

**ARTICLE/ARTÍCULO**

# From the Civil War to Loneliness: Vulnerability in the Lives of Older People

De la Guerra Civil a la soledad: la vulnerabilidad  
en el curso vital de las personas longevas

**Juan López Doblas**

University of Granada, Spain  
[jdoblas@ugr.es](mailto:jdoblas@ugr.es)

**María del Pilar Díaz Conde**

University of Granada, Spain  
[mpdiaz@ugr.es](mailto:mpdiaz@ugr.es)

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## ABSTRACT

This article addresses the social reality of people over the age 80 years old, focusing on the problems that affect their daily lives and the resources required to deal with them. Based on qualitative methodology, it uses interviews as an information-production technique and grounded theory as an analytical tool. Our results indicate that these people, who live alone, are exposed to a situation of vulnerability that is generated as a result of the deterioration of their health or physical weakness. At home, many of them have difficulty performing domestic tasks, while outside, their social activity is reduced. The family is their main source of instrumental support, but there are many cases of unmet needs, especially if they do not have the financial means to hire professional help. There are also those who live in social isolation, the magnitude of which depends on the severity of their physical limitations. All of this combines to intensify this sense of loneliness. However, vulnerability is not something that is new to them. An analysis of their lives reveals that many have already endured it, experiencing a childhood that was severely impacted by the Spanish Civil War and the post-war period. Back then they were familiar with sacrifice and suffering, problems that have reared their heads once again in their old age.

**KEYWORDS:** old people; living alone; vulnerability; unmet needs; qualitative methodology.

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## RESUMEN

Este artículo aborda la realidad social de las personas mayores de 80 años, centrándose en los problemas que afectan a su vida cotidiana y los recursos para afrontarlos. Utiliza metodología cualitativa: la entrevista como técnica de producción de información y la *Grounded Theory* como herramienta analítica. Nuestros resultados apuntan que estas personas, viviendo solas, se exponen a una situación de vulnerabilidad generada por el deterioro de la salud o su debilidad física. En casa, muchas de ellas tienen dificultad para realizar tareas domésticas y, fuera, ven reducida su actividad social. La familia es su principal fuente de apoyo instrumental, pero abundan los casos de necesidades no cubiertas, sobre todo si no existen medios económicos para contratar ayuda profesional. También los hay de un aislamiento social cuya magnitud depende del grado de sus limitaciones físicas. Todo ello acaba agudizando el sentimiento interno de soledad. Pero la vulnerabilidad no es algo que resulte novedoso para ellas. El análisis de su curso vital revela que muchas ya la experimentaron en una infancia, como la que tuvieron, marcada por la Guerra Civil y la posguerra. En aquel entonces conocieron el sacrificio y el sufrimiento, y tal cosa vuelven a encontrar en su vejez.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** personas mayores; viviendo solas; vulnerabilidad; necesidades no cubiertas; metodología cualitativa.

## 1. Introduction

This article focuses on elderly people who live alone. The demographic shift which greatly increased the size of the elderly population is by no means unknown, with numerous articles from the 1990s warning of the potential consequences of this change (Flaquer and Soler, 1990; Solsona and Treviño, 1990; Valero, 1995; Requena, 1999), in addition to others published in more recent years (López Doblas, 2005; Zueras and Miret, 2013; López Villanueva and Pujadas, 2018; Cámara et al., 2021). One of the most recent of these works confirms that the number of single-person households in Spain is continuing to grow and that the over-65s are particularly likely to form part of one: in 2019, 22.74% of those in this age group lived alone, more than two million people in real terms (López Doblas and Díaz Conde, 2021). In addition, the 2022–2037 *household projection* recently published by the Spanish National Statistics Institute (*Instituto Nacional de Estadística, INE*) affirms that this situation is only going to get worse. All indicators point towards the elderly being at the centre of this phenomenon.

Lots of research has also been done on the underlying reasons behind this process with the goal of helping us gain a better understanding of it, from the point of view of the social actors involved. In this vein, López Doblas (2005), for example, claimed that autonomy was increasing amongst this population, while he also underlined the social modernisation that old age is currently undergoing in Spain (López Doblas and Díaz Conde, 2013). Other studies have stressed elderly people's preference to grow old in their own home (Fernández Carro, 2016; Molina, Gallo and González, 2020), or demographic factors, such as the low birth rate which is increasingly leaving them without descendants (Reher and Requena, 2017; Padyab et al., 2019). Emphasis has also been placed on the elderly's desire to live independently from other generations, driven especially by their negative perception of moving in with family members, as well as on the instrumental and emotional support received from their children, particularly daughters, and their will to maintain financial self-sufficiency (López Doblas, 2018).

Beyond the demographic expansion of the phenomenon and the understanding of its root causes, there is a lack of sociological information about one of the most serious issues that should concern society as a whole—especially this ageing Spanish society—which is that loneliness is rife. Here, the reference is to the living conditions, needs and demands of elderly people who live alone. It is true, however, that there is a pioneering study from the beginning of the century that analyses their family ties, their social relationships, the problems that tend to affect them and how cohabitation is a possible alternative to solitary life (López Doblas, 2005). In recent years, additional studies have also emerged that aim to fill the information void regarding this subject (Gallo and Molina, 2015; San Martín and Jiménez, 2021), many of which centre around one of the most serious problems affecting this population, which is the feeling of loneliness (López Doblas and Díaz Conde, 2018; Yanguas et al., 2020; Lorente, Brotons and Sitges, 2022).

Even so, it is difficult to deny that very little is known about elderly people who live alone in Spain. To get a better idea of how many aspects pertaining to this population group that have yet to be addressed, a quick glance at the international specialised literature will suffice. One of these aspects is their health status. There are those who are in good health and are able to go about their daily life with no issues, however there are also others who have functional limitations and, therefore, require assistance. As a result, we are faced with a population group that is particularly heterogeneous in terms of health (Park et al., 2017). Research undertaken in other countries indicates that many elderly people continue to live alone despite suffering from mental illnesses of differing levels of severity (Rongve et al., 2014; Eichler et al., 2016). In Spain, a fifth of the dependent population aged 65 and over lives in single-person households (Abellán et al., 2011). The details of the most vital aspects of their lives are, however, overlooked: how they manage their everyday tasks, doctor's visits and medication, as well as their scope of their sources of support and the extent to which they are able to meet their care needs. On a statistical level, family support networks are known to be a vital resource (Fernández and Tobío, 2007), but a comprehensive study of their role is required from the point of view of those involved.

This is a topic that must be researched urgently, especially in a social context, such as the way in which it is being approached here, given the growing demand for carers and the decline in the family support on offer, both in Spain (Durán, 2018; Elizalde, 2018) and abroad (Verropoulou and Tsimbos, 2017; Pickard, 2015). This situation is particularly severe for elderly people who live alone, as international studies provide evidence of the disadvantage that this population is at when compared with those who live with another person. It is less likely that they have informal carers (Eichler et al., 2016; Spitze and Ward, 2000), and even more probable that they do not receive as much assistance, even when they really need it, in carrying out tasks such as washing themselves, cooking and leaving the house (Vlachantoni, 2019; Desai et al., 2001). Those who do not have children are more affected by this problem (Larsson and Silverstein, 2004). Generally speaking, elderly people who live alone tend to have less stable family networks and, when they get sick, they are exposed to a greater risk of being referred to the formal care sector as their main source of care (Allen et al., 2012; Betini et al., 2017), including institutionalisation (Martikainen et al., 2009;

Dramé et al., 2012; Pimouguet et al., 2015). Very few studies have touched on these aspects in Spain, which is why they should be of utmost importance.

Moreover, the elderly also often fall victim to other types of problems when they live alone. The one that has received the most attention is the feeling of loneliness. Years ago, De Jong Gierveld (1987) concluded that it affects people when they are unsatisfied with their social relationships, whether because they have fewer than they would like or because they do not provide the desired level of intimacy. A number of works claim that the transition from marriage to widowhood is a critical point at which it can materialise (Dahlberg et al., 2021; Aarten and Jylhä, 2011). Countless other articles also link loneliness among the elderly with the fact that they often live alone (Sundström et al., 2009; De Jong Gierveld, Dykstra and Schenk, 2012). It is also worth adding that the feeling of loneliness sometimes emerges alongside another problem which is equally as worrying, as is the case with social isolation, which is linked to insufficient interpersonal relationships (Havens et al., 2004) and a decrease in available support networks (Domènech et al., 2021). The topic of social isolation among the elderly has barely been touched on by Spanish sociologists.

## 2. Methodology and Objectives

*Lonely older people. Problemas cotidianos y mejora de su calidad de vida* (“Daily problems and an improved quality of life”) is a study that aims to fill in these gaps, and others, in sociological research. The project was financed as part of the 11th call for funding by the Andalusian Studies Centre Foundation. It must be mentioned that the qualitative aspect of the project was considerably impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, not just due to the delay in starting the fieldwork, but also because the information collection technique had to be altered, changing from a group discussion to individual interviews. This decision was driven by the health and social circumstances deriving from the pandemic, particularly given the impossibility of gathering people together in a group. The first interviews were performed in Granada in May 2021 once the elderly had received the vaccine, with this phase concluding in December 2022 in the town of Cortegana, Huelva province.

The decision was made that the interviews would be semi-structured. Also, in order to ensure that the fundamental questions of interest for the research were addressed in each interview, a script was prepared made up of general thematic blocks (daily life, family structure and relationships, neighbours, friendships, sources of instrumental and emotional support, physical and mental health, social isolation, the feeling of loneliness, financial situation and consequences of the pandemic). However, in no way was a fixed sequence of questions forced on the participants, nor were the interviews controlled; instead, the elderly participants themselves freely spoke about these issues and others. The interviews were held in different spaces, such as private homes, active participation centres and cafés, with the audio being recorded with the participants' consent and a guarantee of confidentiality and anonymity. As such, the names that appear in the analysis are fictional and in no case correspond to the true identity of the participants.

The interviewee selection process considered two fixed criteria: that they were over the age of 65 and lived alone. Theoretical sampling was conducted based on their gender, age, marital status and the setting in which they live. This enabled a typological profile to be designed that included a wide range of social actors. Of the 102 total interviews performed as part of the study, 46 were selected to include in this article. All of the chosen interviews correspond to participants who were born before 1940. This decision meets the main objective of this study: to describe the social reality of older people who either lived through the Spanish Civil War or were born during it, emphasising the situation of vulnerability many of them are currently experiencing as a result of health problems, isolation or loneliness. This will be tackled from the premise that the lives of these people foster understanding of the social problems they are faced with, which in turn feeds into the second objective: to analyse these people’s childhood, discovering key features that defined it and, in one way or another, have had a profound impact on their existence to this very day. The characteristics of the interviewees can be found in Table 1.

**Table 1**  
*Characteristics of the sample*

No.	Gender	Age	Marital status	No.	Gender	Age	Marital status
12	Female	85	Widowed	168	Female	81	Widowed
14	Female	81	Separated	170	Female	84	Widowed
15	Female	93	Widowed	171	Female	86	Single
16	Male	80	Widowed	174	Male	83	Widowed
18	Male	89	Widowed	175	Male	82	Widowed
19	Female	84	Widowed	176	Female	85	Widowed
112	Female	86	Widowed	180	Female	85	Widowed
113	Female	85	Widowed	181	Male	90	Widowed
115	Female	99	Widowed	185	Male	81	Separated
126	Female	81	Widowed	186	Female	82	Divorced
127	Female	88	Widowed	187	Female	83	Widowed
128	Male	82	Widowed	190	Male	89	Married
129	Female	88	Widowed	191	Male	95	Widowed
131	Female	88	Widowed	192	Female	86	Widowed
136	Female	91	Widowed	193	Female	88	Widowed
137	Male	84	Widowed	194	Female	91	Widowed
140	Male	92	Widowed	195	Female	82	Divorced
143	Female	87	Widowed	196	Female	91	Widowed
144	Female	84	Widowed	197	Female	90	Divorced
146	Male	89	Widowed	198	Male	96	Widowed
153	Female	87	Widowed	199	Female	87	Widowed
155	Female	85	Widowed	1100	Male	85	Divorced
156	Female	88	Widowed	1102	Female	89	Widowed

The analysis process followed the principles of *grounded theory*. The interviews were held and transcribed verbatim by members of the research team. Later, inductive coding was performed in a way that was guided by the thematic blocks of the script. By constantly comparing the information gathered, a system of categories and sub-categories was created, enabling it to be structured. This work details a large part of this information, particularly that pertaining to the main issues affecting the elderly who live alone, such as deteriorated health, unmet needs, social isolation and the feeling of loneliness. The work also provides an interpretation of the field materials which refer to their childhood, largely impacted by the Spanish Civil War. This allows emphasis to be placed on their life experiences when studying the social problems that affect them. In the case of the analysis presented here, the common thread is the vulnerability that many of them experienced at a young age and that once again plagues them in their old age, this time for entirely different reasons. Table 2 shows the coding process that was followed.

**Table 2**  
*Analysis strategy followed*

SUBCATEGORIES	THEORETICAL CATEGORIES	MAIN CATEGORIES	CENTRAL CATEGORY
Hunger Malnutrition Death by starvation	Memories of poverty		
Farmwork Cattle farming	Child labour		
Never going to school Illiteracy Learning in any way possible	Education deficit	Infancy marked by suffering and sacrifice	
Growing up without a father Situation of abandonment Family disintegration	Family deficit		
Fear Direct threats Witnesses of war	Victims of the Spanish Civil War		Vulnerability in the lives of the elderly
Severe illnesses Physical weakness Mobility problems	Social relationship deficits		
Filial support Help at home Hiring someone Self-care	Unmet needs	Risk of social isolation and feeling of loneliness in old age	
Recently widowed No children or grandchildren Perceived lack of help Lack of financial resources Prospect of living in a care home	Emotional loneliness		

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Sacrifice and Suffering During Childhood

The results obtained shine a light on how difficult life has been for many of the elderly who currently live alone. It is rather indicative that they wanted to share the misery that they remember from their childhood without having to be expressly asked about it. What most stands out is that they often refer to the *hunger* that ran rampant throughout Spain during that time, whether they suffered from it themselves to some extent or they managed to avoid it, offering a better idea of the main problem of the era. This is something that men living in rural settings, such as Pepe, mentioned with greater frequency:

Well, I can't call it bad because I never went hungry. We lived in a *cortijo* (a type of farm-house where numerous families would live), and everyone ate the same there. Yes. We never lacked food there. But then, after the war, that's when *the real hunger* came. Well, I didn't really experience hunger then either, so what can I say. But I would see people going to work and they wouldn't have any food to take with them for lunch.

[...]

I saw this with my own eyes. And people coming to the *cortijos* asking for food, lots of them! Yes.

*And I've even heard of people eating potato peel.*

Yes, people would eat anything, whatever they could get their hands on. And banana skin... even kids searching for things in the fields (I90: 2).

Some of the interviewees spoke of the extreme material needs they experienced during the Spanish Civil War, which was only exacerbated in the post-war years. They told of a drastic lack of food, and even though it was a fairly long time ago, memories of how hungry they were have stuck with them to this day. Sometimes they would not have any food to eat, and they would instead have to eat whatever they could find to prevent them from dying from starvation. Numerous testimonies bear witness to this, such as that of Antonio who, when comparing his own childhood to how children experience it nowadays, emphasises that times have changed and that *bad luck* seemingly stalked his generation, practically from birth:

And then... then came the post-war years. That's when then we were really hungry! Some people had money while others didn't... There was nothing, absolutely nothing to eat! So...

*Did you ever starve?*

Did I ever starve? I used to eat banana peel!

*You used to eat banana peel?*

Yes, sir. And what about potato peel? I'd wash them, peel them and eat the skin. Me. I was... Bloody hell, let me tell you, the bad luck I've had. And there I was, at nine years old, I'd have to round up the pigs, bare naked and with no shoes on, with nobody to take care of me! But nowadays, kids can just be kids. Whereas in the past, you wouldn't have anyone to look after you (I81: 3-4).

Obviously, not everyone suffered from starvation during that period. But even those who never experienced it still recall how they had to sacrifice their childhood and were put to work from a very young age. If they lived in the countryside, they generally had to help with tasks related to the fields, farms and/or cattle, working endless days that often required great physical effort. It is worth reiterating that it was the men who were interviewed who tended to point to the social vulnerability that was a constant in their childhood. This study now turns to look at what Manuel, one of the oldest interviewees, had to say, whose hands still attest to the hard farmwork that he had to perform as a young boy:

My childhood? Lots of work, but then again, we were never weak due to a lack of food. Yes, we worked like dogs; just look at my fingers.

*Wow, they really show how much you worked!*

That's from working and not having the strength. At ten years old, working with a yoke and a plough, while being told to hurry up. We'd tie a stone to the wood here... because we couldn't fasten them to the yoke to drive them. We went through a lot (I91: 2).

As can be seen, it was a generation that was subject not just to shortages and child labour but to all sorts of other hardships. When they reflect upon that era, the lack of education also rears its head. More specifically, they lament the opportunities they never had to receive a formal education, to the point that many of them never even step foot inside a school. This is one of the grievances of Juan, to whom this study will return later:

I never managed to go to school! I lived in the countryside, with turkeys and pigs... Then, when I was older, I worked with the yoke, and then... Finally came the cattle. We had cattle at home, and they were like slaves, so we had to assist them, and we had to... Anyway, we had to slog. And I was one of nine children!

*Oh my Lord!*

My mother had ten in total, but one of them died. He was younger, he was the one that came after me (I40: 19).

During the war and in the years that followed, it is clear that putting food on the table was of utmost importance, and each member of the family had a role to play, regardless of whether they were only eight, nine or ten years old. In other words, child labour prevented many elderly people from going to school: some took it upon themselves to learn to read and write, even if only *badly*, while others would remain illiterate. Here is another sacrifice that this generation had to make, as revealed by Manuel later in his interview:

I didn't go to school.

*You never went to school?*

No, never. A man with a walking stick taught me what little I know.

*He taught me to read and write.*



The basics, just my name and things like that. We didn't have time for anything else. At night we would study with an oil lamp. And we could hardly see the paper (I91: 21).

A number of the older people interviewed shared memories of an even more painful shortcoming: a lack of affection from their family. In some cases, this was because they grew up without a father and/or mother as a result of the Spanish Civil War. Pepe is one such person:

I think I was already living in a *cortijo* when I was eight years old. There were nine of us and we didn't have a father...

*Why didn't you have a father?*

Because they killed him during the war. I don't even remember what my father was like, imagine that! And so we grew up scattered among the *cortijos* (I90: 1).

Some lost their fathers before they had learned to walk, while others never even got to meet them, with their mother already being a widow at the time she gave birth, or shortly after. This is what happened to María, who would go on to form part of a reconstituted family:

Because I have two other siblings, although we only share a mother. My dad was killed in the war.

[...]

In '36. And they killed him... they took him away... He wasn't dead when I was born, but just a few days later he was. It was his parents, my grandparents, who came to sign my birth certificate. And so... my mother didn't get married for another 20 years.

*With another...*

With another man. So my siblings are just my half siblings as we share the same mother, but there's a big age gap between us. I'm 23 years older than my brother and 21-and-a-bit years older than my sister (I80: 9).

The same can be said for Carmen, whose mother became a widow while she was pregnant with her. In her case, her mother did not want to remarry, instead choosing to lead a single-parent family which she was able to provide for despite facing countless difficulties. As can be seen, this is a generation marked not only by sacrifice, but also by past suffering. Many boys and girls, without ever really knowing why, saw their lives turned upside down as a consequence of the Spanish Civil War:

My mother was from a small town... They killed my dad, who was 33 years old. I was two when they killed him and she was four months pregnant with my sister. The poor thing raised us in her town... very humbly, with whatever she could get from the large estates. We didn't have any kind of connections; we just took what we could from the estates and that was all (I12: 6).

For others, the military conflict left an indelible impression on their family make-up as a consequence of the exodus of those who feared for their lives. Their loved ones, and in some cases the interviewees themselves, were forced to hurriedly flee from their homes and their social settings in search of safety. They see it as a necessary, lesser evil, especially given what was at stake if they refused to leave. Araceli, a widow now in her nineties, recounts in great detail the ordeal that she went through:

My parents... we lived in Baena (Córdoba province) during the war, which was something normal. Baena was a disaster during that time. My dad played the piano in the church, and at that time they were coming after everyone in the church... One day a position popped up in a parish church in La Línea (de la Concepción, Cádiz province), and when we got there all the lights were on... In Baena we had to turn the lights off at night in case of bombings... Anyway, it was a complete disaster (I36: 8–9).

There are even some, such as Manuel and Araceli herself, who have recollections of being in close proximity to victims of the war during their childhood and of being saved from the brink of death:

*You must have some memories of the war.*

Oh yes, and plenty of them, too! Like that time they almost killed me and my father, as he was carrying me in his arms! (I36: 13).

It's been a long time and I've lived through so many trials and tribulations, because... I was very young when war broke out and... and we were constantly on the move. My parents were in hiding because they were looking for them to... well, to kill them. That's the truth of the matter, haha.

*And you remember this?*

Yes, of course I do. And I remember when they came after me with a shotgun and, if it wasn't for one of my aunts, they would have shot me (I91: 1).

Some of the others who were interviewed were just witnesses to the horrors of war, whether this meant seeing shoot-outs in the street, like Encarna:

I remember living in San Juan de Dios and I'd see the Moors at the top of the tower at the town hall, and we'd run and... there was a shoot-out... Anyway, I do remember certain things, yes.

*Some things you can't forget.*

No, no. Even things from when I was really small as well... No, I'll never forget them. I remember them like it was yesterday (I56: 1).

Others have recollections of military planes flying overhead while they played in the street with the other children, oblivious to the danger they were in. This is exactly how Pedro remembers it:

Although I was only four-and-a-half years old, I remember lots of things. Plenty of things, because of where we lived... I spent the entire war in Jaén province, and I remember that I'd be playing with the other kids and the aeroplanes would fly right over us, so close to the ground... Hahaha, I remember all of that.

*But that... Pfft.*

Yes. We had to throw ourselves to the ground (I46: 14–15).

This woman from Granada, who was born in 1928, has memories of some particularly horrific events. During that time Nieves lived opposite the prison, and each night she could see vehicles full of prisoners leaving the gates, accompanied by the sound of crying, leading them to their death. This is further evidence of the suffering, experienced by the interviewees and those around them, to which these elderly people were exposed during their younger years:

They would go in lorries... I remember those lorries, I've got the image engraved in my brain. They weren't like modern lorries, they were very long...

[...]

*And you saw this yourself?*

Yes, I remember seeing them. I was a bit older when this happened. I remember seeing a whole line of these lorries, you know? And they were waiting to take the prisoners away. At night! They would take them at night! [...] They'd pile them into the lorries. And you could hear them screaming! And you could hear the screams. My poor mother, she would scream louder than anyone else! (I5: 17–18).

### 3.2. Isolation and Loneliness in Old Age

The Spanish Civil War created a context of vulnerability during the childhood and, in all likelihood, the adolescence of many of these elderly people. As victims of this vulnerability, in the interviews they spoke of the sacrifice and suffering that surrounded them from a very young age and which, one way or another, had a profound impact on their existence. However, during this phase of their lives, they also see how new circumstances have appeared and how vulnerability preys on them once more. It does so by worsening their health, and the consequences that this has on their daily lives. In order to understand what they have to say, it is important to know that some of them have overcome serious illnesses like cancer, while others continue to fight them, all while living alone. This is what happened to Antonia, who is still suffering from the after-effects of the chemotherapy she has received:

I've got a problem with my throat, as now I'm asthmatic thanks to the chemo. So sometimes my voice goes. But thank God, it could be worse.

*What illness do you have?*

None any more! I did have cancer, lymphoma. I had it removed in 2011 and I had to go through three years of chemo. So obviously, so much chemo has left me with lots... lots of after-effects. The oncologist told me that it takes a long time to go. So I just have to put up with it (I68: 1).

Others have undergone complex operations or even had heart attacks while living alone. They usually stand by their decision to continue living independently, although they do transmit a certain concern that they may suffer a relapse. They spoke of how they learned to live with this handicap, simply put up with it, and they seem prepared to tackle any other setback that may arise with all their strength. Here is the case of Ricardo. He receives support from his only son, but he prefers to manage his *medication and medical conditions* himself, something that he has been doing of late:

So, because of the heart attacks I have to take a number of different pills: *Rami-pril*, *Cardyl 40*, *Adiro 100*, you see? And the drops, too. I have to administer them at different times throughout the day. I recently had an episode where I had blood in my urine, so I went to the care home and they probed me, because I have a blood problem—my body doesn't produce enough platelets or white blood cells, which is what caused the bleeding. So they prescribed me some pills, which they gave me at Virgen del Rocío pharmacy, as well as some injections, and they perform an

analysis every two or three months. My platelet count has already gone up and it seems to have stabilised, but, of course, when I don't have an analysis, I have a consultation, and when I don't have... So I have to follow this schedule... Hahaha. Instead of enjoying myself, I have to make sure I take my medicine and go to all my visits (I75: 3).

Even though they may not have suffered serious health problems, in reality there are plenty of elderly people whose lives are severely impacted by their physical weakness. This reduces their well-being, starting with the difficulties they have in their day-to-day lives doing the cleaning or shopping, preparing their meals and even staying on top of personal hygiene. They require instrumental support, which some receive from their family members, while others are forced to hire the services of someone to come to their home and help out for a few hours each week, as the public home care service is limited, as revealed by many of the interviewees. Among those is Juan, who has two daughters and three sons, but he does not want to move in with any of them or oblige them to care for him. At 92 years old, he is still fighting to remain in his home and retain his independence from his family:

I have my own home and, thanks to the Regional Government of Andalusia, I've got everything I need: I have telecare, a gas detector, another detector for smoke from fires... I've got it all. But I asked them to send someone to come and visit me... Now, a lady comes twice a week to clean my apartment, but I wanted... someone to perform odd jobs, so I asked for more hours... They gave me two hours, but the lady is only really here for one hour. The lady is always here around an hour, but she's really good to me. I asked them for more hours because of the loneliness and my old age, but they refused. They won't give me any more. So here we are (I40: 3).

Mobility problems and their consequences also bring with them additional vulnerability by limiting what a person can do outside the home. There are those who overcome their difficulties to move by using a walking stick or frame for support so that they can continue to go outside every day. Other people, on the other hand, are incapable of doing it on their own given their fragile state; they can only go out with the help of another person, with this seriously restricting their ability to socialise and see others face to face. These situations put them at an enormous risk of social isolation, as we have seen, particularly when they occur in urban settings. The next testimony to be examined belongs to Mercedes. She too lives alone, so the few times she ventures outside her home are when her daughter visits and decides to take her out for a walk around the neighbourhood:

I walk regularly.

*And you use a walking stick?*

Yes, now I do because I get tired quickly. It's like my whole body gets tired, and my body is very tired. Or maybe it's my heart or my knees, as I've had them operated on... But I've been very lucky, as I can still walk well with my knees. I had the operation a long time ago. In that regard, yes... No, I've been very lucky with my operations. I've already had four operations, so I say, "that's enough, isn't it?"

*And do you go outside, Mercedes?*

Yes, I go out with my daughter (I9: 8).

In this sense, not having children is a real handicap, given that it often greatly restricts the size of the older person's support network and their opportunities for socialising. In general, the most severe and prolonged cases of social isolation have been found to occur in those older people living alone who, in addition to having limited mobility, also lack family members. Emilio is one of these, and he only gets to go outside when a volunteer comes to help him on one of his (extremely rare) outings. He also receives home care but, as he explains, the short time the carers are with him is mainly spent performing household chores, meaning that they do not have enough time to do the shopping for him or take him for a walk:

If the man called Antonio comes, obviously I say to him, "hey, you have to take me out for a walk".

*And that's once a week?*

No, that's when he comes next time, next week!

*But he only comes once a week. You go out once a week?*

No, only when he wants to take me out. If he told me right now, "let's go out for a short walk", even if it's just around the block, so I say, "okay, let me put my trousers on", haha. Lately it's the volunteer who takes me out, and, logically, she can't take me out because... because she has to spend more time here than with me. Even she understands it, and she says, "I don't understand it, Antonio. I don't understand why you don't have more hours" (I85: 13).

This study highlights the fact that this is a generation that is in dire need of material support, both in the home and out. Some of them are lucky enough to have sons and daughters who live nearby, who are a source of daily help, but on the other end of the spectrum there are those who have no family members in the vicinity or, if they do have some, they are not able to provide assistance due to their work responsibilities, conflicts or any other reason. Perhaps these people are unable to contract someone to come and help them due to a lack of financial resources, so they are forced to get by on their own in their daily lives despite suffering from functional limitations, in some cases, as a result of an illness or even just their old age. It is not uncommon to encounter unmet needs in these cases. Alfredo perfectly illustrates this situation:

Let me tell you the truth: nobody comes to help me. Nobody helps me, and I don't have the money... I can't afford it.

*You can't pay someone to come and clean for you?*

Me? With the 600 euros I get? I wish. With my 600 euros... I can pay my monthly community fees, yes, but... I can't afford to, I just don't have enough money. Then I'd have to find a lady who'd charge ten euros an hour... Ten euros an hour, that's how much they charge! And then what happens is, if this lady comes every... twice a week? I'd have to give her 100 euros. I just can't. Can you see? (I74: 8-9).

In other words, the lack of financial resources further stresses the vulnerability of many elderly people who live alone. The risk of institutionalisation, on the other hand, is a real threat that is present as soon as their health worsens and they begin to require more help with household chores or personal care. Therefore, upon asking them, they view care homes as a future prospect in order to receive the care they need, even though this is far from their preferred option. However, it is also indicative that this feeling is shared by others who do have support from their families; when faced with the option of moving in with a son or daughter, some elderly people even consider moving into a care home when they can no longer look after themselves so as not to bother their children. Another contributing factor is the difficulty they believe they will have in receiving filial support when the time comes. This fear was shared by many of the interviewees, including Luisa, a mother of two:

I don't have any other options. I'll have to move into a care home!

*You'll move into a care home?*

Because they both work. Dear me, what can I say to them? There's no point saying anything as nobody knows what will happen. But my son works, his wife works... you think they'd be able to look after me? I don't know. Why bother saying anything when I don't know what will happen? And if not that, there's always a care home. But I won't say anything because who knows (I43: 8–9).

Finally, it is clear to see that a deterioration in health, social isolation and a lack of material and/or emotional support are all factors that trigger a feeling of loneliness among many elderly people who live alone. Add to this the mark usually left by widowhood, especially if it is recent and follows decades of being happily married. When several of these elements combine, the feeling of loneliness takes on an especially profound prevalence that is difficult to combat. Manuel, who was examined earlier, has been a widower for just over two years. Although he has several children, his main source of assistance comes from a home carer whom he has contracted (only one of his children lives nearby, and he does not provide him with much support). Furthermore, his social activity is limited by mobility problems. However, what most provokes a feeling of loneliness, he states, is the emptiness he sees in his home:

Loneliness? Terrible. Being alone is terrible. If you lived with someone else, even if it was the devil, you would still be together and be able to talk and do one thing or another. But on your own, who can you talk to? There's no-one to speak to. And being with someone else... even if it was someone horrible, you'd still be able to talk to them, ask them, "what are you doing? What have you got there? What hurts you?" But on your own, you've got no-one to talk to.

*So how would you explain loneliness to those who haven't experienced it?*

Terrible. Loneliness is terrible (I91: 13–14).

## 4. Discussion

On 24 February 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine, triggering a war that we have been able to follow through the media. People have seen in detail how the cruelty of war and its atrocious consequences have affected the civilian population. It has left society *shell shocked* in one way or another. This conflict was happening while the fieldwork for this study was being carried out. In the context of this study, dozens of elderly people were interviewed who saw their childhoods turned upside down as a result of a similar event in a previous era: the Spanish Civil War. Many have spoken of the sacrifice and suffering that they experienced and the social vulnerability they were exposed to as they lost loved ones, struggled to find food and were forced to work from a very young age. Although the war made these people vulnerable in their childhood—and perhaps this is the message that they wanted to get across spontaneously in the interviews—many of these same people now feel vulnerable once again in their old age as a consequence of living alone.

Despite not all elderly people living in a situation of vulnerability, and not all of them experiencing poverty when they were younger, they have mostly indicated that they require a level of support in their daily lives, which they do not always receive. In fact, this study draws attention to the lack of instrumental care encountered by many older people who live alone in Spain, a circumstance that has already been documented in other countries, including the United States (Desai et al., 2001) and the United Kingdom (Vlachantoni, 2019). It affects them in their day-to-day lives, both in the home (performing household chores and/or personal care) and out (going outside for errands or socialising). Adverse family circumstances only increase the risk of this occurring, whether that is a lack of children (Larsson and Silverstein, 2004) or having family members who live far away. Although it has not been touched on here, it is impossible to deny the importance that conflicts with sons and daughters-in-law, and with daughters and sons-in-law can have on them.

In line with the observations of Park et al. (2017), this research has shown how health varies greatly from one elderly person to another. The study presented here uses an in-depth interview technique that has given access to some participants who are in a severe state of fragility, while others have given the impression of suffering from a certain level of cognitive impairment, perhaps mild dementia. This was to be expected, given that studies have informed of there being some older people living alone who suffer from dementia (Eichler et al., 2016), and that its worsening often leads to them being moved into a care home (Rongve et al., 2014). Regardless of their current health, physical or mental state, this study reveals that many older people consider institutionalisation as a future resource for covering possible care needs that they do not think can be taken on by their family. Although this is not the preferred option, it is still their number one prospect. It is likely that this is what actually occurs when the time comes, given the plethora of works that claim that living alone increases the probability of being admitted to a care home (Martikainen et al., 2009; Pimouguet et al., 2015).

In any case, the interviews underline that the family, particularly sons and daughters, continue to be the main source of support for elderly people. When distance allows, this support, mainly instrumental in nature, helps prevent the person from

being institutionalised, even in cases where the person has considerable functional limitations. This confirms the findings of previous studies on the importance of the family, as it facilitates the independence and autonomy of the elderly (López Doblas, 2005, 2018). However, the relevance of factors that make it difficult or impossible to maintain this level of support, especially their children's work obligations, have also been noted. This entails the risk of there being older people who live alone having unmet needs, particularly if they do not have the financial resources needed to contract private help. This is also suggested by Pickard (2015) and Durán (2018). In line with Allen et al. (2012) and Betini et al. (2017), it can currently be said that many older people do not rely on their family as their main source of support, but instead on the formal sector.

In addition, the research carried out here reveals that the feeling of loneliness is more prevalent among older people who live alone, something which has been upheld for years both in Spain (López Doblas, 2005; Gallo and Molina, 2015; López Doblas and Díaz Conde, 2018; Yanguas et al., 2020; San Martín and Jiménez, 2021; Lórente, Brotons and Sitges, 2022) and in other countries (Sundström et al., 2009; De Jong Gierveld, Dykstra and Schenk, 2012). Much less is known of the degree of social isolation that these people suffer, especially in Spain. Even though this issue has not been addressed in great depth in this article, the fieldwork has uncovered that it is a significant problem among the elderly who live alone, mainly as a result of their mobility limitations. One final aspect that is worth underscoring is that the COVID-19 pandemic is further deepening the issue of social isolation (and internal loneliness) in this segment of the population.

The main limitation of this work centres around the lack of quantitative information that delves further into this matter or that even corroborates the results obtained from the qualitative interviews. The next step would be to undertake surveys that address not only the feeling of loneliness among the elderly who live alone, which is already a known issue, but also additional problems that tend to affect them, such as social isolation, unmet needs and a lack of financial resources. On the other hand, the suggestion is that any further studies that are carried out, be they quantitative or qualitative, do not treat the elderly who live alone as a uniform collective; instead, they must be approached as a series of different profiles within the collective. The research presented here, for example, focused on the older population, as it is this group which suffers a greater risk of experiencing the situation of vulnerability described. Thus, importance was placed on the life experiences of these people, particularly the sacrifice and suffering that many of them endured during their childhood against a backdrop that only increased their vulnerability: the Spanish Civil War. Beyond merely discovering the degree to which each of the interviewees suffered as a result of the conflict, this study collects the testimony of the last generation to have witnessed it first hand as, in a few short years, there will be nobody left who lived through its horrors.



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