

ARTICLES/ARTÍCULOS

Immigration and the Public Economy: Prejudices, Myths and Misperceptions of the Spanish Case

Inmigración y economía pública: prejuicios, mitos y percepciones erróneas del caso español

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ABSTRACT

It is twenty years since the beginning in Spain of an immigration cycle without precedent in the international migration scenario. After receiving more than six million new citizens continuously throughout a cycle of growth, crisis and economic recovery, the article makes an exhaustive analysis of the connection between immigration and the public economy in Spain. It analyses in detail the empirical evidence which makes it possible to disprove the usual prejudices, myths and misperceptions about immigration and the public economy. The analysis of a specific context such as that of Spain allows for a detailed quantification of the non-specific and aggregated findings shown in the literature on immigration and the public economy. The article shows evidence that refutes the so-called welfare magnet, accurately reveals the scant impact of immigration on public spending, quantifies the essential contribution to tax collection and rejects its negative net fiscal impact.

KEYWORDS: Migration Economics, International Migration, Public Economy and Migration, Spanish Immigration.

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RESUMEN

Se cumplen veinte años del inicio en España de un ciclo de inmigración sin precedentes en el panorama migratorio internacional. Tras recibir más de 6 millones de nuevos ciudadanos de forma continuada a lo largo de un ciclo de crecimiento, crisis y recuperación económica, se analiza exhaustivamente la conexión entre la inmigración y la economía pública en España. Analiza en detalle la evidencia empírica que permite desmentir los prejuicios, mitos y percepciones erróneas habituales sobre la inmigración y la economía pública. El análisis de un contexto específico como el de España permite cuantificar con detalle los hallazgos inespecíficos y agregados que muestra la literatura sobre inmigración y economía pública. El artículo muestra evidencias que refutan el llamado imán del bienestar, revela con precisión el escaso impacto de la inmigración en el gasto público, cuantifica la imprescindible contribución a la recaudación de impuestos y rechaza su impacto fiscal neto negativo.

PALABRAS CLAVE: migraciones económicas, migraciones internacionales, economía pública y migración, inmigración española.

1. Introduction

In just two decades, Spain, a country of forty-seven million people, has become the destination of more than eight million foreigners according to the OECD's international migration database, concentrating 8% of total foreign population inflows, only behind, in order of importance, the United States and Germany. This flow of immigrants is a peculiar phenomenon on the international scene, both in terms of the magnitude of the immigration flow and its speed: according to data from the National Statistics Institute (INE¹) the stock of foreign-born population in 2019 accounts for 14% of the total, compared with only 3% of 1999.

The contribution of immigration to economic growth has been widely analysed with special attention to the insertion of migrants in the labour market. As far as the public economy is concerned, analyses have often considered immigration to be an essential issue, but even so, the true global impact of immigration on the public economy remains a matter of discussion. Benefits and costs associated with immigration in terms of public economy provide fertile ground for false debates supported by stereotypes that often are not shown by empirical data and analysis.

Twenty years after the beginning of immigration to Spain, the objective of this article is to systematically present the evidence regarding the impact of immigration on the public economy in Spain. The text will try to show reality based on the data, contrasting the observable reality with the prejudices or myths that populate the little informed debates.

2. Literature review

Frequently, the shape of a positive or negative attitude towards immigration stems from the perception of a threat, whether it is economic, cultural, social, ... As a personal and, to a certain extent, psychological process, the construction of this attitude is a mix of objective and subjective aspects. The "threat" is

constructed based on a wide range of perspectives, including personal ones (education, socio-economic level, degree of exposure or contact, religious/cultural conventions, etc.), the perception of the effect on the environment or sociotropic ones, the treatment of the issue in the media, etc. In short, it is a complex process in which a broad range of personal and collective conditioning factors mix and interact.

In this context, the effect of economic expectations (for the “group” or individually considered) has been a controversial issue in the literature (see Rincken, 2015). For Valentino et al. (2017), attitudes against or toward migrants can be divided in two groups: those concerned for the impact of competition in job and salaries of migrants’ accession, and those “who bear the costs of social welfare that newcomers demand”.

Their relationship could be analysed from different perspectives. Traditionally, authors speak of labour market competition as the main factor influencing the formation of negative attitudes towards immigration (see Hanson et al., 2007). While the reason for this process seems logical, it is also common to find nuances when other factors related to the degree of labour specialisation and the degree of vulnerability to the entry of newcomers are considered.” Wealthy citizens may oppose immigration most in places where an influx of low-skilled newcomers is likely to boost social welfare costs” (Facchini and Mayda, 2009; Hanson, Scheve, and Slaughter, 2007).

Specifically, the education level could play a relevant place in shaping these attitudes. Literature focus on two theories: (i) dissolution of ethnocentrism based in more intercultural integration coming from schooling (Shayo, 2009), and (ii) “education as cleavage”, considering that education produces more opportunities of lower unemployment risk, different life expectations, higher income... (Napier and Jost, 2009). Cavaille and Marshall (2018) found that each additional year of compulsory secondary education decreases the anti-immigration attitudes by using a comparative study in some European countries. They estimated that each additional year reduces between 8 to 18 percentage points the individuals declaring themselves as anti-immigrants.

Mayda (2006) affirms that the higher the educational level, the less adverse feelings towards immigration since they would not see it as a threat to their jobs. For others, such as Dustmann and Preston (2004), the greater hostility of those with a lower level of education would be determined not so much by a job threat, but by a question of racism. Malchow-Møllerab (2008) conclude that the former derives from economic self-interest and the latter from perceptions of the effects of immigration.

From a psychological perspective, Karinen et al. (2019) found an interesting point in the construction of individual attitudes towards migration based in the personal perception of the nature of each immigrant: migration considered as voluntary receives a lower support in terms of “deserving aid” than involuntary migration (due to wars, political persecution, socio-cultural rejection in the origin country...). Using

a survey to native Dutch born people, their conclusions are based on the perception of newcomers as “fortune seekers” or “bogus refugees.” A similar conclusion can be found in Bansak et al. (2016).

Poutvaara and Steinhhardt (2018) conduct an even more introspective analysis on what we could consider the latent psychological aspect of immigration opinion. These authors present as the main driver of immigration opinion the bitterness scale of each subject. The hypothesis that they confront is that to the extent that individuals do not feel that their personal worth is fully recognized, they will be especially critical of immigration.

Valentino et al. (2017) found an interesting role of the economic status of migrants as the main driver in attitudes toward migration. By using an original methodology (also based on a vignettes’ survey), they explore respondents’ reaction to the same person but changing some racial and/or ethnic attributes. They find that the “Competitive labour market assumption” would be the main driver that makes opinions about migration more or less favourable. On the other hand, they reject the called “Tax-burning hypothesis,” asserting that higher-skill workers would reject low-skill workers when they find that they would rise their taxes payment. Skin-tone or ethnical origins have just a little significance from the conclusions of this study. Only the Muslim origins could be slightly significant in the attitudes toward migration formation.

Several authors consider that growing up in an economic downturn context or living it during “impressionable years” (18-25 years) shapes the individual perception of less favoured more because of “bad luck” than because of deficient performance. Therefore, these generational cohorts are normally supporters of policies to alleviate this situation, even in the case of the people coming from other countries (see Giuliano and Spilimbergo, 2014; Alesina and Giuliano, 2011 or Bianchi, 2016).

Recently, Danielle et al. (2020) conducted an interesting experience by analysing the dramatic economic effects of COVID-19 crisis in Italy to assess the changes in the anti-immigrant sentiments of population by pre-conditioning their answers about the estimate of the economic crisis coming from this pandemic event. In this way, they claim to have a quasi-laboratory experiment where they can isolate two phenomena frequently included in literature about anti-immigrant sentiments: the natural origin of this crisis deactivates the potential migrants’ attribution and, the non-anticipated and cruelty of this crisis, produce unprecedented economic insecurity. From their findings, the economic situation emerges as a crucial issue shaping the attitudes towards migrants.

Cotofan et al. (2021) tested two hypotheses:

“(i) If recessions increase support for redistribution due to a universal increase in “compassion for the poor”, then we would expect support for immigration to increase as well, since immigration tends to reduce overall poverty or (ii) if, on the other hand, recessions increase support for redistribution out of self or group interest, then we predict that support for immigration will decrease, since lower immigration may reduce competition for jobs and benefits”.

They find robust evidence for the first hypothesis, highlighting this position among low-skilled workers, who may see migration as increased competition in times of scarcity.

From a different and complementary perspective, sociologists have often focused their findings by considering what they call “sociotropic concerns” (see for example Valentino et al., 2017). These authors find that “the notion that ‘person positivity’ could explain why respondents express more favourable views towards individual immigrants than towards immigration policies in general.”

In the same field of knowledge, “ethnocentrism” is worth noting. For Valentino et al. (2017), racial animosity could be the major driver in formation of attitudes (considering in this category issues such as cultural differences mainly in terms of religion).

Although it is not easy to measure, for Hatton (2020) a difference should be made between preference (level of migration that each one would like to have in his/her region) and salience (political importance as a political issue that each person considers). This author finds relevant evidence of differences between both concepts in the formation of attitudes.

In a recent study, Rodríguez and Rozo (2021) conducted a survey to Colombian natives dividing the sample in two halves: one of them pre-instructed about the economic effects of Covid19 crisis and the other one used as a control group. They found that the negative attitudes towards migration was significantly higher in the “treated group,” considering that it clearly shows the “salience aspect” in shaping these attitudes and reflecting the effect of a socioeconomic crisis in this process.

In short, we could conclude as we began this section. Attitudes towards immigration are the complex result of the perception (or not) of a threat. This may concern the personal economy (or that of your group), the preservation of the native culture, the personal perception of who deserves help and who does not. Personal conditions such as empathy, degree of bitterness, cultural level, etc. shape the attitude towards immigration of each person. Obviously, the way in which the subject is discussed in different contexts (friends, politics, press...) may act, in a certain way, as cooperative modulator of personal public opinion.

3. Welfare Magnet effect in Spain

Attempts to determine the causes of international migration and to separate the specific effect associated with the welfare state from other competing factors have been multiple. There is in fact a specific term “welfare magnet” for this effect which, in sum, would suggest that generous welfare states cause two effects, one quantitative (they tend to attract more migrants and also inhibit the return of those who are in a bad economic situation) and one qualitative (they tend to attract and retain those migrants who are low skilled and have low income potential as they are more likely to use the benefits of the system). Dozens of empirical analyses in many countries have tried to quantify how important the welfare state is as a factor in attracting migration (Borjas,

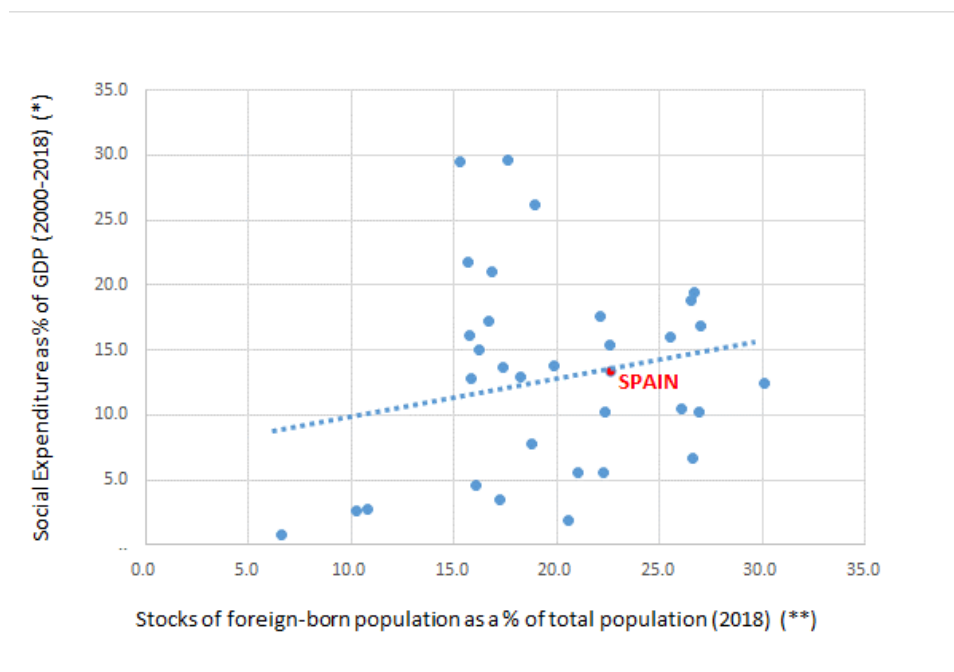
1999; Levine and Zimmerman, 1999; Enchautegui, 1997; De Giorgi and Pellizzari, 2006; McKin-nish, 2007; Giuliatti, C. and Wahba, J., 2013). As it is usually the case with a phenomenon as complex and multidimensional as migration, the results are in turn very heterogeneous and difficult to generalise. Although recent studies have shown some evidence of the welfare magnet in migration flows (Agersnap et al., 2019) or its composition (Razin and Wahba, 2015) in general terms it must be said that there is no clear and systematic evidence of such an effect.

Beyond the empirical evidence, it is reasonable to think that, when choosing their country of destination, migrants will tend to value positively the existence of a welfare state with broad coverage and free access to basic benefits (health, education or pensions, for example), especially in the case of low-skilled migrants with low expectations of future income. But at the same time, it can be assumed that the decision to migrate is due to a complex network of reasons of quite distinct kinds and, therefore, it is easy to sense that the welfare state is not the main factor in attracting migration. Figure 1 shows on the horizontal axis the average social expenditure (2000-2018) as a percentage of GDP in OECD countries, and on the vertical axis the percentage of the population born abroad. Each point represents a country and the dispersion around this “norm” is exceptionally large, although there is a slight direct connection between both variables (represented by the line through the country cloud). It is easy to find countries with social expenditure rates well above or below the OECD average and yet with hugely different percentages of foreign population, above or below what the “norm” would suggest.

Several factors inhibit the logic of the positive relationship between welfare state generosity and immigration. To begin with, the hypothesis of a positive connection between migration and welfare state generosity would presuppose that the migrant is well informed about benefits in one place or another and about the ease or otherwise of access to benefits. This is only true in those countries where there are already extensive migrant networks in place, which, where appropriate, function as sources of information for new migrants.

On the other hand, systems could be generously designed but inaccessible to immigrants. Some social protection systems are very generous, but they set limits on immigrants' access to the full range of public benefits and services. Although no restrictions are imposed on beneficiaries based on their origin, some benefits may require legal status, long term residence and/or formal employment so that potential welfare state benefits would function as secondary incentives, always conditioned by overriding objectives: the greater or lesser ease of finding a job and access to legal status. Likewise, it is common for many benefits, both for natives and immigrants, to be of a contributory nature (unemployment and certain pensions, for example) so that they could only be received by immigrants as benefits in the medium or long term.

Figure 1
Social Expenditure and Foreign Population in the OECD



(*) Average 2000-2018 (or latest data if the full range is not available) (OECD, 2020).

(**) Data for 2018 (OECD, 2019a).

Source: Own elaboration based on OECD data (Japan, Korea and Russia excluded due to the lack of homogeneous data. Luxembourg has been deliberately excluded as distorting the whole).

In the case of Spain, there are several reasons to think that the so-called “welfare magnet” has *never existed*. As some public economy experts have pointed out on several occasions (Múñoz de Bustillo and Grande 2017), there are a number of powerful reasons to think that the Spanish welfare state has not been and is not a strong factor in attracting immigration.

To begin with, the dynamics of immigration evolution itself has not shown any relationship with the evolution of the welfare state in Spain. Immigration began abruptly, almost “suddenly”, and accelerated with the beginning of the 2000’s without any stimulating change in the quantity or quality of social spending. Over the last two decades, net migration has varied significantly, following a dynamic linked to the economic cycle and employment demand without, in this same period, any notable favourable changes in the framework of benefits of the Spanish welfare state.

Moreover, over the last few years, in the framework of the recent deep economic crisis, social policies in Spain have been subordinated to the logic of financial stability, austerity policies or growth. The unfavourable evolution of the indicators of poverty and social exclusion are evident in aggregate terms, but particularly intense among the immigrant population without a similar decrease in migratory pressure.

In fact, Spanish welfare state is considered to have wide coverage in services and benefits, but low or very low protective intensity (that is, of little effectiveness in combating forms of social exclusion). On the other hand, current trends show a clear process of deterioration, with a reduction in social spending on the most relevant social items (health, education, care for dependency) which have not yet recovered their pre-crisis levels (Lorenzo, 2014). In comparative terms, the level of social spending in the broadest sense (i.e. including health, education, culture, social benefits, housing, environment, defence and security) expressed as a % of GDP was 41% in 2018 (Eurostat, 2020a), clearly below the EU-28 average (46%) and very far from countries such as France (56%), Finland (55%), Belgium (52%) or Denmark (51)

In the specific case of access to welfare benefits by immigrants, the specificities are truly relevant and largely exclude those without regular residence status. Although census registration is a priori sufficient for access to health, education and some assistance programmes, the public benefits which protect against the main contingencies are contributory and are therefore associated with regular employment and contributions during a certain period. We should therefore consider the potential benefits of the social protection system to be secondary, at least when compared to the potential opportunity for regular employment and legal status. In this sense, the procedure of regularization, which requires accredited residence for a period of three years in an irregular situation, is de facto a restriction of access to the social protection system and therefore an inhibiting factor, if not a direct negative stimulus, for the selection of Spain as a migration destination.

4. Immigration and use of public benefits and services

One of the key issues which, together with the labour market, concentrates most of the analysis regarding the economic impact of immigration is the use of public benefits and services. It is quite common to hear expressions such as “immigrants have the right to benefits that we Spaniards do not have”, “they take advantage of the benefits leaving Spaniards without them”, “they abuse the benefits” or “they should not have the right when they have not been in Spain paying contributions”.

This view became more evident during the recent economic crisis (2008-2013), fuelling positions in favour of limiting immigrants’ rights and showing opposition to adapting social programmes to the specific needs of groups of immigrant origin (Moreno and Bruquetas, 2011). Even if these are minority opinions, it is important to

stress that the perception that citizens have of the contribution or use of public benefits by immigrants is truly relevant when it comes to defining their overall assessment of immigration. Using data from the CIS' studies of attitudes to immigration for the years 2008, 2012 and 2017 (CIS 2008, 2012, 2017), we have conducted a multivariate regression to determine which specific attitudes to immigration affect overall opinion on immigration to a greater or lesser extent (Defensor del Pueblo, 2020). Once the basic characteristics of the surveyed person (age, social class and ideological position) have been controlled, the analysis shows that the impact of beliefs about immigration and the economy on overall opinion of immigration is over 40% and that the issues which carry most weight in the construction of this negative perception are precisely those relating to the abuse of certain benefits or the imbalance between what they contribute and what they receive.

One of the most widespread misconceptions is that many foreigners live on pensions and social benefits. This perception is wrong: foreigners do NOT live on pensions in Spain. Their main source of income comes from work even more than in the case of Spaniards.

Data from the INE's Household Budget Survey reveal that 60% of foreign households have employed labour as their main source of income compared to 44.7% of Spanish households (CES, 2019). Even excluding households with pensioners for a more appropriate comparison (the presence of foreigners over 65 years of age who are pensioners is extremely low), the proportion of foreign households whose main source of income is employed (65%) also exceeds that of Spanish households (64%). See table 1.

Table 1

Source of Household Income by Nationality

	Total Households		Households with a main breadwinner under 6	
	Spanish	Foreigners	Spanish	Foreigners
Self-employment	11%	13%	16%	14%
Employee work	45%	60%	64%	65%
SubTotal	56%	73%	80%	79%
Contributory pensions	37%	12%	12%	4%
Unemployment benefits	4%	8%	5%	8%
Other social benefits	1%	5%	2%	6%
Other sources of income	2%	3%	2%	3%

Source: CES (2019). Household Budget Survey, (INE)

Foreigners do not enjoy any preference in social security pensions and benefits, which does not formally discriminate, for or against, on the grounds of origin. Article 14.1 of the Law on the Rights and Freedoms of Foreigners in Spain and their Social Integration (LO 4/2000, 2000) states that resident foreigners have the right to access

Social Security benefits and services under the same conditions as Spaniards. In formal terms, the social security system is oriented towards the principle of universality. On this principle, the eligibility criteria for the various public social security benefits are based exclusively on certain “contributory” or residence criteria, which are the same for all potential beneficiaries; there can therefore be no formal discrimination, whether positive or negative, on grounds of origin.

In any case, if anything could be found, it is the existence of some restrictions for foreigners in the formulation or practical application of some formal eligibility criteria. For example, in the case of non-contributory benefits, the requirement for a minimum period of residence is a *de facto* restriction on access by foreigners. It should be recalled that access to a non-contributory retirement benefit is subject to a minimum residence of ten years in the national territory for all applicants and five years in the case of a disability pension. This rule therefore excludes foreigners who arrived less than a decade ago.

Furthermore, it should be remembered that the previously mentioned Law on Foreigners (LO 4/2000, 2000) states that to have access to the entire catalogue of social security and social services benefits it is necessary to have legal residence. A recent ruling by the Supreme Court (SC, 2019) explained that, in the case of foreigners, the census registration does not prove the years of legal residence required to qualify for the non-contributory retirement pension (while the same census registration is a valid document as proof of residence for Spanish nationals).

Another popular prejudice is that foreigners are entitled to contributory pensions even though they are “newcomers”. However, the reality is quite different: contributory pensions require the same contribution times for nationals and foreigners so that public expenditure on contributory pensions for foreigners is obviously very low. It should first be noted that in Spain 98% of expenditure on pensions (or 95% of the number of pensions) is of a contributory nature. Thus, the bulk of expenditure on social security benefits is subject to the beneficiary’s previous legal relationship with the social security system. In general terms, therefore, eligibility for and amount of a pension are determined by the worker’s employment history and the contributions made by the worker during the period under consideration for the purposes of the regulatory basis of the pension in question. This implies that the current weight of foreign beneficiaries in the volume of expenditure on contributory pensions is extremely low.

Table 2 illustrates the weight of foreigners in contributory expenditure, both in terms of the number of pensions and the volume of expenditure. The number of contributory pensions for foreigners was, at the end of 2019, 1.6% of the total, which represents 0.9% of average payroll expenditure, also including the EU residence regime and other international agreements. This small proportion is reasonable if we consider that 70% of expenditure is allocated to retirement pensions: the foreign population over the age of sixty-five is 3.6%, but in addition, obviously their period of residence is not long enough for many of them to be able to prove the minimum qualifying period or contribution.

Table 2

Pensioners and Expenditure by Nationality on Social Security Contributive Benefits

	Permanent Disability	Retirement	Widowhood	Orphanage	Family (other)	TOTAL Pensions
NUMBER OF PENSIONS (1)	962,035	6,089,294	2,366,788	340,106	43,156	9,801,379
Spanish	933,681	6,012,608	2,328,768	329,079	43,071	9,647,207
Foreigners	28,354	76,686	38,020	11,027	85	154,172
% Foreigners	2.9%	1.3%	1.6%	3.2%	0.2%	1.6%
TOTAL EXPENDITURE (2)	941,3	6,963.4	1,692.2	137,9	25,0	9,759.8
Spanish	920,8	6,922.1	1,672.3	135,4	24,9	9,675.5
Foreigners	20,5	41,3	19,9	2,5	0,1	84,3
% Foreigners	2.2%	0.6%	1.2%	1.8%	0.2%	0.9%

Source: Own elaboration from Social Security data (Estadiss database, Pension Statistics).

(1) December 2019.

(2) Thousands of Euros. Monthly average. Year 2019.

Nor do foreigners enjoy any relative advantage in receiving unemployment benefits which, again, are associated with previous employment and contribution history. In fact, about unemployment benefits, which are excluded from the previous section of contributory social security benefits, it should again be pointed out that their contribution level is a benefit whose duration and amount is once again linked to the beneficiary's work history as accredited in Spain, regardless of the worker's nationality. Foreign workers have no particular benefit in terms of receiving this benefit.

On the other hand, under the non-contributory scheme (social assistance benefit), foreign nationals must be legally resident in Spain and must again meet the requirements for all unemployed persons in similar circumstances. It is not possible to come to Spain and receive the social assistance allowance for the unemployed simply because you cannot find a job, since, on the one hand, the residence permit is generally linked to having a job and because, in addition, this allowance also requires having paid a minimum social security contribution for the contingency of unemployment. It should also be remembered that unemployment benefits for foreigners, even at the level of assistance, specifically exclude those who have worked under authorisations for cross-border workers, for seasonal activities and for students.

The relative weight of foreigners among the beneficiaries of unemployment benefits (10.9%) is lower than their weight among the unemployed; (18.1% in EPA terms or 12.6% in terms of registered unemployment). The coverage rate of the benefit is therefore ten points lower for foreigners (53%) than for Spaniards (63%) — see table 3 —.

Table 3
Unemployment figures and benefits by nationality

	Foreigners	Spanish	TOTAL	%Foreigners
Active Population (EPA 2019 Q3)	3,011,200	20,077,500	23,088,700	13.0%
Unemployed (EPA 2019 Q3)	582,400	2,632,000	3,214,400	18.1%
Unemployment rate (EPA 2019 Q3)	19%	13%	14%	
Registered Unemployed SEPE (1)	403,848	2,794,336	3,198,184	12.6%
Beneficiaries of Unemp. Benefits (2)	213,442	1,750,658	1,964,100	10.9%
Aprox. Coverage Rate (3) (SEPE data based)	53%	63%	61%	
Aprox. Coverage Rate (3) (EPA data based)	37%	67%	61%	
Contributory type	126,074	743,826	869,900	14.5%
% over total	59%	42%	44%	
Social Assistance type(4)	87,368	1,006,832	1,094,200	8.0%
% over total	41%	58%	56%	

Source: Own elaboration from data of the National Institute of Statistics (INE) and Social Security (Estadiss data base, Pension Statistics).

(1) Public State Employment Service (SEPE). December 2019

(2) Pension Statistics. Social Security. November 2019.

(3) The exact coverage rate could be computed by subtracting from the unemployed those who do not have previous work experience.

(4) Excluding the employment activation program.

Contributory unemployment benefits, to the detriment of non-contributory benefits, are higher among foreigners (59%) than among Spaniards (42%). This difference could be due to two factors. On the one hand, some of the modalities that grant the right to the non-contributory benefit are aimed at workers over 45 or 52 years of age, something that, on average, is less common in the case of foreigners, given their greater relative youth. In addition, access to the non-contributory benefit is simpler and the duration of the benefit is longer if they have family responsibilities, which is more common among the Spanish population (10% of foreigners do not even live in a family home). The second factor could be that foreigners experience shorter periods of unemployment, so that they do not exhaust the contributory benefit that activates this form of assistance (data invoked about the differences between migrant and native population can be easily contrasted by using de Salary Structural Survey by INE, 2020).

Foreigners are also under-represented in non-contributory pensions, except for non-contributory retirement pensions. In addition to benefits of a contributory nature and unemployment benefits, there is also a wide range of non-contributory and assistance benefits. If we look at data in table 4 referring to the non-contributory disability and retirement benefits, two results seem evident.

Table 4

Pensioners by Nationality in Non-contributory Social Security Benefits

	Pensioners Totals	Pensioners Foreigners	% of Foreigners
Total Benefits	450,837	26,530	5.9%
Disability	193,174	8,868	4.6%
Retirement	200,532	16,439	8.2%
Disability Retirement	57,131	1,223	2.1%

Source: IMSERSO, 2018.

First, there is the over-representation of foreigners in the case of retirement pensions. In effect, the percentage of foreign pensioners (8%) exceeds the relative weight of the foreign population over 65 years of age, which is only 3.6%. However, this is far from illustrating a relative advantage for foreigners: let's remember that in this case we are talking about the Non-Contributory Pension modality, that is, the one that is activated only when the individual lacks sufficient resources for his subsistence in the legally established terms, and has never contributed or for long enough to reach the benefits of the contributory level.

Secondly, the relative weight of foreigners among disability pensioners is exceptionally low: only 4.6% of disability pensioners are foreigners, which is clearly below what would correspond to their relative population weight. In effect, considering the general age distribution of disability pensioners (IMSERSO, 2019), the weight of foreigners among these pensioners should be 10.6%, and yet it barely reaches 5%.

The average salary of Spanish workers is 56% higher than that of non-EU foreigners and the average income per person is 83% higher. The at-risk-of-poverty rate and the AROPE (At Risk of Poverty or Exclusion Index) rate should be double those of Spaniards and almost reach 50% of foreigners (EU or non-EU). It is sad to note that 1 in 2 foreigners are poor in Spain (see Salary Structure Survey, INE 2020).

Although a significant part of the higher poverty rate has to do with a higher unemployment rate of foreign workers, the rates of risk of poverty are also extremely high among the foreign population in work (in-work at-risk-of-poverty rate). According to Eurostat data, the at-risk-of-poverty rate among non-EU foreign workers reaches 32.3% in 2018 in Spain, the highest percentage in the Union only behind Bulgaria, and far behind the EU average of 17.4%. The OECD has also alerted Spain to this phenomenon in its recent report on the international migration outlook (OECD, 2019), noting that around 30 per cent of foreign-born workers were poor in 2017-18.

Immigrants do not monopolise the benefits of the Social Services and their over-representation is logically due to a situation of vulnerability which, on average, is also very marked. It is difficult to quantify the extent to which aid associated with social service activity is allocated to foreigners. The capillarity of these services network is

so fine and the benefits so varied and numerous that it is difficult to segment figures and associate them with a particular group in a consolidated manner.

Data on the use of Social Services collected in the Concerted Plan for Basic Social Services in Local Corporations (Ministry of Health, 2018) reveals that throughout the year the public network of Social Services Centres serves almost five and a half million users with a budget of nearly 1.8 billion euros. The detail of the profile of the users of the different services includes the attention of 505,135 immigrant users and 5,474 refugees and asylum seekers, which represents only 5.7% of the users.

Another classic anti-immigration prejudice is that immigrants misuse and abuse health services. This prejudice is perhaps one of the most widespread even among those who do not have overtly unfavourable attitudes to immigration. Data from the latest CIS study (CIS, 2019) shows that, for example, over 50% of respondents agree with the view that migrants abuse free health care.

However, ensuring universal access to health care is not only an ethical requirement, but also a measure of economic efficiency. The law guarantees the universal right to health protection and health care, under the same conditions, to all persons in Spain. The current regulatory framework is the origin of the prejudices that question the access of immigrants, in any situation, to the health system. The Royal Decree Law 7/2018 (RDL 7/2018, 2018) legally recovered the universality of the right to health protection and healthcare, linking it to residence in Spanish territory. The rule was intended to put an end to the restrictions established by the controversial Royal Decree-Law 16/2012 (RDL 16/2012, 2012) which, de facto, excluded from health care at public expense adults who were neither registered nor authorised to reside in Spain (except in a few exceptional situations; access to the National Health System is therefore a right linked to citizenship in its broadest sense.

The free access of undocumented immigrants to the national health system is, first, and reproducing the spirit of the Spanish law, an “ethical requirement”, as it intends to “protect those most vulnerable groups”. Secondly, the standard moves in the direction of international recommendations such as the World Health Organisation’s Health 2020 agenda or other important regional policy frameworks aimed at facilitating and supporting universal, sustainable, high quality, inclusive and equitable health systems. The Lisbon Conference (Health and Migration in the EU: Better Health for All in an Inclusive Society) stressed that preventive care and access to care for refugees and migrants should be understood as a human right; as an essential element of social, economic, and political development; and as a prerequisite for achieving public health and global health goals.

Moreover, unrestricted universal access contributes to the improvement of “the collective health of the entire population” as far as exclusion or marginalisation from access to the system makes it difficult to detect and treat diseases and can

represent a major public health risk. Consequently, this policy of inclusion ends up having favourable economic consequences. A recent study by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA 2015) in this regard, indicates that providing access to regular preventive health care to undocumented migrants would result in cost savings for health systems. Even when a simple model is used to estimate costs, the implications are clear: treating a condition only when it becomes an emergency not only jeopardizes a patient’s health, but also results in a greater financial burden on health systems.

Immigrants use public health services less, with average per capita expenditure far lower than that of Spaniards. Regarding the use of health services, diagnostic tests and the consumption of medicines, the data from the National Health Survey could not be clearer: foreigners make less use of consultations, diagnostic tests, and medicines.

Table 5

*Health: Frequency of use, diagnostic tests, and other indicators of use
 Comparison by Nationality*

INDICATOR	NATIONALITY	
	Spanish	Foreign
COVERAGE		
Public Health Coverage	99.27%	97.29%
FREQUENCY OF USE	Spanish	Foreign
Average number of visits to the family doctor or paediatrician in the last 4 weeks	1.28	1.24
Medical consultation in the last 12 months. %	87%	82%
Number of medical consultations in the last 12 months	7.4	6.1
Number of visits to the family doctor in the last 12 months	5.0	4.3
Number of specialist consultations in the last 12 months	2.4	1.7
Need for medical assistance not attended in the last 12 months	1.9	2.8
Doctor’s visit 4 months ago or less (% respondents)	36%	31%
DIAGNOSTIC TESTS	Spanish	Foreign
X-rays taken in the last 12 months	26.7%	24.4%
CT scan or scan performed in the last 12 months	9.1%	7.3%
Performed ultrasound in the last 12 months	16.6%	16.6%
Performed MRI in the last 12 months	9.2%	6.4%
CONSUMPTION OF MEDICINES	Spanish	Foreign
Consumption of prescription drugs in last 2 weeks (% surveyed)	61%	48%

Source: Spanish National Health Survey 2017. Ministry of Health.

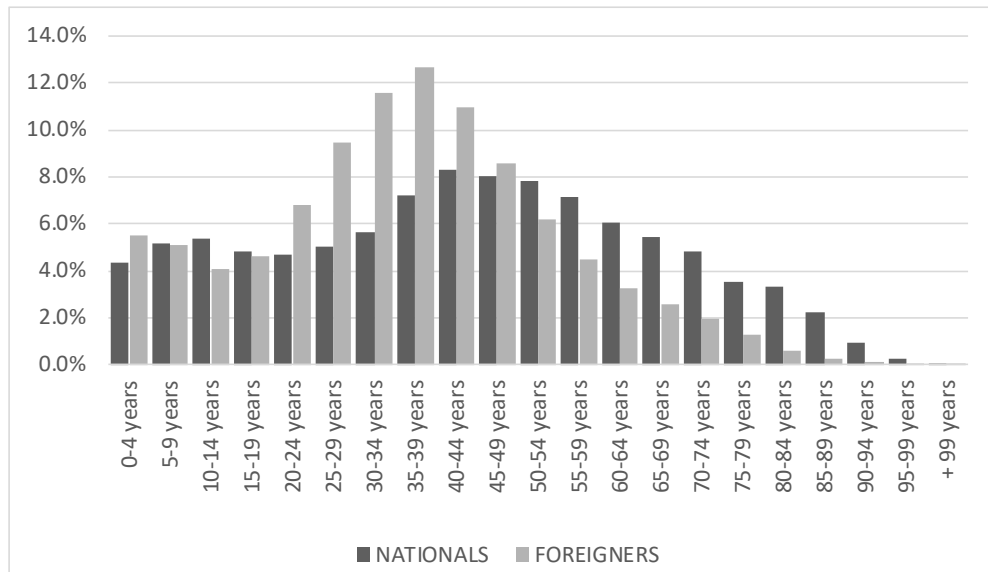
In general terms, age, living conditions and certain socio-economic differences explain notable differences in terms of the greater or lesser use of health services by the population and, therefore, of health expenditure.

In this sense, the lower average age of foreign residents in Spain is a fundamental factor that explains the lower frequency use and lower per capita expenditure of the foreign population (Múñoz de Bustillo y Antón, 2010). Many studies in this respect have pointed out that health expenditure, especially hospital expenditure, is in the form of a “J” when analysed by age: high during the first year of life, falling to a minimum between 5 and 14 years of age and then rising steadily thereafter. For example, (Aguado Alba et al., 2012) indicated that the median expenditure on primary care for the group up to 2 years of age was 410 euros, falling to 203 euros in the interval from 15 to 44 years and 1,255 euros for the population aged 75 years and over.

With these figures in mind, it should be noted that in our country, more than 50% of the foreign population is concentrated in the 25-44 age group, a group with a low rate of use of health resources, while this figure only reaches 30% for the national population. At the other extreme, for the age group over forty-five, the weight of the national population is much greater than that of the foreign population, 50% as opposed to 29%. In the case of the population over 65 years of age, much more associated with cases of chronic and dependent patients, the foreign population only represents 7% compared to 21% of the Spanish population.

Figure 2

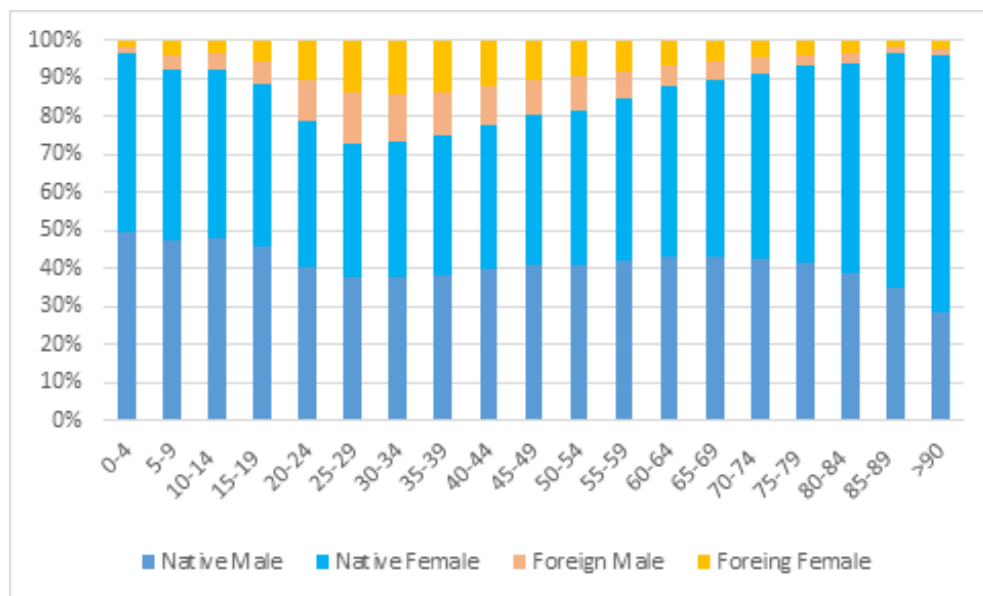
Distribution by age of the Spanish and foreign population



Source: Own elaboration from INE data (Main Population Series. Data for 2018).

Figure 3

Distribution by age and gender of the Spanish and foreign population



Source: Own elaboration from INE data (Main Population Series. Data for 2018).

According to a report by the working group on health expenditure analysis published by the Ministry of Finance (Ministry of Finance, 2007), the relative expenditure ratios for seven age groups are radically different. If we use only these coefficients and average the expenditure for the foreign and Spanish population, the per capita expenditure for public health care would be 38% higher for the Spanish population than for the foreign one (1,544 euros versus 1,115 euros). Some other studies have compared the health expenditure of both groups with a more elaborated methodology (Vicens, Mahía and Arce, 2006) but the results are similar given the significant differences in the age distribution and the relevance of this demographic factor.

Demographics also have other ways of impacting on health spending. For example, higher fertility among the immigrant population could be a factor in higher health expenditure associated with pregnancy, childbirth and first-year care of children. However, it seems easy to assume that the relative impact of this higher fertility on expenditure would not be relevant in aggregate terms and, in any case, the benefits of this higher fertility seem clear in other ways. On the other hand, although greater fertility is associated with greater expenditure, lower fertility is capable of generating comparable expenditure when it is associated with a delay in the age at which motherhood begins, as occurs in the case of Spanish women on average; indeed, this delay is associated with an increase in health expenditure given the increase in risks and complications related to pregnancy and childbirth (FGC, 2018).

Table 6*Estimation of Public Per Capita Health Expenditure by Nationality*

	Coefficients of relative expen- diture	Relative Spending Estimated (€)	Weight Age groups SPANISH (Sum 100%)	Weight Age groups FOREIGNERS (Sum 100%)
0-4 years	1.03	1,442 €	4.3%	5.5%
5-14 years	0.43	606 €	10.5%	9.2%
15-44 years	0.55	765 €	35.7%	56.1%
45-54 years	0.90	1,265 €	15.9%	14.8%
55-64 years	1.29	1,808 €	13.2%	7.7%
65-74 years	2.18	3,043 €	10.2%	4.5%
Over 74 years	2.76	3,860 €	10.2%	2.2%
	Relative expenditure		1,544 €	1,115 €

Source: Own elaboration.

(€) Taking as an overall average basis an indicative figure of 1,500 €.

Socioeconomic level and quality of living conditions can significantly affect health expenditure and that both factors are not comparable, in average aggregate terms, between Spaniards and foreigners. The level of per capita income is in fact another factor which gives rise to differences which condition many aspects of health care and, as was seen in the section on the labour market, income and poverty conditions are significantly worse among the foreign population. Immigration thus becomes, in fact, a “risk factor” for poorer health. A recent report (WHO, 2018) indeed indicated that “migration and displacement are social determinants affecting the health of refugees and migrants” and the same report recognizes that migrants, especially refugees, may be more vulnerable to some diseases (such as infectious diseases) due to lack of or interrupted health care in the country of origin, exposure to infections and lack of care in transit, and poor living conditions in the country of destination.

5. Fiscal revenues and fiscal balance of immigration

Sometimes the economic debate on immigration is formulated around the concept of “fiscal balance” with the idea of “doing the math” on whether immigration “brings in” more than it “detracts”. After reviewing the chapter on expenditure, we will look at the revenue dimension and some of the evidence surrounding the concept of the “fiscal balance”.

First, it should be recalled that, in Spain, in terms of tax collection, there is no exception for foreigners residing in Spanish territory. The tax collection is essentially made up of social security contributions and collections of personal income tax, VAT, corporate tax, property tax and other minor taxes. None of these tax instruments provide, in the case of individuals, for any relevant exception in terms of nationality or country of birth of the taxable person.

As far as the taxation of individuals is concerned, there is no particularity that can be applied to a foreigner resident in our country. In terms of personal income tax (IRPF), the obligation to declare is established based on unique requirements that identify the “tax resident” and the taxation of business activity does not provide for any exceptions for foreigners.

The tax contribution migrants in terms of social security (taxation of labour) is notable given the high rate of activity and occupation of the group. It should be remembered that in Spain a large part of public revenue comes from the collection of social security contributions from workers and companies. The weight of social security contributions over total income is 33.8% in Spain, while in the OECD the average relative importance is 27%. In fact, although tax collection as a percentage of gross domestic product is at the OECD average (34%), social security contributions in Spain reach 11.6% of GDP, a percentage higher than the OECD average (9.4%) (see OECD, 2020).

With labour taxation being so important, the role of labour immigration from the point of view of fiscal revenue is remarkable. Although the proportion of foreign workers registered with the general social security system was barely 11 per cent at the end of 2019, they have contributed far more to the increase in new contributors since 2016, accounting for 27 per cent of new registrations in 2019.

The importance of foreigners in the self-employed regime is even clearer. Although the relative importance of affiliated workers in the self-employed regime is only 10.3% at the end of 2019, their contribution to affiliations’ growth has been spectacular since 2016. The impressive increase in the number of workers affiliated as self-employed deserves special attention, as the conditions for access or change of regime to this special regime are far from simple for non-EU applicants (who account for 52% of foreign affiliates registered in this special regime). One of the reasons for this increase has to do with the special situation of the many Venezuelan refugees and other Central American countries who have recently arrived in Spain in search of international protection: the number of Venezuelans registered in the self-employed regime has grown by 35% in 2019 and the increase has also been notable in the case of Colombia (16%) and Paraguay (14%). Although it is sometimes heard that registering as a self-employed person is a way of obtaining legal residence when there is no offer of work for others, the truth is that, as with Spanish workers, some foreigners may be forced to register as self-employed to work in “other people’s” businesses².

It is common to hear that, in terms of balance, immigrants receive more than they contribute. It should be noted that the concept of “fiscal balance” of immigration distils a dangerous economic approach. Although the aim of this article has been to evaluate immigration from an economic, utilitarian perspective, the concept of the “fiscal balance” of immigration is even more crude. The term proposes to “balance” in purely economic terms, to “settle” a phenomenon whose pros and cons adopt multiple facets, making a “profit and loss” exercise essentially impossible.

The results reveal a neutral or slightly positive fiscal impact, although there are major difficulties in measuring the fiscal balance of immigration instantly. The OECD recently dedicated a whole section of its annual publication on migration (OECD, 2019) to the objective of analysing the fiscal impact of immigration and comparing it internationally and in Spain. The conclusions of the OECD report indicated that the fiscal contribution of immigration was only negative in several Eastern European countries with small immigrant populations, as well as in Germany, France, and Ireland. In the latter countries, except for Ireland, immigrant populations are relatively old and therefore over-represented among the population receiving pensions.

On the other hand, the OECD found (with data mostly from before the crisis) that in most countries the net fiscal position of immigrant households is below that of natives. However, this was not the case in several countries, particularly in southern Europe such as Italy, Greece, Spain, and Portugal, as well as in Ireland. In these countries, households with low-educated migrants have higher net contributions than comparable native households.

The net fiscal impact figure estimated for Spain by the OECD was 0.54% of GDP, significantly higher than the OECD average (positive and close to 0.30%). This figure is broadly in line with that of the above-mentioned report of the Economic Office of the President (0.55%).

The reason for the positive contribution is that, in all these countries, a large part of the resident migrant population is made up of recent (and young) migrant workers. Although the contribution via taxes is lower (a consequence of the lower relative level of income), their contribution via social security is relatively higher than their population weight (given the higher activity and employment rates) and some of the more important expenditures are also proportionally lower due to their relative youth (very low spending on pensions or low relative spending in terms of health benefits, for example).

One of the many difficulties associated with calculating the fiscal balance of immigration has to do with what we could call the accrual of costs and benefits. In this sense, “favourable” calculations illustrating a positive net contribution are conditioned by the relative youth of our immigrant population. Today’s immigration is young and therefore hardly involves any expenditure on pension or health benefits, for example.

However, it seems logical to think that in the medium and long term this reality will slowly adjust. In this respect, it seems sensible to think that a successful integration process will generate a convergence between the foreign and Spanish populations that will tend to homogenise the fiscal contribution between the two.

6. Conclusions

None of the common prejudices about the effects of immigration on the public economy seem to be supported by the data.

In relation to the so-called welfare magnet there are several reasons to think that it has never existed. Spain is not a particularly interesting destination in the European framework if we judge the quality and accessibility of the social protection system. Immigration flows have remained extraordinarily strong even during the recent economic crisis, in a context of clear deterioration of the social protection framework, increased poverty and growing inequalities.

Regarding the impact of immigration on public expenditure and services, the analyses once again refute a wide range of unfounded prejudices. Foreigners do NOT live on pensions in Spain, do not enjoy any preference in social security pensions and benefits, they do not enjoy any relative advantage in receiving unemployment benefits or other contributory pensions and are also under-represented in most of the social – assistance (non-contributory) services. Immigrants do not monopolize the benefits of the Social Services and their over-representation in some chapters is logically due to a situation of vulnerability which, on average, is also very marked. Once again, it should be emphasized that, due to the nature of new admissions (mostly at ages with few health complications), the impact of these admissions on the use of health services is low.

In relation to the connection between public revenues and immigration, there is no exception for foreigners residing in Spanish territory. The contribution in terms of taxation is the same as that of nationals in similar income circumstances. The classic hoax, very widespread in Spain, that some foreign groups have any type of tax advantages has no authentic basis. The text also documents the interesting evidence that the tax contribution of immigration in terms of social security (taxation of labour) is notable given the high rate of activity and occupation of the group.

7. Notes

- 1 “Instituto Nacional de Estadística”.
- 2 Data coming from the Labour Force Survey (EPA, INE, 2020).

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