

## Older British migrants in Spain

Giner-Monfort, Jordi; Hall, Kelly

DOI:

[10.1002/psp.2730](https://doi.org/10.1002/psp.2730)

License:

Creative Commons: Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs (CC BY-NC-ND)

*Document Version*

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

*Citation for published version (Harvard):*

Giner-Monfort, J & Hall, K 2023, 'Older British migrants in Spain: Return patterns and intentions post-Brexit', *Population, Space and Place*. <https://doi.org/10.1002/psp.2730>

[Link to publication on Research at Birmingham portal](#)

### General rights

Unless a licence is specified above, all rights (including copyright and moral rights) in this document are retained by the authors and/or the copyright holders. The express permission of the copyright holder must be obtained for any use of this material other than for purposes permitted by law.

- Users may freely distribute the URL that is used to identify this publication.
- Users may download and/or print one copy of the publication from the University of Birmingham research portal for the purpose of private study or non-commercial research.
- User may use extracts from the document in line with the concept of 'fair dealing' under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 (?)
- Users may not further distribute the material nor use it for the purposes of commercial gain.

Where a licence is displayed above, please note the terms and conditions of the licence govern your use of this document.

When citing, please reference the published version.

### Take down policy

While the University of Birmingham exercises care and attention in making items available there are rare occasions when an item has been uploaded in error or has been deemed to be commercially or otherwise sensitive.

If you believe that this is the case for this document, please contact [UBIRA@lists.bham.ac.uk](mailto:UBIRA@lists.bham.ac.uk) providing details and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate.

# Older British migrants in Spain: Return patterns and intentions post-Brexit

Jordi Giner-Monfort<sup>1</sup>  | Kelly Hall<sup>2</sup> 

<sup>1</sup>Departament de Sociologia i Antropologia Social, Universitat de València, València, Spain

<sup>2</sup>Department of Social Policy, Sociology and Criminology, School of Social Policy, University of Birmingham, Edgbaston, Birmingham, UK

## Correspondence

Jordi Giner-Monfort, Departament de Sociologia i Antropologia Social, Universitat de València, València 46021, Spain.

Email: [Jordi.Giner@uv.es](mailto:Jordi.Giner@uv.es)

## Funding information

None

## Abstract

After the Brexit referendum results, there may have been fears that a significant part of the British population in Spain, one of the largest outside the Commonwealth, would return to the United Kingdom. This paper uses different sources to assess whether, on the one hand, such a return movement has existed and, on the other hand, whether it could exist in the future. To do so, we analyse data from the Spanish Population Register (Padrón) and the Residential Variation Statistics (EVR) from 2003 to 2021, and a survey carried out in 2020 of 643 British people over 55 years of age living in Spain. In relation to the registry data, it has been observed that the return movement after Brexit has not been as significant as might be expected at a time of great uncertainty. Only in 2021 it was detected an increase in return movements, especially above the age of 75, probably caused by the end of the application of the Withdrawal Agreement. On the other hand, the survey results show that the intention to return is lower than in other similar surveys that have been carried out in the past, even in another COVID-19 outbreak scenario. Moreover, this intention to return is especially related to variables linked to insertion, such as not being properly registered or owning a property in the United Kingdom, among other variables.

## KEYWORDS

ageing, lifestyle migration, return migration, Spain, United Kingdom

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Back in 2016 the EU referendum resulted in the withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the EU. This created considerable uncertainty for British migrants living in other EU countries, including Spain (Reference), especially pensioners who before Brexit were entitled not only to freedom of movement and the exportability of pensions (including annual increments), but also free healthcare in Spain which was bound through reciprocal agreements existing between EU nations. Whilst a withdrawal agreement has secured the rights of

those who were legally registered in Spain by the end of 2020, uncertainty leading up to this mandate may have resulted in some choosing to return to the United Kingdom. This paper aims to answer the following question: Have older British citizens returned to the United Kingdom as a consequence of Brexit? We draw on three sources of data to answer this question: Spanish registration data on the stocks of British people living in Spain; Spanish registration data on the flows of British people arriving and leaving Spain; and a survey to British people aged 55 and more living in Spain on their return intentions. Our analysis suggests that return migration has not

This is an open access article under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs License, which permits use and distribution in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, the use is non-commercial and no modifications or adaptations are made.

© 2023 The Authors. *Population, Space and Place* published by John Wiley & Sons Ltd.

increased since the United Kingdom left the EU and even there is more British population in the register in 2022 than in 2016. Instead, return intentions were in 2020 lower than they were in 2015.

## 2 | RETURN MIGRATION AND THE BRITISH IN SPAIN

Spain has a long tradition of welcoming British citizens, both as tourists and as migrants, although it is recognised that there can be some overlap between these categories (Castilla-Polo et al., 2023; Huete et al., 2013). As it is well known, most British migrants migrate to Spain for lifestyle reasons rather than for work (O'Reilly, 2000). Therefore, Spain is the most common destination for older, retired British migrants, and there are approximately 117,000 British nationals receiving a British state pension in Spain (Hall, 2023). This figure does not however include those who are retired and under state pension age or those who are not legally resident in Spain, and therefore estimates have suggested that there are up to a million older British nationals living in Spain for all or most of the year (Benton, 2017). Spain is an attractive destination due to substantial tourist infrastructure that caters to the language, cultural and lifestyle needs of the British population. The social integration model of British citizens living in Spain is arguably very different from other national groups, for example, Romanians or Moroccans, who find little difficulty in settling down in a new environment (Montoro Gurich & López Hernández, 2013), even in relation to other lifestyle migration national groups as French or German (Casado-Díaz, 2006). Contrarily, the acquisition and use of Spanish language is low among the British community in Spain and this can result in a lack of integration into local Spanish society (Betty & Cahill, 1998; Betty & Hall, 2015; Gustafson & Laksfoss Cardozo, 2017; Oliver, 2008). The social lives of older British migrants tend to be centred around other British (or at least English) speaking networks and activities. For example, there are a plethora of social clubs and voluntary organisations within the British community in Spain. These organisations provide social support as well as help for these migrants as they age, including with care and domestic help (Simó et al., 2013).

British migrants in Spain have been referred to as transmigrants, who maintain a strong sense of British identity through their everyday practices, like watching British TV, consuming British goods and through their social interactions, something that boosts their home belonging through familiarity, safety and nourishing social relations (Hall & Hardill, 2016; Huber & O'Reilly, 2004; O'Reilly, 2007). Their transnational lifestyle often combines dual settlement, and many retain property in the United Kingdom and engage in frequent movements between Spain and the United Kingdom. Such strong connections to the United Kingdom can also facilitate return movements (Cassarino, 2004; Duval, 2004) and it is considered that owning property in the home country or regularly visiting it are two variables positively associated with the likelihood of returning (Giner-Monfort et al., 2016). The decision to return is often connected to the onset of older age or the 'fourth age' where the need for

additional care and support increases (Walsh, 2020). Returning to access health and care services or support from family is common (Ahmed & Hall, 2016; Betty, 2017; Hall & Hardill, 2016). Prior research has indicated that both the intention to return and actual returns among the British living in Spain have however remained low for many decades. Warnes et al.'s (1999) survey of retired British migrants observed that only 25% to 60% would return to the United Kingdom. More than a decade later, a survey in 2014 estimated that 29% to 50% of older British migrants in Spain would return to the United Kingdom (Giner-Monfort, 2018). However, as indicated above, Brexit may have led to increasing numbers of return migrations from EU countries.

Prior research (Giner-Monfort et al., 2016) has suggested that one of the main return triggers for older British migrants in Spain is a 'rise in control to European citizens' that would in turn result in the loss of freedom or reduced lifestyle possibilities. EU freedom of movement principles previously enabled largely unrestricted mobility for U.K. nationals between the United Kingdom and Spain; however, Brexit has now removed EU citizenship from U.K. nationals and so this increases levels of control and restricts their mobility (i.e., the 90 days rule). Research on Brexit and migration has suggested that British (and other EU migrants) have faced considerable uncertainty and stress due to Brexit. The Brexit process has been represented both a crisis and a reason for dissatisfaction with the conditions in the current country of residence (Sredanovic, 2021). Brexit may both encourage EU migrants to plan return or onward migration or introduce limits to return or onward migration. In an effort to conserve their resources, some EU migrants, including the British in Spain, were found to engage in return migration as a tactic to overcome uncertainty (Hall et al., 2022). There exists evidence of Britons that, even in situations of fragility, prefer to express their willingness to stay in Spain (Miller, 2019) or develop practices directed to ensure their welfare in EU countries, as citizenship acquisitions (Ferbrache, 2019).

Whilst the 2018 Withdrawal Agreement had safeguarded the rights of U.K. citizens legally resident in another EU country by the end of 2020, the same rights have not been agreed for those who migrated after January 2021. For example, those who moved before January 2021 are entitled to access certain welfare benefits like Attendance Allowance whilst those who moved from January 2021 are not. Throughout and immediately after the EU withdrawal process, media reports pointed to a 'Brexodus' of EU nationals from U.K. and British nationals from the EU (Kilkey & Ryan, 2021; Sredanovic, 2021) and research has not yet explored the extent to which this actually happened. Our research explores the extent to which Brexit triggered the return of older British people from Spain.

In this paper, we consider return migration in two forms. First, as a response to an unsuccessful migratory project or in response to a crisis (e.g., Apsite-Berina et al., 2020; White & Ryan, 2008), for example when a migrant can no longer live independently and need to utilise the welfare state of the home country (Hall & Hardill, 2016). Second, as a lifestyle choice (e.g., Bolognani, 2014) or for older migrants part of the 'retirement plan' whereby they make the positive

**TABLE 1** Sample characteristics.

Gender	48% women; 52% men
Average age	67.66 years
Year of arrival	44.5% arrived from 2000 to 2009
Marital Status	65.8% married; 13.2 divorced or separated; 11.4 widowed
Studies	37.9% University educated (bachelor, master or doctorate); 53% preuniversity studies
Territory	Málaga 34.1%; Alicante 28.8%
Living place	Countryside 34.8%; urbanisations 32.4%; city/town centres 32.9%
Property	84.3% own a property in Spain; 15.7% rent
Property in the United Kingdom	20.1% own a property; 79.9% had no U.K. property
Spanish knowledge	62.2% do not speak Spanish fluently; 37.8% speak fluently
Household income	57% earn less than £2k per month; 2.3% up to £500 per month
Happy with Brexit results	80.6% no; 19.4% yes

Source: The authors.

decision to return as they feel it is the right option for them following a change in their circumstances (Ackers & Dwyer, 2004), for example, to return to be close to family in the home country (Hall & Hardill, 2016). We explore if Brexit has therefore impacted on return migration patterns among older British migrants in Spain.

### 3 | METHODOLOGY

We used a mixed method approach by bringing together three data sets to better understand the return movements of older British nationals from Spain before, during and after Brexit. First, we use the Estadística de Variaciones Residenciales (RVS, Residential Variations Statistics) from Instituto Nacional de Estadística (NSI, National Statistics Institute). The RVS is compiled from the data on the local population register (Padron). Whilst it has been suggested that not everyone who lives in Spain is registered (O'Reilly, 2000), registration on the Padron does not require residency and allows migrants to access health, care and other local services and so identifies the vast majority of British nationals in Spain.

The RVS is highly reliable for internal migrations and arrivals, and whilst it is less reliable as a means to identify return migrations as de-registration is not a compulsory procedure, each year large numbers of 'exits' are recorded when British migrants notify the authorities of their decision to return to their home country (Percival, 2013). However, between 2012 and 2014, the Spanish administration removed all inhabitants from the register could not confirm that they were living in Spain and so thousands of British residents disappeared from the register in those years (as identified in the below analysis). These de-registrations were coded as 'exits with unknown destinations'. Whilst this has led to some uncertainty in the data before this period, the Padron data is arguably more reliable since 2016. Our

analysis therefore includes the number of British residents on the Padron and the number of 'de-registrations' to an unknown destination and return migrations. Microdata for every residential variation in Spain were downloaded from INE website, then coded into an SPSS file and selected only those migrations led by British citizens towards the United Kingdom or an unknown destination. That constitutes a file with 236,135 rows, where each row represents a migratory event, and 17 columns including age, sex, nationality and place of departure and arrival, among others. SPSS version 26.0 was used on the analysis.

Second, we completed an electronic survey of 643 British migrants over the age of 55 in Spain based on a Google platform undertaken from 15 June to 31 July 2020. The survey was open to all British people living in Spain but our analysis only includes those who identified as being over the age of 55. The survey was distributed as widely as possible including through a range of social media platforms, such as those of British social and voluntary associations based in Spain, media adverts (e.g., adverts in local English-media press) and through snowball sampling where we asked our networks and British-led associations to spread the word among their members via email, newsletters or other forms of communication.

The survey questions cover return motivations and expectations, including intentions to return, what might trigger a return, if Brexit changed return motivations and finally given the timeframe in which the survey was undertaken, we also asked about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on return motivations. We recognise the limitations of such a survey including the lack of control regarding who responds, the impossibility to adjust a priori the sample to the population size and potential biases due to our recruitment strategy (as those who are not online were much less likely to respond). Despite these challenges, it was possible to reunite the opinion of a representative sample of 643 British nationals living in Spain who

were 55 years and over (based on a total estimated population of 145,800). Respondent characteristics are detailed in Table 1. The survey took place in 2020 during a month and a half in which the Spanish territory was under restrictions of movement, but not in lockdown due to COVID-19 crisis. The survey has an estimated error of 3.9%, assuming  $P = Q = 0.5$  and a confidence level of  $2\sigma$ . Survey data was imported and analysed in SPSS version 26.0.

Ethical approval was obtained from one or both of the host University's Ethical Review Committee as required. Every participant on the survey was provided with an online information sheet before the survey being undertaken that detailed the purpose of the research, the ways in which data would be utilised and how contributions would be anonymised and confidential. All participants were provided with the contact details of one or both of the researchers and had the opportunity to ask questions before marking a box to state they agree to take part in the survey.

## 4 | RESULTS

### 4.1 | Brexit and older British migrants in Spain

Our Padron analysis found that the number of older British residents in Spain increased every year until 2012, after which there has been a decline (Table 2). As noted above, the decline in numbers from 2012 to 2016 is likely to be linked to administrative changes and the automatic removal of citizens from the Padron, but data from 2017 can highlight any returns due to Brexit. What we observe is not loss of population but net gains after 2017 and especially from 2018 onwards. Therefore, the number of older British people registering after the referendum results increased year on year. This may be explained by a rush by non-residents to become legally resident before the United Kingdom departed the EU. During this time there were active campaigns by the Town Halls, voluntary organisations and British Consulates in Spain encouraging people to get registered.

We also compared registrations fluctuation by age. Those who have a job in Spain and depend on their wage could perceive they have more risk of suffering Brexit effects, as long as they may have to retain the residence and work permissions. But nowadays, most of the Britons living in Spain have 55 years or more whom, even after register depositions, represent 55.87% of total residents in Spain, as it can be seen in Table 3. These data suggest that those who have been returning after Brexit are the younger, those who have their incomes related to work, whilst pensioners and retirees, who have their incomes secured (even though it could fluctuate with the euro-sterling pound change). Pensioners and retirees are the ones who have more risks associated to Brexit, even though some researchers have stated that return intentions are very low, independently of the future individual/social scenarios (Betty & Hall, 2015; Giner-Monfort et al., 2016; Warnes et al., 1999). First, because of the pension itself and its bonds with the sterling pound. Some of the economic analysts predicted that the sterling pound will lose value against euro, especially if the markets receive the deal as bad news

**TABLE 2** British residents in Spain, 1981–2022.

Year	N	N + 1 – N
1981	22,678	30,731
1991	53,409	17,205
2001	107,326	20,795
2011	391,194	6698
2012	397,892	–12,713
2013	385,179	–84,893
2014	300,286	–17,043
2015	283,243	–26,742
2016	256,501	–15,716
2017	240,785	149
2018	242,837	2052
2019	250,392	7555
2020	262,885	12,493
2021	282,124	19,239
2022 <sup>a</sup>	290,372	8248

<sup>a</sup>Provisional data.

Source: INE Padron.

**TABLE 3** British Residents in Spain by age, 2003–2021.

	55–64	65–74	75–84	85 and more	55 and more over total (%)
2003	33,401	25,355	11,657	2613	45.22
2004	38,888	26,352	9991	1957	44.16
2005	52,666	33,939	11,972	2358	44.43
2006	65,029	41,208	13,950	3073	44.87
2007	75,575	48,592	15,774	3681	45.60
2008	83,754	56,841	18,178	4403	46.23
2009	87,300	64,400	20,549	5156	47.22
2010	86,888	71,579	23,010	5951	48.35
2011	85,635	77,028	25,369	6634	49.76
2012	82,845	83,986	28,454	7503	50.97
2013	75,329	87,839	30,818	7857	52.40
2014	56,908	74,913	24,870	4615	53.72
2015	51,367	72,514	25,601	4650	54.42
2016	45,551	66,179	24,312	4302	54.71
2017	42,557	62,223	24,038	4078	55.19
2018	43,046	61,825	25,858	4752	55.60
2019	45,689	61,616	27,596	4571	55.70
2020	49,937	61,915	30,103	4759	55.81
2021	56,735	63,932	32,111	5113	55.97

Source: INE Padron.

(Gourinchas & Hale, 2017; Korus & Celebi, 2018), even though the losses were not so important after a year. One of the effects of depreciation of sterling pound could be the loss of purchasing power for those who remain in Spain and have to acquire goods and services with euros. The same would happen in the case of a no-deal, with application of tariffs and other measures related to trade. After Brexit, it could be seen that there have been no losses on social rights, public health or care services, two of the most important services for the older population, especially if they cannot pay for private health care (Ahmed & Hall, 2016). Even more, social inclusion indicators are lower among the older because they do not have contact with schools or working centres, two of the most important agents of social inclusion. In the worst scenario those who would face more difficulties are the elders.

Another interesting observation is the distribution of the population by sex. It is widely known that these migration movements are often decided within couples (Huber & O'Reilly, 2004) so in the ideal situation one would expect to see as many men as women, assuming the fact that most of the couples over 55 years will be heterosexuals. Over the years there is a general trend whereby the percentage of British women between 55 and 64 years of age in the Register is practically 50% up to 65 years of age, as it can be seen in Table 4, with significant fluctuations between 2007 and 2017, which indicating a greater presence of women. The percentage of women decreases in the older cohorts, reaching a minimum 42.58% in the range between 75 and 84 years in 2012 with. Even in that situation, the number of women is very similar to that of men. However, a greater presence of women in these older ages is to be expected due to their longer life expectancy. This could have various explanations: first, the existence of mixed marriages among British and Spanish, something that is not so extended to leave a statistical mark. Second, a greater return of women due to separation from their husbands, who would remain in Spain, which could be a probable fact, even though separation and divorce are not so habitual as we saw in our sample characteristics. And finally, that men's decision to stay is greater than that of women when one of the partners dies. This would explain the differences between 65 and 84 years and how, after this point in which the life expectancy of men decreases, it becomes balanced again, even though it represents a much smaller number of population (as seen in the Table 3, it is about 5000 people over the years). So one would expect more women returns within these limits.

## 4.2 | Returning from Spain before and after Brexit

With these scenarios over the table it is quite normal to find return patterns on the British residents, at least, because of two reasons: first one, the elders, arrived before the crisis, decide to return home for whatever the reason. This movement is growing year after year, with a maximum in the middle of the deputation years as it can be seen in Table 5. Second one, and this is still to be studied, the first effects of Brexit referendum and its wave of insecurities. With the

**TABLE 4** Percentage of British women residing in Spain over total population, 2003–2021.

	55–64	65–74	75–84	85 and more	55 and more
2003	50.21	42.88	45.46	50.47	48.68
2004	50.33	43.08	45.27	50.44	48.10
2005	50.49	43.40	44.57	50.91	48.12
2006	50.74	43.97	43.76	51.44	48.18
2007	51.16	44.65	43.41	51.86	48.23
2008	51.48	45.32	43.31	51.17	48.24
2009	51.83	45.81	43.35	50.66	48.48
2010	52.14	46.42	43.05	50.19	48.58
2011	52.50	47.22	42.85	49.96	48.66
2012	52.95	47.84	42.58	51.68	48.70
2013	52.75	48.38	42.44	51.18	48.84
2014	52.37	48.62	42.66	50.21	49.09
2015	52.27	48.64	43.11	49.93	49.01
2016	51.54	48.99	43.56	48.86	48.93
2017	51.04	48.92	44.12	48.20	48.92
2018	50.46	48.88	44.58	47.68	48.90
2019	50.00	48.56	45.15	47.51	48.78
2020	50.40	44.63	46.44	49.37	48.62
2021	50.03	43.09	45.67	49.97	48.42

Source: INE Padron.

numbers of 2017 to 2020 the exits from Spain where instable but from 2016 are declining, both for the young and old population, and for registered returns and unknown destination. grew until 2017 and then started to decline. The more feasible explanation for peak numbers in 2021 is the end of Withdrawal agreement which meant that those who were not registered would only receive their residence permit under the new rules (i.e., golden visa or non-lucrative residence). From 2003 to 2021 more than 230,000 Britons left Spanish register, 31,859 towards the United Kingdom.

Talking in relative terms and interpreting every single exit from the Padron as a return migration (which is not 100% sure) we could see that the percentage of returnees over the total British settlers in Spain has been following an increasing line, as it can be seen in Table 6. From 2016 to 2017 the percentage was above 10% for the whole British collective and also for those above 55 years with maximums over 20% of Britons over 85 years. These numbers are to be considered as more reliable than those from 2013 to 2015 because there is no effect of methodological accumulated deparations but more realistic residential variations (mostly returns). From 2018 to 2020, return migration have descended, even though the numbers are still high when compared to those before the economic crisis. Data in 2021 show an increase in return, probably caused by the end of the registration period under the Withdrawal Agreement

**TABLE 5** British exits from Spain, 2002–2021.

Year	Towards United Kingdom		Unknown destination		Total	
	Total	55 years and more	Total	55 years and more	Total	55 years and more
2003	262	84	.	.	262	84
2004	297	99	0	0	936	361
2005	314	88	639	262	886	236
2006	509	137	572	148	1354	358
2007	671	194	845	221	1558	434
2008	948	236	887	240	2225	514
2009	1180	435	1277	278	5934	1879
2010	1463	707	4754	1444	10,403	3234
2011	1276	591	8940	2527	8620	2542
2012	1417	678	7344	1951	8143	3152
2013	3479	1785	6726	2474	21,660	9604
2014	5131	2736	18,181	7819	24,895	11,780
2015	2451	1348	19,764	9044	29,165	14,042
2016	2007	1161	26,714	12,694	29,645	16,511
2017	2926	1505	27,638	15,350	29,039	15,425
2018	1962	1140	26,113	13,920	15,756	8239
2019	1682	886	13,794	7099	14,425	7291
2020	1742	967	12,743	6405	13,159	7483
2021	2142	1240	11,417	6516	18,250	10,300
Total 2003-2021	31,859	16,017	204,456	97,452	236,315	113,469

Source: INE EVR.

conditions and the accumulation of de-registrations. This may have caused a larger outflow of people than would be expected, especially significant in the older cohorts, where 9% of people aged 75%–84% and 20% of people aged 85 and over have been removed from the register in just 1 year. Those movements could be related to insecurities linked to COVID-19 and Brexit, probably by people who wanted to be close to their British family (especially the older ones) and/or owners of properties who realised that the new 90 days rule was going to difficult their transnational life between United Kingdom and Spain.

The analysis of return movements by gender offers some interesting data as it can be seen in Table 7. On the one hand, it can be observed that, on a general level, the return of women (% over total) is always lower than that of men. This can be observed in practically each age bracket and throughout every year analysed, although on some occasions the percentage exceeds 50% (i.e., there are more women than men departures). However, what is of greater interest is the fact that if we look at the recorded return movements, that is, those where we know that there was a return to the United Kingdom, the percentage of women is significantly higher than the

reported previously. This is something that happens every year, which would indicate a greater predisposition to the recorded return. On the other hand, the proportion of men whose destination is unknown is significantly higher.

In relation to the question of whether more older British people are returning due to Brexit referendum, we found that no they are not. Return migration movements recorded in 2017 are the same as 2016, around 30,000 people. The only indicator which makes the difference is the percentage of returnees over British population in Spain, which has been increasing especially in 2021, the last year in which they can apply for citizenship under the Withdrawal Agreement. From 2017 onwards, the number of older British citizens in Spain has been growing, which suggest that despite Brexit, there are new arrivals of British citizens under new EU-U.K. rules and/or those who were already living in Spain off the radar are registering. Some socioeconomic indicators suggest that the number of new arrivals are increasing again post-COVID with house purchases by British citizens recovering especially along the coastal locations (UVE Valoraciones, 2022). We explore this data further through our survey.

**TABLE 6** Potential British returnees (returnees plus residential variations towards unknown destination) over total British population in Spain.

	Total		55–64 years		65–74 years		75–84 years		Over 85 years and more	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
2003	262	0.16	29	0.09	28	0.11	21	0.18	6	0.23
2004	936	0.54	154	0.40	114	0.43	61	0.61	32	1.64
2005	886	0.39	133	0.25	76	0.22	24	0.20	3	0.13
2006	1354	0.49	189	0.29	108	0.26	55	0.39	6	0.20
2007	1558	0.49	228	0.30	131	0.27	56	0.36	19	0.52
2008	2225	0.63	266	0.32	169	0.30	61	0.34	18	0.41
2009	5934	1.58	887	1.02	701	1.09	212	1.03	79	1.53
2010	10,403	2.68	1523	1.75	1129	1.58	412	1.79	170	2.86
2011	8620	2.20	1236	1.44	883	1.15	336	1.32	87	1.31
2012	8143	2.05	1305	1.58	1314	1.56	405	1.42	128	1.71
2013	21,660	5.62	3174	4.21	3602	4.10	1871	6.07	957	12.18
2014	24,895	8.29	3840	6.75	4508	6.02	2432	9.78	1000	21.67
2015	29,165	10.30	4589	8.93	5660	7.81	2822	11.02	971	20.88
2016	29,645	11.56	4574	10.04	6540	9.88	4009	16.49	1388	32.26
2017	29,039	12.06	4442	10.44	6534	10.50	3431	14.27	1018	24.96
2018	15,756	6.49	2500	5.81	3358	5.43	1875	7.25	506	11.78
2019	14,425	5.76	2159	4.73	2846	4.62	1797	6.51	489	10.70
2020	13,159	5.01	2028	4.06	3022	4.88	1936	6.43	497	10.44
2021	18,250	6.47	2631	4.64	3767	5.89	2887	8.99	1015	19.85

### 4.3 | What might trigger return migration?

In our survey, we used two different measures to ask about a return migration. The first one has to do with future return considerations, that is, if the respondents are planning to return to the United Kingdom or not. This is what we call return intentions. On the other hand, we asked about return prevision, that is, if the respondents think that in some future scenarios it is probable for them to return to the United Kingdom, as it can be seen in Table 8. Most of the respondents do not want to return (87.4%), which is a higher number than previous surveys suggest, indicating that return intentions were lower in 2020 than in 2016 (in Hall, 2023, return intentions were 71.3%). This suggests that more older British population living in Spain intend to stay than before Brexit ( $t = -5685.610$ ;  $df = 642$ ;  $p = 0.000$ ).

Conversely, when asked about return prevision, that is, likelihood of returning in the future in different scenarios (Table 9), only half (51.6%) reported that they have no intention to ever return, with 42.6% reporting that it is something that could happen in the future (42.6%), and 5.8% said it is a preplanned step.

Recoding return intentions into a binomial variable, that is, having intentions to return or not, was compared with key demographic and

attitude responses (Table 10). There is no relation between age, sex, educational level, place of living, monthly income or supporting Brexit. However, there is a significant relationship between return intentions and marriage status; registry status; and having properties in United Kingdom. Most of the measures are repeated when comparing return intentions and return prevision except four: sex; year of arrival; having a property in Spain and Spanish knowledge which all become significant relationships, whilst marriage status is not related to return prevision. From these data it can be deduced that variables indicating the level of integration into the Spanish society are related to different return intentions/previsions. For example, regarding return prevision: women want to return more than men; those who are not registered want to return more than those who are registered; those who arrived between 2000 and 2009 and after 2015 want to return more than the other categories; those who rent a property in Spain want to return more than those who have a property; having a property in the United Kingdom increases the will to return; and knowing less Spanish is associated with more desire to return.

We compared our results with prior surveys on return migration, including Warnes et al.'s (1999) survey of British return migration from the Costa del Sol, Algarve, Tuscany and Malta. and



**TABLE 7** Percentage of potential British women (returnees plus residential variations towards unknown destination) over total returnees.

	% over total	% 55–64	% 65–74	% over 75 and more	% over 85 and more	% over total, towards United Kingdom	% over total unknown destination
2003	47.33	41.38	57.14	42.86	66.67	48.81	47.33
2004	48.29	53.25	44.74	42.62	46.88	49.49	49.49
2005	45.37	53.38	43.42	41.67	66.67	51.14	46.82
2006	45.72	43.92	47.22	49.09	66.67	45.99	45.58
2007	45.31	46.49	48.09	51.79	36.84	49.48	46.50
2008	46.61	45.11	43.79	39.34	44.44	45.34	48.73
2009	46.65	48.93	46.50	42.45	45.57	48.05	49.41
2010	47.07	48.06	45.26	41.26	54.12	49.65	49.01
2011	47.27	47.65	46.32	45.24	58.62	49.58	49.29
2012	48.24	49.35	49.09	45.19	47.66	51.03	49.05
2013	48.24	49.24	47.83	45.48	48.28	48.24	49.09
2014	48.35	48.57	48.82	42.93	47.70	46.38	48.04
2015	48.57	49.36	47.69	44.26	47.79	48.22	49.45
2016	49.50	49.50	51.19	45.97	48.34	48.15	49.58
2017	48.64	49.26	48.58	44.62	45.19	49.83	49.93
2018	49.11	48.92	51.10	45.76	45.65	50.09	49.39
2019	48.76	49.75	49.72	46.24	44.99	48.98	48.63
2020	48.30	48.37	49.93	45.35	45.88	49.02	50.69
2021	48.62	46.83	50.73	46.07	47.09	49.76	49.58

Source: INE EVR.

**TABLE 8** Return intentions.

Consider returning within the next months/years	4.7%
Consider return but not sure when	6.7%
Consider moving to another country	1.2%
Not planning to return	87.4%

Source: The authors.

**TABLE 9** Return prevision.

Pre-planned step	5.8%
Something that could happen	42.6%
Something that will never happen	51.6%

Source: The authors.

Giner-Monfort et al. (2016) survey in the Northern Costa Blanca, Spain. In our 2020 survey, we used the same nine reasons for return indicators used in these surveys enabling a direct comparison over time. Each reason is rated from  $-1$ , which indicates a firm decision to leave Spain, to  $+1$ , which points to a definite decision to remain in

Spain, as it can be seen in Table 11. We controlled the results for those respondents aged 55 years or more. Our comparison indicates that stay intentions for Spain have increased under most scenarios and older people are more likely choose to stay in Spain even in the worst scenario, which is, as it was on previous surveys, being unable to manage the household. It also suggests that in positive scenarios (improved health and a lottery win), return intentions are lower than in previous years. There are significant differences between every indicator in our survey and previous surveys on the same nine events, except on income decline and lottery win where the difference is minimum. These findings support the view that even after Brexit, return intentions in any scenario have declined over the last two decades among older British migrants in Spain. Even in the case of another COVID outbreak, 94.1% of respondents argued that they would stay rather than returning to the United Kingdom, while 24% agreed that COVID-19 had negative effects in their daily life.

Finally, a Multinomial Logistic Regression was applied to our data, focusing on return intentions and return prevision as the dependent variables and a set of five independent variables including the moment of arrival, having properties in the United Kingdom and in Spain, being registered, income level and opinion on Brexit (Table 12). As for return intentions, that is, the direct response to the

question of willingness to return, four categories have a significant weight on the improvement of the intersection model over a null model ( $\chi^2(4) = 54.209$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). These variables are: being married, not being registered on the local Padron, having a property under a mortgage and having a property in the United Kingdom. Under these conditions, the statistical model is able to predict 88.6% of the results for return intentions. On the other hand, return previsions, that is, the likelihood of returning in the future, only needed two variables to build a significant model ( $\chi^2(2) = 60.012$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). In this case, the variables are: not being registered on the local Padron and having a

**TABLE 10** Return intentions (binomial)  $\chi^2$  with independent variables.

	Return intentions			Return prevision		
	$\chi^2$	df	p	$\chi^2$	df	p
Sex	0.000	1	0.985	5.597	1	0.018*
Age group (>75)	0.000	1	0.997	0.313	1	0.576
Marriage status	11.622	4	0.020*	1.062	4	0.900
Educational level	8.574	5	0.127	10.736	5	0.057
Urban/ disseminate	0.902	2	0.637	2.678	2	0.262
Registry status	15.264	1	0.000*	15.425	1	0.000*
Year of arrival	5.437	6	0.489	15.174	6	0.019*
Property in Spain	4.356	2	0.113	8.223	2	0.016*
Property in United Kingdom	17.185	1	0.000*	43.856	1	0.000*
Spanish knowledge	1.564	3	0.667	24.014	3	0.000*
Monthly income	2.835	4	0.586	5.107	4	0.276
Happy with Brexit	2.174	3	0.537	3.754	3	0.289

Source: The authors.

\* $p < 0.05$ .

property in the United Kingdom. The statistical model is able to predict correctly 62.1% of the results for return previsions. Both models underline that migrants having a strong tie with the home country (as a property) and weak bonds with the host country

**TABLE 11** Stay/leave scores in response to hypothetical individual changes.

	Our survey	Giner-Monfort et al. (2016) <sup>a</sup>	Warnes et al. <sup>b</sup>	Warnes et al. <sup>c</sup>
Death of spouse/ partner	0.57* <sup>o</sup>	0.41	0.49	0.38
Decline in health	0.56* <sup>o</sup>	0.29	0.39	0.27
1/3 income decline	0.65* <sup>o</sup>	0.39	0.59	0.56
Unable to shop	0.57* <sup>o</sup>	0.30	0.46	0.46
Give up car	0.60* <sup>o</sup>	0.27	0.70	0.56
Unable to run home	0.22* <sup>o</sup>	-0.18	0.09	-0.01
Close friends move	0.76* <sup>o</sup>	0.57	0.95	0.93
Improved health	0.84* <sup>o</sup>	0.73	0.96	0.94
Lottery win 100 K	0.85* <sup>o</sup>	0.71	0.79	0.77
Nine events	5.63* <sup>o</sup>	3.49	5.2	4.6
n	643	216	293	957

<sup>a</sup>Measures for northern Costa Blanca, 2014.

<sup>b</sup>Measures for Costa del Sol, 1999.

<sup>c</sup>Measures for Costa del Sol, Algarve, Malta, and Tuscany, 1999.

\*Significative difference with Giner-Monfort et al. (2016).

<sup>o</sup>Significative difference with Warnes et al. (1999) measures for Costa del Sol.

Source: Prepared by the authors.

**TABLE 12** Likelihood ratio tests.

	Return intentions				Return previsions			
	-2 log likelihood of reduced model	$\chi^2$	df	Sig.	-2 log likelihood of reduced model	$\chi^2$	df	Sig.
Intercept	54.209	0.000	0	-	60.012	0.000	0	-
Being married	65.915	11.705	1	0.001	60.359	0.347	1	0.556
Not registered	61.207	6.997	1	0.008	69.940	9.928	1	0.002
Property in Spain under mortgage	58.645	4.436	1	0.035	60.275	0.263	1	0.608
Having property in United Kingdom	67.958	13.748	1	0.000	99.002	38.990	1	0.000
Happy with Brexit result	55.555	1.346	1	0.246	62.328	2.315	1	0.128

Source: The authors.

(e.g., not being registered) would be more likely to return (Bonifazi & Paparusso, 2018).

## 5 | CONCLUSIONS

The living conditions of the Brexpaths in Spain have changed significantly in recent years. First there was the economic crisis that began in 2008, which coincided in time with the administrative pressures to regularize the British collective, from 2011 to 2013. Later, in 2016, a crisis of insecurity arose due to the result of the Brexit referendum. And then in 2020, the arrival of COVID-19 caused a profound health, economic and social crisis. Even though, the effects of these events on the British population in Spain have not been significant. There have been losses of population, most of them associated to administrative changes in the Register (2012–2015). After the Withdrawal Agreement in February 2020, peace of mind spread among the British population, who saw that the immediate effects of Brexit would not be as serious as they once seemed. On the other hand, the fact that no significant increase in returns has been detected in recent years could also be explained by the fact that their stay in Spain is highly valued, not only in terms of lifestyle but also of healthcare attention, which is highly valued. However, it was possible to detect a greater predisposition to return during 2021 especially within the older cohorts. The recorded return rate was as high as 9% for Britons aged 75%–84% and 20% for those aged 85 and over.

There is a growing intention among the British population to stay in Spain, even in the worst situations such as being unable to manage their own home or seeing their income reduced. If before the Brexit referendum the intention of direct return was around 29% in the collective, now it is less than 14%. However, indirect measures of return intention indicate that around 49% of the Brexpaths could consider returning in the future. Some of the factors that are shown to be determinant of this position are: having a home in the United Kingdom; living in rented accommodation; and not being registered. In other words, those who are less well-established are more likely to want to return in the future.

Some limitations of this paper should be noted. First, it is based on a relatively large sample, although the selection was not randomised. Second, the sample's geographical representation may not correspond to the distribution of the population over the Spanish territory. Third, the respondents' opinions were intentional as they did not refer to *fait accompli*. On the other hand, it would be interesting to reproduce the research in other countries and moments to monitor possible changes as well as focusing the research on the population that has effectively returned.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This article is dedicated to the memory of Dr. Charles Betty MBE for his help during the fieldwork and preparation of this paper and his lifelong service to the British in Spain.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

## ORCID

Jordi Giner-Monfort  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6899-3609>

Kelly Hall  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3642-422X>

## REFERENCES

- Ackers, L., & Dwyer, P. (2004). Fixed laws, fluid lives: The citizenship status of post-retirement migrants in the European Union. *Ageing and Society*, 24(3), 451–475. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0144686X0300165X>
- Ahmed, A., & Hall, K. (2016). Negotiating the challenges of ageing as a British migrant in Spain. *The Journal of Gerontopsychology and Geriatric Psychiatry*, 29, 105–114. <https://doi.org/10.1024/1662-9647/a000147>
- Apsite-Berina, E., Manea, M. E., & Berzins, M. (2020). The ambiguity of return migration: Prolonged crisis and uncertainty in the life strategies of young Romanian and Latvian returnees. *International Migration*, 58(1), 61–75. <https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.12580>
- Benton, M. (2017). *Safe or Sorry? Prospects for Britons in the European Union after Brexit*. Migration Policy Institute. <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/safe-or-sorry-prospects-britons-european-union-after-brexit>
- Betty, C. (2017). *Return migration of older British residents in Spain*. Doctoral Dissertation. Northampton University.
- Betty, C., & Cahill, M. (1998). Consideraciones sociales y sanitarias sobre los inmigrantes británicos mayores en España, en particular los de la Costa del Sol. *Migraciones*, 3, 83–115.
- Betty, C., & Hall, K. (2015). The Myth of No Return? Why Retired British Migrants in Spain Return to the UK. In K. Torkington, I. David, & J. Sardinha (Eds.), *Practising the good life. Lifestyle migration in practices* (pp. 123–137). Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Bolognani, M. (2014). The emergence of lifestyle reasoning in return considerations among British Pakistanis. *International Migration*, 52(6), 31–42. <https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.12153>
- Bonifazi, C., & Paparusso, A. (2018). Remain or return home: The migration intentions of first-generation migrants in Italy. *Population, Space and Place*, 25(2), e2174. <https://doi.org/10.1002/psp.2174>
- Casado-Díaz, M. A. (2006). Retiring to Spain: An analysis of differences among North European nationals. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 32(8), 1321–1339. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691830600928714>
- Cassarino, J. P. (2004). Theorising return migration: The conceptual approach to return migration revisited international. *Journal of Multicultural Societies*, 62, 253–279.
- Castilla-Polo, A., Huete-Nieves, R., Mantecón, A., & Rosa-Jiménez, C. (2023). Explaining the complexity in the tourism-migration conceptual framework. *Current Issues in Tourism*, 26(3), 358–379. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13683500.2022.2084717>
- Duval, D. T. (2004). Linking return visits and return migration among Commonwealth Eastern Caribbean migrants in Toronto. *Global Networks*, 4(1), 51–67. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1471-0374.2004.00080.x>
- Ferbrache, F. (2019). Acts of European citizenship: How Britons resident in France have been negotiating post-Brexit futures. *Geography*, 104(2), 81–88. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00167487.2019.12094067>

- Giner-Monfort, J. (2018). End to dream? British retired residents in Spain and their return patterns. *Journal of Spatial and Organizational Dynamics*, 6/4, 360–374.
- Giner-Monfort, J., Hall, K., & Betty, C. (2016). Back to Brit: Retired British migrants returning from Spain. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 42, 797–815. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2015.1100068>
- Gourinchas, P. O., & Hale, G. (2017). *Brexit: Whither the Pound?* (p. 11). FRBSF Economic Letter. <https://www.frbsf.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/el2017-11.pdf>
- Gustafson, P., & Laksfoss Cardozo, A. E. (2017). Language use and social inclusion in international retirement migration. *Social Inclusion*, 5(4), 69–77.
- Hall, K. (2023). Care precarity among older British migrants in Spain. *Ageing and Society*, 43(8), 1915–1933. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0144686X21001392>
- Hall, K., & Hardill, I. (2016). Retirement migration, the 'other' story: caring for frail elderly British citizens in Spain. *Ageing and Society*, 36(3), 562–585. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0144686X14001342>
- Hall, K., Phillimore, J., Grzymala-Kazłowska, A., Vershina, N., Ögtem-Young, Ö., & Harris, C. (2022). Migration uncertainty in the context of Brexit: Resource conservation tactics. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 48(1), 173–191. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2020.1839398>
- Huber, A., & O'Reilly, K. (2004). The construction of Heimat under conditions of individualised modernity: Swiss and British elderly migrants in Spain. *Ageing and Society*, 24(3), 327–351. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0144686X03001478>
- Huete, R., Mantecón, A., & Estévez, J. (2013). Challenges in lifestyle migration research: Reflections and findings about the Spanish crisis. *Mobilities*, 8(3), 331–348. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17450101.2013.814236>
- Kilkey, M., & Ryan, L. (2021). Unsettling events: Understanding migrants' responses to geopolitical transformative episodes through a life-course lens. *International Migration Review*, 55(1), 227–253. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0197918320905507>
- Korus, A., & Celebi, K. (2018). *The impact of Brexit on the British pound/euro exchange rate*. EIIW Discussion paper 243. [https://eiiw.wiwi.uni-wuppertal.de/fileadmin/eiiw/Daten/Publikationen/Gelbe\\_Reihe/disbei243.pdf](https://eiiw.wiwi.uni-wuppertal.de/fileadmin/eiiw/Daten/Publikationen/Gelbe_Reihe/disbei243.pdf)
- Miller, R. G. (2019). (Un)settling home during the Brexit process. *Population, Space and Place*, 25(1), e2203. <https://doi.org/10.1002/psp.2203>
- Montoro Gurich, C., & López Hernández, D. (2013). Medir la integración de los inmigrantes en España. *Boletín de la Asociación de Geógrafos Españoles*, 63, 203–223.
- Oliver, C. (2008). *Retirement migration—Paradoxes of ageing*. Routledge.
- O'Reilly, K. (2000). *The British on the Costa del Sol—Transnational identities and local communities*. Routledge.
- O'Reilly, K. (2007). Intra-European migration and the mobility-enclosure dialectic. *Sociology*, 41(2), 277–293. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038507074974>
- Percival, J. (2013). "We belong to the land": British immigrants in Australia contemplating or realising their return "home" in later life. In J. Percival (Ed.), *Return migration in later life* (pp. 113–139). Bristol University Press.
- Simó, C., Herzog, B., & Fleerackers, J. (2013). Forms of social capital among European retirement migrants in the Valencian Community. *Migraciones Internacionales*, 7(1), 131–163.
- Sredanovic, D. (2021). Brexit as a trigger and an obstacle to onwards and return migration. *International Migration*, 59(6), 93–108. <https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.12712>
- UVE Valoraciones (2022). *La compra de viviendas por extranjeros tras el Brexit*. <https://v-valoraciones.es/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/LA-COMPRA-DE-VIVIENDAS-POR-EXTRANJEROS-TRAS-EL-BREXIT-junio-2022.pdf>
- Walsh, K. (2020). Returning at retirement: British migrants coming 'home' in later life. In P. Leonard & K. Walsh (Eds.), *British migration privilege, diversity and vulnerability* (pp. 182–198). Routledge.
- Warnes, T., King, R., Williams, A., & Patterson, G. (1999). The well being of British expatriate retirees in Southern Europe. *Ageing & Society*, 19(6), 717–740. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0144686X9900759X>
- White, A., & Ryan, L. (2008). Polish 'temporary' migration: The formation and significance of social networks. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 60(9), 1467–1502. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668130802362227>

**How to cite this article:** Giner-Monfort, J., & Hall, K. (2023). Older British migrants in Spain: Return patterns and intentions post-Brexit. *Population, Space and Place*, e2730. <https://doi.org/10.1002/psp.2730>