

The implementation of the Guaranteed Minimum Income in times of COVID19: implications for Social Services in Spain

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Abstract

Minimum income policies are one of the social measures that have the greatest impact on social protection systems. After a year and a half since the implementation of the Guaranteed Minimum Income (IMV *in Spanish*) in Spain, this article aims at analyzing the perception of social workers on the effects of this new economic benefit on public Social Services. For this purpose, a qualitative methodology is followed, through a total number of six rounds of interviews in fifty-two social services centers located in different territories of the Spanish context. A total of 364 telephone interviews of 52 social service centers were conducted between July 2020 and September 2021. The results of this research point out to the unfulfilled expectations generated, the subordination of the social services to other institutional spheres, the bureaucratization of tasks and oversight in the social intervention processes, as well as the lack of recognition of social services' professionals regarding the management of this provision.

Keywords: social services, guaranteed minimum income, pandemic, social workers, poverty

La implementación del ingreso mínimo vital (imv) en tiempo de covid19: implicaciones para los servicios sociales de España

Resumen

Este artículo tiene como objetivo analizar el impacto del Ingreso Mínimo Vital (IMV) en los Servicios Sociales públicos en España. Parte de una reflexión sobre el desarrollo, las complejidades y las limitaciones del sistema de garantía de rentas en el contexto español y se continúa con un análisis en profundidad de las implicaciones de esta nueva prestación para la práctica profesional de las trabajadoras sociales. El artículo se enmarca en una investigación nacional que cuenta con la participación de cinco universidades públicas, cuyo propósito ha sido la realización de un seguimiento longitudinal sobre el impacto de la Covid19 en Servicios Sociales. Entre los temas ejes identificados en los discursos de las más de 350 entrevistas realizadas a trabajadoras sociales, se identifican los intensos efectos generados por la aprobación del IMV en tiempos de emergencia sanitaria y social. Todos estos efectos ponen de manifiesto, una vez más, la función de cajón desastre de los Servicios Sociales, esto es, su tendencia a colaborar en la información, tramitación y gestión de un recurso de garantía de ingresos que pertenece a otro sistema, así como el incremento de los procesos burocráticos, la falta de coordinación entre instituciones o la imposición de tareas de fiscalización sobre las vidas de las personas usuarias.

Palabras clave: servicios sociales, ingreso mínimo vital, pandemia, trabajadoras sociales, pobreza

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1. Introduction. Notes about social policy in Spain and its system for guaranteed incomes

In the European context and following the main features of the Mediterranean model, the Spanish welfare state has been defined as a late, weak (Moreno and Sarasa, 1992), and familistic welfare state (Ferrer, 1996; Gal, 2010). However, the institutional commitment to modernization and rationalization has allowed it to reduce the distance existing between Spain and other guarantee-based countries (Rodríguez-Cabrero, 2010; Guillén *et al.*, 2015). Having a recognized National Health System, considerable contributive pensions, and adequate unemployment benefits (Moreno-Fuentes and Mari-Klose, 2015) has generated sufficient protection to the most stable groups. Yet, the scarce coverage that the system allocates to the so-called ‘outsiders’ (Mingione and Benassi, 2019) - which are those people disconnected from the labor system and therefore receive no benefit, especially among younger population groups and women - reflects the difficulties to reduce poverty for those who do not participate in the contributory systems (Arranz *et al.*, 2019).

Along with the welfare states, public social services in Spain have shaped as a decentralized social protection system in the past decades, without a state level law to ensure minimal agreements. This has resulted in a fragmented social attention with its own specificities depending on each territory (Alguacil, 2012). In addition, social services have been identified with a clear resource management function, so that a large part of their daily activity is related to the processing of economic benefits. That said, benefits alone are not an end in themselves for social services, nor should they be the ultimate goal of social interventions, but rather they are, or at least they should try to be, a means to facilitate accompaniment that allows the objectives of the intervention to be achieved (Pacheco and Hernández, 2016).

One of the major developments in social policy in Spain is the development of a system of minimum guaranteed incomes. This Spanish system of guaranteed incomes took its first steps in the 1990s, led by the most advanced territory in this field, the Basque Country. It is considered a system with a complex organization due to different reasons, which have conditioned the development of the benefits developed over the last few decades. The variety of functions they fulfill depending on the type of population they are aimed to, a demanding but also necessary task of inter-institutional coordination or the differences between the amounts and eligibility of the same benefit are some of the reasons why difficulties have arisen when it comes to articulate an homogeneous system of minimum income using the same logic throughout the Spanish territory. If one adds to this the fact that the available resources and the final philosophy differs

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according to the regions (Serrano y Arriba, 1998), the resulting system becomes difficult to organize and manage, since different administrative levels interact for its operation, each one with its own regional specificities and unique regulatory gaps (Ayala *et al*, 2016). Also, there are not enough coordination mechanisms to guarantee a balanced territorial model that guarantees equal rights and opportunities for all people, thus resulting in a system conditioned to the political will of each regional government (Rodríguez-Sumaza *et al*, 2020). In fact, among the territories participating in the research, there is not even a consensus on the name, as each region has its own nomenclature to refer to the minimum or guaranteed income system: Andalusia and Madrid call it the minimum insertion income (renta mínima de inserción), in Aragon it is the Aragonese insertion income (ingreso aragonés de inserción), in the Balearic Islands it is the guaranteed social income (renta social garantizada), in Castilla y León the guaranteed citizenship income (renta garantizada de ciudadanía) and in the Basque Country it is known as the guaranteed income guarantee income (renta de garantía de ingresos). All the Autonomous Communities studied establish as a requirement that the income of the family or cohabitation unit does not exceed the amount corresponding to the number of members and characteristics of the family members. It is also necessary to be registered on the municipality census and to have legal residence. Thereafter, there is significant variability in terms of benefits, requirements and determining factors such as the minimum age to be able to apply, the obligation to be a job seeker, the continuity and amount of benefits, etc.

Despite this heterogeneity, some common characteristics in the Spanish guaranteed income system can be identified (Aguilar *et al*, 1995). Similarities such as the consideration of the family or co-living unit as a reference element for measuring income, the temporary nature of the benefits, the age range of recipients or the conditionality of receiving these benefits in exchange for participation in socio-labor insertion programs. However, the temporary nature with which the benefit was born is maintained only in some territories, and the concern for “avoiding the dependence of poor people on the system” has been put on the back burner in favor a greater concern for dignifying the situation of vulnerable population groups, trying to guarantee their rights and reduce the institutional pressure they receive.

The main goal of the European guaranteed income system is to offer citizens a last safety net, a basic economic security net, the possibility of a transitory support to gain the stability required to weave a social and labor insertion project that ultimately allows the autonomy of the beneficiaries. “The term *final safety net* refers to those mechanisms which offer a minimum guarantee of resources in situations of proven need within the framework of welfare states” (Arriba and Pérez-Eransas, 2007: 115). It is understood that these minimum incomes are part of the protective action of the State, conceiving social protection as the “means to guarantee the coverage of certain typical needs of individuals or households beyond the solidarity of the parental group” (Martínez-Torres, 2005: 156).

If the Spanish income guarantee system is compared with similar systems in Europe², it can be stated that Spain has certain peculiarities that are not found in other countries due to its strong residual nature, as well as its conception as the last protective network for people with no other possibility of economic income (Ayala, 2019). Now, it can also be stated that in a large part of the European context there are common characteristics in minimum income systems because these are developed and implemented from the fundamental idea of income as a tool to fight poverty and social exclusion (Sanzo, 2018). In this sense, European income systems share singularities such as the measurement of amounts and income according to the number of people in the co-living units or the consideration that these amounts do not allow covering people’s basic needs (Cantillon *et al*, 2017).

It is worth noting another similarity that crosses borders, whether due to the design, the procedures attached to minimum incomes, the understanding of employment as the only possible way of economic and social emancipation, or the dynamics and functioning of the system, chronicity in this type of income is an established and increasingly frequent fact (Martín-Giner, 2007). On the issue of the phenomenon

2 There are many studies that address the differences and similarities existing in Europe on the income guarantee systems of each country, and even of each region of these countries. For a more in-depth analysis of this issue, we recommend reading the report “Minimum Income Schemes in Europe. A study of national policies” by Frazer and Marlier, on behalf of the European Commission.

of chronicity in certain population groups receiving minimum incomes, Ayala (2019) states that “the data also show a certain problem of dependence on the time spent in the programs: the probability of leaving decreases the longer one has been in them” (p. 181). And it is precisely this phenomenon of chronicity that becomes a target of criticism. Thus, it is common to find criticisms coming mainly from liberal ideologies, in which there is an underlying suspicion that people who are in a situation of social vulnerability are so by choice, as well as by an alleged lack of responsibility and motivation to actively seek employment (Peris-Cancio, 2021).

2. Minimum incomes, their link to employment and the supervisory role of Social Services

Among the most frequent economic benefits co-managed by social services are minimum incomes. These incomes marked progress in the understanding the economic support as a right. However, decades later, it is understood that “the current income guarantee systems have proven to be insufficient, inefficient and terribly bureaucratic” (Navarro, 2021: 26). In the organization, legislative and administrative framework that contemplates the income systems in Spain, it is implicit that social services are responsible for providing support, accompaniment and follow-up to the people receiving these incomes.

Thus, social services must coordinate with other public and private organizations to offer access to individualized and collective programs for social and labor insertion agreed upon with the recipients of the benefit. As stated in many of the regional regulations that legislate on this issue, it is understood that the granting of this benefit entails a consideration of attendance to labor insertion workshops, training for employment, a willingness to accept those employment contracts offered to the person, etc. In fact, this is what is stated, for example, in the regulations of the Madrid region, “A new relationship is therefore established between economic benefit and insertion activities” (Act on Guaranteed Minimum Income of the Community of Madrid, 2003: 2). The conditionality of the benefit is finding more and more detractors, the debate is topical in the Spanish context, because more and more voices are raised in favor of the unconditionality of this type of benefits, and demand the Government to move towards a model based on the recognition of rights.

On the other hand, the assignment of control functions over who receives insertion income by social services professionals has been the subject of much debate from the beginning, with the question of whether or not the monitoring of compliance with the conditionality of this type of income should be a function of social services. There are many voices that speak of the ineffectiveness of this model, not only because of the logic of the income/employment consideration (Offe, 1985) and the ideology of the deserving (Gujarro, 2015), but also because according to Olmeda (1997) “There are, in short, no real professional reincorporation programs in most of the guaranteed minimum income systems” (p. 11). Moreover, authors such as Urizarri (2012) question not only the fact that minimum incomes are conditioned to their passage through social services, but also that the emancipating logic of the beneficiaries is based on employment as a solution to all social inequalities, what this author calls “work culture” (p. 11).

3. Notes on the implementation of the Guaranteed Minimum Income in a pandemic context

The development of social protection in Spain experienced a historic moment in the midst of a period of strict confinement when, last June 2020, the central government approved a new non-contributory economic benefit, the Guaranteed Minimum Income (*in Spanish* IMV, from now on). This new economic benefit, as reported by the Ministry of Inclusion, Social Security and Migration -the competent body for its management- focuses on preventing the risk of poverty and social exclusion of both individuals and family units whose economic income is non-existent or insufficient to cover basic needs and to develop a

dignified life. “This measure had been maturing and being negotiated for its approval in the parliamentary procedures for some time, as it is part of the National Strategy for the Prevention and Fight against Poverty and Social Exclusion 2019-2023. Its implementation was, however, accelerated as a result of the social emergency arising from the COVID-19 health crisis and the state of alarm” (Royal Decree-Law establishing the Minimum Living Income, p. 7).

In terms of its characterization and nature, the IMV represents an important advance in terms of social rights, since it has been considered an explicit recognition of a subjective right that guarantees a basic level of income. The IMV is understood as a non-contributory benefit of a state nature managed by the Social Security³. The fact that its management depends on Social Security, and not on social services, responds to a twofold objective. On the one hand, not to overburden the already saturated social services system and, on the other hand, to consolidate common social protection measures throughout the territory, ensuring a minimum protection network of guaranteed income that provides a certain universality to the system (Royal Decree-Law establishing the Minimum Vital Income, 2020).

The progress of the IMV in legislative matters has been applauded from different sectors of the professional field of social intervention. The General Council of Social Work (2020), the highest representative body of social work professionals in Spain, stated that the IMV is a positive measure for the advancement of the recognition of social rights because it is committed to strengthening social justice, equal opportunities and the development of citizens’ rights. However, it warned that the measure is a temporary proposal and does not tackle structural poverty, inequality and social exclusion.

In this sense, different authors (Jimeno, 2020; López-Ahumada, 2021) recognize that the legislation of this right is a positive measure because it initiates an ambitious mechanism to fight poverty. However, it has also been questioned and criticized, since from conservative sectors the IMV and any other income guarantee system have been labeled as an incentive for people to settle into the passivity of receiving income in exchange for doing nothing (Peris-Cancio, 2021). In addition, there are authors such as Salido-Cortes (2021) who introduce a fundamental issue such as the application of the gender gaze and the feminist perspective in the elaboration of public policies. “Policies should also consider an evaluation of their consequences from the point of view of gender balance within households and in the labor market” (p. 6).

In this same line of analytical review of the implications of the IMV, other ideas can be read, such as the difficulties of state financing, the overlap with the regional income systems or the difficulties in designing social inclusion itineraries. It is a regulation that needs further legislative development in order to clarify how the objectives pursued are to be achieved (Chabannes, 2020). Thus, it seems clear that these and other aspects, which will be analyzed in the following pages, need to be refined in order to truly consider the IMV as a bridging income to facilitate the social inclusion of people in situations of social exclusion.

Within this framework, the objective of this article is to know the assessment and perception that the IMV has received from the social workers located in the social services during the first year and a half of operation of this measure. This analysis has a longitudinal component that includes the different stages that the professionals have gone through based on their own experiences. In turn, the following specific objectives are derived from this general objective: to analyze the arrival of the IMV in the social services, as well as to study the implications that the IMV has had on the daily tasks of the social workers.

4. Materials y methods

This article is the result of a state research project made possible thanks to funding from the XXX (XXX, *in Spanish*), a body under the Ministry of Finance and the Public Administration of the central go-

³ Social Security in Spain is the body responsible for responding to and covering needs related to incapacity for work, sick leave for health reasons, unemployment situations, retirement pensions, non-contributory pensions, occupational hazards and family allowances, among others (Ministry of Inclusion, Social Security and Migration, 2021).

vernment of Spain. The main objective of this research project is to learn how the coronavirus pandemic and its subsequent health, social and economic crisis has affected the heterogeneous public system of social services in Spain. This article focuses exclusively on the results obtained on the perception of the implementation of the IMV in the social services centers. For this purpose, a total of six rounds of structured interviews were carried out with social workers in different municipal social services centers. This monitoring made it possible to obtain information in real time of what was happening in the social services centers from the analysis of the discourse of the social workers interviewed. The research was carried out between July 2020 and September 2021.

The sample plan was based on the selection of six autonomous territories (Andalusia, Aragon, Balearic Islands, Castile and Leon, Community of Madrid and the Basque Country) which together represent a total of 47% of the total Spanish population and 49% of the national territory. These communities include elements of sufficient economic diversity, with agricultural communities as opposed to industrialized and service communities, some of which are coastal and tourist communities. This diversity of sectors includes a range of positions in which there are some of the most impoverished communities as opposed to other medium and rich ones. Within these communities we found very aged territories versus territories with younger people and with different percentages of immigrant population. There are also political differences in terms of communities governed by conservative parties versus others governed by social democratic parties, as well as communities governed by nationalist parties.

In each of these territories, a random selection of municipalities was made, stratified by the size of these territories through three categories: small municipalities with less than 15,000 inhabitants, medium-sized municipalities with 15,000 to 50,000 inhabitants, and, finally, large municipalities with more than 50,000 inhabitants. Of these 52 participating municipalities, 33% were small municipalities, 30% were medium-sized municipalities and 37% were large municipalities (according to stratification by number of inhabitants). This sample selection of municipalities has allowed us to know the varieties, differences and similarities between different social services centers, as well as the different demands of the users.

Once the participating municipalities had been selected, the centers of social services of these select municipalities were contacted by telephone. The project and its objectives were explained, and the social workers-coordinators of the centers were invited to participate. The participating professionals were all social workers with functions of coordination, direction and management of primary social care centers. Of the sample of participants, 87% of the professionals interviewed were women, while 13% were men. It should be noted that, although different professional profiles can be found in the Social Services centers (social educators, psychologists, mediators, lawyers, administrative staff, etc.), all the participants in this research were female social workers. These two issues, the fact that only professionals with the profile of Social Worker were interviewed and that they carry out coordination and management functions in primary social care centers, can be considered limitations of the study when explaining the sample design, since the impossibility of interviewing the professionals at the base (direct care) due to their work overload conditioned access to the informants to a certain extent.

In relation to the process of organization and execution of the field work, it should be explained that the professionals received a bimonthly call from the research team to answer a structured telephone interview with an identical script for all the territories in the different participating regions. The telephone interview was chosen as the research technique because it was impossible to travel to each of the participating municipalities, among other reasons due to mobility restrictions as a result of the health crisis. Thus, the telephone interview made it possible to access systematic and in-depth information, overcoming the difficulty of a face-to-face meeting. Regarding the telephone interview, Báez (2014) states the following: “it can be very useful as a specific technique for obtaining data, the use of which is limited to special circumstances, almost always related to the difficulty of meeting between the informant and the researcher (p. 234)”.

In each bimonthly round of interviews, a specific design of the interview script was made, adapting it to the exact pandemic moment experienced which has allowed for a longitudinal study of continuous monitoring for more than a year. Each of the interview scripts included, on the one hand, questions that have been maintained throughout the project, which has made it possible to make comparisons and to know the

evolution of some topics (for example, the increase in demand, changes in the profile of users or aspects related to the emotionality and psychological discomfort of the professionals) and, on the other hand, specific issues that have been addressed at some specific time. Some of the changing themes had to do with mental health, the most unprotected population groups, the reorganization of work centers, the absence of group and community social work or the relationship between social intervention techniques and policy makers.

It was precisely the social work professionals interviewed who alerted the team of researchers to the problems that were being generated by the arrival of the IMV in their social services centers. Based on the analysis of their first speeches, it was in the third report (dated November 2020) when different questions related to the impact of the Guaranteed Minimum Income on social services were incorporated. These questions were maintained until the end of the research, thus providing in-depth information that allowed the analysis presented in this article.

As stated above, the speeches of each bimonthly interview conducted with each of the 52 participating professionals have been analyzed and published in open-access reports uploaded to the project website. In addition, the 364 interviews⁴ obtained after one year and three months of project have been transcribed and coded in the qualitative analysis software Atlas.ti to systematize all the information obtained. The codification of the main themes and axes to be analyzed has involved a collective debate by the researchers in order to arrive at general categories of analysis. The main axes of analysis of the qualitative analysis software used were composed of five main codes from which other more specific coding was then derived. Thus, the main coding pivoted around the following categories of analysis: actors/sectors of intervention, demands/provisions, daily work/organizational changes, users and emotions/feelings (Annex I). Thanks to the organization of these general and specific categories of analysis, we identified possible novel topics for media dissemination, thus achieving a transfer of situated knowledge to professionals, institutions and society in general.

5. Results

Throughout this section dedicated to the analysis of results, we can read about the effects of the IMV on the social services centers through the analysis of the discourse of the social workers and their perceptions. From the technical point of view of the professionals, they have detected deficiencies related to the application procedure, the times and forms of resolution, as well as the subsequent follow-up of the beneficiary individuals or families. To this end, aspects such as the implications of the IMV in the daily practice of Social Work, the difficulties of coordination between public bodies, the situation of lack of protection of users in the face of the digital gap, the long waiting periods for resolution or the obligation to link the IMV with socio-labor insertion activities are analyzed. All these difficulties, which are analyzed in the results section, generate situations of strangeness, bewilderment and uncertainty due to the complex framework that has been forged around this benefit.

A longitudinal analysis identifies three temporal stages in the approval of the IMV and its impact on social services. At first (summer 2020), in the speeches of the professionals we find references to perceptions prior to its arrival, where the measure was welcomed as a positive advance that laid the foundations of a right that consolidated citizenship, but little by little the cracks and flaws of the measure began to be seen (autumn 2020).

I had high hopes for the IMV, I thought it was going to be a much better thing than it is in practice. I really thought it was going to have better coverage, but it has disappointed almost all of us (Social worker from Madrid, November 2020).

⁴ This figure is the sum of all interviews considering that there were rounds in which some participants were unable to answer the questions due to lack of time or being on sick leave.

We can speak of a second moment (spring 2021), which speaks of the perceptions of social workers once they experienced the difficulties of application, the long waits and the complicated coordination with other agencies. It is the social workers who pointed out all the bureaucratic impediments that users were experiencing, the institutional mistreatment and the work overload added to a collapsed system.

It is a benefit for which we have no information, it is a chaos. As a professional you feel very helpless, because while it arrives you have to give emergency aid for months. We don't know if they are going to accept it or not, it is like a feeling of constant uncertainty (Social worker from Castile and Leon, March 2021).

Finally, in a third moment (spring-summer 2021), discourses were established that went beyond the measure, and focused on what would happen after the approvals, on the need (or not) to monitor and follow up the beneficiaries, and if so, which agencies and which professionals should do so. There was also a debate on the limits of the control function and the ultimate purpose of this type of insertion income. In this last stage, there was a debate related to the two ways of understanding the benefit which, in fact, had to do with the way of interpreting Social Work. We found a majority perception in favor of the benefit in spite of all the criticisms made because of its management. This was an interpretation of the IMV linked to a subjective right that understands that citizens require a decent standard of living, without which they cannot develop self-sufficient life projects. In contrast to this majority perception, there was a vision that understands that Social Work participates in a function of accompaniment and transference that requires counter-performance on the part of the beneficiaries of the system in order to be truly deserving of this type of benefits.

We hoped that the IMV would satisfy the needs that, once covered, would allow us to do promotional and insertion work, but this is not the case (Social worker from Castile and Leon, May 2021).

I am against the IMV because for me we already had this type of income in which we could accompany families or individuals, there was a contact, not only a follow-up and an inspection, a part of containment and support that we have lost with the IMV (Social worker from Aragon, September 2021).

6. IMV in Social Services and the implications for the daily practice of Social Work

The difficulties associated with the management of the IMV generated feelings of uncertainty among professionals and among users. It is not difficult to detect the ambivalence existing in social services regarding the IMV, since on the one hand, professionals recognized the importance of approving a measure that understood that a basic level of income should be a subjective right. But, on the other hand, these same professionals reported feelings of uncertainty about the application and approval/denial processes, as well as a lack of knowledge of the steps to be followed with respect to compatibilities and incompatibilities with regional incomes. In short, they alluded to a lack of information offered by the institutions, expressing that Social Services learned about everything related to the IMV through the media.

When it came out in the media, people were excited about the IMV. The news comes earlier through the media than the Social Services themselves (Social worker from Madrid).

Another of the issues mentioned has to do with the complex framework generated by the approval of the IMV and its combination with regional/autonomous regional incomes. What it is possible to state is that the IMV has come to establish a minimum threshold of protection that raises the insufficient coverage in those autonomous regions where the amount is lower (Arriba and Aguilar, 2021) such as Murcia, Madrid, Andalusia, Galicia, La Rioja, Aragon, Balearic Islands and Canary Islands (Badenes and Gambau-Suelves, 2020, Ayala *et al.*, 2022). This new benefit is incompatible with many of the previous social insertion incomes, and it is compulsory to apply for the IMV before applying for a regional minimum income. The establishment of a system of incompatibilities between different benefits is very confusing because part of the benefits that users of social services had been receiving are at the expense of the IMV resolution. As the system is unclear, professionals perceived that situations were paralyzed. It seems evident that the existing territorial heterogeneity comes to condition the type of protection received depending on the region in which the person is located (Rodríguez-Sumaza *et al.*, 2020). In the end, the organizational plurality among the different regions in Spain caused different and complex interpretations of the possible compatibilities with the IMV, leaving situations of social emergency on hold, with no possibility of getting out of this situation in the short term.

The specific fact here is that Minimum Insertion Income (RMI) is incompatible in the Community of Madrid in terms of the amounts with IMV and since they are incompatible, people are receiving letters telling them that they have to apply for IMV, they come here in fear, many people are digitally illiterate and receive this letter and do not know what they have to do. Strange situations arise, because up to now their social worker was the one who did all the paperwork for the regional income (Social worker from Madrid).

The management of the IMV is chaotic. It has been distorted in these times of uncertainty and has generated a distortion between what we had and what has been implemented (Social worker from Aragon).

This visible bureaucratic framework has led to situations of discomfort and professional burnout, which add to the chronic overload of social services in Spain. This situation was aggravated by the feeling of having to take on yet another task that it was not the responsibility of this system. The result was that during this year and a half of implementation, the new benefit had gone from being well received and well disposed towards it, to a change of assessment in which the social workers reported an evident disenchantment with the way in which this benefit was managed, and were currently showing absolute skepticism about its potential.

7. The complex coordination between public agencies in Spain. Notes on Social Services and Social Security

One of the points that generated the greatest unease among both social services professionals and users or potential recipients of the IMV was the confusion between the competencies of Social Security and social services. It was a benefit whose management and processing belongs to the agency that manages employment in Spain, the Social Security. However, the complexity of its procedure, the difficulties of establishing a completely telematic application, the lack of face-to-face attention of this agency -the Social Security-, the confusion in the role of other regional aid, the slowness in the resolution, even the very objective of fighting against poverty of the IMV, etc., all of these factors encouraged users of social services to continue to turn to their social worker for guidance on an application that does not fall within her competence.

In fact, the feeling in this social services system was that, although it is not a benefit of their system, it has had a direct impact on them, having to play a fundamental role in their work dynamics, but that this

is not being recognized either with a reinforcement of the staff, or by offering them direct and specific information to be able to attend to the citizens as it should be.

From the very beginning we have seen it as unfair that it is a Social Security benefit and that its greater weight has to fall on the social services. We have been open, and the Social Security personnel closed, and in the end we have had to process it (Social worker from Andalusia).

It has clearly impacted us in social services. People, even if they go to ask for IMV, do not understand that the municipal social services do not manage it. Many times they ask us to do it for them because it replaces RMI, and because Social Security has a very low level of attention. To tell someone that the municipal service centers do not attend to this issue and they have to go to the Social Security office who knows where, well, they don't understand (Social worker from Madrid).

In order to understand the impact of the IMV on social services, it is important to understand the existing institutional framework between different public administration agencies, especially between social services and Social Security. Although it is stated in the ministerial dissemination channels that cooperation between public agencies will be crucial for the correct development of the IMV, coordination and cooperation have been relegated to wishful thinking since the social workers interviewed have referred to a worrying difficulty in establishing communication with Social Security. So much so that, except in exceptional cases where there was already prior coordination and the professionals from one agency and the other already knew each other, it has been very difficult to make a call to Social Security or write an e-mail to an IMV reference professional. They warned that this meant a complication when it came to knowing how the application process was going, where and how to obtain the requested documentation or how to proceed when faced with housing or cohabitation cases that were not covered by the regulations.

They do not provide data: in process, denied, little else... there is no one we can call to find out if there is a long way to go or not. Now they send a letter, we have no information or any reference person so we have to send a letter to the Social Security. (Social worker from Castile and Leon).

It is also important to consider that Social Security is an agency located in urban centers, which makes it difficult to access people in rural areas, with very little face-to-face care, even more so as a result of the pandemic. These situations have meant that, given the impossibility of obtaining a face-to-face or telephone response, the social services, which have been one of the few public services that remained open throughout the health crisis, became a point of reference for seeking information and managing procedures.

From the very beginning we have seen it as unfair that it is a Social Security benefit and that its greater weight has to fall on the social services. We have been open, and the Social Security personnel closed, and in the end we have had to process it (Social worker from Andalusia).

Social workers even proposed the introduction of systems similar to Amazon's computer platforms, where the package can be tracked (accepted, on the way, delivered) in order to know the status of the benefit application, since not even they could know the status of a person's application. Beyond the proposal, this lack of response reflected the institutional vacuum in which users end up being abandoned after months of waiting.

Without wishing to establish capitalist logic in public health care, but it would really be great for us to relieve the tension of the users to be able to know at what stage their request is at. Something like when you buy on Amazon or order a pizza and they tell you that it is already in the oven. Maybe it's crazy, but I see a lot of suffering every day when people are waiting (Social worker from Madrid)

In addition, there was the absence of professional experts in social intervention in the public apparatus dedicated to Social Security benefits. The lack of a professional of reference results in many of the approvals or denials of the new benefit being made only under an administrative criterion of absolute compliance with the scales, ignoring specific situations with a high degree of convivial peculiarity such as those that occur among people in situations of social exclusion (for example, families living in one room, people who rent beds by the hour or sofas, inability to register in the room where you sleep, etc.).

I am seeing that another problem of the IMV is that it is processed by administrative staff, and the administrative staff reviews the documents in a very mechanical way, that is, it complies or does not comply and does not understand some particularities of the applicants, to that we add that there is no social worker of reference to whom we can go to explain or appeal the resolutions (Social worker from Aragon)

The result of all the above is that in the absence of the institutional coordination that was assumed to be essential for the proper functioning of the service, both professionals and users have been confronted with daily situations of uncertainty, discontent and subordination, which led them to allude to the now historic complaint that they seem to be the “catch-all” of the other systems.

Each administration has to do its part, not only us have to comply with the on-site of social services. Users should have had a face-to-face referral for this important service. We continue to be a ‘catch-all’; everything that we do not know how to locate, ends up here. It is the same as in the last 30 years (Social worker from Andalusia)

In addition to the perception of being in charge of responsibilities that belong to another agency, a debate of tremendous importance for Social Services was added, such as the certification of situations of poverty or the certification of cohabitation relationships. These certificates contemplate the collection of data related to the applicant’s current address, the persons registered at the same address, as well as the existence of specific circumstances (such as social exclusion, disability, gender violence, etc.). In general, this proposal was not well received by the professionals, who felt that it restored the control function and did not feel comfortable with the mandates of control over the way of life of the users. The professionals considered that these cannot be functions of social workers or of the Social Services system in any case.

It is not up to us to accredit these types of issues, we do not manage the IMV, and now we cannot go around plugging the holes that have to do with a lack of foresight (Social worker from Aragon)

We are not social police. We cannot chase people to find out if the testimony they tell us is real or not, we have a role between police and tax inspectors, which does not correspond to social services, nor does it correspond to the profession itself (Social worker from Madrid)

The demand for certificates presented an interesting analysis of the role played by social services in the institutional framework and the form of collaboration between the different institutional bodies. There were clear demands that showed that the collaboration provided by social services to other agencies was unilateral, that is, they did not receive it in the same way. In addition, there was a deep criticism of the way in which the IMV was being applied. Time had not allowed the establishment of operating channels that ensured a good anchorage between the social services and the Social Security System. In short, the requirement for certificates presented an interesting analysis of the role played by social services in the institutional framework and the form of collaboration between the different public bodies.

Users’ concerns about IMV: digital gap, expectations and long waits

Social services professionals considered that the impact of the IMVI affected users not only from a bureaucratic point of view, but also emotionally (especially in terms of expectations and long waits) and procedurally (in terms of the telematic processing process). If the latter idea is taken into account, one of the main difficulties encountered by users when applying for the new benefit had to do with the pressing digital gap that became even more evident, if possible, during the pandemic. The IMV is a benefit whose application and processing design is completely telematic, from start to finish. The professionals claimed that there had been a growing digitalization of the public administration as a result of the pandemic. However, these same professionals denounced that the issue of the digital divide and the difficulties of access and use of the new technologies among a large part of the applicant population was not considered.

In fact, according to the most updated data from Spain's National Statistics Institute (INE⁵) in its annual survey on equipment and use of information and communication technologies in households (2020) -which analyzes the situation of the digital gap throughout the country- reveals that almost 35% of the Spanish population does not know how to make purchases over the Internet, much less communicate with the public administration by telematic means. Likewise, 30% of Spaniards do not know how to send or read e-mails and the situation of digital illiteracy is notably worse among the unemployed population or those in precarious employment. Population eligible to apply for the new IMV benefit. In view of the above, the social workers affirm that the lack of information and direct attention for applying for the IMV by the Social Security has consequences for both professionals and users. The fact that they did not have access to the Internet, nor to a computer, *let alone* the necessary knowledge to be able to carry out the process online, as required by the benefit, resulted in the impossibility of being able to carry out the procedures independently. This situation, added to the low presence of the competent body or the remoteness of the Social Security offices (explained in the previous section), resulted in an evident overload of work in the social services centers.

It is true that now with the issue of the digital gap, that we have to do it via the web and we have had to support people so that they could manage it (Social worker from Madrid)

The people who use the Internet have not had any problems, but those who do not use it have a very bad time, they get very confused; sometimes they come here for us to help them fill out forms (Social worker from Aragon)

In our case, we have also processed it and all because of our geographic location. We had to do it because the Social Security center is very far away. We have processed it ourselves because the private agencies charge 80 Euros for processing it (Social worker from Andalusia)

Likewise, based on the analysis of the interviews carried out, it has been possible to identify recurrent emotional exhaustion from the moment the news reached the media and was made public until the first resolutions were finally issued. The fact of announcing it in the media with so much coverage caused many people in situations of social vulnerability to generate a series of expectations, imagining themselves as beneficiaries of the new benefit approved by the Government. However, the feeling of euphoria turned into a feeling closer to despair within months as a result of the long waiting periods between the application and the provisional resolution, often taking months.

But the IMV is taking a long time, it takes 6 months to resolve, before it was 3 but...and until they receive the denial they cannot ask for another benefit. In these cases we give food aid or economic aid. This is the way it is (Social worker from the Balearic Islands)

⁵ The INE in Spain is the highest authority responsible for the management of the statistical data of the General State Administration, being in charge of the surveillance, control and supervision of the technical procedures.

The long waits experienced by applicants can be illustrated most clearly by the following data: in March 2021, the National Institute of Social Security put the waiting list at 30%, i.e., almost 350,000 applications awaiting resolution. In October 2021, the waiting list had significantly decreased. However, it was also reported by associations specializing in Social Services that 3 out of 4 applications had been rejected (specifically 888,458 rejected applications), and that only 6.4% of people living in poverty in Spain had managed to collect the IMV after more than a year of implementation of the measure (Association of Directors and Managers of Social Services, 2021).

In the light of the situations caused by these long waits, as well as the high rate of rejection, social workers explained that the only possible response by the general social services was to try to contain the needs of people through specific municipal emergency social aid. These municipal aids were temporary, specific and with a marked objective, such as help for the payment of food, medicines, supplies or even, in some cases, for the temporary payment of housing alternatives. In no case were the municipal emergency aids a stable economic support that would allow continuity in income to facilitate the labor insertion of people, but rather they were one-off aids that acted as temporary patches. The seriousness of which the professionals warned was that there were people and families who were placed in an administrative limbo between the IMV and the autonomic insertion benefits, causing that the only possible alternative until the resolution was to survive with emergency aid for the payment of basic needs, very basic.

We are worried about all the people who are going to be left out or who are being left out. Right now, with those who are waiting and have nothing, what we are doing is processing emergency aid (Social worker from Aragon)

It is a benefit for which we have no information, it is chaos. You feel very helpless, because while it reaches them or not, you have to give them food, emergency aid, etc. (Social worker from Castile and Leon).

8. Socio-labor support and participation as a condition attached to the Guaranteed Minimum Income

Another issue that raised concerns was related to the follow-up of IMV beneficiaries. The proposal, based on the Ministry's proposal for the IMV, envisages a protection network that will allow them "the transition from a situation of exclusion to participation in society. Its design will include incentives for employment and inclusion, articulated through different cooperation formulas between administrations" (Ministry of Inclusion, Social Security and Migration, 2020).

This accompaniment proposal aims to enable beneficiaries to develop their social and labor market insertion, thus establishing different itineraries to facilitate the inclusion process. In theory, these insertion mechanism designs are nothing new, since they are already included in the autonomous regulations governing the specific insertion income of each territory, since, as we have seen in the theoretical section, they are based on a "activation" so that people are really worthy of some type of benefit. However, in the specific case of the IMV, the professionals do not know from which body this monitoring will be carried out, under what terms and whether it will be compulsory.

The perception of the professionals is that a service has been launched without having all the legislative and organizational supports well anchored, perhaps because of the social crisis situation being experienced as a result of the pandemic. The professionals interviewed indicated that both they and the users have been placed in a situation of uncertainty, in which they can only wait.

It places us in a limbo in which we professionals do not know how to situate ourselves, because the autonomous income monitoring is not going to be done now. We professionals are a bit lost as to

what we are going to do with these families and what the follow-up is going to be like or what we are going to have to do with them (Social worker from Madrid).

There is nothing we can do, because there is no clarity as to whether all IMV beneficiaries will be followed up and how the follow-up will be and who will do it (Social worker from Aragon)

This question is linked to the debate on whether benefits should be conditional on the idea of merit, or whether they should be subjective rights by virtue of being a citizen, i.e., the debate on the conception of social policies as rights or as compassion for the poor (Ochman, 2016). This debate is directly related not only to the way of understanding the IMV, but also, in a broader sense, to the ways of interpreting social intervention.

9. Conclusions

Understanding that the IMV constitutes the clearest attempt to simplify and standardize procedures aimed at guaranteeing a social protection network, the approval of the IMV has been a measure applauded by different sectors specialized in social intervention, because, among other things, it represents an improvement in terms of economic protection compared to what previously existed only with the autonomous region's income, although it is true that it is still far from the equivalent benefits in other European countries (Ayala *et al.*, 2022). In addition, it was also recognized as a positive measure that the administrative management did not fall on the already saturated social services system (Calzada *et al.*, 2020). This does not eliminate misgivings such as the necessary adaptation of the amount to the socioeconomic reality of Spain (Moreno and Rodríguez, 2020) or the difficulty of integrating into an income guarantee system (Ayala *et al.*, 2021). As explained above, this administrative framework warns that in many cases it is the social services system that takes over functions over which it has no competence, as in the case of the IMV (Fantova, 2021). In this line, the decision of the professionals to collaborate voluntarily with the users in the IMV application process has had a cost in the abandonment of the exercise of Social Work functions and tasks performed in the social services centers.

Although the objective of the IMV is to establish a basic income ground throughout the entire national territory, which can be complemented with subsidized amounts of regional insertion incomes (Arriba and Aguilar, 2021), the current reality is that this mechanism is proving complicated, resulting in a notable feeling of uncertainty, both among professionals and applicants. The waits and the bureaucratic labyrinth associated with the IMV end up placing users in situations of anguish, bewilderment and, in short, institutional abandonment. What can be perceived after the exhaustive analysis of the social workers' discourse is that it underlies a profound criticism of the way in which the IMV is being managed and implemented, not of the measure itself. Thus, it can be affirmed that the procedure continues to condition the meaning of the measure and, in fact, substantial assessments on the meaning of the IMV disappear in order to exclusively analyze its implementation. The fact that it was born without any link to the social services had reinforced its purely economic character, but the difficulty of implementing it effectively and with universal aspirations from the Social Security system is conditioning its development and suffocating the social services system. In this year and a half of implementation, it has not been possible to establish channels of operation that ensure a good anchorage between social services and the Social Security System. Dealing with a measure of social protection to the lowest social strata, the result is worrying as the bureaucratic paralysis ends up affecting the purpose of social inclusion of the recipients (Estepa-Mestre and Beltrán-Roca, 2018).

By maintaining the incompatibility between the IMV and the rest of the social benefits or autonomous regional incomes (Chabannes, 2020), the delay in processing results in the transit of the user between social services and Social Security, many of whom return to social services due to delays in the resolution, leaves users in a situation of vulnerability in a bureaucratic limbo that traps them between administrative re-

quirements. Procedural limitations also differ between regions of the same State as a result of territorial heterogeneity. In fact, the differences in the resources available and the divergences in the conception of this type of benefits according to regions make this system a labyrinth of complicated comprehension (Serrano and Arriba, 1998). In any case, no differences were found in the discourse of the social workers according to the different autonomous communities, since the perception of the IMV was similar in all of them.

Thus, the social workers interviewed highlight the need to rethink the administrative procedure established for its application, assessment and follow-up, because from the outset both social professionals and users warn of numerous situations that, far from helping, seem to be adding to the difficulties in facing the growing situation of social exclusion in Spain. The analysis of the impact of the IMV on social services through the speeches of the professionals confirms that, without being a service of the system itself, it has had a direct impact on the daily practice of the workers (workload, difficulties of institutional coordination, emotional affectations, etc.), also affecting the vital situations of the users (long waits, bureaucratic entanglements, subsisting on local emergency aid, etc.). Even so, from a technical level, the positive step taken by the approval of the IMV is recognized, perhaps as a step towards the achievement of a universal basic income, which also has strong social support in the Spanish context, above the European average (Baranowski, Mariusz, and Piotr Jabkowski, 2019).

In conclusion, the implementation of the IMV has led to situations of uncertainty, bewilderment and lack of information and clear indications, both for social workers and users. It is evident that more than two years later, the regulation continues to be in constant change, with legislative modifications that attempt to counteract the unease of citizens with respect to the application and approval procedure for a measure that was thought to relax the pressure on social services and which was intended to end severe poverty, but which currently still does not reach two thirds of the expected households and therefore has limited effectiveness (Ayala *et al.*, 2022).

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Annex I

Main Atlas.ti codes with their respective specific categories of analysis

GENERAL CODING	SPECIFIC ANALYSIS CATEGORY
Actors/sectors of intervention	Public Administration Third Sector Company Private lucrative initiative Local/municipal Informal help Volunteering Political decision-makers Social Security Educational system Health system
Demands/provisions	Emergency aid Comprehensive assistance Basic needs Aid delays Food Medicines
Daily work/organizational changes	Workload IMV New recruitment Online Telematics New technologies Face-to-face modality Vacations Conciliation
Users	IMV Digital gap Housing Youth Elderly people Loneliness Isolation Vulnerability ERTE (Record of Temporary Employment Regulation) Unemployment Telephone/WhatsApp
Emotions/feelings	Dissatisfaction Mental health Overload Leave Informal care Professional monitoring Uncertainty Exhaustion Relaxation

Source: own elaboration