

OBSERVATORY
OF SOCIAL REALITY

THE COVID-19 CRISIS

Number 4, June 2021

**From the tsunami
to groundswell:
mental health and
social protection.**

**The reality
of the families
accompanied
by Caritas in
April 2021**

Executive summary

After 15 months since the official declaration of the global pandemic by the World Health Organization, it seems that the pandemic is beginning to be under control. During this time, the health crisis has also become an economic and social crisis that has hit the most vulnerable people hardest. It is time to see what is left after the tsunami, when the tide is ebbing: to see if beneath the apparent calm there is a rough and turbulent groundswell that is preventing the buoyancy of those who are submerged and those who are trying to swim.

In terms of employment, even before the pandemic, 43% of active people in a situation of exclusion were unemployed, a figure that almost doubled in the first months of the strictest confinement (79%) and which gradually fell to 53% of this population today. This means that **the unemployment rate for the people assisted by Caritas is more than three times higher than for the population as a whole (17%)**.

When there is employment, it is in very precarious conditions. Thus, 33% of the people accompanied by Caritas who have worked during April 2021 have worked for less than 10 days. In addition, 57% have had intermittent trajectories between periods of work and unemployment over the last year, including those who were working before the pandemic and who are not working now (14%). Only 23% have maintained their employment prior to the declaration of the state of alarm. At the other extreme, more than 95,000 people have never had access to employment.

Lack of employment and job insecurity affect income, **and 315,000 people live in households whose income is so low that they have not managed to escape from poverty** in the entire period measured in this Observatory, from before the pandemic to the present. This is evidence of their chronic situation of poverty.

But even more people **live below the severe poverty line**, a reality for almost **700,000 people**. Of these, around 26,000 have reached this situation as a result of the COVID crisis and its socio-economic impact. Poverty increases especially in households where there are children and/or adolescents, so that 81% of large families are in a situation of poverty.

One of the strategies to help families stay afloat was the implementation of the minimum living income (IMV, as per the Spanish acronym), whose coverage rate remains very limited. Thus, the percentage of families receiving either the IMV or the social wage, guaranteed income, or its regional equivalent is 13.4%. However, there is a positive impact of these instruments which indicates that we must continue to work to ensure that they reach the families who need them, as **for the almost 60,000 families assisted by Caritas whose only income came from the guaranteed income system this system has come to be their lifeline**.

These difficulties make covering certain expenses quite a challenge. In this sense, **housing is a serious problem**: rent or mortgage costs are the main economic difficulty for these families, and **more than 220,000 households are unable to meet the costs of basic supplies**. However, the difficulties go beyond this and mean that they are unable to eat properly (38%) or buy necessary medicines (24%) due to

a lack of financial resources. And, once again, we see that the difficulties expressed by families with minors in their care are greater.

All this is materialised in the fact that **20% of the families assisted by Caritas have had to move house during this period and, of these, half have done so because they could no longer afford the expenses of their previous home.** This change does not seem to have been for the better: more than 130,000 families feel dissatisfied with their housing in terms of habitability, space, number of rooms, etc.

During this period, the digital divide has become more evident than ever due to the digitalisation brought about by confinement, but we have not all moved at the same speed, **and more than half of the families assisted by Caritas are in a situation of technological blackout.** Aware of the need to start putting light into this blackout, 6.7% of families have made an extra effort to join the digital society.

For their part, social connections beyond the digital world show some erosion with regard to more practical or material help, but they maintain their strength on the emotional and care levels. **A large part of the population served by Caritas (70%) has someone who can offer emotional support in any eventuality, and more than half (55%) can count on someone to take care of them in case they need it.** At the other extreme, less than 40% have someone who can lend them money occasionally or who can help them get a job.

At the most vulnerable extreme at a relational level, more than 65,000 families have no support in terms of emotional support or care, nor in the more material aspect. Among the families that have not been lifted out of poverty during the whole period, one in five have no support at all.

In relation to the above, **the families assisted by Caritas state that the aspect of their personal life most affected by COVID is work and personal finances (52%), followed by a negative state of mind (19%).** Impacts on social life are in second place, with only one in ten indicating an impact related to distancing from loved ones.

These types of measures (distancing from loved ones, restrictions on movement, etc.) have the greatest impact on the population as a whole. This shows a different impact; while for the population in a situation of exclusion, employment and personal finances are their main concern, for the population as a whole, the greatest impact is in the area of social relations and the limitations in this regard.

In terms of the fear or concern experienced in different situations, the situation of exclusion means that the fear is caused by more material or practical issues for subsistence, and three out of four people are afraid of losing economic income. In relation to this, seven out of ten fear that a family member will lose his/her job and, in the relational sphere, six out of ten are afraid of not being able to see family and friends.

All this means that, given the complex initial situation of Caritas families, their perception of the general economic situation in Spain is currently fair or good for more than 40% of families. On the other hand, more than 60% rate their personal economic situation as bad or very bad. This contrasts with the perception of

the Spanish resident population as a whole, who rate the country's economic situation as bad or very bad (90%), but mostly perceive their economic situation as good or very good (60%).

The lack of employment and financial means to meet the most necessary expenses – food, supplies, housing, medicines, etc. – among the families assisted by Caritas means that they are more concerned about the effects of the pandemic on the economy and employment (41%) than solely about the health effects (16%).

In this report, we delve more deeply into the impacts of COVID on the mental health of Cáritas participants. Since the pandemic began, **around 40% of the population in exclusion have felt overwhelmed or stressed, worried about many things without being able to control it, sad, or depressed often or quite often.** This has led to one or more anxiety or panic attacks in four out of ten people.

With all that we have seen, we close this series of reports with **some of the challenges we face as a society and as a welfare state**, and some proposals that derive from the data we have been collecting in the different studies. Thus, we talk about the right to decent work, the **right to housing, the rights of children and the family, the establishment of an income guarantee system that really protects these families, we include being digital as a new right, and we reflect on the right to mental health, understanding health as much more than the absence of illness.**