

DEMOGRAPHIC CHALLENGES IN A CATALONIA OF EIGHT MILLION PEOPLE

Demographic challenges for Catalonia in the 21st century

Volumes, structure and origins

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Several people meet on a Friday evening at the La Masia bar, a central establishment in the Raval neighborhood of Barcelona, on December 15, 2017. Photography by Santi Palacios

According to the population estimates by the Statistical Institute of Catalonia (Idescat), in November 2023 the population of Catalonia reached 8 million inhabitants. This growth, raising the population of Catalonia from 7 to 8 million in just 17 years, occurred despite two major crises: the 2008 economic crisis, which reversed migration flows, and the COVID-19 pandemic, which paralysed migration dynamics. This demographic trend reflects the resilience of the Catalan population, which has doubled in size over the last six decades, from 4 million in 1961 to 8 million in 2023. Of this increase, 2 million were added between 1961 and 1987, while the remaining 2 million have been added over the last 36 years (Figure 1).



Weighty numbers, such as the current 8 million, prompt reflections on the current situation and future challenges. This article analyses three major demographic challenges for Catalonia in the coming years and their implications for society: population size and territorial distribution; population ageing; and social cohesion in the face of growing diversity.

Increasingly urban population concentrated on the coast and in pre-coastal areas

In 2022, the population of Catalonia rose by 140,000, reaching 7,902,000 inhabitants on 1 January 2023. This growth, the highest since 2007, was due exclusively to positive net migration with foreign countries, as both internal net migration with the rest of Spain (-5,900 people) and the natural balance (-14,300 people) were negative. At present, migration is the only positive component of Catalan population growth.

According to population projections drawn up by Idescat, the Catalan population is expected to continue to grow in the medium and long terms. Based on 2021 figures, the projection period is up to 2071 for the territory as a whole and 2046 for the territorial, area, regional and municipal projections. Idescat takes the years prior to the COVID-19 pandemic as the benchmark and provides three different scenarios (low, intermediate and high), based on combinations of different hypotheses regarding fertility, life expectancy and migratory flows. For the territorial projections, it recommends using the intermediate scenario up to 2041, which combines intermediate values for the three components and is considered the most plausible. The other two scenarios, low and high, serve to assess the possible maximum and minimum levels of the Catalan population in the future.

The intermediate scenario estimates that the population will reach 8.4 million by 2041 and 8.7 million by 2071, mainly driven by positive net migration with foreign countries. Territorially, a higher concentration of population is projected for cities with over 50,000 inhabitants and in coastal and pre-coastal regions, 56% and 86% of the total population, respectively, by 2041.

Unstoppable ageing

Ageing population, a phenomenon shared with the rest of Europe and much of the Western world, is one of the main demographic challenges in Catalonia. It is due to three fundamental factors: longer life expectancy, the steady decline in birth rates and the impact of migration flows, whose effect may vary depending on net migration and the age composition of migrants.

The ageing process started in the last quarter of the last century and has intensified over the last two decades. In 2001, 17.4% of the Catalan population was over 65 years of age, rising to 19% in 2023 (Figure 2). During this period, Catalonia had one of the highest life expectancies at birth in Europe: in 2023, it reached 81.3 for men and 86.5 for women. For its part, the birth rate has continued to fall: it declined from 1.28 children per woman in 2001 to 1.1 in 2023, shrinking the base of the population pyramid and accentuating generational imbalance. Although migration has partially mitigated this ageing, with a net inflow of more than 1.2 million young people over the last two decades, it has not been enough to counteract structural trends.

This process is projected to intensify further. In the intermediate scenario, it is estimated that by 2071 the population over 65 will represent 29.4% of the total, compared to 19.0% in 2023. In addition, the old-age dependency ratio, which compares the number of people aged 65 or over to those aged 15 to 64, is set to rise from 29.1% in 2023 to 43.7% in 2041 and 50.4% in 2071. This will put increasing pressure on the labour market and social services, with significant territorial differences between urban and rural areas and between coastal and inland regions.



Territorially, the differences between the lowest and highest dependency ratios are expected to increase, widening the gap between urban and rural areas. In particular, the coastal and pre-coastal regions, which have more urban areas with a younger population, such as the Barcelona metropolitan area, Camp de Tarragona and the regions of Girona and El Penedès, will continue to experience relatively low rates. On the other hand, the less populated inland regions with older populations, such as Les Terres de l'Ebre, L'Alt Pirineu and Aran, and the central and Ponent regions, will experience significantly higher rates.

An increasingly diverse population

The third major challenge, no less relevant than the previous ones, is the growing diversity of the Catalan population. In the last two decades, the proportion of the foreign population has risen from 4.1% of the total in 2001 to 16.3% in 2022, an increase of more than 1 million people. This phenomenon confirms the validity of the “Catalan reproduction system” defined by Anna Cabré, in which migration is the main driver of population growth in a context of systematically low fertility.

In line with the above, the Catalan population is increasingly diverse in terms of place of birth. Of the current 8 million inhabitants, 5 million were born in Catalonia, 1.3 million in the rest of Spain, and the remaining 1.7 million abroad: 64%, 15% and 21% of the total, respectively.

The foreign population in Catalonia is mainly concentrated in the large cities. More than 62% of people born outside Spain reside in municipalities with more than 50,000 inhabitants, a proportion that is 10% higher than for the population as a whole. By contrast, the foreign population is under-represented in smaller municipalities, especially those with less than 10,000 inhabitants. In general terms, the territorial distribution of the foreign population is more heterogeneous than that of the total population, with greater concentrations in certain municipalities and regions, but a lower presence in the metropolitan area and in less populated localities. This distribution largely reflects socioeconomic and employment factors that influence settlement patterns. As can be seen from the map in Figure 3, the foreign population is higher in places where economic sectors such as agriculture, construction and tourism play a relevant role; i.e. where the demand for foreign labour is particularly significant.



One of the most distinctive features of the foreign population compared to the rest of the

Catalan population is its youth. The population pyramid of foreign-born persons (Figure 2) shows that the vast majority are of working age: 88% of foreigners are aged between 15 and 64 (born between 1958 and 2007). This percentage contrasts significantly with the 61% for the rest of the Catalan population. Moreover, the proportion of people under 15 and over 65 is 11% and 16% lower, respectively, in the foreign population compared to the rest. These figures highlight the economic importance of the foreign population, as its age structure helps mitigate the effects of demographic ageing.

The impact of the foreign population is not limited to its age structure, it also has direct implications for the birth rate. In 2002, births to foreign mothers accounted for nearly 14% of the total in Catalonia; two decades later, this proportion is 33%. At the municipal level, the proportion of births varies considerably depending on the presence of foreign population. As can be seen from the map in Figure 4, municipalities with percentages of births to foreign mothers above 50% cover a wide range of localities: from small municipalities, where just a few births can generate high percentages, to large cities such as L'Hospitalet de Llobregat and Santa Coloma de Gramenet. Medium-sized towns such as Salt, Lloret de Mar and Figueres are also notable, as well as smaller towns such as Castelló d'Empúries, Torroella de Montgrí and Mollerussa.



Another significant aspect of the foreign population is its diversity of origin. By continent, in 2022, people born in Latin America were the majority (44.8%), followed by those from Europe (22.1%), Africa (20.8%) and Asia (11.3%). In terms of country of birth, Morocco ranks first with 266,000 registered residents, equivalent to 15% of the foreign population. This is followed by Colombia with 121,000 (6.8%) and Argentina with 98,000 (5.5%). In total, the list of countries of origin extends to 170 nationalities, drawing an extremely diverse picture.

The diversity of the foreign population is not limited to place of birth and also encompasses ethnicity, religion and language. Such diversity not only enriches the social and cultural fabric of Catalonia, but also poses significant challenges that go beyond demographics, as it requires society to find ways to manage and take advantage of this diversity to the benefit of cohesion and development.

Final thoughts

The inertia of the Catalan demographic structure makes the progressive ageing of the population inevitable, a phenomenon which is already a reality and set to intensify in the coming decades. This process is directly linked to the ageing of the baby-boom generations, who will increasingly occupy and swell the upper rungs of the population pyramid. Neither higher birth rates nor external migratory flows are sufficient to halt this dynamic, which is part of a global trend towards demographic ageing.

The ageing of the population poses significant economic, health and social challenges, such as the sustainability of the pension system and public services, the increase in longer and

long-term medical care, and the need to adapt cities and services to an ageing population.

The question is how to meet the challenges of ageing with a shrinking proportion of working population. Demography offers two avenues: fostering higher birth rates and facilitating migration, which are complementary rather than mutually exclusive. The former would require social policies to support people who want to have children, as well as improvements in access to and the stability and quality of employment. However, even in the unlikely event of a dramatic increase in the number of births, the results would take years to have an effect. The second channel, migration, helps to compensate for the ageing population, by increasing the birth rate, balancing the territorial distribution of the population and making society more diverse.

Catalonia, like many other developed societies, needs the arrival of a foreign population of working age because it brings vitality to the demography and economy, as well as cultural diversity. But their integration requires policies that foster a cohesive society, promote collective well-being, minimise inequalities and facilitate positive interaction between different groups.

It is essential to combat stereotypes and half-truths that perpetuate racist and xenophobic attitudes, such as the false belief that immigrants take jobs from locals or alarmist narratives about “ethnic replacement”. In this sense, the data disprove these ideas: although the number of births to foreign mothers is almost the same as two decades ago, what has changed is that native-born women are having fewer children.

This process of mass immigration is not new in Catalonia. The 1950s and 1960s also saw a comparable phenomenon, at least in terms of population growth over the last two decades, with the arrival of 1 million people in 20 years. This historical experience not only highlights Catalonia’s capacity to adapt, but also underlines the need to learn from the past to ensure cohesion and social development in the face of today’s challenges.

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