



Article

# Psychological and Social Vulnerability in Spaniards' Quality of Life in the Face of COVID-19: Age and Gender Results

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**Abstract:** Following the serious health situation in Spain and around the world in 2020 and 2021 stemming from COVID-19, this paper examines how the most vulnerable groups (in social and health terms) in Spanish society suffered the worst impacts on their quality of life during the pandemic. The review of the literature and publications released by the health authorities highlight the high number of cases of illness and death due to COVID-19; however, there are no studies about how it has affected aspects of citizens' daily lives, considering some of their sociodemographic characteristics such as age and gender. A key issue when measuring citizens' quality of life is that we typically see a U-shaped curve by age group, where young people register the highest shares along with the elderly; nevertheless, the pandemic has clearly brought about a change in this regard. In this study, we corroborate this finding, along with the psychological issues underlying this fact in young people and the physical ones in the elderly. To do so, we use an ANOVA and regression analysis with data from a sample of 908 Spanish citizens belonging to different age groups. These data were collected through an online survey distributed throughout Spain, mostly by email and social media, between 15 February and 15 April 2021 with a margin of error of 3.25% and a confidence level of 95%. Furthermore, the analysis allowed us to determine how aspects of daily life—family situation, living conditions, social environment, employment and financial situation—have been negatively affected during the pandemic, clearly depending on the age of the people surveyed, pushing them towards social and health vulnerability.

**Keywords:** age; gender; COVID-19; vulnerability; quality of life



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## 1. Introduction

COVID-19 has had significant social and health consequences worldwide, negatively affecting economies, and especially health sectors and educational systems [1]; however, its adverse effects have also been felt by certain more vulnerable social groups [2]. These consequences can be extensive and long-lasting, not only affecting the most vulnerable but also leaving consequences for future generations [3].

Vulnerability affects individuals differently depending on their social disadvantages. For example, social vulnerability refers to the strength of communities when faced with complex external factors such as the social rupture caused by COVID-19 [1]. This phenomenon has posed important challenges for society, causing increases in depressive and obsessive-compulsive symptoms [4]. Social distancing measures have had extremely negative effects worldwide, giving rise to social instability mainly among vulnerable populations; for example, in low-income households with children [5], the well-being of families is of particular concern due to the potential lasting effects on health and cognitive and social development. However, for both citizens of working age [6] and those still participating in some stage of education, age and vulnerability with respect to COVID-19 are key

## 5. Conclusions

Psychological vulnerability has been exacerbated by COVID-19, particularly for young people, specifically those under 30 years of age. Some of them suffered major disruptions to their education due to the closure of classrooms, while others saw their financial emancipation hindered by the difficulty of entering the labour market. In addition to this situation, the isolation suffered has meant that the youngest display a lack of trust in their immediate surroundings. Furthermore, taking into consideration gender, young women suffered more from this situation than men, being unable to balance their work and family lives due to having to care for children or other family members during the lockdown. It is also proven that there is a gender gap in terms of women's self-assessment of their employment. Finally, to aggravate this social mix, the social factors that determine quality of life are more representative of the elderly, with young people being more affected by their own individual conditions, such as psychological aspects. Psychological factors such as self-esteem are difficult to measure exactly, but the results do show how these factors have been more decisive in the quality of life of young people than have physical factors in relation to the elderly. This is in line with other works such as those by Anderson and Gettings [8] and Rahman and Jahan [18].

On the other hand, this study indicates that vulnerability also falls on the older Spanish population (found to be worse among people aged over 70), affecting their physical condition, due to the isolation suffered during the pandemic and to health and immunity issues.

Notable among the factors that play a relevant role in this vulnerability for over 30s are the family situation (far more so for those over 70), their employment and education conditions and the cultural and sports facilities on offer, followed by the quality of the environment. Key factors also include issues of mobility and access to consumption, as well as the safety of their entire surrounding area, not just their neighbourhood.

Therefore, it can be concluded from this research that of the sample of Spanish citizens compiled, it is those over 70s who have the most problems with vulnerability, along with the youngest citizens aged between 18 and 29 years old. However, in this case, the analysis carried out has not confirmed an impact of gender except in regard to family and work situations, where women are more affected. This can indirectly aggravate the situation they face due to the pandemic for any age group.

Lastly, this research presents some limitations that are being addressed with future studies. The first refers to enlarging the sample of citizens. Another was that it would have been interesting to study other sociodemographic variables of Spanish citizens that made them more vulnerable depending on the employment situation in certain environments. In addition, in future lines of research, it would be interesting to examine whether, after the pandemic, citizens consider these variables relevant or highlight others that were not considered at the time.

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