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## **Spain's shrinking medium-sized cities: an overview and a closer look at critical cases**

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## Spain's shrinking medium-sized cities: an overview and a closer look at critical cases

*Abstract:* The process of urban decline is widespread in Europe; however, in Spain, it was an isolated phenomenon, affecting a few deindustrialized cities during the crisis of the 1980s. In the second decade of the 21st century, it has affected more than a third of Spain's medium-sized cities that have experienced depopulation. Largely ignored at the political level, urban geography is beginning to address the issue. In general, the aging and loss of the working population correlates with the decline of these cities. However, four clusters show that the process is complex. A closer examination of five critical cases Cádiz, Ferrol, Jaén, Linares and Talavera de la Reina, shows that the industrial crisis is combined with the Great Recession and the decline of private services, simultaneously with an increase in the population over 65 and an emigration of skilled workers to the main metropolitan areas. This process, which has already raised citizens' awareness, should be included in the political agenda. The discussion of the article suggests some strategies for dealing with the problem.

*Keywords:* urban geography, shrinking cities, medium-sized cities, urban crisis, urban decline, urban policy.

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## IDEAS CLAVE

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Las ciudades medias españolas experimentan un proceso de decrecimiento en la segunda década del siglo XXI.</li><li>2. El envejecimiento y la pérdida de población activa se correlacionan con el fenómeno.</li><li>3. Se trata de un proceso complejo donde el contexto local determina los casos más críticos.</li><li>4. La deslocalización industrial, la atonía económica tras la Gran Recesión y la emigración de mano obra cualificada se combinan en estos casos.</li></ol> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Spain's medium-sized cities are experiencing a process of decline in the second decade of the 21st century.</li><li>2. This phenomenon is linked to the ageing and loss of the active population.</li><li>3. It is a complex process in which the local context determines the most critical cases.</li><li>4. Industrial relocation, the economic slowdown following the Great Recession and the emigration of skilled workers combine in these cases.</li></ol> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Les ciutats espanyoles de talla mitjana experimenten un procés de decreixement des de la segona dècada del segle XXI.</li><li>2. L'envelliment i la perduda de població activa estan correlacionades amb aquest fenomen.</li><li>3. Es tracta d'un procés complex on el context local determina els casos més crítics.</li><li>4. La deslocalització industrial, l'atonía econòmica des de la Gran Recessió, a més de l'emigració de mà d'obra qualificada es combina en aquests casos.</li></ol> |
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## EXTENDED ABSTRACT<sup>1</sup>

Today, in more and more cities, urban growth is being replaced by processes of stagnation and shrinkage. Although historically urban shrinkage is an old phenomenon, whether in Europe or worldwide, it has now become a major phenomenon. It has taken on a global scale and a multidimensional character. Regional and urban imbalances are increasing, leading to an increasingly polarised territorial scenario, with a growing number of shrinking cities and a few dominant global cities.

In an almost universal pattern, the large metropolitan areas, either their capital city or the municipalities of their metropolitan area, and the areas with greater tourist attraction and international exposure tend to have greater employment opportunities and concentrate more capital, companies and therefore more workers. Meanwhile, demographic depopulation is concentrated in rural areas and in the most deprived urban areas.

However, this is a new phenomenon in the Spanish urban system, where, as has been pointed out, these medium-sized cities and their metropolitan areas have just experienced strong urban growth, moving from a compact to a dispersed model. Their current decline, although it is beginning to be addressed academically and socially denounced in some urban centres such as Jaén or Talavera de la Reina, is still politically ignored. Despite or because of this, public policies should address this issue and give priority to the economic development of cities in peripheral regions, in order to reduce the territorial polarisation caused by the current globalised economy. There is a political ignorance about urban degrowth that needs to be defused.

In Spain, a phenomenon of urban degrowth is taking place in medium-sized cities. It has historical precedents, such as Avilés or Ferrol, but basically it is taking place in the second and last decade of the 21st century, between 2011 and 2020. This phenomenon, which is politically ignored and only in some cities has provoked a social response from citizens, already affects a third of Spain's medium-sized cities. With a general approach to the process, based on the authors' previous work, it can be correlated with the ageing and decline of the active population. The Spanish medium-sized cities, on the other hand, respond to complex dynamics and can be grouped into four clusters, the majority of which are the urban centres affected by the Great Recession, where demographic factors such as the increase in the population over 65 years of age are combined with other socio-economic factors, the evolution of unemployment, the emigration of skilled workers and the decline in the arrival of foreign immigrants.

However, it is precisely the complexity of the process and the fact that the quantitative analysis results in four different clusters, which are not without contradictions within them, that makes it necessary to adopt a qualitative approach, which in this research has been carried out through five critical cases of medium-sized Spanish cities in decline. In these cities, the local context marks a serious situation, perceived by their citizens and giving rise to social protest platforms. Depending on the case, the continuous industrial decline, the decline due to more recent relocation phenomena and the economic

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<sup>1</sup> Traducción exclusiva de los autores/ Authors' exclusive translation.

slowdown following the Great Recession have led to high unemployment rates and out-migration of the working population, while the demographic structure is ageing.

A city's ability and capacity to imagine its own future without losing its local culture, community ties and sense of place will shape the future of these shrinking cities. It is desirable for people to be able to find a dignified life and project in medium-sized cities, which value their strength as cities of roots and identity. These ideals require the implementation of policies against urban degrowth, but this reality has not yet been taken into account in Spain and, on the contrary, critical cases have revealed political and managerial errors with failed public investments that have aggravated the situation.

This article is a contribution to highlighting the seriousness of the problem, with the aim of providing a general overview of Spain's shrinking medium-sized cities, but essentially with the intention of approaching a sample of five critical cases. In the latter sense, it is an original contribution that hopes to have a practical side if it raises political awareness of the issue.