

Population & Societies

A new wave of Spanish emigration to France and the United Kingdom: who are the emigrants and why are they moving?

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France has a long tradition of receiving Spanish migrants, and in 1968 they were the country's largest foreign-born population. But with the growth of the Spanish economy, migrant flows later began to decline. Today, Spanish nationals are again leaving the country for other European destinations. The authors⁽¹⁾ describe these flows and the profiles of these new Spanish emigrants.

Spain, a receiving country at the turn of the 21st century

During the 20th century, Spain was an emigration country, marked by waves of departures mainly towards France and other European countries such as Germany and Switzerland. It was not until the very end of the century, in 1999, that the country experienced positive net migration (more arrivals than departures) for the first time. In the following years, Spain became the main destination for world flows towards the European Union, and between 1999 and 2007, the proportion of foreigners in Spain rose from 2% to 12%.⁽²⁾

However, in 2008, Spain was hit by an economic crisis that continued for several years. Consequently, net migration changed again, with a decrease in entries and a rise in departures. Some immigrant groups returned to their country of origin, while others remigrated elsewhere. Spanish nationals also moved abroad, marking a resumption of Spanish emigration. For 3 years, net migration became negative again (2013–2015) with more departures than arrivals in Spain, and while it then turned positive once more, outflows remained higher than during the years preceding the crisis. This recent Spanish emigration rebound, also observed in other southern European countries, is visible in France. In 2023, a quarter of

the immigrants from Spain or Italy living in France had arrived within the last 10 years [1].

Using a range of data sources (see Box), this article analyses migration trends, the main sociodemographic characteristics of recent Spanish emigrants, and their reasons for migration. It focuses on Spanish nationals, whether born in Spain or naturalized Spanish.

Large outflows from Spain since the economic crisis in 2008

The Spanish National Statistics Institute (INE) provides data on Spanish nationals living abroad. These data sets, based on registrations at Spanish consulates in destination countries and despite some limitations (see Box), provide information on emigrants' characteristics, such as their country of birth, sex, and age.

Since 2008, the United Kingdom, France, and Germany have been the three main destination countries in Europe for Spanish nationals (Figure 1). Departures towards the United Kingdom increased until 2016, and towards Germany until 2015. Over the 2008–2013 period, Spain experienced several quarters of economic recession, with an unemployment rate that reached 27% in the 1st quarter of 2013. Departures then stabilized between 2016 and 2021, but at levels much higher than those observed during the first years of the economic crisis, despite the improvement of the economic situation. In 2021, the United Kingdom was by far the most popular destination for Spanish emigrants, with annual flows of 13,500 people, followed by France with 8,500 and Germany with 6,000. During this period, the structure of the population of Spanish emigrant flows changed. The proportion of foreign-born

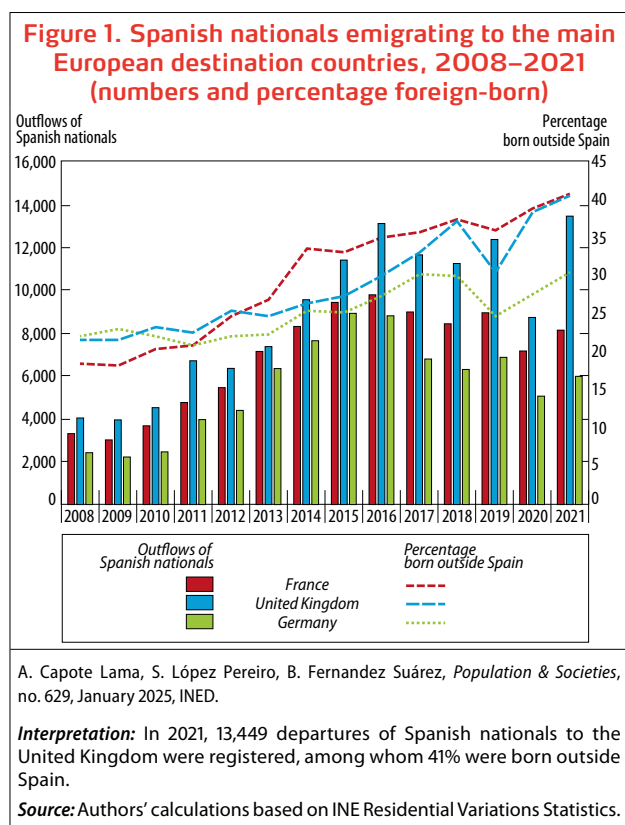
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(2) Instituto Nacional de Estadística (Spanish National Statistics Institute [INE]).

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Spanish nationals increased progressively, reaching 42% in France and the United Kingdom in 2021, with a notably large share of people born in Morocco (24.7%), Colombia (10%) and Ecuador (8.8%) throughout the period. During the economic crisis, the number of applications for Spanish nationality⁽³⁾ increased sharply [2].

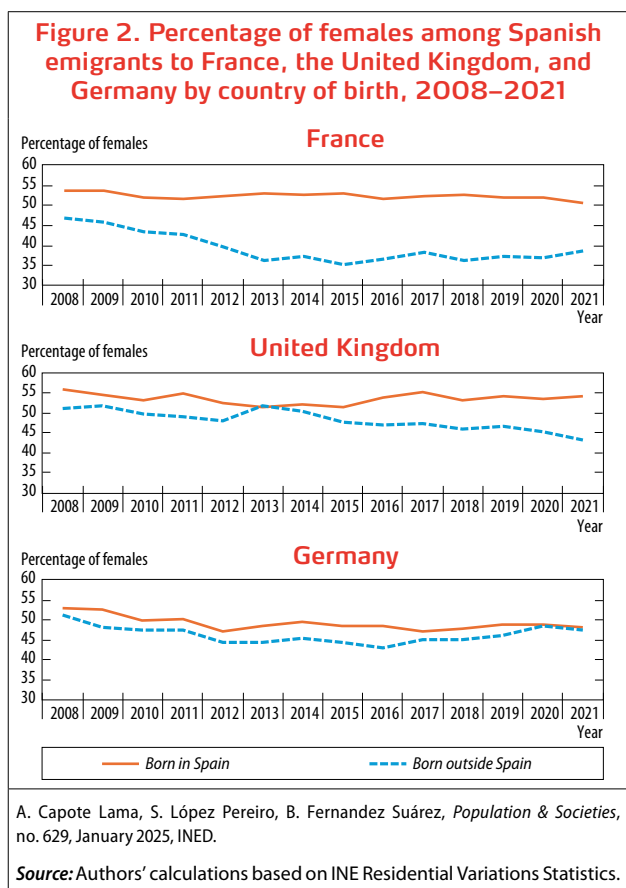


A diverse range of profiles

The profiles of Spanish emigrants are more diverse than in earlier economic emigration waves, especially those of the 1960s and 1970s. The share of males is much lower, with females accounting for the majority of Spanish-born migrants towards the United Kingdom and France in 2021 (Figure 2). The share of females among Spanish-born emigrants to the three destination countries is consistently higher than among foreign-born emigrants, while the share of males is higher among foreign-born naturalized Spanish emigrants, especially in France. This can be explained by two factors. First, the jobs destroyed during the Spanish economic downturn were mainly in male-dominated sectors, such as the crisis-stricken construction industry. Second, a large share of the naturalized Spanish migrants who left for France were born in Morocco (49.4%), among whom a large majority were males (69.11%).

While the mean age at emigration is between 28 and 35 years, ages vary by destination country and place of birth (Figure 3). Among Spanish-born emigrants to France, the 18–34 age group was largest up to 2014, and the under-18s from

(3) According to the Ministry of Immigration and Inclusion, Social Security and Migration, between 2009 and 2023, 1,891,732 immigrants obtained Spanish nationality.



then on.⁽⁴⁾ The situation of naturalized Spanish individuals is different, with the largest share of emigrants being in the 35–49 age group since 2009. Spanish emigrants to the United Kingdom, both native and foreign-born, are younger, while those heading to Germany are slightly older.

Naturalized Spanish people thus emigrate from Spain at a later stage in the life cycle. Arriving in Spain at a young age during the construction boom, they were able to find stable jobs and obtain Spanish citizenship. But with the onset of the crisis, their economic situation deteriorated, and they decided to migrate again. Spanish-born emigrants are younger and generally quite highly educated, with plans to launch their career in a country with more job opportunities than in Spain.

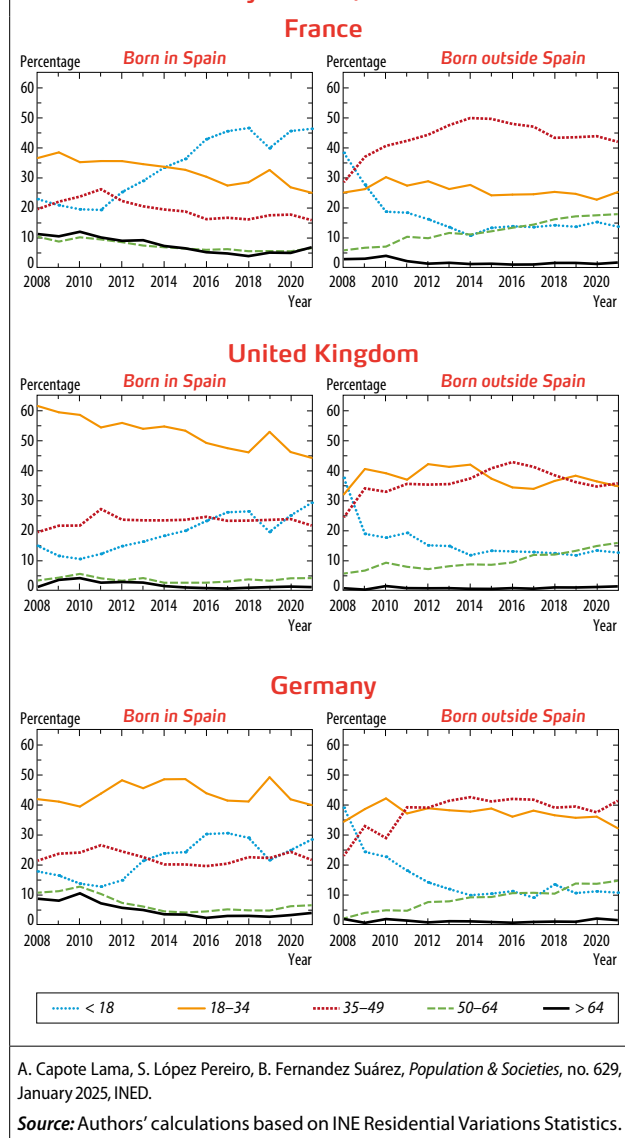
Data on educational level are only available from 2019. They reveal differences between the two groups of Spanish emigrants over the 2019–2021 period, with a much higher proportion of highly educated people among native-born Spanish nationals than among naturalized immigrants. These data are consistent with those of the French annual census surveys (INSEE) which indicate that 56% of Spanish-born individuals who have entered France since 2012 have a tertiary qualification [3].

Why leave Spain?

Why have Spanish people started leaving the country again? Part of the explanation is linked to the consequences of the 2008–2014 crisis. Spain has a historically weak labour market

(4) This may include both the Spanish-born children of naturalized immigrants and the children of native-born Spaniards.

Figure 3. Departures of Spanish nationals to destination countries by age group and country of birth, 2008–2021



that was severely impacted by the effects of the sharp economic downturn. Over the crisis period, unemployment peaked at 27% in the 1st quarter of 2013, and remained above 20% until the 2nd quarter of 2016. Levels were even higher for young people (including the most highly educated) and for the immigrant-origin population. In recent years, the overall unemployment rate has remained close to its pre-crisis level but remains above the European Union average.

For young university graduates, their departure is motivated by a lack of career prospects in Spain. Seeking to launch or advance their career, engineers, architects, and healthcare professionals look for opportunities outside the country. Their plans are diverse, and very frequently seen as 'liquid migration', i.e. individual, flexible and revisable, often with no clearly defined initial objective. Sometimes their projects are short-term, with a spell of employment abroad seen as a useful learning experience for a future career in Spain.

In the health sector, this is illustrated by the case of nurses and physiotherapists. It is estimated that more than 10,000 Spanish nurses were working outside Spain in 2016, of whom around 70% in the United Kingdom and 18% in France.⁽⁵⁾ Nursing being a highly feminized profession, this strong presence in the United Kingdom may explain the large share of females in emigration flows. Things changed after Brexit, however, and some nurses returned to Spain, depleting the stock of Spanish nurses in the United Kingdom. In 2021, the number of Spanish nurses working abroad had fallen to around 6,500, of whom 50% in the United Kingdom. For Spanish physiotherapists, France is the most popular destination country. They account for 23.4% of all foreigners exercising this profession in the country, behind Belgians, and around 9% of the profession as a whole.⁽⁶⁾ The reason for this preference is not so much unemployment in Spain, but rather better working conditions in France where treatment costs are covered by state health insurance. In Spain, by contrast, the cost of physiotherapy sessions is only partly covered, with restrictions and delayed reimbursement for non-urgent cases, so public sector working conditions are less favourable.

Pablo is a young physiotherapist from Bilbao who emigrated to Nice in France in 2014. Having completed his studies in Spain, he decided to move to France after working in the private sector for just a few months:

Because it was much simpler here, there are lots of job offers. What I won't do is say anything bad about my job. I know that I have lots of friends who work in Spain for very little money... With our qualifications, nothing obliges us to work in Spain under the current conditions. If I'd stayed in Spain, I wouldn't have had the chance to learn more, I would have had a job, you know, in a private care home... here [in France], we have career opportunities.

Marouane, born in Tetouan in Morocco, emigrated to Spain in 1991 when he was 19 and held a range of jobs, mainly in the hotel trade. He obtained Spanish nationality in 2011. He says that things have been difficult since the crisis in 2008. Finding himself jobless in 2012, his first option was to return to Morocco. He stayed there for a year then came back to Spain, but his situation didn't improve, and he was worried that he would lose his social security coverage. At age 40, he decided to head for the Paris region to look for work in the hotel sector:

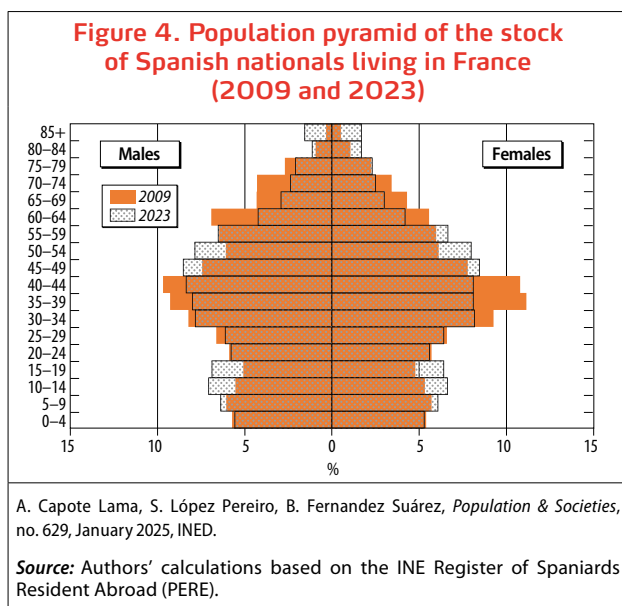
I decided to go to France because I stopped getting any unemployment benefits or welfare payments. You start looking for work to survive and you can't even find a job to pay the rent. You have to move on. Go back to Morocco? You'd have to start again from scratch, at my age. There was an alternative—I had a Spanish passport. The alternative of another country where they offer you a job. It's like a wheel that keeps turning. It's like a marathon from the day you are born: you start running and running, without ever stopping or having time to think...

(5) Data obtained from the General Council of Official Nursing Colleges of Spain.

(6) Data obtained from the Demographic Observatory of the National Council of the Order of Spanish Physiotherapists (2022).

Spanish migrants in France: before the crisis and today

The register of Spanish nationals living abroad can be used to construct population pyramids (Figure 4) comparing the structure of the Spanish population in a destination country such as France in 2009, at the start of the Spanish crisis and in 2023 (most recent available year). This Spanish expatriate population comprises emigrants from different migration waves and origins, along with their descendants with Spanish nationality. The pyramid of Spanish nationals in France reveals an increase in the share of under-25s between 2009 and 2023, and the ageing of earlier emigrants aged 85 and over who have remained in France. The lower half of the pyramid illustrates the transition to working ages of recent emigrants and their children in France.



Box. Different types of data

This study uses two data sets compiled by the Spanish National Statistics Institute (INE) based on data from consular registers. The first is the Residential Variations Statistics (Estadística de variaciones residenciales) that record entries and departures of Spanish nationals between 2008 and 2021. When Spanish citizens emigrate, they must register at the consulate of the destination country. While registration is obligatory, the Spanish authorities do not prosecute people for non-compliance, so a share of migrants is doubtless omitted from the register or registered at some time after arrival.^(a) As shown in other studies [5], data on emigration by country of origin generally underestimate actual emigration flows. Despite these limitations, our data reveal the general pattern of Spanish emigration.

The second data set is the Register of Spaniards Resident Abroad (Padrón de españoles residentes en el extranjero (PERE)), which provides information on the stock of Spanish expatriates. It includes not only Spaniards who have emigrated from Spain and their children but also emigrants who transited via another country before reaching their current destination (re-emigrants).

A series of qualitative interviews was also conducted between 2018 and 2022 in three of the main destination countries for Spanish emigrants (France, United Kingdom, and Germany) to shed light on their reasons for migration and their objectives. The sample was first selected using various criteria (sex, educational level, country of birth, etc.) to obtain a wide range of profiles, and then via the snowball method, with participants giving the contact details of others who might be willing to take part. Here, we highlight the two most common profiles identified in the quantitative analysis: young, highly qualified Spaniards and naturalized immigrants.

(a) Registering with the consulate in the destination country enables emigrants to obtain or renew their passport locally and to vote from abroad. However, people who register also run the risk of losing their Spanish welfare entitlements and healthcare coverage.

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Abstract

The number of Spanish nationals emigrating towards the United Kingdom, France, and Germany has risen to consistently high levels. Two main profiles emerge: naturalized immigrants who were particularly hard-hit by the 2008 economic crisis and who emigrate to find work in another European country, and young, often highly qualified, native-born Spaniards for whom freedom of movement in Europe provides opportunities for career advancement.

Keywords

emigration, immigrant, migration, net migration, crisis, Spain, France, Europe, United Kingdom, Germany