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## Policy Insights

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### Urban Depopulation and Loss of Human Capital: An Emerging Phenomenon in the European Union

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*Depopulation is no longer a phenomenon exclusive to rural areas. It has now expanded to small and medium-sized towns and cities in outflow regions. Young people in these municipalities, mainly those who are highly educated, are more likely to emigrate to the more thriving metropolitan areas. The departure of qualified young people is not compensated for, either numerically or based on the educational level of people who arrive from other places. This situation gives rise to negative migration balances and processes of educational decapitalisation.*

The problem of depopulation is one of the most crucial demographic challenges facing the continent of Europe. Although it has only recently appeared on the political agenda, it is a territorial reality that goes a long way back. Spain is one of the European Union (EU) member states showing the lowest population densities, with fewer than 15 inhabitants per square kilometre in 60% of its territory. After the second half of the 19th century, emigration of the rural population increased and reached a critical level between the end of the 1950s and the mid-1970s when there was a massive rural exodus as a result of industrialisation in the main Spanish cities (Recaño, 2017). Thereafter, the outflows were smaller, but the rural population was still constantly trickling out. In addition to this are declining fertility rates.

Although depopulation is only associated with rural areas, the demographic factors causing this situation - emigration of young people and the negative natural balance- are now extending to small and medium-sized cities and towns that have been decreasing in population size for centuries. Rural-urban migrations have diminished in size as the capacity of these areas to send young people to the cities is more limited. Meanwhile, the polarisation of cities is worsening as a result of the processes of globalisation, which tend to concentrate capital and activities of high added value in global cities and their areas of influence, thus marginalising the smaller urban areas (Sassen, 1991; Florida, 2002). As a result, the significance of interurban migratory flows from towns and cities at lower levels of the territorial hierarchy to predominant metropolitan areas has increased (Sánchez-Moral et al., 2018; González-Leonardo and López-Gay, 2019).

In addition to the diminishing numbers of inhabitants, population ageing that comes about with the emigration of young people, and falling birth rates in small and medium-sized cities and towns must be included in the loss of qualified human capital as a result of the outflow of highly educated people. There is a high proportion of university degree holders in these outflows, but this is not compensated for the educational profile of immigrants coming from other places. Besides their smaller numbers, the latter are less qualified than those who leave. It should be kept in mind that emigration of human capital is no trivial matter since it has very negative consequences for the outflow areas (Docquier and Rapoport, 2012).

To summarise, since the turn of the century, we have been witnessing increasing long-distance mobility among young, university-educated Spaniards, mainly from the urban areas of regions with more precarious productive systems to more thriving parts of the country and, to a lesser extent, abroad. The metropolitan area of Madrid

has been consolidated as the main receiver of Spain's internal migrants and, above all, highly educated young people. Simultaneously, small and medium-sized towns and cities in the interior and north of Spain are emptying and undergoing educational decapitalisation. The extent of depopulation caused by outflows to these urban areas can be applied to other countries of the EU, together with a concomitant exacerbation of already-existing territorial imbalances between regions. In some rural towns, little can be done to reverse depopulation as it is the result of large-scale emigration in earlier times. Nevertheless, the emerging dynamics that are starting to empty medium-sized towns and cities are a relatively recent phenomenon for which there is still some room to respond with appropriate policies.

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