain disadvantaged or vulnerable groups.

The White Paper on Dependency [14] indicates that people aged 65 and over will represent 22% of the population in 2026, and, as a consequence of the increase in life expectancy, people aged 80 and over will also have a significant percentage increase [33,35].

Furthermore, this process will be accompanied, as in other developed or "progressive" countries, by a characteristic associated with old age, which is the process of increasing feminization [12,22], making it essential to add the necessary gender perspective [33], which, according to some authors, is still not sufficiently integrated [24]. This gender perspective, which is linked to essential issues such as care, values, and the distribution of different family roles based on the different composition of Spanish households, is essential for facing the new changes [27] and demographic contours of societies such as the Spanish one in solidarity.

When reviewing the projected population pyramid of Spanish society, the authors of [30] point out that, in 2100, Spain will be the country with the highest life expectancy in the European Union, together with Iceland and Norway (countries belonging to the demographic model of northern Europe), reaching ninety years of life [30]. Furthermore, at birth, Spanish women have the highest life expectancy of all women in the European Union, which is a matter of great importance, as pointed out by the authors of [33]. This sociological reality has important implications, especially today, such as the necessary management of the care of people aged 65 or over who live alone. If we consult the 2001 Population Census [5], the proportion of people in this age cohort who live alone amounts to 20%, which is, in terms of figures, practically four points more than those registered in the 1991 census, which is logical matter given the demographic trends indicated in this work.

First-hand knowledge of the reality of older adults who live alone or who, at certain times, may experience unintentional loneliness is essential for designing appropriate public policies that differentiate between healthy life expectancy—which considers, according to [36], mortality, morbidity, and factors concerning the quality of life—and life expectancy in general [33].

One of the most important trends in today's developed societies is that "healthy life expectancy" has not increased at the same rate as the total life span [33]. This clear imbalance in trends makes one of the fundamental challenges of society that of increasing life expectancy without serious or disabling disabilities in old age, which is why prevention is essential from both an individual and a social perspective.

According to the White Paper on Dependency [20], out of every 1000 men between the ages of 75 and 79, 125 have some form of disability. According to data from [14], in 2050, Spain will be the oldest country in the world [33], which makes it necessary to orchestrate different welfare policies and promote intergenerational solidarity in care. For a detailed analysis of intergenerational relations within the framework of families, the reader is referred to a sociological work by Iglesias de Ussel [29].

These issues are very sociologically relevant and present major national differences, since each society has different expectations and cultural patterns regarding the balance between the state and the institution of the family. When designing support structures for older adults, these different traditions must be taken into account. Various investigations carried out by the OECD have shown that in Southern European countries, older people tend to prefer care provided within the family, while in Northern European countries, older adults prefer care that is structured around formal services [7]. In this sense, it is important to carry out large macro-surveys at the European level with a solid methodological basis, which will allow representative comparative conclusions to be drawn.

The emergence, consolidation, and necessary presence of feminist values and cultural changes of various kinds, such as the emergence of a culture focused on individualism, have radically transformed the position of the female figure within the framework of the social structure, which, according to [33], is a movement away from traditional models to a model full of new variables, since women, for several decades now, have begun to be more demanding in terms of care during the stage corresponding to their later years.

In any case, the unifying factor of all of the issues pointed out throughout this section is the consideration of older people as an important and decisive social capital that has great potential. In sociological and gerontological articles from the 1990s, there was already talk of a "new old age" [33], resulting in the successful construction of the period corresponding to old age [19]. This is where sociology makes its great contributions [15] because it focuses on older adults—not only from the psychological or biological perspective but also from the value that they give to the group as a whole, which is an essential issue at all stages of life [7]. This social value, which has been exponentially enhanced after the pandemic, can be seen with multiple examples, such as in helping family members, providing economic support, which is especially important in times of great crisis or social fractures, and conducting altruistic activities of a social nature within the framework of volunteer associations [33], which have gained significant prominence in Spain in recent years.

However, for this new construction of old age to be effective, intergenerational solidarity networks must be strengthened [33]. According to [7], Silverstein et al. (1998), this intergenerational solidarity must necessarily be sustained over time and is immediately exemplified by public finances [19,32]. As can be seen from the analysis of the data on dependency rates, it is a priority to adapt the pension system, productivity, and the workforce to the new demographic profiles of society.

Let us assume that savings rates will foreseeably tend to fall as the percentage of the retired population increases, making support for dependents one of the great challenges. Sociology has made great contributions to gerontology, such as through the so-called social loneliness scale [17], which is configured as an objective indicator of loneliness in old age [17]. Finally, it should be noted that lifelong education is another of the challenges that must be faced in this new historical time [31], where the university acquires a great role.

Solid social services, the adaptation of the health system, and labor regulations will be other challenges for Spanish society, which is an aging European society, implying the revision of the jurisprudential foundation and the reinforcement of social capital and intergenerational solidarity. In the applied part of this work, dependency rates were analyzed, and it was pointed out that it was necessary to eliminate the dividing line between a "healthy life" and a "dependent life". As a result, health-related issues [16] are established as a first-order factor that must be addressed in correlation with the financing of care [14,16,30] and with the growing support of administrations.

According to the most recent research, there is already discussion of the emergence of a fourth age [11]. In line with the issues raised here, old age and the fourth age, depending on their conditions, will have a different impact on the new composition of households [34] and on the life trajectories of individuals, which also entails a series of methodological considerations that must be taken into account [15].

5. Conclusions

In *The Republic,* Plato emphasizes critical judgment and the prudence of old age, which is a great antecedent of a positive vision of this stage of life. In the same way, in his work *Cato Maior de senectute*, Cicero relates, with examples from classical antiquity, the enormous social relevance of senescence. Specifically, he explains the great events experienced by all kinds of older adults.

Spain is currently in a process of demographic change. One of the most noteworthy factors is that, by the year 2050, demographic projections predict that our country will have the highest dependency rate in Europe and one of the highest in the world. The contours of the dependency rates reveal data on longer and more expensive retirements, numbers that already allow us to outline the challenge of the pension system or what the authors are already calling the "demography of pensions".

The unifying factor of all of the issues pointed out in this work is that older people are an important element of social capital, which makes it essential to continue addressing the issues related to the "new old age" [33], resulting in the successful construction of the period corresponding to old age [34]. For this new construction of old age to be effective, networks of intergenerational solidarity must be strengthened [33] to alleviate the effects of unwanted loneliness.

The analysis of population aging in Spain should not only focus on the challenges but also on the positive contributions of healthy older people, who are often underestimated or ignored. These contributions include their involvement in caring for family members, their role as volunteers in various community activities, and their impact as consumers in the economy. However, it is striking, that the phenomenon of older people continuing to work beyond the conventional retirement age, a growing trend in countries such as Great Britain and possibly in other contexts, is not addressed. This aspect could enrich the debate, showing how the experience and knowledge of this population group can continue to generate economic and social value, and the concept of active aging in contemporary societies can be rethought.

This document emphasizes Spanish data to illustrate the main problems associated with population aging, highlighting its relevance as a social phenomenon of great transcendence. Although it does not seek to propose complex processes necessary to address them, it offers an analysis of the indicators of aging and the demographic structure in Spain. This approach provides a solid basis for understanding the sociological implications of aging, considering that specific conditions vary between countries. In addition, this study argues that the associated challenges, such as the sustainability of the pension system and the care

of the elderly, require solutions adapted to each context. In short, the initial demographic analysis becomes a fundamental tool for addressing the most pressing challenges.

Likewise, factors such as migration patterns are particularly difficult to predict, as are other aspects of demographic change. A relevant example comes from Great Britain, where the healthy life expectancy, after decades of steadily increasing, has started to decline since 2011 among the poorest sectors, while it continues to increase among the better-off groups. This contrast underscores the importance of analyzing social and economic inequalities in the context of population aging, as these disparities can significantly influence the future dynamics of aging societies and the necessary policies.

It should be noted that many studies on loneliness in older adults are still missing, and these are highly complex investigations due to the subjectivity in the perception of loneliness, which represents an additional methodological difficulty. The reports carried out by the Center for Sociological Research and by the IMSERSO should be highlighted, but there are few such efforts. It should be noted that the latest data from the Continuous Household Survey, which studies households according to their composition [20], are from 2020. It is essential to carry out multiple studies on the composition of households to detect what situations of vulnerability may exist in single-person households inhabited by older adults and to reinforce gerontological plans, social policies, and links between the administration and the private sector.

One of the main limitations of this work is its reliance on census and statistical data, which, although fundamental, may present limitations in terms of accuracy and the updating of the information. The methodological change introduced in the 2021 Population and Housing Census implies adjustments in comparison with previous censuses, which could affect the interpretation of long-term demographic trends. Moreover, although key indicators of aging and population structure were analyzed, this research does not delve into regional dynamics, which are crucial for understanding local variations within Spain. Another important limitation is that the qualitative data, although useful for enriching the sociological interpretation, are not developed in depth, which restricts the analysis of the subjective experiences of the elderly in the face of population aging.

Future research could focus on exploring the impact of regional dynamics on aging, incorporating comparative studies between different autonomous communities to identify specific patterns and design context-specific policies. It would also be valuable to include a longitudinal approach that combines qualitative and quantitative data to better understand how changes in public policies and socioeconomic factors affect older generations over time. Another promising direction is to analyze the role of migration in mitigating the effects of demographic aging in greater detail by investigating both the integration of migrants in an aging society and the impact of out-migration of young people on the sustainability of the welfare system. Finally, delving into intergenerational aspects and how family relationships are transformed in an aging context would be key to enriching the sociological perspective.

The CIS study published in 1998 on loneliness in older adults is already a classic. However, if we review the latest CIS barometer [35], the category of "loneliness" appears to be linked to "psychological problems" [35] but is not related to issues relating to roots or social considerations, which leaves the sociological factor very blurred.

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