

# Working but Poor: An Analysis of In-Work Poverty Transitions in Spain

*Pobres con empleo: un análisis de transiciones de pobreza laboral en España*

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## Key words

- Labour Market
- Child Poverty
  - In-Work Poverty
  - Precariousness
  - Transitions

## Palabras clave

- Mercado laboral
- Pobreza infantil
  - Pobreza laboral
  - Precariedad
  - Transiciones

## Abstract

Spain has one of the highest in-work poverty rates in Europe and a high degree of job instability. Reducing in-work poverty requires an understanding of the entry and exit mechanisms specific to this situation, as well as the protective and risk factors involved. Based on data from the Spanish Living Conditions Survey (2017-2020), this paper shows that households with children are more likely to experience in-work poverty, and that in-work poverty is more persistent in these cases. That said, entry into and exit from poverty is mostly associated with employment-related events, and to a lesser extent, with changes in household composition. The concentration of in-work poverty in households with children results from a process of erosion and accumulated risks, whereby wage losses have a greater effect on the risk of poverty, and the social protection system appears to be insufficient.

## Resumen

España registra una de las tasas más altas de pobreza laboral en Europa y una alta inestabilidad laboral. Reducir la pobreza laboral requiere comprender los mecanismos de entrada y salida de esta situación, y los factores protectores y de riesgo. Con datos de la Encuesta de Condiciones de Vida (2017-2020), mostramos que los hogares con menores tienen mayor probabilidad de pobreza laboral y ésta es más persistente. Dicho esto, las entradas y salidas están mayormente asociadas a eventos laborales, y en menor medida a cambios en la composición del hogar. La concentración de pobreza laboral en hogares con menores corresponde a un proceso de erosión y acumulación de riesgos, por el que las pérdidas salariales tienen mayor efecto en el riesgo de pobreza y el sistema de protección social parece insuficiente.

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## INTRODUCTION

Employment is often described as a route out of poverty. However, for a growing number of households, having a member of the family working is not enough to avoid poverty (Lanau and Lozano, 2022). Spain is currently the second European country with the highest in-work poverty rate, only behind Romania (Eurostat, 2023). Spain is one of the few EU countries where in-work poverty has increased since 2012, and household wages have fallen sharply after the 2008 economic recession (Peña-Casas *et al.*, 2019). In-work poverty is also one of the causes of child poverty, as most children in poverty live in households where there is at least one working adult (Lanau, 2021). Despite these data, studies on the dynamics of in-work poverty in Spain and its relationship with child poverty have been rather scarce, and the mechanisms by which the presence of children increases the risk of poverty have been little studied.

In this article we will analyse transitions into and out of in-work poverty, and compare households with and without children. Specifically, we will address the following research questions: 1) How frequent are transitions into in-work poverty; 2) What are the most common routes into and out of in-work poverty in Spain; and 3) What are the factors associated with entry into and exit from in-work poverty in Spain?

Using cross-sectional (2015-2020) and longitudinal (2017-2020) data from the Spanish Living Conditions Survey (known by its Spanish abbreviated form “ECV”)<sup>1</sup>, this article makes three contributions to the existing literature. First, it updates and extends previous results on the dynamics of in-work poverty in Spain (Gutiérrez, Ibáñez

and Tejero, 2011; Tejero, 2017, 2018) by exploring data for recent periods of economic recession, from 2015 onwards. Second, it explores the events associated with routes into and out of in-work poverty by distinguishing between in-work factors, demographic factors and changes in non-employment income, primarily welfare state transfers. This allows the relative weight of each category of events in in-work poverty transitions to be assessed. Finally, a regression model is used to identify those households most likely to experience entries into and/or exits from in-work poverty. This makes it possible to contribute to the extant empirical evidence on the concentration of in-work poverty in households with children and to better understand what mechanisms explain it.

## BACKGROUND

The high prevalence of in-work poverty in Spain has been associated with low-quality, low-wage employment, the expansion of the service sector, company relocation and rising housing prices. Several studies have analysed the phenomenon of in-work poverty in Spain. This kind of poverty is particularly high among young households, households with children, single breadwinners, people with low educational attainment and also among the self-employed (Cantó, 2003; Tejero, 2018; Lanau and Lozano, 2022; Peña-Casas *et al.*, 2019). Tejero (2017) used ECV data for the period 2003-2008 and found that those who had been in poverty in the past are more likely to be in poverty again in the future, thus underlining a dependency path regarding in-work poverty. Both temporary work and self-employment increase the risk of present and future poverty through the so-called scar effect, whereby early experiences have lifelong consequences (Amuedo-Dorantes and Serrano-Padial, 2010; Cantó, Gradín

<sup>1</sup> Since the SILC/ECV economic data refer to the previous year, the selection of the period 2017-2020 allows the use of updated data, but where poverty entry and exit dynamics are not affected by the pandemic.

and Río, 2012). García-Espejo and Gutiérrez (2011) showed a significant association between in-work poverty and low wages, job insecurity and unemployment. Furthermore, they stressed the importance of women's access to employment, as this has been shown to contribute to a decrease in the risk of poverty for those households where women enter the labour market. Thus, the literature has found a positive relationship between low wages and in-work poverty, but has also highlighted that these are not equivalent, which reinforces the importance of considering the household as a unit of analysis in the study of in-work poverty (Hick and Lanau, 2018).

Previous research in the UK has shown that women are more prone to in-work poverty at the individual level, but not necessarily at the household level, due to their role as secondary income earners in many households (Hick and Lanau, 2018). However, women's income could be expected to be essential in Spain to keep households above the poverty line, due to low wages and high levels of male unemployment compared to other European countries. Spain has experienced a considerable increase in female labour participation since the mid-1980s, and in access to education, especially among younger cohorts. However, despite the modernisation of Spanish society, gender norms continue to limit women's options in the labour market. Women still perform the bulk of domestic and family care, not only during motherhood but also at other stages of life (Quinto, Hospido and Sanz, 2020). These factors are likely to shape poverty trajectories for both men and women.

Finally, there is a typically high risk of in-work poverty among workers in the early stages of the life course in Spain. This pattern is likely to reflect high youth unemployment, as well as weaknesses in the welfare system, which has a limited capacity to sustain households out of poverty, particularly

households with children (Chzhen, 2014; Lancker and Mechelen, 2015; Cantó, Cebrián and Moreno, 2022). These factors are examined in more detail below.

### **Labour market conditions**

The Spanish labour market is characterised by high unemployment rates and a high prevalence of job insecurity. Unemployment is particularly high among the young population (Torre, 2021). After the 2008 crisis, unemployment rates in Spain reached 27 %, one of the highest in the euro area. Young people and households with children were the hardest hit by the recession: between 2012 and the second half of 2015, the unemployment rate for those under 25 exceeded 50 %. In 2020, at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, unemployment rates had not yet returned to pre-recession levels (INE, 2022).

The notion of precarious employment refers to the new forms of employment that emerged in the 1970s. Previous studies have indicated that precarious jobs are strongly affected by temporary contracts in Spain (Miguélez, 2010; Banyuls and Recio, 2012). Temporary contracts involve great uncertainty and no protection against dismissal; in addition, temporary workers are often paid less than those on permanent contracts. In this regard, Lozano and Rentería (2019) noted that temporary, low-quality and low-paid jobs have increased in recent decades, and their duration is becoming longer and longer over workers' working lives, especially among women.

Moreover, Spain has lower labour market participation rates for women than other EU countries, although there has been a notable increase in the last 20 years. Until the beginning of the 21st century, the single breadwinner model was predominant among Spanish families (García-Román and Cortina, 2015). However, this is changing. León and Migliavacca (2013) showed that Spain has moved from

“Southern” levels of female employment to “Northern” rates in recent decades, especially due to rising levels of female education among younger cohorts. Still, traditional gender role norms in Spain limit women’s labour market choices (Giménez-Nadal and Sevilla, 2012; Domínguez-Folgueras, 2015). Traditionally, women have been considered to be primarily responsible for household tasks, not only in the early stages of motherhood but also in life stages (Flaquer and Escobedo, 2014). In addition, the literature has highlighted that women, especially those with young children, face structural barriers to entering the labour market, such as high work-family conflict and a lack of family policies (Addabbo, Rodríguez-Moroño and Gálvez-Muños, 2015; Henau, Meulders and O’Dorchai, 2010). Family support policies, and in particular paternity leave, are based on “the male breadwinner short leave model” (Wall and Escobedo, 2013). This means that male employment still prevails. The length of parental leave for the birth of a child on equal terms for both parents has only recently been approved (16 weeks). Similar measures have had a very positive impact in other countries to improve women’s labour participation (Farré, 2016) and are expected to increase female employment in the future.

Previous studies in Spain have highlighted that, although women have more uncertain and unstable employment situations, the usual profile of in-work poverty in Spain tends to correspond to men, due to the lower participation of women in the labour market (Peña-Casas and Latta, 2004). Men are therefore more likely to have persistent in-work poverty (Tejero, 2011).

### **The welfare system and public support for vulnerable households**

High in-work poverty rates in Spain not only point to a weak labour market, but also under-

line the limitations of the welfare system, particularly for families with children and young couples with unstable labour participation (Marí-Klose and Marí-Klose, 2012; Cantó and Ayala, 2014). Spain has one of the lowest expenditures on family benefits per child in the EU (Lancker and Mechelen, 2015; Hernández and Picos, 2021). This low spending, coupled with a regressive system articulated through tax credits, translates into a limited capacity to lift families with children out of poverty (Cantó and Ayala, 2014; Lancker and Mechelen, 2015; Ayllón, 2017).

On the other hand, the Spanish social protection system has historically been related strongly related to contributions paid (Marí-Klose and Marí-Klose, 2012). Unemployment benefit is also received based on national insurance contributions, and both the amount and duration are linked to previous employment history. In addition, unemployment benefit is capped at two years, irrespective of contributions. Over the years, subsidies have been introduced to help those who exhaust unemployment benefit without finding a job, but until recently they operated on an *ad hoc* basis, although some regions have historically provided more generous minimum income protection schemes (Peña-Casas *et al.*, 2019; Hernández and Picos, 2021). In 2021, the Spanish central government expanded the minimum income protection scheme, a low-income benefit not linked to contributions or labour market participation, with the adoption of the Minimum Living Wage (known by its initials in Spanish as IMV, which stand for - *Ingreso Mínimo Vital*) (MISSM, 2020). Therefore, the data from our study (2017-2020) did not reflect the potential effect of the Minimum Living Wage on poverty.

### **The concentration of in-work poverty in households with children**

The high in-work poverty rates in households with children are not surprising, since

Spain has one of the highest child poverty rates in the European Union (Marí-Klose and Marí-Klose, 2012; Ayllón, 2017). Indeed, in-work poverty is particularly high in households where there are children and only one person working (the traditional single-earner model), and poverty among these households has also increased progressively since 2013 (Lanau and Lozano, 2022). In 2020, almost a third (32 %) of households with children and a single worker were poor. This is twice the risk experienced by households with only one worker but no children.

From a static point of view, high child poverty rates are explained by the factors discussed above (welfare state and labour market characteristics), as well as by the fragility of young households. In-work poverty is concentrated in households with only one worker, with low educational attainment, either employed on temporary contracts or self-employed (Lanau and Lozano, 2022). Three sets of hypotheses on the relationship between child and in-work poverty can be identified (Polizzi, Struffolino, and Winkle, 2022). The first set of hypotheses pose that the birth or adoption of a child within a household could result in that household immediately entering poverty due to the increase in needs without commensurate resources to meet them (mechanical effect). The second set of hypotheses proposes that there is a causal relationship between the birth of a child and a reduction in household income when income becomes lower due to one of the parents (usually the mother) leaving the labour market. These effects can also be observed over time. Numerous studies have identified the motherhood penalty, a process whereby motherhood is associated with lower earnings throughout a mother's working life and more precarious career paths (Glauber, 2018; Keck and Saraceno, 2013; Domínguez-Folgueras, González and Lapuerta, 2022). A third block of hypotheses focuses on selection theory and

suggests that households decide to have children when their economic situation stabilises or is expected to improve (e.g. because of a job promotion). These theories have been used mainly to explain effects such as the paternity bonus, whereby being a father in some countries is associated with improved job prospects. Since this study seeks to understand the processes of the entry into and exit out of poverty, it focuses on the first two sets of hypotheses. It should be noted that these hypotheses are not mutually exclusive but point to several factors that may act in concert. This study contributes to examining the relative weight of these factors in the Spanish context and, more broadly, to the literature on poverty dynamics in Spain and Europe.

## DATA AND METHODS

As households share resources and expenses, and poverty measures generally take the household as the unit of analysis. The unit of analysis in this study is also the household, deviating from Eurostat's definition of in-work poverty, which is limited to employed persons. The approach taken here has two main advantages. First, it follows a more holistic approach to understanding the determinants of in-work poverty, by analysing both the labour market and the demographic composition of households and non-labour income (Hick and Lanau, 2018). Second (related to the above), reducing in-work poverty and designing appropriate policy responses to it requires taking into account the circumstances of the household, and not only of those working in the labour market. In addition, a household approach is particularly relevant when addressing child poverty.

The use of household-based measures helps to better understand the role of family dynamics in moving in and out of poverty, as well as the weight of the presence

of children compared to studies that focus only on poor adults who are in work. A study comparing individual-based and household-based measures (Filandri and Struffolino, 2019) found that the level of analysis has very important implications for the interpretation of the results, especially from a gender perspective. While women's relatively disadvantaged position in the labour market involves that they are more likely to experience in-work poverty, the opposite holds true if household indicators are used, because working women tend to live in dual-income households. These results reinforce the importance of considering the unit of analysis in the interpretation of results.

This study categorises households as poor where disposable income is below 60% of the median, the threshold for being at risk of poverty (Eurostat, 2023). Following Eurostat recommendations, workers are categorised as those individuals who have been in paid employment for more than half a year (at least 7 months) during the reference year. In summary, this paper defines an in-work poor household as one where at least one member of the household is active in the labour market but the household income is insufficient to cover the household's needs.

## Sample

The analyses are based on the ECV (2017-2020), the benchmark survey for poverty studies in Spain. The panel component of the survey has a rotating design, with 25 % of the sample being renewed on an annual basis. Households are thus in the survey for a maximum period of four years. This study is limited to those households where there was at least one adult person of working age (between 18 and 64) during the reference period and which were in the sample for at least 3 consecutive years

( $n = 7367$ ). All analyses were carried out using the household weighting factor provided by the survey, which takes into account the sample design and the loss of households in longitudinal samples.

## Dependent variable

Since in-work poverty households are those that meet two requirements (being in work and being poor), a household can exit in-work poverty by exiting the labour market, exiting poverty or both (Guio, Marguerit and Salagean, 2021; Hick and Lanau, 2018). This adds complexity to the analysis of in-work poverty transitions, because the exit can occur through successful situations (moving out of poverty) or through situations that can be negative (leaving the labour market). In view of these considerations, four categories were established:

1. Non-poor workless households.
2. Non-poor working households.
3. Poor workless households.
4. Poor working households (in-work poverty).

## Method

In order to answer the research questions, the analysis was structured into three parts. First transition matrices were used, a method long used in studies on changes between states to explore the flows between the four categories above. Second, we explored how households moved in and out of in-work poverty. The analysis of trigger events was used for this purpose. This terminology was proposed by Jenkins (2011) and adapted by Hick and Lanau (2018) to study in-work poverty transitions. Triggers are events that co-occur with in-work poverty entries and exits. The main advantage of this approach lies in the ability to identify the proportion of entries and ex-

its that are associated with different events. Following Hick and Lanau (2018), it was recognised that households often experience multiple changes or events at once, so we examined non-exclusive events. The analysis of non-exclusive events avoids the need to make arbitrary methodological choices in determining the hierarchy of events and more accurately represents all changes experienced by households (Jenkins, 2011). The method differentiates between three types of events.

1. Demographic events: associated with changes in household composition. Three events were considered, the change in the number of adults, the number of children and household size.
2. Labour market events: changes associated with the labour market position of household members, including: entering or leaving the labour market, changes in the number of months worked, between full-time and part-time employment, and increases or decreases in wages. All of these are calculated on a household basis.
3. Non-earned income events: changes in income not derived from the labour market, from benefits or other sources, such as property rental or dividends. To minimise the risk of overestimating the effect of small changes in income, income-related events were only coded as such when the change exceeded 10 % and at least 50 euros per month.

Three parameters were calculated for each event: incidence, rate and quota. Incidence shows the frequency of the event among the population group (e.g. among the working poor). Rate reflects what proportion of those who experienced the event saw their in-work poverty status change. Share shows what proportion of those who experienced a change in in-work poverty status experienced the event. This factor depends on both the incidence of the event

and the exit rate of the event. Thus, events experienced by only a few households in a given year (e.g. a birth) will naturally account for only a small part of transitions, even if the entry or exit rate associated with the event is high.

The analysis of triggers and trajectories is descriptive, and causality cannot be assumed. It does, however, provide useful information on the events associated with multiple trajectories into and out of poverty. It allows coexisting events to be considered and sheds light on the relative weight of each of them in poverty trajectories.

In the final section, the descriptive analysis of the triggers is complemented by a logistic regression model to assess the factors associated with a transition between categories and how these vary by household characteristics. The selection of independent variables was based on previous literature (Lanau, 2021; Peña-Casas *et al.*, 2019; Tejero, 2017) and included the following factors associated with economic outcomes: the characteristics of the household head (gender, employment status and position, type of contract) and other key household characteristics generally associated with economic outcomes (tenure, number of workers and number of children).

## RESULTS

### The persistence of in-work poverty

The fact that Spain has one of the highest in-work poverty rates in the EU means that approximately 14 % of households suffer from in-work poverty. Studies on the dynamics of poverty in Spain have found that it is much more persistent than in other central and northern European countries (Ayllón, 2013). Table 1 shows the number of years spent in in-work poverty by households in the sample. We limited our analysis to households for which data is availa-

ble for at least three years and differentiated between households with and without children. The results are in line with previous evidence that, for most households, in-work poverty is relatively short-lived, although it may be recurrent (Tejero, 2017). It was

found that 43 % of poor households were in in-work poverty for one year, 26 % for two years and 31 % for three or more years. The persistence of in-work poverty was highest in households with children: 40 % were in this situation for three or more years.

**TABLE 1.** Persistence of in-work poverty, households that have experienced in-work poverty at some point in the period

| Number of years | Years in poverty             |                           | Total |
|-----------------|------------------------------|---------------------------|-------|
|                 | No children in the household | Children in the household |       |
| 1               | 49                           | 35                        | 43    |
| 2               | 27                           | 26                        | 26    |
| 3+              | 23                           | 40                        | 31    |

Source: Developed by the authors based on ECV data (2017-2020).

Additional regression analyses suggested that, in addition to the presence of children, having only one household member in work and being self-employed were associated with a higher probability of being in in-work poverty for three or more years. Our results are consistent with the analyses of Tejero (2018), who pointed to the vulnerability of the self-employed population and the importance of household composition as a predictor of persistent poverty. The higher persistence among households with children is likely to be one of the factors explaining the high in-work poverty rates among these households. This is worrying, as even short experiences of poverty can have long-term consequences for children's health, well-being and educational outcomes (Pillas *et al.*, 2014; Ayllón, 2017; Green *et al.*, 2018).

### In-work poverty dynamics

To better understand the dynamics of in-work poverty, we analysed the poverty trajectories of households among the four categories presented in the meth-

odological section: non-poor workless households, non-poor working households, poor workless households, and poor working households. Transition tables were used to plot these trajectories. The annual nature of the ECV means that only transitions from one year to the next can be reflected. To maximise the sample size, the data corresponded to the aggregate sample, but each household was only included once, in the last year of observation.

Table 2 shows that approximately seven out of ten households in the sample were non-poor working households. The rest of the share included poor working households (14 %), poor workless households (9 %) and non-poor workless households (8 %). The majority of poor working households (60 %) were already in this situation in the previous year. About a third of the households that entered in-work poverty (30 %) were non-poor and working, and 9 % were poor but not working. Thus, the main trajectory into in-work was that of households that remained in work but became poor.



**TABLE 2.** *Entry into in-work poverty (in-work poverty situations in the following year)*

|                 |                              | Destination (Year+1)         |                             |                          |                 | Total |
|-----------------|------------------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------|-------|
|                 |                              | Non-poor workless households | Non-poor working households | Poor workless households | In-work poverty |       |
| Origin (Year 0) | Non-poor workless households | 57                           | 2                           | 14                       | 1               | 8     |
|                 | Non-poor working households  | 32                           | 91                          | 11                       | 30              | 68    |
|                 | Poor workless households     | 8                            | 1                           | 62                       | 9               | 9     |
|                 | In-work poverty              | 3                            | 6                           | 13                       | 60              | 14    |
|                 | Total                        | 100%                         | 100%                        | 100%                     | 100%            | 100   |

Source: Developed by the authors based on ECV data (2017-2020).

The trajectories of exit from in-work poverty (see Table 3) largely reflect these results: 60 % of households in in-work poverty remained in poverty the following year, 29 % remained in the labour market but ex-

ited poverty and 9 % remained in poverty but exited the labour market. Thus, although the persistence of in-work poverty was relatively high, most transitions were positive, towards the non-poor working group.

**TABLE 3.** *Exits from in-work poverty (In-work poverty at origin)*

|                 |                              | Destination (Year+1)         |                             |                          |                 | Total (%) |
|-----------------|------------------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------|-----------|
|                 |                              | Non-poor workless households | Non-poor working households | Poor workless households | In-work poverty |           |
| Origin (Year 0) | Non-poor workless households | 65                           | 16                          | 17                       | 2               | 100       |
|                 | Non-poor working households  | 5                            | 88                          | 2                        | 6               | 100       |
|                 | Poor workless households     | 9                            | 7                           | 69                       | 14              | 100       |
|                 | In-work poverty              | 2                            | 29                          | 9                        | 60              | 100       |
|                 | Total                        | 10                           | 66                          | 10                       | 14              | 100       |

Source: Developed by the authors based on ECV data (2017-2020).

Thus, most in-work poverty transitions (more than 70% in each direction) occurred in households that moved in and out of poverty but remained in the labour market. On the other hand, there was a small but concerning group of poor households for whom entering the labour market was not enough to exit poverty (see also Guio, Marguerit and Salagean, 2021). Temporary work, the presence of children in the household and living in rented accommodation were associated with a higher likelihood of being in this situation. For the sake of brevity and considering the objectives of the study, the focus here is on in-work poverty transitions; therefore we did not study un-

employment processes which, albeit important, are distinctive and would require more space than we can give them here. Given their particular vulnerability, the study paid particular attention to factors related to the presence of children in the household.

### **Triggers: associated with poverty entries and exits**

The trigger events are explored below. The processes by which working households move in and out of in-work poverty will be focused on, as these represent the most common trajectories.

**TABLE 4.** *Triggers of entries into in-work poverty (non-poor working households at t0)*

| Type of Event                                     | Changes   |           | Incidence | Rate | Share |
|---|---|-----------|-----------|------|-------|
| Changes in the employment status of the household | Number of employees                                       | Decrease  | 11        | 18   | 31    |
|   |   | No change | 80        | 5    | 61    |
|   |   | Increase  | 8         | 7    | 8     |
|   | Number of months worked without reduction in workers      | Decrease  | 6         | 9    | 12    |
|   |   | No change | 88        | 4    | 80    |
|   |   | Increase  | 5         | 7    | 8     |
|   | Salary  | Decrease  | 18        | 25   | 65    |
|   |   | No change | 50        | 2    | 15    |
|   |   | Increase  | 32        | 4    | 20    |
|   | Salary, no reduction in workers                           | Decrease  | 11        | 26   | 43    |
|   |   | No change | 58        | 5    | 46    |
|   |   | Increase  | 30        | 3    | 12    |
|   | Salary, no reduction in workers or months worked          | Decrease  | 11        | 22   | 32    |
|   |   | No change | 60        | 6    | 56    |
|   |   | Increase  | 30        | 3    | 12    |
|   | Salary, no reduction in workers, months or work intensity | Decrease  | 8         | 22   | 27    |
|   |   | No change | 66        | 6    | 62    |
|   |   | Increase  | 26        | 3    | 11    |
|   | Household size  | Decrease  | 2         | 6    | 1     |
|   |   | No change | 90        | 6    | 87    |
|   |   | Increase  | 8         | 9    | 12    |
| Demographic changes                               | Number of children  | Decrease  | 3         | 16   | 8     |
|   |   | No change | 89        | 6    | 81    |
|   |   | Increase  | 8         | 10   | 12    |
| Number of adults                                  | Decrease  | 1         | 5         | 1    |       |
|   | No change   | 95        | 7         | 93   |       |
|   | Increase  | 4         | 10        | 6    |       |
| Benefits  | Decrease  | 23        | 10        | 34   |       |
|   | No change   | 58        | 6         | 48   |       |
|   | Increase  | 19        | 7         | 18   |       |
| Changes in non-earned income                      | Unemployment benefits                                     | Decrease  | 16        | 12   | 28    |
|   |   | No change | 73        | 5    | 59    |
|   |   | Increase  | 10        | 9    | 13    |
| Other income                                      | Decrease  | 10        | 10        | 14   |       |
|   | No change   | 80        | 7         | 83   |       |
|   | Increase  | 11        | 2         | 3    |       |

Source: Developed by the authors based on ECV data (2017-2020).

### *Entries into in-work poverty*

Table 4 shows the triggers accounting for in-work poverty entries among in-work households. For each event we show the incidence of the event, the risk rate and the

share of entries that co-occurred with the event. Entry into in-work poverty is mainly associated with labour market events. Sixty percent of households entering in-work poverty experienced a decline in earnings.

This reduction in earnings largely reflected a decrease in work intensity. Thus, almost one third (31 %) of the entries were associated with a decrease in the number of workers. However, there was a decrease in earnings without a reduction in the number of workers in 43 % of cases, and there was a decrease in wages without a reduction in the number of workers, the number of months worked, or the working hours in 27 % of entries. These were changes in earnings associated with decreases in wages or changes in the number of hours.

Changes in benefits are also important drivers of in-work poverty dynamics. One third of the entries into in-work poverty (34 %) co-occurred with a decline in benefit income, mainly through a decline in unemployment benefits (28 % of total entries). These were households that had either exhausted or seen their benefits reduced while falling into poverty despite remaining in the labour market. The high prevalence of this situation in Spain illustrates the limitations of the welfare state in protecting working households from poverty.

Demographic factors are the least important in understanding in-work poverty entries. Only 12 % of entries were associated with an increase in the number of children in the household (by birth, adoption or union). This reflects the fact that the increase in the number of children is relatively infrequent (prevalence), as well as the low proportion of people with children entering in-work poverty (rate).

#### *Exits from in-work poverty*

Those households that were in in-work poverty during the first year of observation and exited this condition subsequently will now be analysed. As in the case of entries, exits from in-work poverty were mostly associated with labour market events. Eighty per cent of households that moved out of poverty experienced an increase in earnings. In-

terestingly, despite the strong concentration of in-work poverty in single-worker households, most households that experienced a wage increase did so without increasing the number of workers in the household. Such increases were achieved through increases in work intensity (e.g. moving from part-time to full-time or a greater number of months worked) or through wage improvements. That said, "gaining a worker" (either because one of the household members finds a job, or because a new working adult enters the household) was associated with a strong probability of moving out of poverty: half of the households that gained a worker moved out of in-work poverty.

On the other hand, changes in non-earned income also played a substantial role in exit dynamics. Half of the households in in-work poverty experienced a change in non-earned income of 10 % or more during the period observed, mainly due to changes in unemployment benefits. The association between transfers and exit from in-work poverty was symmetrical: both increases and decreases in non-earned income were associated with an exit. However, the two reflected different situations. Increases in benefit payments can help a household move out of poverty. In turn, reductions in benefits may indicate a shorter time in unemployment and are therefore also associated with exits. The role of other non-earned income, such as rental payments and dividends, was comparatively smaller than that of benefits: 17 % of households moving out of poverty saw their non-earned income increase. Unfortunately, the level of detail in the survey does not allow for the factors associated with these changes to be explored.

Finally, as with entries, demographic events accounted for a relatively small share of exits. About 10% of the exits from in-work poverty co-occurred with an increase in the number of adults in the household.

**TABLE 5.** *Triggers of in-work poverty exits (poor working households at t0 and poor workless households at t1)*

| Type of Event                                     | Changes   |           | Incidence | Rate | Share |
|---|---|-----------|-----------|------|-------|
| Changes in the employment status of the household | Number of employees                                   | Decrease  | 16        | 6    | 3     |
|   |   | No change | 74        | 33   | 79    |
|   |   | Increase  | 10        | 55   | 18    |
|   | Salary  | Decrease  | 16        | 3    | 1     |
|   |   | No change | 28        | 23   | 19    |
|   |   | Increase  | 56        | 49   | 80    |
|   | Salary without more workers                           | Decrease  | 15        | 3    | 1     |
|   |   | No change | 40        | 33   | 38    |
|   |   | Increase  | 46        | 46   | 61    |
|   | Salary without more workers or months                 | Decrease  | 13        | 2    | 1     |
|   |   | No change | 46        | 31   | 42    |
|   |   | Increase  | 41        | 48   | 57    |
|   | Salary without more workers, months or work intensity | Decrease  | 10        | 1    | 0     |
|   |   | No change | 65        | 33   | 62    |
|   |   | Increase  | 25        | 52   | 37    |
| Household size                                    | Decrease  | 4         | 28        | 3    |       |
|   | No change   | 88        | 31        | 89   |       |
|   | Increase  | 8         | 26        | 7    |       |
| Demographic changes                               | Number of children                                    | Decrease  | 9         | 25   | 7     |
|   |   | No change | 86        | 32   | 89    |
|   |   | Increase  | 5         | 19   | 3     |
|   | Number of adults                                      | Decrease  | 4         | 25   | 3     |
|   |   | No change | 85        | 31   | 87    |
|   | Increase  | 12        | 27        | 10   |       |
| Benefits  | Decrease  | 19        | 34        | 21   |       |
|   | No change   | 49        | 31        | 49   |       |
|   | Increase  | 32        | 29        | 30   |       |
| Changes in non-earned income                      | Unemployment benefits                                 | Decrease  | 18        | 31   | 18    |
|   |   | No change | 62        | 31   | 63    |
|   |   | Increase  | 21        | 29   | 19    |
|   | Other income  | Decrease  | 6         | 30   | 6     |
|   |   | No change | 86        | 28   | 77    |
|   |   | Increase  | 8         | 61   | 17    |

Source: Developed by the authors based on ECV data (2017-2020).

### Who moves in and out of poverty? Transitions and household characteristics

Two logistic regression models were used to analyse the predictors of exits from and entries into in-work poverty. Regression models allow the structural factors associ-

ated with in-work poverty dynamics to be examined together with the extent to which observed relationships (such as the concentration of risk in households with children) remain when controlling for other household characteristics such as educational attainment or number of workers.

**TABLE 6.** Logistic regression. Probability of entry into and exit from in-work poverty for working households

| Variables  | Entries     |               | Exits       |               |
|--|-------------|---------------|-------------|---------------|
|  | Sig. coeff. | C.I.          | Sig. coeff. | C.I.          |
| Households with children                                     | 0.77***     | [ 0.50; 1.03] | -0.62**     | [-0.95;-0.29] |
| Employment status of the household head<br>(ref.: permanent) |             |               |             |               |
| Temporary contract   | 1.15***     | [ 0.77; 1.54] | -0.02       | [-0.42; 0.46] |
| Self-employed  | 1.69***     | [ 1.36; 2.02] | -0.57*      | [-1.02;-0.12] |
| Unemployed   | 0.21        | [-0.15; 0.57] | -0.36       | [-0.80; 0.08] |
| Number of workers in the household (ref.:1)                  |             |               |             |               |
| 2 workers  | -1.44***    | [-1.74;-1.13] | 0.87***     | [ 0.52; 1.21] |
| 3 or more workers  | -1.54***    | [-2.23;-0.84] | 1.90***     | [ 1.02; 2.77] |
| Female-headed household                                      | 0.16        | [-0.11; 0.43] | 0.10        | [-0.24; 0.44] |
| Educational attainment of the household<br>head (ref: low)   |             |               |             |               |
| Upper secondary education                                    | -0.01       | [-0.32; 0.29] | -0.02       | [-0.42; 0.37] |
| Tertiary education   | -1.10***    | [v1.43;-0.77] | 0.07        | [-0.33; 0.48] |
| Home ownership   | -0.83***    | [-1.10;-0.55] | 0.32        | [-0.02; 0.65] |
| Constant   | -2.06***    | [-2.42;-1.69] | -0.82***    | [-1.27;-0.36] |
| N  | 4,783.00    |               | 771.00      |               |
| R <sup>2</sup>   | 0.13        |               | 0.07        |               |

\*p<0.05; \*\*p<0.01; \*\*\*p<0.001.

Source: Developed by the authors based on ECV data (2017-2020).

Households with children and those in which the head of the household has a temporary contract or is self-employed are more likely to enter in-work poverty and also tend to experience greater difficulties in exiting this situation, a result that is consistent with previous literature (Cantó, Gradín and Río, 2012; Tejero, 2017). The presence of children increased the probability of entry into in-work poverty from 5 % to 9 %, and their probability of exit is also lower, 25 % vs. 34 %. Additional modelling suggested that a permanent contract protected households with children from entries into poverty to a lesser extent. On the other hand, large families were less likely to exit in-work poverty once they entered it (results available on request).

As was to be expected, households with more workers were more protected from in-work poverty, and also had a higher probability of exit. Tertiary education reduced

the probability of entering in-work poverty, but did not seem to have a positive effect on exits. Finally, home ownership also appeared to be a protective factor, which may reflect both a wealth accumulation effect and the need for some job and economic stability to gain access to property.

Generally, factors that are associated with a higher probability of entering in-work poverty were also associated with a lower probability of exiting in-work poverty, with the exception of higher education. No significant effect of the gender of the household head on the risk of in-work poverty was found. Multivariate analysis suggests that the higher risk of in-work poverty experienced by households with children is maintained when controlling for other household characteristics associated with higher risk of in-work poverty. The next section examines the implications of these results.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this study was to analyse the dynamics of in-work poverty in Spain, with particular emphasis on the vulnerability of households with children. The results show that entries into and exits from in-work poverty are frequent: 4 % of households move out of in-work poverty after only one year. Of these, the majority (one third of the total) remain in work and manage to work their way out of poverty, while the rest leave the labour market. This latter group of households that remain in poverty and lose their jobs is small, but is particularly worrying from a public policy perspective, given the accumulation of risks. Our analysis reinforces the importance of taking into account the origin and destination of transitions when examining in-work poverty dynamics.

In general, the most frequent transitions are between households experiencing entries into and exits from poverty while remaining in the labour market. We have focused on this group to examine trigger events associated with entry and exit transitions. Trigger analysis allowed the relative weight of different events in the trajectories of entry into and exit from in-work poverty to be estimated. This analysis identifies continuities over time, as well as novelties with respect to previous academic literature. In terms of continuity, both entries and exits are mainly associated with labour market events, such as wage reductions or periods of unemployment. That is, most transitions resulted from changes in the employment status of households, while demographic factors play a relatively minor role (Cantó, 2003; Guio, Marguerit and Salagean, 2021). We will return to the implications of this finding below when examining the situation of households with children.

In line with previous studies, our results have shown that changes in the number of workers have a strong effect on the

probability of entry into and exit from in-work poverty (Gutiérrez, Ibáñez and Tejero, 2011). This suggests that policies that facilitate the entry of a second worker into the labour market in households where this is possible would be effective in reducing in-work poverty. Along these lines, it is necessary to strengthen initiatives that promote the work and family balance, making it easier for mothers to remain in the labour market.

That said, only 18 % of the exits from in-work poverty are associated with an increase in the number of workers. Indeed, not all households are able to increase the number of workers. The data indicated that a substantial proportion of the entries into and exits from in-work poverty are associated with changes in wages and/or work intensity, with no change in the number of workers. For example, it was seen that 61 % of the exits from in-work poverty were due to wage increases, with no increase in the number of workers. These households enter poverty as a result of short periods of unemployment, or of reductions in working hours or wages. These results diverge from previous studies that have pointed to the comparatively minor role of changes in work intensity in in-work poverty dynamics (Gutiérrez, Ibáñez and Tejero, 2011). This divergence can be explained by the emphasis of this paper on the share rather than the rates (the increase in poverty risk) associated with each event. Substantially reducing in-work poverty requires policies aimed at sustaining the income of these groups during periods of lower work intensity that could reduce earned income. The limitations of the Spanish welfare state have been identified as one of the factors explaining the high risk of in-work and child poverty (Lancker and Mechelen, 2015; Cantó, Cebrián and Moreno, 2022). These constraints also affect in-work poverty dynamics. About one third of working households that fall into poverty report a decline

in benefit income, particularly in unemployment benefits. The co-occurrence of benefit reductions with entries into in-work poverty suggests the need for more support for households that exhaust their benefits but remain in a situation of financial vulnerability. It would be necessary to implement schemes that allow people to have earned income and transfers simultaneously in certain circumstances. It remains to be seen whether recently introduced benefits such as the Minimum Living Wage, have the ability to reduce the proportion of households entering poverty after unemployment benefits has been reduced or terminated.

In-work poverty and child poverty often go hand in hand. Our study has reaffirmed the high risk of in-work poverty in households with children in Spain (Ayllón, 2017; Lanau, 2021). Comparatively, households with children are more likely to enter in-work poverty and less likely to exit it once they have entered it. This is particularly true for households with three or more children. The longer duration of poverty is one of the factors explaining the greater presence of in-work poverty in households with children. The literature review provided two main hypotheses to explain the entries into poverty of households with children according to 1) an increase in household needs (mechanical effect), or 2) a decrease in income as a result of the motherhood penalty (Polizzi, Struffolino and Winkle, 2022). This study did not allow either of these hypotheses to be ruled out, but it makes it possible to examine the relative weight of the various explanatory factors in the Spanish context. We have seen that demographic events play a comparatively minor role in in-work poverty dynamics. The mechanical effect, whereby the birth of a child would lead households to enter into poverty as a consequence of an increase in needs, has little weight in Spain. This result is consistent with similar studies conducted in the United Kingdom, where demographic events were found to

carry relatively little weight, partly due to their low frequency (Hick and Lanau, 2018; Jenkins, 2011).

On the other hand, the results suggest that households with children accumulate difficulties in that they are less able to cope with negative events such as job loss or a reduction in the number of hours worked. Thus, the results are consistent with theories of “motherhood penalty” (Domínguez-Folgueras, González and Lapuerta, 2022; Glauber, 2018). The development of policies that facilitate the work and family balance can help to reduce this penalty and consequently, in-work and child poverty.

Nevertheless, our study has some methodological limitations. Firstly, we can only observe four-year periods, which partly explains the greater weight of labour market transitions relative to demographic events. Job changes are much more frequent than births or divorces, especially when the focus of study is only four years. If a more long-term perspective were applied, the weight of demographic events could be greater. Unfortunately, longitudinal data covering longer periods are not available. Secondly, the ECV only allows analysis of changes from one year to the next. Not being able to analyse monthly variations is very likely to underestimate entries into and exits from poverty. Thirdly, the sample size did not allow the effect of events on different population groups or combinations of events over time to be analysed. Similarly, due to the sample, we were unable to examine regional differences. Having data available to address these issues would improve our understanding of in-work poverty. Despite these limitations, the study provides new evidence on the dynamics of in-work poverty in Spain.

In summary, the trigger analysis highlights the diversity of situations among households in in-work poverty. Reducing in-

work poverty requires multi-sectoral policies to minimise entry pathways, such as benefit termination and temporariness, and to streamline exit pathways, facilitating work-life balance and allowing for earned and non-earned income to co-exist. This study also stresses the importance of risk accumulation in understanding poverty trajectories. Households with children in the most fragile employment situations suffer the most from loss of employment and/or public benefits. Encouraging labour market participation and introducing complementary social benefits are essential to reduce risks for this group. Therefore, measures to reduce in-work poverty inevitably involve reducing occupational inequality and improving women's working conditions. Increasing female participation would help households at risk, especially those with children, to exit poverty.

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