
ARTÍCULOS / ARTICLES

PURITY AND DANGER IN SPANISH AGRICULTURE: FARM WORKERS DURING THE PANDEMIC

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to carry out a sociological analysis of the implications of what could be referred to as the paradox of farm labourers during the pandemic. That is, their designation as essential workers turned them simultaneously into high-risk workers and a source of public alarm. Based on the analysis of the logics of purity and danger of Mary Douglas (1991), this article analyses how some of the public health strategies developed by the institutions during the pandemic contributed to reinforcing the invisibility and vulnerability of migrant workers. The article shows how, being placed in the realm of the impure and dangerous, foreign agricultural workers were not able to receive the health care they required, and their living spaces thus became environments conducive to the spread of the virus. Through an exploration of secondary sources, a review of pertinent documents and in-depth interviews with key informants, this article firstly offers a description of the institutional process by which foreign agricultural workers in the Region of Murcia were converted into essential workers facilitated the spread of infections. Secondly, it explores the link between the precariousness of the working and living conditions of farm labourers and the absence of the ethics of self-care, which was at the heart of the chain of Covid-19 infections suffered by this population. Finally, it focuses on institutional responses to the threat posed by the threat posed by increased infections among immigrant farm workers.

Key words: Foreign agricultural workers, COVID-19, public health strategies, immune democracy, intensive agricultural production, vulnerability, syndemic

SEGURIDAD Y PELIGRO EN LA AGRICULTURA ESPAÑOLA: LOS TRABAJADORES DEL CAMPO DURANTE LA PANDEMIA

Resumen: Este artículo tiene como objeto reconstruir sociológicamente las implicaciones de lo que podríamos llamar la paradoja de los trabajadores agrícolas durante la pandemia. Esto es, su consideración como trabajadores esenciales supuso, al mismo tiempo, su conversión en trabajadores de riesgo y motivo de alarma pública. Basándose en las lógicas de pureza y peligro identificadas por Mary Douglas (1991), el artículo analiza cómo algunas de las estrategias de salud pública desarrolladas por las instituciones durante la pandemia contribuyeron a reforzar la invisibilidad y la vulnerabilidad de los trabajadores migrantes. El artículo muestra cómo, al ser situados en el ámbito de lo impuro y lo peligroso, los trabajadores agrícolas extranjeros no pudieron recibir la atención sanitaria que requerían y sus espacios de vida se convirtieron así en entornos propicios para el contagio del virus.

A partir de la explotación de fuentes secundarias, revisión documental y entrevistas en profundidad a informantes clave, este artículo ofrece, en primer lugar, una descripción del proceso por el que la conversión institucional de los trabajadores agrícolas extranjeros en la Región de Murcia en trabajadores esenciales facilitó la propagación de los contagios. En segundo lugar, se muestra la vinculación entre la precariedad de las condiciones de trabajo y vida de los trabajadores agrícolas y la ausencia de una ética del cuidado de sí mismos. Y, finalmente, el artículo se analiza las respuestas institucionales ante la amenaza representada por el aumento de contagios entre los trabajadores agrícolas inmigrantes.

Palabras clave: Trabajadores agrícolas extranjeros, COVID-19, estrategias de salud pública, democracia inmunitaria, producción agrícola intensiva, vulnerabilidad, pandemia

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this paper is to carry out a sociological analysis of the implications of what could be referred to as the paradox of farm labourers during the pandemic. Their designation as essential workers after the first state of emergency was declared by the Spanish government turned them simultaneously into high-risk workers and a source of public alarm, to the extent that they were exposed to community-acquired infection in both the production field and that of social reproduction. How did we not foresee that the public health strategy put in place would be utterly ineffective for those whose living and working conditions rendered them particularly vulnerable and exposed to social disaffection?

This blind spot in public policy clearly reveals the social invisibility of agricultural labourers, particularly in light of the fact that most of them are migrants. This invisibility is linked to ideas of purity and danger that, according to Mary Douglas (1991/1966), lie at the heart of societies: 'we find that certain moral values are upheld and certain social rules defined by beliefs in dangerous contagion' (Douglas, 1991, p.16). This is also applicable to postmodern societies, in which the 'dream of purity' continues to function (Bauman, 2001). So much so, in fact, that those who fail the 'stern test of purity which whoever applies for admission is required to pass', which consists of demonstrating one's ability for infinitely renewed consumption, the adoption of liquid identifies and dedication to chasing intense experiences and sensations, are viewed as the "'dirt" of postmodern purity' (Bauman, 2001, pp. 23-25). In their condition as foreign migrants and poor workers, farm labourers do not comply with this dream of purity about which Bauman warned. Therefore, if Alain Brossat (2008) is right about the constitution in modern societies of an 'immunitarian democracy', according to which there is a close connection between 'law and immunity', immunity is reserved for those with Bauman's purity and denied to others, who are associated with 'danger', 'threat' or 'dirtiness'. This would explain the social blindness and even the coldness of the public response to the evident extreme exposure of migrant agricultural workers to the Covid-19 virus.

If, as Brossat argues, the opposite of 'community' is 'immunity', then the pandemic has revealed the hard-

ness of the border which divides our common world, protecting some while rendering others vulnerable. As Donatella di Cesare points out, 'the disparity between the protected and the defenceless, which defies any notion of justice, has never been as striking, as barefaced, as in the crisis that the coronavirus has prompted' (Di Cesare, 2021, p.32). The Covid-19 pandemic has served to highlight the importance of the subjectivity of 'care of the self', which Foucault (1999) conceptualised as comprising three elements: 1) one's attitude to oneself, others and the world; 2) a certain type of gaze or attention, to the extent that looking after oneself involves shifting one's gaze inwards from outside; it involves paying attention to what one thinks, and to what happens in that thought; and 3) the notion of care of the self speaks to a series of actions, actions which one carries out on oneself, actions by which one takes responsibility for oneself, purifies oneself and transforms and transfigures oneself. As we have learned during the health crisis, systemic risks require that this self-care be exercised in relation to others and the world, in terms of both (self)awareness and as a set of practical decisions.

The social and occupational space occupied by farm labourers has emerged in intensive agricultural enclaves on the basis of severe abridgment of social and labour rights, which leaves no room for the ethics of self-care. This divide rose to the fore during the health crisis, with the world inhabited by farm labourers quickly becoming a space in which the virus ran rampant.

From a methodological perspective, the strategy followed in this study comprised an exploration of secondary sources, a review of pertinent documents and in-depth interviews with key informants. To obtain infection and cumulative incidence data by area and place of work, at both a national level and specifically for the Murcia Region, we analysed the information provided by the Health Ministry's Health Alert and Emergency Coordination Centre, as well as the situation reports issued by the Murcia Regional Epidemiological Service (Centro de Coordinación, 2020; Servicio de epidemiología Región de Murcia, 2020). The document review included different general and specific protocols and measures pertaining to the agrifood industry, which were approved by the European Union, the Spanish government and the Murcia Regional Government, as well as the action plans issued by agrifood companies, reports published by social or-

ganisations and public institutions, and press releases. Finally, interviews were held with technical staff working in the field of housing and trade union representatives from the agrifood industry in the Murcia Region¹.

The first section of the paper offers an overview of how the designation of farm labourers as essential workers not only prevented the wheel of capital accumulation in the intensive, export-oriented agricultural industry from grinding to a halt, but even enabled it to speed up, while at the same time laying the groundwork for the community-acquired infection experienced by so many migrant agricultural workers in many regions of Spain.

The second section explores the link between the precariousness of the working and living conditions of farm labourers and the absence of the ethics of self-care, which was at the heart of the chain of Covid-19 infections suffered by this population.

Finally, the third section focuses on institutional responses to the threat posed by those excluded from the immunitarian democracy, when society finally realised that the spread of the disease among migrant farm labourers (exacerbated by their exclusion) was affecting the 'protected' population also. In response to these threats, the public authorities felt pressure to develop action protocols designed to improve the hygiene conditions to which farm labourers are exposed.

AGRIFOOD PRODUCTION COULD NOT BE ALLOWED TO STOP. FARM LABOURERS: ESSENTIAL YET EXPOSED TO INFECTION

By 14 March 2020, when the Spanish government decreed a state of emergency² and announced a general lockdown for the entire country, infection rates, hospital admissions and the death toll had all started rising sharply³. The lockdown lasted until the end of spring.

Approximately one month later, on 18 April, the Covid-19 virus had claimed over 20,000 lives in Spain. The final days of March were particularly dramatic. For over a week, more than 800 people died from the virus every day, hospital ICUs were overrun, the virus ran rampant through nursing homes and funeral parlours were overwhelmed. In the Autonomous Community of Madrid, one of the most heavily affected areas of the country, several impromptu mass morgues were set up (in the Madrid and Majadahonda ice rinks, for example) to house thousands of bodies⁴, resulting in some of the most devastating images to come out of the health crisis.

It was, without doubt, one of the most intense moments of social, political and emotional turmoil in recent history. The government's priority aim was to reduce the infection rate ('flatten the curve') and increasingly drastic measures were taken to this end. Since there was as yet no tracking system to enable infection rates to be calculated separately for each region and steps taken accordingly, the measures were applied equally all over the country. For example, in the Murcia Region, the number of deaths and infections notified during the first wave of the pandemic (March-June) was extraordinarily low in comparison with the national mean⁵, and yet the region was subject to the same stringent measures as the rest of the Spanish population.

Just two weeks after the state of emergency was declared, in the days leading up to the Easter break, the government imposed an even stricter lockdown and suspended all non-essential activities⁶. The decree was issued on 29 March 2020 and included a wide range of activities deemed to be essential (pharmacies, petrol stations, transport, etc.) that were exempt from the suspension. It also contained a section dedicated specifically to those working in 'activities included in the supply chain serving the market and production centres involved in essential goods and services'. At a time of intense uncertainty, the maintenance of the supply chain for essential goods was a strategic priority. The government was afraid that images of empty supermarket shelves might trigger chaos and social panic among the general population. The agrifood industry of the Murcia Region and, more specifically, farm labourers, became a decisive factor in terms of both primary production in the fields and postharvest preparation in packaging plants.

The agrifood industry was faced with the challenge of maintaining production levels while at the same time guaranteeing the protection of day labourers in the field and employees working in packaging plants. In terms of the volume of fruit and vegetable exports, PROEXPORT, the principal association of fruit and vegetable producers and exporters in the Murcia Region, reported that, in 2020, the industry had managed to maintain the same production levels as the previous year: around 2.5 million tons, to the value of €2.5 billion⁷.

The agrifood industry of the Murcia Region exports over two thirds of its production and employs around 90,000 people, of which approximately 75% work in the fields, with the rest being employed in packaging plants linked to the food processing industry (SEPE, 2020b: 27). Field labourers are mostly male migrant

workers, mainly from Morocco, while packaging plant workers are mostly native (and to a lesser extent migrant) women.

According to various different organisations⁸, the Murcia agrifood industry was one of those that responded and adapted most quickly to the market demands generated by the pandemic. This was due, among other factors, to agricultural export companies' capacity to mobilise and supply an agricultural labour force in a very short space of time. Indeed, according to a recent report by the Murcia Regional Economic and Social Council, throughout the whole of 2020, the agrifood industry maintained similar employment rates to the previous year (Consejo Económico y Social de la Región de Murcia (2021))⁹, which clearly indicates the physical exposure to which workers in that industry were subject in all stages of the pandemic.

In other words, the risk of shortages in supermarkets was eliminated or reduced mostly thanks to the fact that neither harvesting nor packaging were halted from March to December, even though this implied a potential increase in infection risk among workers.

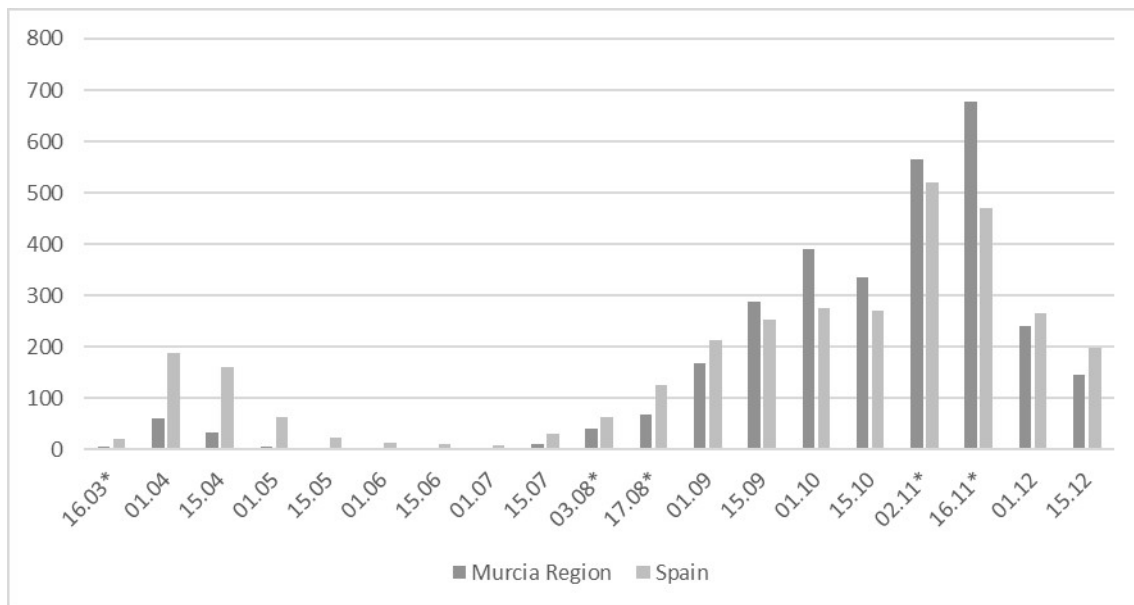
Although, as stated earlier, infection rates in the Murcia Region during the first wave of the pandemic were very low in comparison with the national mean

and those recorded in other parts of the country, during the second wave, which commenced around the beginning of August, they were much more similar to those registered in the rest of Spain (Graph 1). The greater incidence recorded in the Murcia Region during the second wave of the pandemic is reflected also in the increase in infection figures (Graph 2).

This rise in infections occurred mainly in the occupational, family and social fields (Graph 3). If we look at the data pertaining to the occupational field, it becomes clear that, as shown in Table 1, Covid-19 outbreaks in the Murcia Region were mainly concentrated in fruit and vegetable production companies and food packaging and processing plants, which were the hub of 113 out of the 274 outbreaks¹⁰ (41.2%) recorded from July to December 2020. Consequently, the working environments of farm labourers and packaging plant workers had higher infection rates than other working environments, rendering this population particularly vulnerable. This vulnerability is even greater if we bear in mind the (generally) precarious living conditions of this particular population, which are explored in more detail in the next section.

The extreme vulnerability of migrant agricultural workers to the Covid-19 virus is not an isolated phenomenon, but rather is linked to more general dynam-

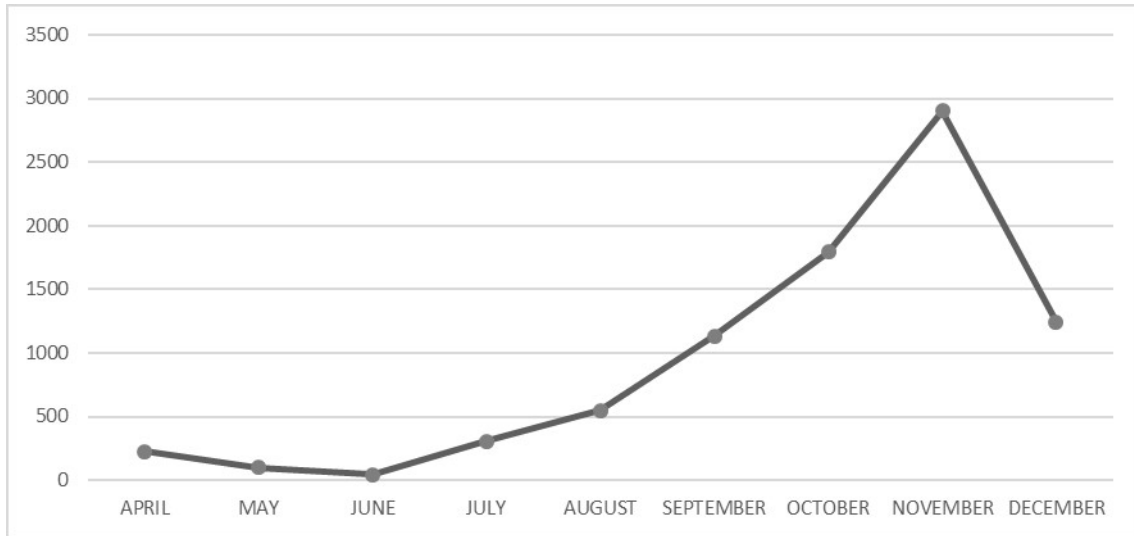
GRAPH 1.
EVOLUTION OF THE 14-DAY CUMULATIVE INCIDENCE RATE IN SPAIN AND THE MURCIA REGION



Source: Ministry of Health.

Notes: Days 1 and 15 of each month have been taken as a reference. CI: num. cases diagnosed per 100,000 inhabitants. *No data are available for 15/03; 01/08; 15.08; 01/11 or 15/11.

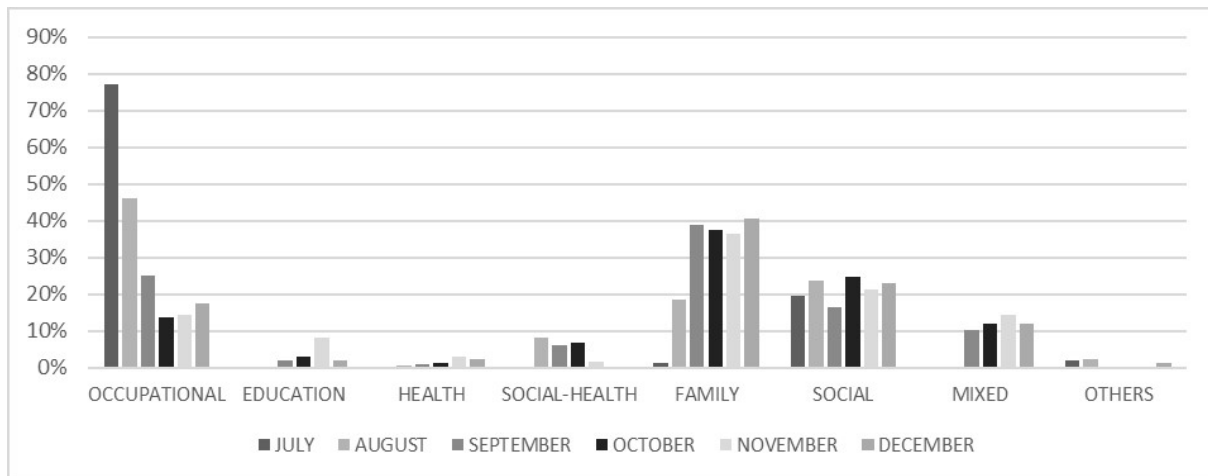
GRAPH 2.
EVOLUTION OF NEW INFECTIONS PER MONTH IN THE MURCIA REGION (THOUSANDS)



Source: Ministry of Health.

Notes: Due to technical problems, Murcia did not report data on new infections on 3, 16 and 17 September and 24 December.

GRAPH 3.
DISTRIBUTION OF INFECTIONS BY AREA IN THE MURCIA REGION (JULY-DECEMBER, 2020), AS A PERCENTAGE OF THE TOTAL NUMBER OF INFECTIONS



Source: Department of Health of the Murcia Regional Government.

ics that affect the entire foreign working population in Europe. The health crisis has served to highlight, perhaps more than at any other moment in recent history, the extent to which European economies depend on foreign labour. However, it has also brought to light the fragile living conditions to which many foreign citizens are exposed during their migratory process. As shown by recent studies, migrant workers are overrepresented in activities that were categorised as strategic in European countries during the

Covid-19 pandemic (Augerie-Graner, 2021). However, despite their key role in Europe's response to the crisis, migrant workers, particularly those from countries outside the EU, were one of the population groups that were hit hardest by the health and socio-economic consequences of the pandemic. This situation is largely explained by the high concentration of these workers in low skilled jobs in which teleworking is not possible (cleaning, care work, transport and agriculture, for example), coupled with higher rates of tem-

TABLE 1.
OUTBREAKS BETWEEN JULY AND DECEMBER, BY COMPANY CATEGORY, IN THE OCCUPATIONAL FIELD IN THE MURCIA REGION, JULY-DECEMBER, 2020

OUTBREAKS JULY-DECEMBER	J	A	S	O	N	D	Total
Seasonal workers/fruit and vegetable producers	4	15	23	16	25	14	97
Abattoirs/meat production companies	2	1	2	1	1	0	7
Food industry (distribution, supermarkets)	0	0	3	10	2	1	16
Business sector and construction industry	0	0	0	13	6	5	24
Homecare	0	0	0	11	11	2	24
Catering establishments (workers)	0	0	0	6	2	2	10
Other companies (including bars, cafés, restaurants and other firms)	2	24	24	45	19	6	120

Source: Ministry of Health.

Notes: Due to technical problems, Murcia did not report data on new outbreaks in the first week of October and November.

porary contracts and outsourcing, lower salaries and problems accessing housing (Castracani et al., 2020; Fasani & Mazza, 2020). Palumbo & Corrado (2020), for instance, have shown how the enormous pressure exerted by the pandemic on the agrifood industry throughout Europe has disproportionately affected migrant workers¹¹.

HOW THE PANDEMIC BECAME A SYNDEMIC: WHEN THE VIRUS COMBINED WITH DENIAL OF SELF-CARE AMONG AGRICULTURAL WORKERS

The concept ‘syndemic’ has the virtue of focusing attention on the origins of infection and on the social spaces in which interactions that have a detrimental effect on people’s health and render them more vulnerable to infection take place. The notion of syndemic was first conceived by Merrill Singer, a North American medical anthropologist who argued that a syndemic approach reveals biological and social interactions that are important for prognosis, treatment and health policy. On 26 September 2020, Richard Horton, director of the medical journal *The Lancet*¹², claimed that the Covid-19 crisis was not a pandemic, but rather a syndemic. Syndemics are characterised by biological and social factors, interactions between conditions and states that increase a person’s susceptibility to harm or worsen their health outcomes. The most important consequence of viewing Covid-19 as a syndemic is that it enables one to identify and highlight its social origins: the vulnerability of older adults, the migrant population, minorities, and poorly-paid key workers with a lower level of social protection.

Industrial agriculture is, without doubt, one of the social spaces that are vulnerable to the virus (Table 1). Working conditions in the agricultural labour field

entail a series of elements that make it impossible for workers (mostly migrants) to ‘care for themselves’, since they do not have access to decent living conditions (Pedreño, de Castro & Gadea, 2015).

Agricultural work has traditionally been subject to crop cycles, resulting in a highly uneven need for labour. The development of industrial farming in agricultural export regions such as Murcia has significantly extended working periods, which in turn has reduced employment seasonality. However, the sector is still characterised by the temporary nature of the jobs it generates (Ramírez Melgarejo, 2020), meaning that temporary contracts and unemployment are constant features in day labourers’ lives. In the Murcia Region, the temporary nature of the work on offer is managed through different types of contract, all of which have important implications for workers. The more fortunate ones (usually natives or migrants with extensive experience in the sector) are hired under what are known as permanent seasonal contracts, and have stable relationships with agricultural companies, even though said relationships are limited to specific periods of the year. These day labourers work more days and hours during the season, their working conditions are more protected by collective agreements and they receive benefits of some kind during periods of unemployment. However, when additional labour is required (such as during peak moments of the season), agricultural companies have recourse to temporary contracts. These contracts are often signed with temporary employment agencies (TEAs), which have become increasingly important intermediaries since the 2012 labour reform. These TEAs, which mainly hire migrant workers, have been the target of multiple complaints concerning irregularities (extension of working days, piecework, salaries lower than that

established by the collective agreement and failure to make the Social Security payments corresponding to all the days worked, among others). In some cases, uncertainty regarding whether or not they will have work, and for how long, prompts day labourers to try to work as many hours as possible, engaging in long, exhausting working days that hardly leave them any time at all to recover their strength before starting all over again, a situation which often leads to injury and illness. In both the fields and the packaging plants, repetitive tasks and uncomfortable postures which must be maintained for hours leave their mark on workers' bodies: muscle spasms, degenerative osteoarthritis, circulatory problems, stress, etc. In order to keep going, workers combat these diseases and conditions with pain killers and muscle relaxants, which are often self-administered since they cannot afford to take time off work to go to the doctor's (Gadea et al., 2016).

In addition to suffering from job uncertainty, farm labourers also earn very low salaries, generally being paid by the day and often per item (piecework). In Murcia, agricultural workers earn €6.93 per hour, a rate which corresponds to the minimum wage decreed for 2019, since employers from the agricultural sector refuse to apply the raise established for 2020¹³. Insufficient work, coupled with low wages, results in financial hardship, making it very difficult for the families of agricultural day labourers to make ends meet. For many migrant farm labourers, missing one day of work means missing one day's wages and losing money that is vital to their basic survival. Missing ten days of work in order to self-isolate is unthinkable. One clear indicator of this financial precariousness is the difference between the migrant and native Spanish population in terms of the AROPE¹⁴ indicator, with the former having an index (49.6%) that is 20% higher than the latter (29.9%). In other words, almost half of the foreign population residing in the Murcia Region is at risk of poverty and/or social exclusion (Losa, 2020). Looking after oneself, protecting oneself and protecting others require material resources that are simply not available to migrant farm labourers.

The last element that is worth highlighting here is the high degree of mobility to which agricultural workers are subject. If we take contracts that involve inter-provincial movement as our reference, we see that, during 2019, almost one fourth of all such contracts were signed with companies in the agricultural sector. This sector is by far the one with the highest mobility rate (25.48%). The flows which generate the

most contracts are between Alicante and Murcia, Cordoba and Seville, and Murcia and Almería, with all movement being bidirectional (SEPE, 2020a). But mobility is not just inter-provincial, and day labourers often move around different agricultural areas of the Murcia Region on a daily basis. This means that transport, usually in shared cars, vans or buses in which it is impossible to guarantee protective measures, is a key element in agricultural labour¹⁵.

Alongside employment conditions, housing has been another major area of risk for migrant agricultural workers, since, during the pandemic, the home became a key space for preventing and containing the virus. There is a large body of scientific evidence that has shown, for some time now, that not having affordable and adequate housing is severely harmful to human health and wellbeing (Novoa et al., 2014; Eurofound, 2016; Trilla & Bosch, 2018). In this sense, the pandemic has pushed to the fore a relationship (between housing and health) that has existed for many years. Migrants constitute one of the population groups that have historically had most difficulty accessing and maintaining adequate housing in Spain (FOESSA, 2019; Alguacil & Leal, 2012; Martínez Veiga, 1999). This situation particularly affects farm labourers due to the low salaries and high rate of temporary and informal contracts that are so typical of the agricultural sector. Moreover, since most farm labourers are foreign, they are more exposed to ethnic profile discrimination by real estate companies and property owners (Sánchez-García, 2019)¹⁶. In his report of June 2020, drafted after his visit to Spain on 27 January 2020, the UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, Philip Alston, deplored the housing crisis in the country and highlighted the special housing difficulties experienced by migrants, particularly those working in agriculture (Alston, 2020).

Once of the characteristics common to all agricultural export enclaves in Spain is the deficient housing conditions in which a significant part of the foreign day labourers live. This situation has been widely exposed by the pandemic, since it was among this group of workers that outbreaks and infections occurred most frequently within the labour field, both nationally and in the Murcia Region (Centro de Coordinación y de Alertas y Emergencias Sanitarias (2020))¹⁷.

In the Murcia Region, the residential difficulties of migrant agricultural workers are characterised, on the one hand, by the predominance of poor living situations: overcrowding, shared houses, subletting, insecurity of tenure and the absence of basic services

and supplies for guaranteeing personal health and hygiene. And, on the other hand, by the presence, albeit to a lesser extent, of substandard housing: informal localised settlements, squatting, slums and homelessness. This residential model, in which the main issues are the barriers to adequate housing, followed (to a lesser extent) by informal settlements and substandard housing, is the result of the existence of a supply of agricultural labour throughout almost the entire year, which, coupled with business strategies that seek to maintain a reserve army in the fields, has enabled agricultural workers to settle more stably in the region than in seasonal agricultural enclaves, such as Huelva or Lleida, for example (de Castro, Gadea, Pedreño & Ramírez, 2017). Nevertheless, this model does not exclude the possibility of recruiting (during peak production periods) itinerant workers in more irregular situations, who are more likely to reside temporarily in precarious accommodation located near the crop fields, settlements which may house between 200 and 250 people at any given time¹⁸.

As shown above, the Covid-19 pandemic in the Murcia Region hit labourers in the fruit and vegetable industry particularly hard, with the impact being even higher among those living in poor housing conditions¹⁹. In other words, residential conditions played a key role in the spread of the virus, for a number of different reasons. Firstly, as a result of lack of space due to overcrowding and shared living spaces, which prevented correct compliance with isolation protocols and fostered the spread of infection, often across dif-

ferent family units sharing a single space²⁰. Secondly, due to problems linked to the informal nature of rental contracts (subletting, shared dwellings or poor housing), which makes it hard for workers to obtain a census certificate, a vital prerequisite for accessing primary medical care, as well as for track and trace operations. This invisibility in the eyes of the health system is even greater in the case of illegal migrant workers, who often do not seek medical care for fear of being deported or fined. And thirdly, it was very difficult to implement health-related prevention measures in these places of residence, due to insalubrious, unhygienic conditions and the absence of basic services, particularly in the more precarious dwellings.

THE INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSE

In this section, we explore the three institutional responses to the spread of the Covid-19 virus in the spaces linked to farm labourers’ work and life. These responses are summarised in Table 2. Each response reveals different aspects of the social divide which exists in the citizen community and the difficulties faced by migrant workers in terms of inclusion. Of the three responses identified, the hygiene-related strategy was the most prevalent, which is why we will focus mainly on this approach.

Hygiene-related strategy

The first Action Protocols against the Risk of Covid-19 issued by regional governments targeted specifi-

TABLE 2.
INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSES TO INFECTIONS

INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSE	DEFINITION	STAKEHOLDER	CARING FOR ONESELF AND OTHERS
Hygiene	The purity of the workplace as a means of eliminating danger: cleanliness, disinfection and social distancing of bodies.	Individual / company	Contradiction between the workplace and the worker’s structural working and living conditions.
Recognition	Recognition and respect for worker rights.	Social class and labour law	There is a recognition of the protective effect of citizenship and worker rights, but their inclusive effects are limited by the structural persistence of the social divide (the poverty and precariousness to which agricultural workers are exposed). Compliance problems due to poor collective organisation of workers and contradictions between citizen and migrant status.
Community	Analysis and processing of different ways of living and different means of catching a disease.	Local community and social stakeholders	Community awareness is limited to the local sphere and de-stigmatisation.

Source: own elaboration

cally at ‘agricultural holdings’ (CARM, 2020a) and the ‘agrifood industry’ (CARM, 2020b) were published on 1 April 2020, shortly after the state of emergency was decreed on 14 March 2020 and farm labourers were declared essential workers for guaranteeing food supplies to society. The two protocols were updated on 15 July, following reports of high infection rates among agricultural workers, something that posed a threat to both society in general and production companies, which were responsible for guaranteeing certain product delivery and hygiene conditions for the large-scale food distribution firms for which they work (CARM, 2020c, 2020d).

The specific measures established in these protocols included, among others, social distancing (in plant production lines and in the fields, as well as during transport in buses or vans), a recommendation to create stable groups and fixed work teams, the thorough disinfection of physical spaces and temperature taking at work.

We would like to highlight the perspective underpinning the design of these protocols. Firstly, they defined their action proposals as hygiene measures focused on the workplace. Secondly, they defined a subject for the action, namely the company, which was responsible for assessing the risk of exposure ‘in every task, individually’, compiling a specific contingency plan for Covid-19 risk assessment.

The hygiene-related strategy is therefore a form of threat management (with the threat being posed by migrant farm labourers) that focuses on the purity of the workplace through cleaning, disinfection and social distancing between bodies. The aim is to prevent the threat and its impurities from contaminating the productive space and, most particularly, food products²¹.

Nevertheless, the deployment of this protective barrier in the workplace to guarantee proper hygiene has serious limitations, since it fails to address the social divide from which the threat and impurity spring. Indeed, the hygiene-related strategy focused solely on the work carried out excludes a large number of problems that are closely linked to the precarious working and living conditions to which agricultural workers are exposed. As shown in the previous section, these conditions exist outside the working environment (around which the protective barrier is erected) and are the main cause of this population’s particular vulnerability to infection by the virus²².

The hygiene-related approach also assumes that all working and production environments are similar and comply equally with formal labour regulations. How-

ever, one of the principal characteristics of the agricultural industry is the heterogeneity of the working conditions imposed by the companies operating in it, resulting in a sliding scale of company types and jobs that moves gradually from informal to formal (from work without contract or piecework, typical of smaller and medium-sized firms or TEAs, to the –gradually– more formal working conditions found in larger companies and cooperatives). This uneven assortment of working conditions and companies extends also to the enforcement of the measures contemplated in the protocols. Moreover, another crucial element in the spread of the virus is that of the social reproduction of work (especially housing), a field in which the link between the precariousness of migrants’ employment situation and that of their living conditions is patent since, as shown in previous sections, low salaries and poor working conditions make it hard for them to access decent housing and practice self-care. In sum, these structural conditions, which are configured in both salary terms and in the field of social reproduction, are outside the ‘purity and danger’ perspective from which the hygiene-related, task-centred approach was looking at the problem.

Despite being known to both researchers and social intervention associations, one situation that was completely ignored by public policies was that of migrant workers (many of whom were in the country illegally) living in informal settlements in many agricultural regions. Seasonal workers (or ‘temporeros’ as they are known in Spain), who spend the season moving from one informal settlement to another in accordance with the harvest periods of different crops, were also largely ignored by government policies.

A set of Guidelines for Seasonal Workers in the EU in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic was issued by the Spanish Government on 3 August 2020 (Ministerio de Sanidad, 2020), after months of formal complaints lodged by a wide range of associations and denunciations in the media of the appalling living conditions to which migrant day labourers were exposed in informal settlements. This situation was further exacerbated when it was discovered that these extreme conditions were at the heart of the major outbreaks of the virus registered in the fruit and vegetable producing regions of Lleida and Aragón during the summer fruit harvesting season.

The hygiene-related, workplace-centred approach remained the predominant outlook in these guidelines or recommendations for seasonal workers. While housing and transport were recognised as important

problems, the solution proposed was rational-legal in nature. In other words, the recommendations were designed on the basis of the assumption of full compliance with housing and transport regulations.

The guidelines established hygiene recommendations targeted exclusively at ‘the temporary residences made available to workers by employers’, in the event of such facilities existing. However, if we look at the formal definition of residence established in the corresponding regulation, it becomes clear that it does not cover the informal settlements and inadequate accommodation provided to workers, regardless of the material housing conditions. The document also states that ‘transport between different geographical areas, both in Spain and abroad, and labour activities themselves, involve a high number of interpersonal contacts, which lead to a greater risk of infection’ (Ministerio de Sanidad, 2020, p.4). Here again, the hygiene-related approach focused on social distancing is the dominant one, and the problem of outsourcing labour relations to agricultural subcontractors, with the resulting transport solutions organised either informally or through TEAs, is not addressed.

Rights recognition strategy

On 16 July 2020, the European Commission issued a set of Guidelines on Seasonal Workers in the EU in the context of the Covid-19 outbreak. Alongside a list of recommendations for Member States, the document includes a diagnosis of the situation of seasonal workers, in which it explicitly recognises that the precariousness of their working and living conditions is the principal problem to address when designing a policy aimed preventing the spread of the virus: ‘cross-border seasonal workers enjoy a broad set of rights, which may differ depending on whether they are Union citizens or third-country nationals. Nevertheless, given the temporary nature of their work and the particular circumstances they work in, they can be more vulnerable to precarious working and living conditions. The COVID-19 pandemic gave more visibility to these conditions, and in some cases exacerbated them. In addition, it showed that in some cases such problems can lead to the further spreading of infectious diseases and increase the risk of COVID-19 clusters’ (European Commission, 2020, p. 1).

Consistently with the diagnosis carried out, the recommendations established by the European Commission adopted a different approach from the one espoused by the Spanish health authorities. Indeed, the Commission’s approach was basically one of rec-

ognising and ensuring respect for worker rights, as the principal strategy for stopping the spread of the virus among this population: ‘the COVID-19 crisis has shed light on the often poor working, living, as well as the occupational safety and health conditions of seasonal workers. A number of cases regarding the breaches of seasonal workers’ rights have been reported during the crisis and exacerbated ongoing issues faced by the seasonal workers that need to be addressed’ (European Commission, 2020, p. 4). This approach is clearly different from the one informing the aforementioned protocols issued by the Spanish Health Ministry, which were much more focused on hygiene measures in the workplace. For example, regarding housing and transport conditions, the Commission document states that: ‘the COVID-19 crisis has highlighted the often poor accommodation of seasonal workers and the conditions in which they are transported to their place of work [...] The Commission therefore calls on the Member States to take all necessary measures to ensure decent working and living conditions for seasonal workers. All seasonal workers should benefit during their stay in the host Member State from accommodation corresponding to an adequate standard according to national law and practice’ (European Commission, 2020, p.5).

Community strategy

As shown in the first section of this paper, in the Murcia Region, the onset of autumn and the start of the fruit, vegetable and table grape harvest in many municipalities exacerbated the spread of the virus among both agricultural labourers and employees working in packaging and processing plants (who were mostly women). In several of these municipalities, the situation during the ‘second wave’ of the pandemic became totally out of control. This prompted the Murcia Regional Government’s Health Ministry to intervene by deploying a new strategy: the community strategy. The initial test bed for this new strategy was the municipality of Totana, although it was later expanded to include others, including Torre Pacheco and Jumilla.

Totana is a municipality with, according to the 2020 Municipal Register, 35,301 inhabitants. It also has a large migrant population (approximately 31.3% of the total), mainly hailing from Ecuador, Morocco, Bolivia and, in recent years, Central America. Most migrants live in the town centre and travel daily to the Valle del Guadalentín region to work. The municipality also has a significant number of seasonal workers who

live there for several months (during the table grape harvest, for example) and are usually transported to their place of work in vans owned by TEAs. From September to November, coinciding with the table grape harvest and that of other seasonal horticultural products, there was a severe outbreak of the virus among the migrant working population: 'on 25 September, the cumulative incidence rate for the previous two weeks in the municipality of Totana was over 1,818 cases/100,000 (almost 4 times higher than the regional mean)' (CARM, 2021, p.1).

In order to halt the spread of virus, the Murcia Regional Health Ministry's strategy was forced to overcome the hygiene-related approach focused solely on the workplace. To this end, it designed a community strategy involving all social and institutional stakeholders in the municipality. The aim was to intervene first and foremost (although not exclusively) in the field of the social reproduction of migrant agricultural labourers. This is how the Murcia Regional Health Ministry described it in a document presenting the 'Totana Strategy':

'After the summer, an increasing body of evidence attested to the limited effect of the health and hygiene strategy in certain contexts. The epidemic proved particularly virulent among the most vulnerable sectors of the population: workers in precarious employment conditions, groups who have difficulty accessing the health system and those with severe housing problems, etc. The cases that were diagnosed were only the "tip of the iceberg" and it was clear that the cumulative incidence rate was not going to decrease unless we began to detect the submerged part of the pandemic. This approach could not only be focused on health and hygiene. A community approach was also required. Following the publication of the Murcia Health Service Framework Document, a working group was established with the participation of different stakeholders from the social and health-care fields, NGOs, representatives of migrant groups, the Regional Department of Social Policy and the University of Murcia's Social Exclusion Observatory. The aim was to develop a community plan for addressing the problem in specific areas of the region. At the end of September, the Head Office of the Murcia Health Service requested immediate intervention in the municipality of Totana [...] It was necessary to adapt the control and mitigation measures to the vulnerability of the different social groups, due to their greater risk of infection, but also to the greater negative impact that prevention measures themselves, such as self-

isolation, had on certain populations' (CARM - Autonomous Community of Murcia, 2021, p. 1).

The 'Totana Strategy' comprised a series of interrelated measures that sought to involve the entire local community in the prevention effort, moving beyond the individual approach of the hygiene-related perspective and paying particular attention to situations of social vulnerability, especially those linked to housing. For example, alternative places were established where workers could self-isolate under guaranteed conditions of basic hygiene and safety. This strategy proved especially critical in light of the unintended consequences of the hygiene-related strategy, namely the stigmatisation or blaming of the 'other'.

'Citizens are seen as mere recipients of regulations and advice within a general appeal to individual responsibility and the blaming of "others" when this fails. This in turn results in the stigmatisation of well-defined population groups (young people, migrants, working-class neighbourhoods, etc.) [...] In Totana, the discourse of blame, focused on individual behaviour, was the predominant discourse when the community intervention was first initiated. During the various meetings and communication events, these ideas were repeated time and time again. The feeling is that when stakeholders are provided with access to an alternative, inclusive narrative focused on social conditions, the options for intervention increase exponentially. If the causes are social, then the solutions must be social also' (CARM, 2021, p. 5-6).

CONCLUSIONS

Two opposing images are always present in collective representations of the migrant population: migrants as workers (labour-related usefulness) and migrants as threat (outside the labour field). Migrants are socially legitimate insofar as they are workers, but outside the workplace, they are often viewed with suspicion (Ribes *et al.*, 2010).

These two categories or representations, which predate the Covid-19 pandemic, result in migrants often not being perceived as part of the community or neighbourhood. They are not part of *in-group* that needs to be protected, but rather are considered in an abstract and depersonalised way solely in terms of their exchange value, which in turn leads to social indifference.

With the outbreak of the pandemic, the gap between the view of migrants as workers (within the workplace - their legitimate space) and the view of

them as a threat (within the social sphere, outside their legitimate space) has become deeper and more complex. Agricultural labourers became essential workers (increased usefulness), but at the same time, they also became a threat to both society and health (exacerbated threat).

During the pandemic, a complicated tension developed between the images of work and threat generated by agricultural workers.

For local communities, they posed a threat of infection insofar as they worked in high-risk places.

For companies, they represented the threat of being unable to cope with both market demands and the demand for rights (mobilisations), and a source of profitability in a context defined by increased consumption of agricultural products.

For institutions, they posed a threat due to the high number of infections, while at the same time they were viewed as necessary for guaranteeing a stable food supply.

As stated throughout this paper, institutions and agricultural companies implemented two strategies to try and resolve this tension (which was amplified by the health crisis). The first was a production strategy based on the ongoing intensification of work and agricultural production, and the second was a government-led hygiene-related strategy designed to contain the spread of the virus. The community strategy was far less widespread and was limited to a small number of municipalities, whereas the rights recognition strategy was promoted by the EU as a set of recommendations that were largely ignored in the Spanish agricultural industry.

What we have tried to demonstrate in this paper is that the absence of self-care (Foucault, 1999) contributed to turning farm labourers and packing plant workers into one of the most vulnerable population groups in terms of the health crisis triggered by the Covid-19 pandemic, and agricultural holdings into one of the leading 'focuses of infection' in Spain. The structural working and living conditions to which agricultural workers are exposed make it difficult for them to develop the ethics of self-care, particularly in the case of those in the most subordinate positions. Their total dependence on their job, long working days, low salaries and use of shared modes of transport all served to multiply the risk of infection in comparison with other labour fields, and made it difficult for workers to protect either themselves or those in their social and fam-

ily environments. These risks have been exacerbated by the housing conditions in which the most vulnerable agricultural workers live, which have limited the application of protective and infection control measures.

The solely hygiene-focused approach developed during the health crisis did nothing to ensure the social conditions necessary for the ethics of self-care, resulting in the persistence of the precarious conditions which render agricultural workers particularly vulnerable to systemic risks, as indeed was highlighted so evidently during the pandemic. Self-care among farm labourers remains undeveloped insofar as the rights that would enable it are still largely unrecognised (i.e., they continue to suffer from poor housing, low salaries, temporary contracts, sexual abuse, labour vulnerability, illegal status and racism). Consequently, the social conditions and interactions that gave rise to the syndemic persist, and agricultural workers continue to be an extremely vulnerable group.

The underlying problem is that the link between immunity and law generates an exclusive border within our democracies. It is therefore necessary to first dismantle this architecture in order to move towards a new link between community and rights (including labour, housing, citizenship, social and political rights).

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TRIBUTE

Authors would like to honour the memory of Juan José Cánovas, mayor of Totana (Murcia), who died from Covid on January 16th, while this article was in the edition process. We interviewed him in the fieldwork for this article because he was the main responsible in the design and application of a bold and innovative program of community intervention to prevent virus infection.

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NOTES

¹ The article prioritizes, on the one hand, the way in which the response to the rapid spread of contagion has been institutionally designed at the European, national, regional, and local levels and, on the other hand, the description of the structural working and residential conditions. Hence, it relies mainly on secondary sources and, to a lesser extent, on interviews. In fact, the use of key informant interviews has been limited to complementing this information. This implies that the article has excluded from the analysis, on the one hand, the problems of applying the measures to concrete situations and, on the other hand, the way in which migrant workers have experienced and represented these situations.

² <https://elpais.com/espana/2020-03-13/el-gobierno-debate-decretar-el-estado-de-alarma.html>

³ <https://www.epdata.es/datos/coronavirus-china-datos-graficos/498>. Last consulted: 10/05/2021.

⁴ <https://elpais.com/espana/madrid/2020-04-03/la-comunidad-de-madrid-prepara-una-tercera-morgue-en-la-pista-de-hielo-de-majadahonda.html>. Last consulted: 10/05/2021.

⁵ <https://www.epdata.es/datos/evolucion-coronavirus-cada-comunidad/518/murcia/306>.

⁶ <https://elpais.com/espana/2020-03-28/el-gobierno-amplia-el-confinamiento-los-trabajadores-de-actividades-no-esenciales-deberan-quedarse-en-casa.html>. Last consulted: 10/05/2021.

⁷ <https://www.agrodiario.com/texto-diario/mostrar/2246951/exportaciones-hortofruticolas-murcianas-resisten-pandemia-2020>. Last consulted: 10/05/2021.

⁸ <https://murciaplaza.com/el-orgullo-por-la-tierra-nueve-de-cada-diez-murcianos-crea-tan-crucial-el-sector-agricola-como-el-sanitario>. Last consulted: 10/05/2021.

⁹ Several reports describe similar situations in which employment levels were maintained during the pandemic in different intensive agricultural enclaves in Spain (Palumbo & Corrado, 2020; Güell & Garcés-Masareñas, 2020).

¹⁰ The Health Ministry defines an outbreak as any grouping of 3 or more cases of active infection between which an epidemiological link has been established.

¹¹ Some social organisations, such as European Coordination Vía Campesina (2020), asked the European Commission and European Parliament to take urgent measures to protect rural workers during the Covid-19 crisis. Open letter dated 30 April 2020. Available at: <https://www.eurovia.org/publications/open-letter-on-urgent-and-necessary-measures-for-rural-workers-in-the-context-of-covid-19/>

¹² [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(20\)32000-6/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(20)32000-6/fulltext)

¹³ Interview with a CCOO trade union representative working in the industry in Murcia.

¹⁴ Acronym standing for 'At Risk of Poverty and/or Exclusion'.

¹⁵ According to a survey carried out among workers of an agrifood company in the municipality of Totana (one of the municipalities with the highest number of infections among agricultural workers), 65.8% do not live in the town, with this figure being 76.1% among foreign workers. Of these, 84.4% travelled to work every day in a shared vehicle. What is more striking is that only 14.3% of those surveyed said they considered the risk of infection during their journey to work to be high or very high. This percentage is similar to that of those who perceived a high or very high risk of infection at home, and much lower than that pertaining to the risk of infection at work (Hernández Pedreño, 2021).

¹⁶ Over the past decade and a half, these problems have become particularly acute following the effects of the financial and real estate crisis of 2008, which resulted in a significant reduction in the level of residential insertion attained by foreign households prior to the recession (Losa, 2020). Far from being redressed, this situation has only grown worse in the post-recession scenario (Sánchez-García, 2019).

¹⁷ According to the Ministerio de Sanidad, during the first and second waves, the highest number of coronavirus outbreaks was concentrated in the fruit and vegetable industry.

The cases of Huesca (Aragón), Lleida (Catalonia) and Totana (Murcia) were some of the most striking.

¹⁸ This aspect was highlighted by a housing specialist from an NGO working with migrants, in an interview held in February 2021: 'In Murcia, these settlements are different in that they tend to be smaller than in other areas such as Almería, Andalucía and others. [...] At their most crowded, when day work begins during peak production periods, between 200 and 250 people may live there [referring to an informal settlement in Torre-Pacheco, Murcia], in a dwelling designed for 50, or at the most 60 people. But they are basically just rough masonry structures, they are substandard; abandoned estate buildings or equipment warehouses. And they are severely overcrowded. And they rent them out as dwellings. Many of those who live there pay rent to be there in appalling conditions.' [ETV1].

¹⁹ https://www.eldiario.es/murcia/sociedad/totana-murcia-rastreo-coronavirus_1_6042218.html.

²⁰ According to the study cited earlier, 36.6% of migrant workers at the company lived in shared housing (dwellings containing various family units or non-related individuals), and although 95.1% claimed to have an adequate room in which they could self-isolate, 47.8% said they would not be able to completely self-isolate since they did not have their own bathroom (Hernández Pedreño, 2021).

²¹ The purity of food products is the priority concern of the quality certificates controlled by distribution chains, which impose meticulous hygiene procedures on producers and demand pristine conditions in production facilities. See de Castro, Gadea & Sánchez (2021) and Pedreño & Ramírez (2021).

²² These working and living conditions were the focus of numerous journalistic investigations, particularly during the first state of emergency. Indeed, many reports published in different agricultural regions identified precarious working and living conditions as the principal cause of infection.