

# Investigación por Causa

## Foreign, essential and undocumented: A snapshot of irregular immigration in Spain

Gonzalo Fanjul (Fundación porCausa) and Ismael Gálvez-Iniesta (PhD,  
Universidad Carlos III de Madrid)(\*)

---

(\*) This document was translated by Simon Jennings. Throughout this research, the authors have received valuable comments and suggestions from Jesús Fernández-Huertas, Luigi Minale, Lucila Rodríguez-Alarcón, Ana González-Páramo, Josefina Botero, Juan Pablo Riesgo and Fátima de la Calle.

SUMMARY: Ten key arguments about irregular immigration in Spain

1. **Scale:** At the end of 2019, the number of immigrants residing irregularly in Spain was between 390,000 and 470,000 people. This range entails between 11% and 13% of non-EU immigrants and around 0.8% of the total population residing in Spain.
2. **Evolution:** The absolute numbers of irregular immigration grew during the first years of the last decade, fell abruptly during the crisis of 2008-2015 and has, since then, partially recovered. The current scales (depending on the methodology used) multiply those of 2014 by between 6 and 20.
3. **Profile:** Four out of five undocumented immigrants are under the age of 40. Seven out of ten male irregular immigrants are below the age of 30. Women represent the majority of the irregular immigrant population in Spain.
4. **Origin:** Almost four out of five (77%) foreigners without papers come from Central and South America. Irregular immigrants already account for a quarter of the total flow from Latin America. Africa contributes 9.2% (around 43,000 people) of irregular immigrants residing in Spain. Of these, more half originate from a single country: Morocco. The average irregularity rate for the African continent is almost a third of the combined rate of Canada and the United States.
5. **Direct fiscal contribution:** The net direct fiscal contribution - contributions in the form of income tax and social contributions, minus the sum of public transfers received - from households made up of non-EU citizens is positive and stands at around 4,200 euros per year. This amount is 75% higher than that of Spanish households.
6. **Total fiscal contribution:** If we consider the total fiscal impact – incorporating indirect taxes and public spending on education and health to the previous calculation – households made up only of non-EU immigrants receive 400 euros more than those of Spanish nationals only. These aggregate figures, though, include immigrants in an irregular situation, who cannot make contributions through direct taxes and social contributions.
7. **Fiscal effects of regularization:** The irregularity of immigrants represents an average annual loss of 2,000 euros per immigrant for Spanish public coffers. In the event of regularisation, the net tax contribution of immigrants in a current irregular situation would be beyond 3,250 euros.
8. **Irregularity and Covid-19:** Irregular immigrants constitute a high epidemiological risk in a Covid-19 context. The reasons for this include excess caution and breach of confidence with respect to the authorities; language barriers and difficulty of receiving information; and the difficulties of low-income families in maintaining home confinement.
9. **Essential occupations:** One in two (46%) non-EU workers is employed in one of the occupations considered essential by the European Commission. The main sectors of employment are cleaners and assistants (40%); mining and construction (20%); and personal care (12%).
10. **Pull effect:** There is no empirical evidence linking a significant increase in irregular immigration with administrative amnesty measures. The intensity of migratory flows to Spain during the last two years has been inversely proportional to the dynamism of our economy in relation to unemployment rates.

**NOTE ON METHODOLOGY AND SOURCES:**

This report has been produced with best updated information and statistics in June 2020. The nature of the issues addressed involves a number of assumptions and results in estimations. Unless it is explicitly mentioned, all methods and sources for this paper are available at [The Size, Socio-Economic Composition and Fiscal Implications of the Irregular Immigration in Spain](#), working paper from Ismael Gálvez-Iniesta (Carlos III University of Madrid), which can be accessed [here](#).

## 1. Introduction: Regularisation in times of Covid-19

When he emerged from hospital following his convalescence from Sars-Cov-2 infection, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson expressed particular thanks to Jenny and Luis, the nurses from New Zealand and Portugal who had cared for him during the illness. These two immigrants became the epitome of a collective that represents one in three health professionals who work in the United Kingdom; that they have risked their lives during this time and without them, the country would have fallen victim to an even greater tragedy.

For many of them this was the chance to respond the Prime Minister with a question: What if we turned rhetorical thanks into real policies that recognise our work?

The epidemic has been, for many Europeans, a reminder of the critical role that migrant workers play in our societies, including those in an irregular situation. During Covid-19 times many of them have been key to maintaining domestic service during confinement, guaranteeing home care for the elderly or the picking of fruit and vegetables that have fed us.

As in the British case, this contribution has been vindicated in Spain by many groups that ask for a gesture of gratefulness from the State in the form of regularisation or amnesty. This time a strong health argument has been added to the usual ones about the economic and social rationale of the measure: if it is a matter of facing the pandemic and controlling epidemiological risks, it does not seem very sensible to leave a highly vulnerable group with difficulties in complying with the recommendations for social distancing off the institutional radar.

Such a measure does not belong to any ideology, group or political party. All sectors of society are concerned, to a greater or lesser degree, about the combination of ethical and practical arguments that justify amnesty. This is the spirit that has inspired similar initiatives in neighbouring countries like Portugal and Italy and which could soon continue in others, such as Ireland. They are all part of a much broader reformist challenge enabling Europe to ensure effective control of its external borders, while streamlining the immigration system to align it with our core values and long-term interests.

The question is whether a decision of this importance can be made in the context of opacity and statistical obsolescence. Surprising as it may seem, this is the reality in Spain. The poor quality and age of the data available prevent experts, institutions and observers from undertaking informed public debate about the risks and opportunities of reconsidering the irregular immigration phenomenon in Spain.

This document aims to partially fill that gap. As in other areas of our work, the purpose of the **Fundación porCausa** is to raise the quality of public debate and offer all parties the information required by a mature democracy when faced with important decisions like this. For this, we have worked hand in hand with the Department of Economics of Carlos III University of Madrid, whose researchers have carried out a novel and comprehensive analysis of the different elements relevant to this debate. The pages that follow provide an annotated summary of the main preliminary results of this research.

## 1. A snapshot of irregular immigration in Spain

Although this is a recurring issue in public debate, Spain lacks adjusted estimates for the number of immigrants residing in an irregular situation and their main characteristics in our territory. This section offers updated information of such data, using methodological criteria which will be explained later.

### How many irregular immigrants live in our country?

At the end of 2019, the number of immigrants residing irregularly in Spain was between 390,000 and 470,000 people. This range - estimated according to two possible methodologies (Box 1) - represents between 11% and 13% of non-community immigrants recorded in the Municipal Register, and around 0.8% of the total population residing in Spain.

The absolute figures are approximately one third of the 1.2 million in 2005, when Spain last performed the regularisation of undocumented workers.

#### Box 1. Difficulties in estimating irregular immigration

Irregularity is, by nature, a phenomenon difficult to measure with certainty. Many countries face a truly statistical haze when it comes to analysing the reality of irregular immigrants. The risk of being deported, the impossibility of signing an employment contract or the exclusion from public health systems all contribute to the scale of the problem.

Spain, however, has an advantage over many other nations: until now, the authorities have allowed - even encouraged - the registration of all foreigners in the Municipal Register, regardless of their origin or administrative status. Fundamental rights such as access to education and health are derived from this registry, which suggests that it is a reliable indicator. In this way, in our country it is possible to estimate the number of foreign citizens without papers by means of a comparison between the figures of the register and the official residence permits.

The Labour Force Survey softens the limitations of the registry - for example, those citizens who have registered but who no longer reside in the country - while, at the same time, it captures some extremely useful added data. By comparing the affiliations of non-EU foreigners to Social Security, it allows us to obtain a more detailed snapshot of the jobs and sectors in which irregular immigrants are found.

Finally, some authors have suggested the use of complementary sources of information, such as the disposition and use of health cards, to learn about other relevant elements of this phenomenon.

The quality of information is a necessary asset in any public policy, regardless of its purpose. Coercive measures that push irregular immigrants into administrative opacity harm them as well as the societies in which they reside.

The evolution of irregular immigration in recent years generally follows a trend similar to that of regular flows in Spain. Absolute numbers grew during the first few years of the past decade and have fallen sharply since 2005: first as a result of the special regulation that

took place that year, then due to the effects of the recession on the labour market and on the attractiveness of our country as an immigration destination. In 2013 and 2014 both trends bottomed out at the lowest point for the last two decades, with absolute irregularity figures of between 10,000 and 77,000 people.

Since 2015, however, there has been notable intensification of irregular immigration, leading slightly more than 1 in 10 non-EU foreigners in our country being in this situation. This proportion multiplies between 6 to 20 the 2014 figures (depending on the methodology used).

Figure 1. Evolution of irregular migration in Spain (2002-2019)

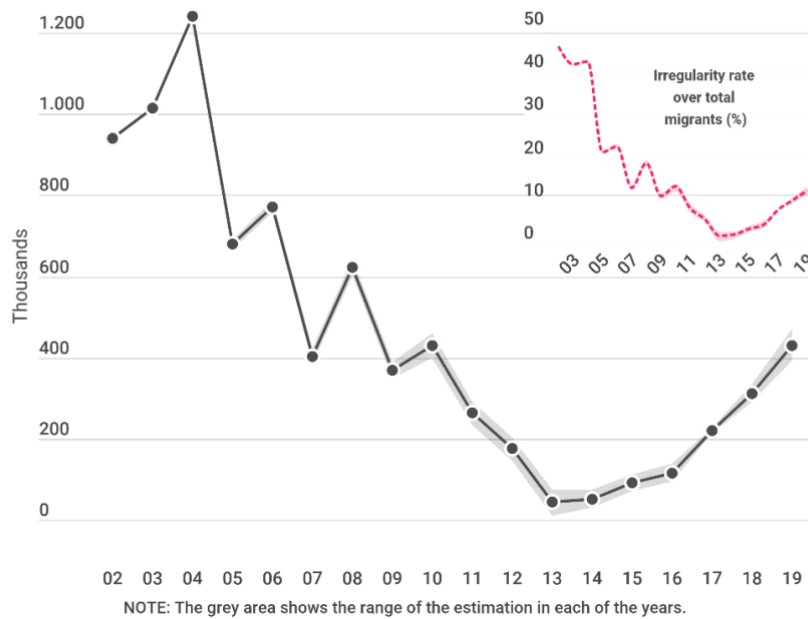
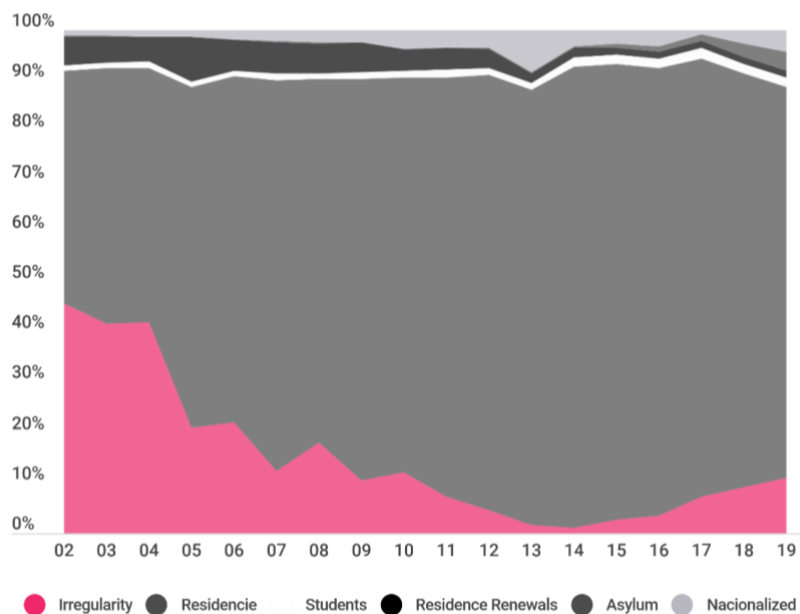
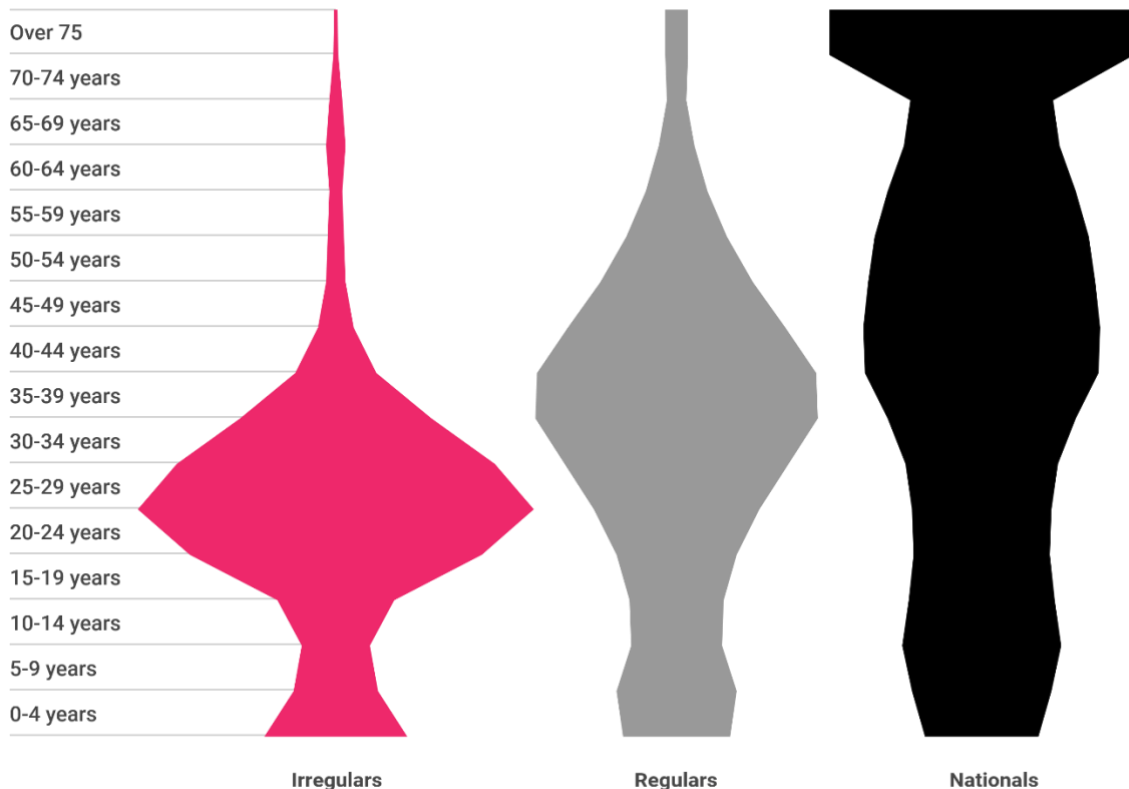


Figure 2. Evolution of different legal residence permits, as compared with irregular migration (2002-2019)



The proportion of women in the irregular immigrant group is 55%, slightly above that observed in regular immigration (50%). The average age of men is significantly lower than that of women here. While a little over 20% of undocumented immigrants are over 40 years old, in the case of men only, this figure is reduced to 4%. Seven out of ten male irregular immigrants are below the age of 30. The average age of immigrants in an irregular administrative situation has important positive implications regarding their balance of costs and contributions to the taxation and labour market of the Spain, as we will see later.

**Figure 3. Age distribution of different population segments**



### Where do they come from?

Irregular immigration in Spain today comes mainly from Central and South America. Almost four out of five (77%) undocumented foreigners originate from this region, and irregular immigrants now account for a quarter of all residents from Latin America.

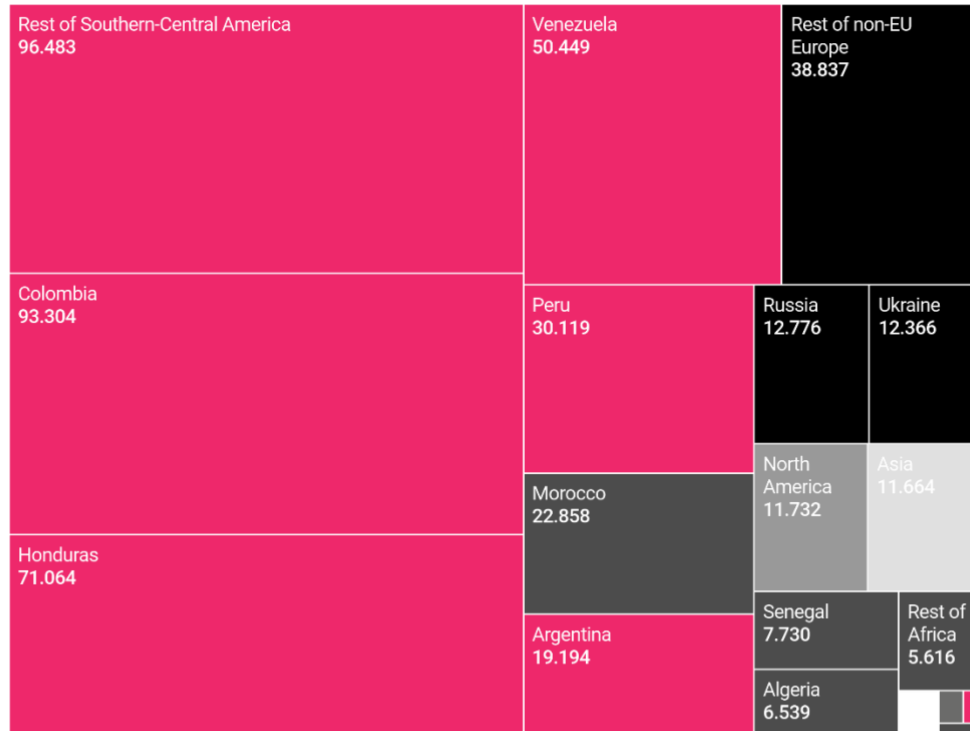
Citizens from Colombia, Venezuela and Honduras stand out. These three nationalities account for 60% of irregular immigrants who come from all the Latin American region, and all three cases have irregularity rates of between 30% and 50% of all those who have arrived. At the opposite end of the scale are Bolivia and Ecuador, where the irregularity rate is practically insignificant.

The increase in absolute and relative values of irregular immigration from these three countries largely explains the accelerated growth of these types of arrivals since 2014. The reasons for this are different for each of them: Venezuela has responded to the extreme political and economic crisis that the country has suffered in recent years; In the

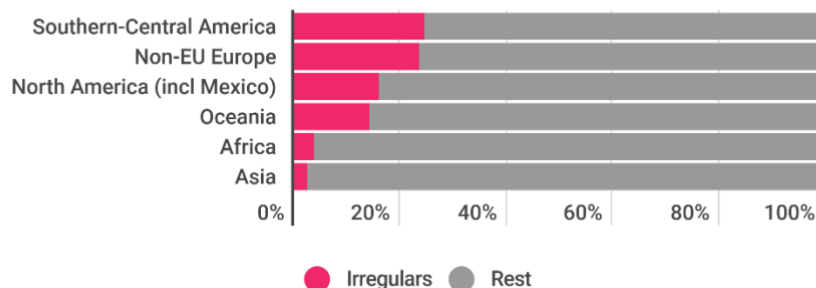
case of Honduras, part of the voluntary or semi-forced displacement flows have moved towards the European Union after the closure of the route through Mexico to the United States; Colombia finally became an important source of irregular immigration after the elimination of the Schengen visa as of June 2015.

Lagging behind the aforementioned, Morocco contributed 20,000 additional irregular immigrants between 2015 and 2019, reaching 5% of the total number of those without papers. The rest of Africa, as a whole, adds up to an even lower proportion (see Box 2).

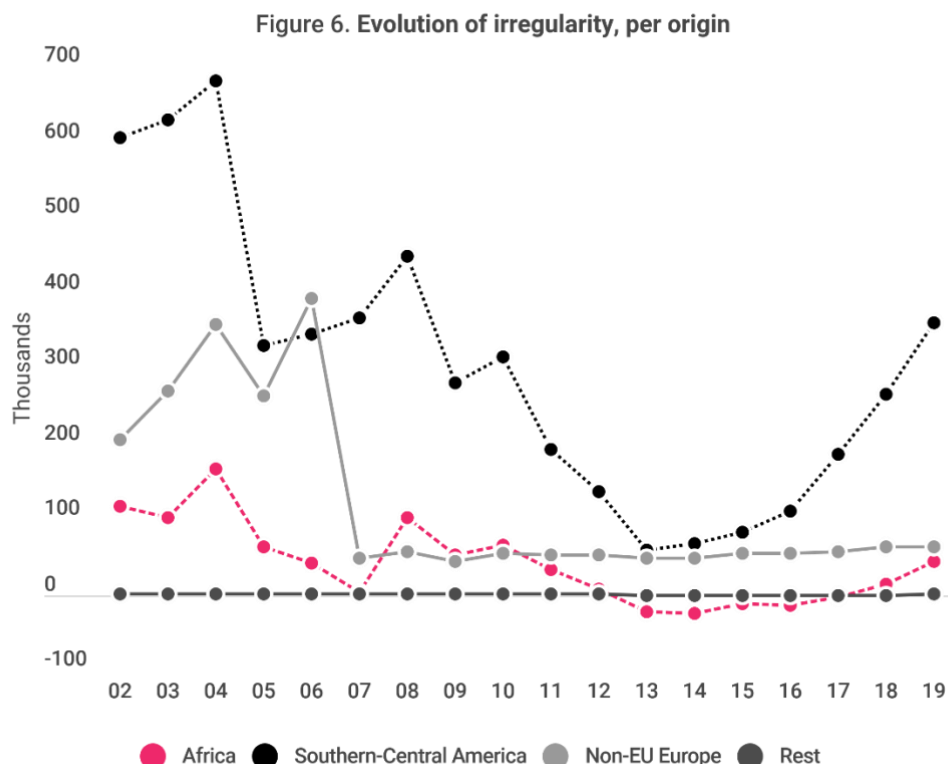
**Figure 4. Relative importance of different nationalities in the total stock of irregular migrants**



**Figure 5. Share of irregularity, per origin**







### Box 2. Africa breaks with its cliché

The image of irregular immigration has been associated for many people with desperate attempts to access the Southern Border or with the harsh situation of groups such as the “manteros” (street vendors) and workers in the agrarian sector. The reality, however, bears little resemblance to this caricature. Africa - especially Sub-Saharan Africa - constitutes a tiny part of undocumented immigration flow to our country.

According to the data collected for this report, the whole of the African continent contributes 9.2% (around 43,000 people) of irregular immigrants residing in Spain. Of these, more than half come from a single country, Morocco, which also accounts for one in four non-EU foreigners residing in Spain. Nigerians and Senegalese constitute the only prominent Sub-Saharan nationalities, with inconsequential irregular immigration figures when compared to other origins. Canada and the United States, for example, almost tripled the irregularity rate for that of the African continent average.

The case of Africa offers valuable lessons about the priorities of the Spanish and European migration regime. Despite the fact that the figures for irregular emigration to Spain are consistent with everything we know about human mobility on the continent – very intense within the region itself, but still without the economic capacity to migrate “en masse” to richer regions – the Southern border constitutes a political and media obsession, which distorts any effective analysis. This is not accidental, as [porCausa](#) explained in their description of the Immigration Control Industry.<sup>1</sup>

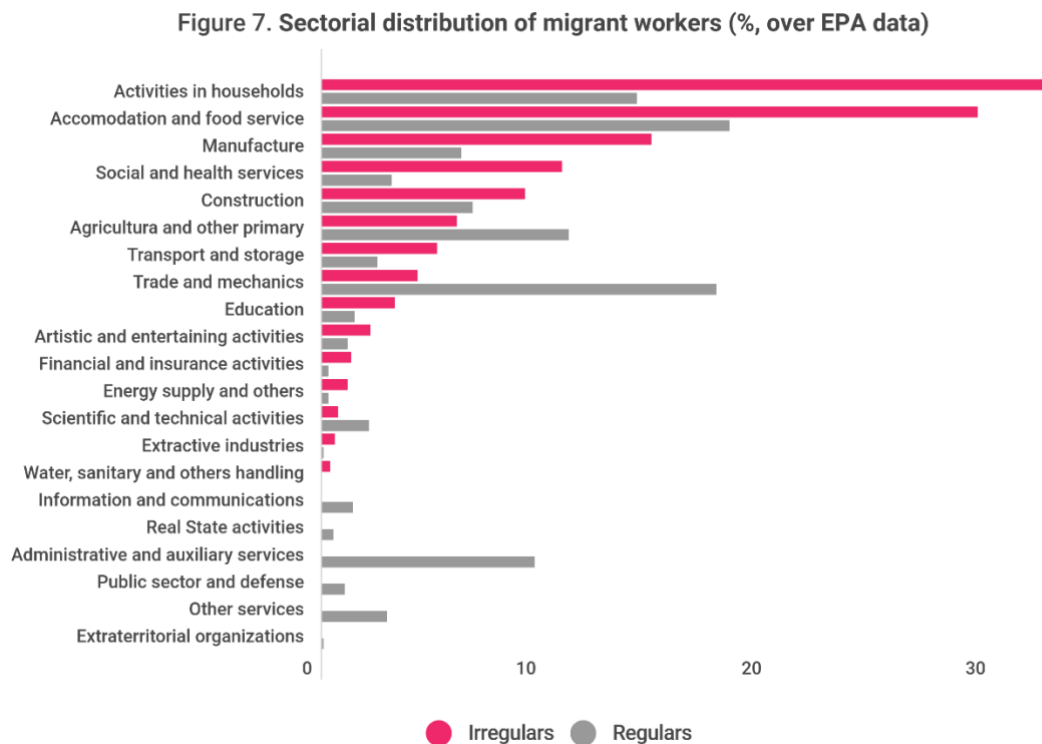
<sup>1</sup> Fundación porCausa report: [Migration Control Industry](#) (2017).

## What do they do?

According to our estimates, some 300,000 non-EU immigrants are currently employed in the informal economy, either because they do not have a work permit or may even have one, but are forced to work in the shadow economy. The available information prevents us from establishing who is who within this group, therefore it is not possible to establish how many undocumented immigrants are currently employed to any degree of certainty.

We can affirm that the percentage of immigrant workers employed in the underground economy is 19% of the total. Although this figure is a third lower than that of 2005, the data suggests that between 2012 and 2016 a considerable number of immigrants continued to work in the informal sector, even when they had a residence permit.

By sector (see Figure 7), our estimates suggest that internal household activities concentrates the largest number of immigrants employed in an irregular situation (80,000 workers, more than 30% of the total), closely followed by the catering sector (29%, 70,000 workers).



**Table 1. The profiles of irregular immigration in Spain**

In order to illustrate the reality of irregular immigration, **porCausa** has defined six profiles (three women and three men) that constitute the most common identikit. Taken together, these six groups stand for two thirds of all irregular migration in Spain today. The next section will make some additional considerations regarding the economic impact of these groups.

**Table 1. The most representative socio-economic household profiles of irregularity**

	Women			Men		
	PROFILE 1	PROFILE 2	PROFILE 3	PROFILE 1	PROFILE 2	PROFILE 3
AGE	20-30	30-55	30-40	25-35	25-40	17-25
SECTOR	Household activities	Accommodation and food services	Household activities	Manufacture-Construction	Acc and food services	Primary-construction
RELATIVE SIZE	15%	9%	8%	17%	13%	4%
# CHILDREN	0,17	0,93	0,77	0,93	0,57	0,22
# ADULTS	2,84	2,19	2,40	2,13	2,84	2,92
% LIVING TOGETHER	38,29%	62,81%	77,25%	80,46%	55,27%	27,62%

### 3. The economic impact of immigration in Spain and the contribution of irregular immigration.

Human mobility is a complex phenomenon with a multiple and differentiated impact on destination and host societies, in addition to the individual opportunities and expectations of those who migrate. From an economic point of view, academic literature has made an effort to study the implications of immigration based on a variety of variables - fiscal, labour, salary, demographic, productivity and innovation, both in host and home economies as well as in the relationship established between them. Only in this way is it possible to capture the aggregate effect of migrations on the global economy.

Economic literature, in general terms, agrees on some fundamental conclusions about the economic impact of migration:<sup>2</sup>

- The vast majority of those who move (around 90%) do so in a non-forced manner and for work or economic reasons. Emigration is one of the fastest and most effective levers to escape poverty, and its resources are the second most important source of development financing.
- Migrations to developed economies offer considerable demographic relief to ageing societies with structural dilemmas concerning the sustainability of their welfare states.
- The net tax contribution of immigrants is positive, particularly during the first years of their experience.
- When in contexts of higher productivity, foreign workers contribute in a tangible way to the growth of economies and job creation (above and beyond their current occupations).
- Except for localized and transitory exceptions, immigration does not harm the salary levels of workers who were already in the destination country. Their average salary levels, however, are consistently below that of the average worker.

Each of these statements allows many nuances when considering the particularities of migrant populations. Asylum seekers, for example, represent greater initial effort on behalf

<sup>2</sup> On top of the literature referenced in Gálvez-Iñiesta's paper, the reader can find a useful Summary of this literature in [People On The Move: Global Migration's Impact And Opportunity](#) (MacKinsey Global Institute, November 2016).

of public administrations in policies and budgets for reception. Workers of different age groups, backgrounds or abilities do not have the same relative impact. Nor do those on whom a larger or smaller number of family members depend.

What happens in the case of irregular immigration? An informal worker (national or foreign, with or without papers) is an active, but incomplete economic actor. Their work and contribution to the progress of the economy are real, as are their contributions through consumption and indirect taxes. They have the potential to contribute to economic growth, innovation and productivity, and if they are young, they prop up the demographic pyramid at its base. These workers, however, lack the opportunity to make direct tax contributions through personal income tax and contributions – either on their own behalf or on behalf of their employer - to Social Security (National Insurance). The salary impact is subject to the same considerations that can be taken into account with respect to the whole underground economy.

The research that supports this report has focused on a partial aspect (but fundamental and measurable, with nuances) of the participation of irregular immigrants in the economy: its fiscal impact. The difficulty of obtaining all the data required through analysis requires a considerable number of assumptions and methodological options (see Box 3), but these estimates add undoubted value to a public debate all too often subject to superficial inferences and considerations.

**Box 3. Up to now, what did we know about the fiscal impact of immigration?**

Studies on the fiscal impact of immigration use two main methodologies: static and dynamic. The first method measures the net fiscal impact (contributions minus benefits) of immigration in any given year, compared to that of the non-immigrant population. The second method is not limited to a single year, but rather projects the fiscal impact of immigrants and their descendants over a period of several years. This allows variations in their fiscal activity to be captured throughout a life in which the balance of contributions and social benefits is altered, although the estimate is inevitably less precise.

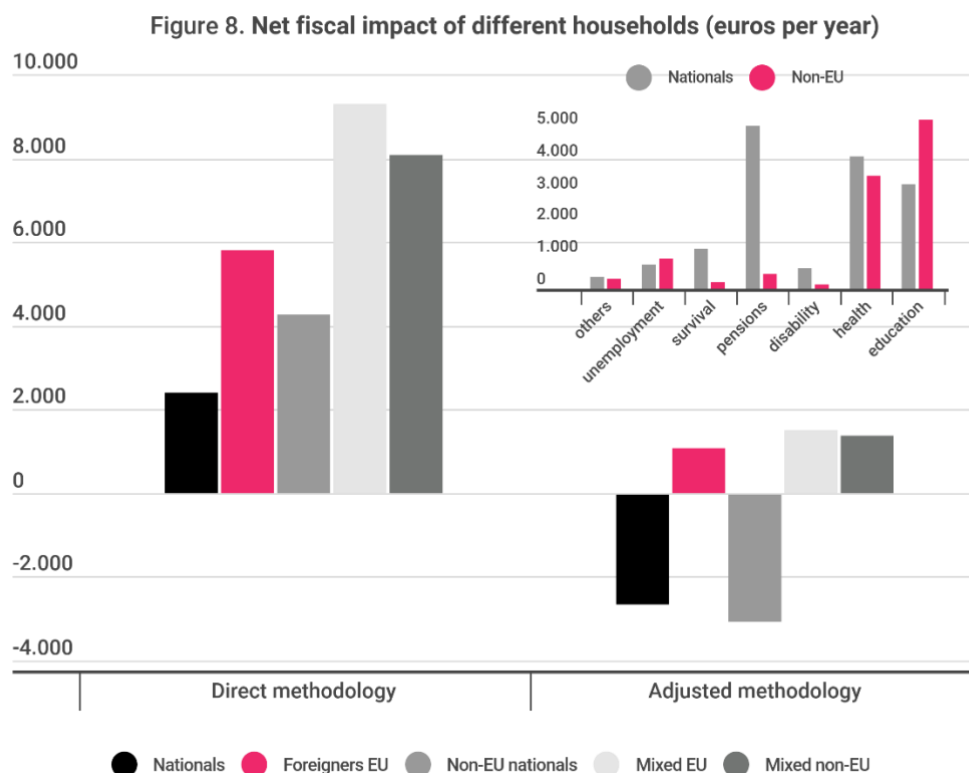
With both methods, we must answer a fundamental question: do immigrants impose a burden on the States in which they settle? The economic response leaves little room for interpretation. Most studies using the static approach suggest net contributions of between 0.5% and 1% of GDP, depending on the year and country. In the case of Spain, different static studies based on the Living Conditions Survey show that immigrants receive less money transfers than the established population, and that they do not make greater use of public resources such as health services. Analyses based on dynamic methodologies are less frequent, but one of the most relevant in the Spanish case finds that immigration has a positive effect which could be significant for the future sustainability of public finances.

Using the static method of fiscal impact analysis, our research reaches the following conclusions about the tax contribution of immigrants:

- The net direct tax contribution – that is, the sum of the contributions to the tax system in the form of income tax and social contributions, minus the sum of public transfers received – of households made up of non-EU citizens is positive and stands at around 4,200 euros per year.

- In the case of households made up of citizens with Spanish nationality, this figure is about 2,400 euros per year, which means that the direct contribution of an immigrant household is 75% higher. The main reason for this difference is attributed to the average age of much younger immigrant households: although they receive transfers for education, family support or low income, assistance via pensions and social transfers, survival or disability is very low.
- If we consider the total fiscal impact – incorporating indirect taxes and public spending on education and health to the previous calculation – these figures are significantly adjusted, to the point that households made up only of non-EU immigrants receive 400 euros more than those formed only by Spaniards. In this case, the differences derive from the average household income, thus coming from their indirect tax contributions through consumption and from the invoicing of health and educational expenses of young families with children.

The accompanying charts offer some details about these findings and their breakdown by household type and transfer. It is important to remember, however, that these aggregate figures include, in the case of immigrants, citizens in an irregular situation. All of this damages the net contribution of the group, insofar as it eliminates its potential contributions through direct taxes and social contributions (own and employers). In the last part of this section we try to estimate this effect for Spain, by analysing the consequences that regularisation would have.



### An estimate of fiscal impact of irregular immigration and of potential regularisation in Spain

Spanish society has reached a consensus that all citizens residing in our country enjoy, regardless of their administrative situation, a series of fundamental rights inherent in human dignity. Thus, by simply registering in the Municipal Register, this allows an

irregular immigrant to access the public education and health systems, which constitutes a cost for the system.

The available information about the structure of immigrant households in an irregular situation, as well as their salary level and living conditions, allow us to estimate both the scale of this cost and the fiscal contributions made by immigrants through the associated indirect taxes via the consumption of necessary goods.

We have calculated this information for the case of the six main profiles of irregular immigrants described in the previous section. This calculation offers two first notable conclusions:

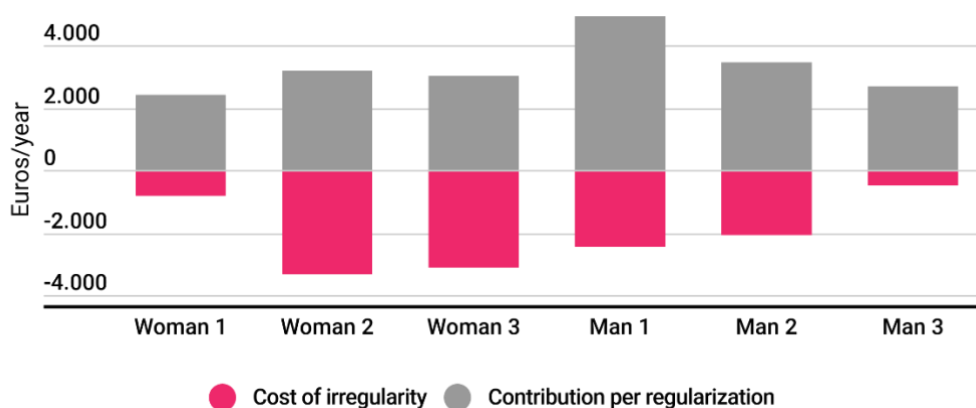
- The irregularity of these workers represents an average annual cost of 2,000 euros per immigrant for Spanish public coffers.
- This average presents notable differences according to the profiles of irregular immigrants: from a cost of 460 euros per year for younger men, to 3,288 euros for women between 30 and 55 years of age. The existence of dependent children constitutes the difference.

The key question after this analysis is the following: How much would this fiscal snapshot change if these workers had a residence and work permit? The fiscal consequences of a possible regularisation constitute one of the fundamental pieces of information in this process, and, as we can see, a powerful reason in favour of the measure (see Figure 9):

- Once the estimated contributions in terms of direct taxes (personal income tax) and social contributions are incorporated into the calculation, the net tax contribution of immigrants in an irregular situation increases above 3,250 euros.
- Again, there are important variations according to the different profiles: from the 2,441 euros contributed by younger women (many of them working in the care sector) to the almost 5,000 euros of men between 25 and 35 years old working in the manufacturing or construction sectors.
- In four of the six profiles analysed, regularisation would allow immigrants to contribute well above what they receive from public budgets. In the remaining two of them, the contributions would neutralise the costs for the State.

**Table 1 y Figure 9. Estimated net fiscal impact of different households of irregular migrants**

	Women			Men		
	PROFILE 1	PROFILE 2	PROFILE 3	PROFILE 1	PROFILE 2	PROFILE 3
AGE	20-30	30-55	30-40	25-35	25-40	17-25
SECTOR	Household activities	Acc and food services	Household activities	Manufacture-Construction	Acc and food services	Primary-construction
RELATIVE SIZE	15%	9%	8%	17%	13%	4%



The estimates made by the **Fundación porCausa** about the potential benefits of a future regularisation largely coincide with the empirical experience of past regularisations. A recent study of the 2005 research (of nearly 700,000 citizens) establishes the average increase per worker at around 4,200 euros per year.<sup>3</sup> This figure is above our estimates, but it is important to remember that the last regularisation was carried out in a period of economic expansion and that we must be cautious regarding the immediate forecasts in sectors such as manufacturing or construction.

#### 4. The health impact of irregular immigration

Spain constitutes, to a certain extent, an anomaly in the recognition of the right to health of all citizens residing in our country. As explained in Table 1, adding oneself to the Municipal Register guarantees this right, which was temporarily interrupted and only in some autonomous communities between April 2012 and July 2018. Public health criteria have traditionally carried as much weight as the ethical ones in maintaining this policy. Precisely, these considerations should be sufficient for all citizens of our country, regardless of their administrative status, to be under the radar of the health authorities responsible for detecting, controlling and reducing the expansion and effects of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The problem is that the recognition of the law collides with the reality of irregular immigration, leading to a health risk that must be considered in this debate. Although health considerations have not been part of the report prepared by the **Carlos III University** for the **Fundación porCausa**, it is worth recapitulating some of the arguments highlighted by experts and academic literature during the first few weeks of the health crisis and before:<sup>4</sup>

- Irregular immigrants constitute a group of high epidemiological risk in a context such as that of Covid-19. The main reasons are as follows: their caution and lack of

<sup>3</sup> Collado, Iturbe-Ormaetxe and Valera (2004). [Quantifying the impact of immigration on the Spanish welfare state](#).

<sup>4</sup> Raj Bhopal: [Covid-19: undocumented migrants are probably at greatest risk](#). Letter to The British Medical Journal (28 April 2020); Lorenzo Guadano (International migrations organisation): [Migrants and the COVID-19 pandemic: An initial analysis](#). (May 2020); \*Helena Legido-Quigley, Leire Pajin, Gonzalo Fanjul, Elena Urdaneta, Martin McKee: [Spain shows that a humane response to migrant health is possible in Europe](#). Correspondence to The Lancet (3 July 2018).



confidence regarding the authorities, which leads many of them avoiding health centres; language barriers and difficulty in receiving information from the authorities; difficulties in maintaining social distance or confinement in low-income households and other such economic circumstances.

- The undocumented immigrant population is among the potential high-risk groups for previous health vulnerabilities, including the prevalence of diseases such as tuberculosis or HIV. During the period in which access to healthcare was partially and temporarily restricted, an increase of 15% was observed in the mortality rate of foreigners in an irregular situation.
- The International Organization for Migration has identified nearly two dozen vulnerabilities associated with the irregularity that would have immediate effects on its exposure to the Covid-19 pandemic. These vulnerabilities are grouped into five risk categories: (1) Contraction of the disease; (2) not accessing care and treatment; (3) development of severe symptoms; (4) suffering of psychosocial impacts; and (5) insecurity in their income and other livelihoods.

Our country, like almost all the others, still lacks the necessary information to be able to assess the real consequences of these risks. However, we have good reasons to believe that they cannot be taken lightly. The health of migrants themselves and of the societies that host them require utmost seriousness.

## 5. Irregular immigration, essential workers and 'pull effect': the obstacles to the reform

Some of the most common arguments against the regularisation of immigrants are related, in the first place, to their place in the labour market and therefore, to their "economic value" for the host society and secondly, to the possible pull effect of other foreign workers seeking to benefit from administrative amnesty. What relevance do these factors have in the current context of Spain?

### Essential workers

The Covid-19 pandemic has reopened the debate about the so-called "essential occupations" of economies and the role that immigrants can play in them throughout the world. During the period of confinement and health emergency, foreign workers have been decisive in critical sectors of diverse qualification, from specialized health care to home delivery, through care and food production and the handling of the same. One in four workers in the US agricultural sector comes from outside the country. This proportion exceeds 30% in the case of doctors. In Australia, 54% of doctors and 35% of nurses are immigrants.<sup>5</sup>

The European Union as a whole depends on non-EU workers in sectors which are sensitive to the management of an epidemic, such as women workers in the care and home sector (1 in 3) or food processing (1 in 5) and in many of its member states, public health systems would be unsustainable without the participation of immigrant professionals. The British think tank Overseas Development Institute has documented

---

<sup>5</sup> Marta Foresti: [Less gratitude, please. How COVID-19 reveals the need for migration reform](#). (Brookings, 22 May 2020).



more than a hundred sector experiences - most of them in developed countries - in which immigrant workers have proved essential in response to Covid-19.<sup>6</sup>

This conversation is part of a much broader one about the future of labour markets and the capabilities and scope of work that will be needed in them. As the OECD has pointed out,<sup>7</sup> two factors will determine this process: the ageing of developed economies – which in countries like Spain will maximize the ratio of people over 65 above the working age population – and the sector composition of that market. The arrival of more immigrant workers, better prepared for essential occupations, constitutes a difficult variable to overcome in this equation.

How does the immigrant population, today in an irregular administrative situation in Spain, fit into this debate? Again, the absence of disaggregated data prevents us from distinguishing between non-EU workers without papers and the rest. However, the analysis of the study set carried out by **porCausa** offers interesting clues about this question:

- One in two (46%) non-EU workers is employed in one of the essential occupations (according to the criteria established by the European Commission).<sup>8</sup> In the case of workers with Spanish nationality, this percentage is 35%.
- Latin Americans and Africans are more aligned with these essential skills (50% and 47% of workers, respectively) and non-EU Europeans have somewhat lower figures (41%). Considering the disproportionate weight of the former in irregular immigration figures, it is foreseeable that this group will make a particularly relevant relative contribution to the essential capacities group.

By occupation, essential skills in which immigrant workers are most represented are the cleaners and assistants' sector (40%); mining and construction (20%) and personal care (12%). The first and third categories on this list perfectly illustrate the paradox of the jobs that make an essential contribution to the maintenance of societies and families, and yet are in the lowest categories of remuneration. As in other areas, the economic value of a job does not necessarily reflect its real value.

### Do regularisations cause a pull effect?

If the regularisation of immigrants becomes a magnet for new workers without papers and not a mechanism to end an administrative anomaly which damages the irregular worker and their host society, what use is the measure? This question, posed before each process of this type, is a serious and legitimate concern that must be considered before making a decision on the steps to be taken.

Academic literature has tried to answer this dilemma from a theoretical and an empirical perspective. These are some of its main conclusions:

---

<sup>6</sup> Overseas Development Institute: [Key workers. Migrants' contribution to the COVID-19 response](#).

<sup>7</sup> OCDE: [The future of work: What do we know?](#) OECD Employment Outlook 2019.

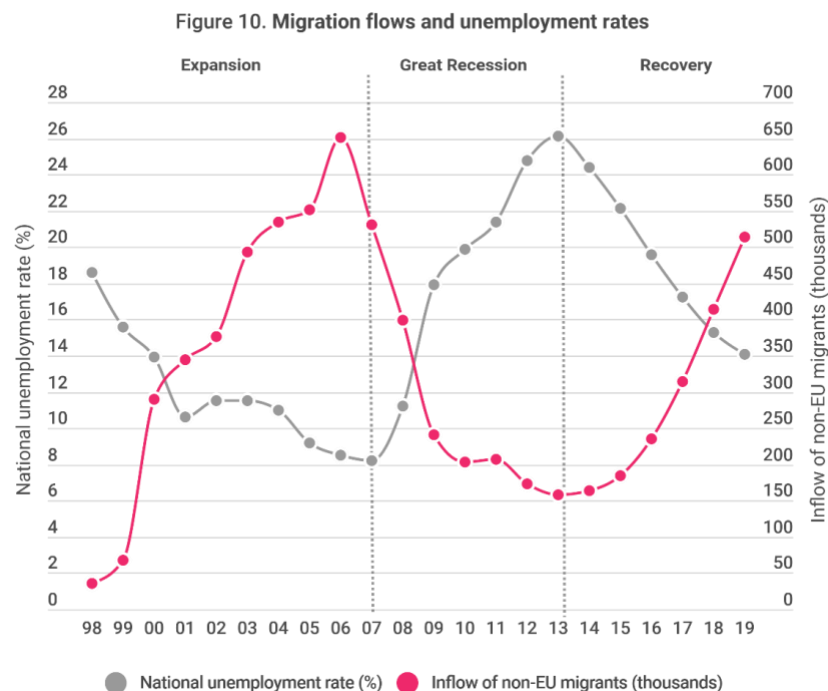
<sup>8</sup> [Coronavirus: Commission presents practical guidance to ensure the free movement of critical workers](#); Fasani y Mazza (2020): [Immigrant Key Workers: Their Contribution to Europe's COVID-19 Response](#). The literature on this point is scarce, but some studies on the American case that dismantle this myth stand out, such as that of Orrenius and Zavodny (2003): Do Amnesty Programs Reduce Undocumented Immigration? Evidence from IRCA.

- There is no empirical evidence linking a significant increase in irregular immigration with administrative amnesty measures. These measures are only produced under exceptional circumstances and incorporate objective conditions such as the actual previous residence time, which nullify the appeal for newcomers.
- Literature on the matter does, however, introduce nuances regarding the best way and moment to undertake a regularisation measure. Poor market entry conditions, excessively temporary residence permits or the absence of other reforms in the system for example, harm the long-term effects of an amnesty and eventually end up generating new pockets of irregularity.

But there is something else. To a large extent, the answer to the dilemma of the pull effect lies in the true reasons that motivate the migratory phenomenon or, at very least in the voluntary phenomenon of emigration for labour or economic reasons. After all, residence and work permits are nothing but a means to an end: the aspiration to work, to prosper through that work and to offer one's environment a better future. All we know about this type of human mobility is that income and employment expectations are the determining trigger of a migratory project, which is later modified by other contributing factors such as the existence of reception networks (diasporas), geographic distance and cultural aspects or, of course, the barriers imposed by the destination State (a visa policy has determining effects in the short term, for example).

From this point of view, the experience of Spain during the last two decades allows us to deduce the attractiveness for potential migrants according to job opportunities at destination. As figure 10 shows, the intensity of migratory flow to Spain is inversely proportional to the dynamism of our economy, expressed in relation to unemployment rates.

In other words, no other control measure is going to be more effective in stopping the flow of immigrants than the certainty of an economic crisis derived from the impact of Covid-19.



## 6. Conclusion: Regularisation as the first step towards comprehensive immigration reform in the EU

Based on the academic research commissioned by the Fundación porCausa, this document has provided original data and a review of the literature which justify four main arguments: First, that the volume of irregular immigration in Spain is relatively small compared to other moments in our recent history and that its origin has little to do with the social and political prejudices that reduce the migratory phenomenon compared to what happens on our Southern border.

Second, that immigrants in an irregular administrative situation make an essential contribution to Spanish society and economy. This contribution is partially reflected by the occupation of essential tasks within the labour market - some of them essential during the recent health crisis. To a certain degree, they are reflected through indirect tax contributions which today are close to equalizing the costs they entail for the State, but which could more than compensate them if a work and residence permit allowed them to make direct contributions.

Third, that the current health epidemiological emergency that world societies are experiencing and that will continue in the coming months is, in itself, a reason to ensure the full incorporation of immigrants into the epidemiological policies of the institutions. As the Portuguese government stressed to justify its recent regularization process, no decent and intelligent society should perpetuate this administrative anomaly.

Fourth, that the experience of Spain and other countries (documented in the existing academic literature and in empirical evidence) does not justify the myth of a so-called *pull effect* associated with regularisations. They do offer clues about when and how to take these steps.

In addition to these four arguments based on academic research, it is worth remembering a fifth related to the *realpolitik*: Whether or not regularisation is undertaken, these immigrants will not disappear from our societies. The practical, legal and electoral obstacles to the processes of mass deportation – beginning with the fact that the cost of expulsion is considerable and regularisation very profitable – as well as the political consensus of not expelling some of the most represented nationalities in the current collective irregular immigration, reduce the real dilemma to this one: should we perpetuate a reality that causes serious direct costs for those affected, epidemiological risks and a significant opportunity cost for society as a whole; or reset the counter to zero and work to prevent this situation from happening again in the future?

Inherently, any such measure will represent mere temporary relief if it is not part of a more ambitious reform process which involves the bulk of the EU's economic powers. This was affirmed before the crisis by states such as Germany and this was the commitment made by the Spanish government at the beginning of the legislature: a rationalization of the migration model that would align the instruments and objectives of this policy with international obligations regarding the protection of asylum-seekers, as well as the labour and demographic needs of our society in the mid to long term. Covid-19 has only enhanced the importance and urgency of these goals.