



BEING A SOCIAL WORKER IN SOCIAL SERVICES DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: A SPANISH CASE STUDY

Virginia Paéz-Izquierdo

*Department of Sociology: Methodology and Theory, Faculty of Political Science and Sociology, Complutense University of Madrid, Spain
Degree in Translation and Interpreting. PhD Candidate at the Faculty of Social Work, Complutense University of Madrid. Support researcher at Department of Sociology: Methodology and Theory.*

Correspondencia: virpaez@ucm.es

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7820-6576>

Mercedes Muriel-Saiz

Department of Social Work and Social Services, Faculty of Social Work, Complutense University of Madrid, Madrid, Spain

Correspondencia: mm.muriel@ucm.es

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8871-9666>

ABSTRACT

Covid-19 has led to a health, social and economic crisis, the like of which has never been seen before. The world has had to tackle a new reality that has shaken the most basic structures of our system. In Spain the Social Services have been declared essential services but, even so, the social workers interviewed in this study have not perceived that this has translated into greater support for the system or for their work. This article forms part of a national funded research project that has developed the only tool to monitor the impact of Covid-19 on the Social Services in Spain. Its sampling design has made it possible to carry out 164 telephone interviews at 52 public Social Services centres all over Spain.

The aim of this article is to ascertain the effects of the pandemic on the daily practice of social work through the analysis of professional discourse, and also to discuss the impact of Covid-19 with special

attention to issues such as the irruption of telematics, the emotional exhaustion of professional teams or the new forms of reorganisation of the Social Services. In other words, changes in the organisational dynamics of the centres, in the incorporation of telematics, in interpersonal relations between the work teams, etc. Changes that will all be decisive in predicting the course of social change in the Social Services in the coming years.

Key words: Social work, Social Services, social intervention, pandemic, Spanish case

SER TRABAJADORA SOCIAL DE SERVICIOS SOCIALES DURANTE LA PANDEMIA COVID19: ANÁLISIS DEL CASO ESPAÑOL

RESUMEN

La Covid19 ha supuesto una crisis sanitaria, económica y social sin precedentes. El mundo ha tenido que enfrentarse a una nueva realidad que ha sacudido las estructuras más básicas de nuestro sistema. En España se han declarado los Servicios Sociales como servicios esenciales, pero, sin embargo, las trabajadoras sociales entrevistadas no han percibido que eso se haya traducido en un mayor apoyo al sistema ni a su trabajo. Este artículo forma parte de una investigación nacional financiada que ha desarrollado el único monitor de impacto del Covid19 en Servicios Sociales en España. Su diseño muestral ha posibilitado la realización de 364 entrevistas telefónicas en 52 centros de Servicios Sociales públicos de todo el territorio español. El objetivo de este artículo es conocer los efectos de la pandemia en la práctica cotidiana del Trabajo Social a través del análisis de los discursos profesionales, así como discutir el impacto de la Covid19 con especial atención a cuestiones tales como la irrupción de la atención telemática, el desgaste emocional de los equipos profesionales o las nuevas formas de reorganización de los Servicios Sociales. Cambios en las dinámicas organizacionales de los centros, en la incorporación de la intervención telemática, en las relaciones interpersonales entre los equipos de trabajo, etc. Cambios todos ellos determinantes para entrever el rumbo de la intervención social en Servicios Sociales en los próximos años.

Palabras Clave: Trabajo Social, Servicios Sociales, intervención social, pandemia, caso español

**BEING A SOCIAL WORKER
IN SOCIAL SERVICES
DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC:
A SPANISH CASE STUDY**

Virginia
Paéz-Izquierdo

Mercedes
Muriel-Saiz

https://doi.org/10.26754/ojs_ais/accioninvestigsoc.2022437428

Recibido: 18-07-2022
Aceptado: 25-10-2022
Publicado: 31-12-2022

INTRODUCTION

Social Work interventions in times of pandemic

The arrival of the pandemic has meant a turning point in the different professional spaces that make up the labor structure in Spain, generating new dynamics and situations hitherto unknown, such as, for example, forcing more than 40% of the working population to telework, a figure for the Spanish context unimaginable before the pandemic (Ruiz, 2021). Social Work has also been directly affected in its daily functions by the consequences of Covid19, since its daily practice has had to respond to the urgent social needs of the most vulnerable population groups (Redondo et al., 2021) with a marked increase in demand, even tripling in the first months of confinement (Calzada et al., 2021). All this has been complicated by the mandate to obey the different measures and protocols established from the political sphere (Dominelli, 2021), despite the fact that on numerous occasions, these political indications seemed contradictory to the nature and culture of Social Work, as understood by Epstein (2001).

In the specific case of Spain, with the obligation of strict lockdown in March 2020, Social Services were also recognized as essential services, a historic and novel fact in the European context (General Council of Social Work, 2020). In this way, social workers were considered essential professionals, since Social Services is the professional context where most social workers work, and the different autonomous laws of Spanish Social Services contemplate that the social worker is the professional of reference¹ in this system (Ministry of Health, Social Services and Equality, 2013). However, despite the importance of the work of social workers during this crisis, their professional commitment has not been as recognized nor has it received the same interest or the same media coverage; in fact, there are hardly any significant studies from the world of social research (Redondo et al, 2020). In this sense, this text aims to change this dynamic, collecting, making visible and recognizing from the discourse of the social workers of Social Services themselves, how this year and a half of intervention in pandemic has been and how, in this unknown framework of health emergency, they were able to quickly reorganize the way of working carried out for decades, in order to ensure the attention to the users in a telematic way.

Telematic care is precisely one of the greatest challenges faced by Social Services during these months, since it is a system based mainly on direct attention and relationship with people (Morilla et al., 2021), with proximity in direct treatment as its most recognizable hallmark. In fact, at first, as a consequence of such abrupt changes, social workers experienced situations of disorder, misinformation and the impossibility of knowing what would await them the following day, all reasonable sensations as

1 This means that every user accessing the public Social Services system in Spain will have a social worker as a reference, who will be the professional in charge of attending the first demand from a primary care level. This person maintains the attention or refers to specialized care, but always ensuring comprehensiveness, continuity and stability in the design of the social intervention (Carmona and Fernández, 2020).

a consequence of a sudden crisis situation in institutional contexts, according to Schlemenson (1998). However, as the weeks went by, these same professionals narrated their adaptation to the “new normality”, thus becoming aware of the capacity of Social Work to respond to the unpredictable social order, as a characteristic of a profession accustomed to managing in contexts of uncertainty and imprecision (Carballeda, 2020).

New forms of organization and the effects of teleworking in Social Services

Social Services have faced a situation of global crisis with a position of generalized weakness, as it is the public social protection system that has suffered the greatest cutbacks in recent decades in the Spanish context (Martínez and Pérez, 2015). This sustained situation of lack of resources has exacerbated the current health and social crisis. It has become more evident the need to reinforce a deeply beaten and ignored system from the political class, which tends to be seen as a well of social spending with no obvious direct benefit. “The collapse of the System when addressing social demand, has shown dramatic situations of social vulnerability that demand public authorities and society, in order to defend and strengthen the System the challenges that the Social Services face” (De las Heras, 2020, p. 46).

The high incidence during the spring of 2020 in the territories of Italy and Spain forced these countries to take health protection measures against the clock, having the opportunity for greater foresight than other countries in the European context whose health effects were slower (Moreno-Manzano and Ordiales, 2020). In this line, Social Services never imagined they would find themselves in such a situation. From one day to the next, they started to manage all the files and direct care by telephone from their homes, not always with the appropriate material equipment to be able to carry out the tasks. Although it should be mentioned that little by little there was a process of improvement of material equipment and training in new technologies. These

improvements were more visible especially from Autumn 2021 (Calzada et al., 2021). To this new anomalous situation, it must be added that, in the context analyzed, almost 90% of Social Work professionals were women, according to data from the General Council of Social Work (2021). Thus, the gender gap and the effects of teleworking directly affected the development of the profession, since teleworking as a working formula has often proved to be a burden of labor invisibilization for many professional women, even claiming that they were imposed an unbearable third working day.

Another of the issues identified as relevant, among the telematic consequences of the new forms of organization in Social Services, has to do directly with the high levels of the digital gap existing in the Spanish context, both among professionals and especially among the user population. On the one hand, the fact that social workers themselves find it difficult to manage in digital environments, with a clear lack of digital competencies, has been a direct obstacle to the exercise of their functions, directly affecting the rest of the staff who did have this knowledge. On the other hand, and regarding the technological inequality of the target population of Social Services, the latest national survey conducted by the INE (National Statistics Institute of Spain, 2021) gives a detailed figure of the warning of Red Cross Spain (2021), which shows that 63.8% of Spanish households in need of social intervention do not have a computer and that almost 50% of these households do not even have any Internet service. This situation has seriously hampered the continuity of many interventions. However, faced with this new situation, Social Work has reinvented itself by developing new tools and techniques to deal with these situations (Bright, 2020) such as, for example, making administrative processes more flexible by allowing the sending of documentation by WhatsApp, the generation of online spaces for psychosocial support groups, or telephone support also as effective interventions in certain situations. According to King et al (2021), “telephonic, and other options should be considered when internet access or client intent, confidence, or capability are low” (p. 6). The discussion now is how far, in what way and at what

price the irruption of new technologies should be accepted. In much the same way as the use of technology without any reflection had been criticized in other fields such as pedagogy and education (Castañeda et al., 2020), it seems advisable to carry out this process to weight the losses involved in the uncritical acceptance of new technologies in the daily practice of Social Work.

Working conditions and professional care in Social Services: an unfinished business

According to Dominelli (2021b), the Covid19 crisis has made visible the difficulties of maintaining social cohesion. Additionally, it served to spotlight that Social Work professionals face other people's situations -but also their own-. These interactions take place in degraded spaces, heavily affected by socioeconomic environments where labor and personal precariousness is progressively evident, largely as a direct effect of neoliberal politics carried over for decades in terms of social protection. "Social workers have risen to the challenges, providing services with inadequate personal protective equipment and limited supervision and support" (p. 7).

In this sense, the need to improve the working conditions of social workers, specifically in the context analyzed in this research (Social Services) is more necessary than ever. In Spain, the General Council of Social Work regulates that there should be no more than 3000 inhabitants for each primary care social worker. However, the latest research figures indicate that there are more than 10,000 inhabitants on average for each social worker (EAPN, 2021). If these data are placed in interaction with the increase in demand in Social Services during the Covid19 crisis, reaching a tripling and quadrupling in many territories, it is clear that the overload of social workers in this work area is unacceptable. In addition to this increase in work demands, there were also sudden and abrupt changes in the way of understanding social care as a result of the pandemic, which caused stress, burnout and emotional exhaustion in social workers (Ben-Ezra and Hamama-Raz, 2020).

In short, the pandemic has exacerbated a lack of material and budgetary resources in Social Services, which added to the structural absence of care and emotional assistance to social professionals (Moesby and Schjellerup, 2015; Bright, 2020). It has implied an overexertion that, almost two years after the beginning of the pandemic, continues to have effects in the form of sick leave due to stress, anxiety or even abandonment of the job and job change request to other areas outside the Social Services (Negro, 2022). Mental health problems have been and continue to be a constant issue during all these months. The social workers interviewed have exposed on numerous occasions feeling overwhelmed, distressed and with levels of stress never experienced before (Morilla et al., 2021). In fact, the complex interweaving of increased demand for care, the lack of institutional care and the global context of the health crisis has in some cases led many of these professionals to question their own existence, their professional identity and whether they want to continue practicing as social workers (Melo et al., 2021).

Context of the research

This article is part of a state research project funded by the National Institute of Public Administration (INAP in *Spanish*), a body under the Ministry of Finance and the Public Administration of the Central Government of Spain and carried out by researchers from five Spanish public universities. The main objective of this project is to explain how the coronavirus pandemic and its subsequent health, social and economic crisis has affected the heterogeneous public system of Social Services in Spain. For this purpose, an impact monitor was designed as a qualitative measurement tool with a limited time frame (from July 2020 to September 2021), which allowed us a real time follow-up of what was happening in the municipal Social Services centers based on the analysis of the discourse of the social workers interviewed. This is the only national research funded in the Spanish context that has analyzed the consequences of Covid19 in Social Services.

Thanks to the extensive information obtained, thematic axes

have been identified whose importance and significance are of great interest for the functioning and development of Social Services in the coming years. Thus, the main objective of this article is to know the effects of the pandemic on Social Work professionals in Social Services. The following specific objectives follow from this general objective: (i) To analyze the forms of organizational adaptation of Social Work professionals from Social Services in a situation of global health and social crisis; (ii) To study the experiences, emotions experienced and feelings of social workers in the context of Social Services.

Materials and methods

The research was carried out between July 2020 and September 2021. For the sample design, six Spanish regions were selected (Andalusia, Aragon, Balearic Islands, Castile and Leon, Community of Madrid and the Basque Country) that have elements that reflect the economic, socio-demographic and political diversity of the country². In each of these autonomous communities, a random selection of municipalities was made, stratified by the size of these territories through three categories: small municipalities with less than 15,000 inhabitants, medium-sized municipalities with 15,000 to 50,000 inhabitants, and, finally, large municipalities with more than 50,000 inhabitants. A total of 52 municipalities were selected³. Of these participating municipalities, 33% were small municipalities, 30% medium-sized municipalities and 37% large municipalities. This sample selection of municipalities has made it possible to ascertain the varieties, differences and similarities between different Social Services centers, also taking into account their location: large

2 For further information on the differences between the selected territories, the complete report can be consulted on the web page of the research project from which this work is derived (Calzada et al, 2021).

3 Initially, 60 participating municipalities were selected, but due to the impossibility of continuing to participate regularly in the bimonthly interviews, the research team was forced to dispense with the participation of 8 Social Services centers.

densely populated cities, medium-sized cities geographically located in the interior of Spain with their own industry and coastal towns whose economy depends directly on the service sector (tourism, leisure and hospitality).

Once the participating municipalities had been selected, the coordinating offices of the centers were invited to participate. We cannot provide data on the sample in terms of age, sex, years of experience, etc. of the people interviewed because they could be easily identified, and we must preserve their anonymity. We can indicate that they are social workers who have coordination functions and that more than 85% of the interviewees are women. The collaborating professionals received a bimonthly call from the research team to answer a structured telephone interview with an identical script for all the territories in the different participating regions. The telephone interview was chosen as the research technique because it was impossible to travel to each of the participating municipalities, among other reasons, due to mobility restrictions. Thanks to the telephone interview, it has been possible to access systematic and in-depth information, overcoming the difficulty of a face-to-face meeting.

A specific design of the interview script was made for each round that included, on the one hand, questions that have been maintained throughout the project, which has allowed comparisons to be made and the evolution of some topics to be known (for example, the increase in demand, changes in the profile of users or aspects related to the emotionality and psychological discomfort of the professionals) and, on the other hand, changing questions in each interview that responded to the partial analysis of the discourses that have been published in monthly reports. This way of structuring the interviews responds to what Lázaro (2021) calls descriptive and exploratory areas. Thus, in the interview scripts, descriptive questions and exploratory questions were complemented and interspersed, always starting with the descriptive ones. "It is preferable to start with the descriptive ones to warm up the atmosphere and create a good climate of trust" (p. 74). Descriptive areas were

incorporated, dealing with the phenomenon under study on the basis of questions on specific facts (situation of demand, professional staffing, feelings experienced during the weeks in question, special financial aid implemented, etc.). Questions were also added in the exploratory areas, which responded to new topics that were not foreseen in the initial scripts. Some of the changing themes had to do with the mental health of the population, the most unprotected population groups, the reorganization of work centers, the absence of group and community social work or the relations between social intervention techniques and political leaders. It was precisely the social workers interviewed who alerted the team of researchers to the problems that were being generated by the need to respond to new organizational, work and emotional situations without previous schemes of action.

The total of 364 interviews obtained after one year and three months of the project were transcribed and coded in the qualitative analysis software Atlas.ti to systematize all the information obtained and to extract the most representative discourses of each thematic axis from which the main topics of analysis emerge. The publication of all the bimonthly reports of the research in open access allows the transfer of knowledge to policy makers and society as part of the commitment to make visible the actions of Social Work during the pandemic.

One of the main limitations of the study has to do with the impossibility of holding all the interviews every two months, so in some territories and in some rounds it was not possible to complete the total number of interviews scheduled in the sample design due to the impossibility of the interviewee to answer the phone call due to the high workload. It is true, however, that in the following rounds, when the intensity of the workload varied, these people returned to the interview rounds. Another limitation of the research refers directly to the impossibility of attending the participating Social Services centers in person due to mobility restrictions, thus losing the opportunity to capture the nuances that could have been offered by the non-verbal communication of

the professionals interviewed and the non-participant observation of the centers analyzed.

RESULTS

“A lot of applause, but little institutional recognition. We are exhausted and sometimes we even feel guilty for not being able to respond to the demands.” Job insecurity and the emotional exhaustion of social workers.

Social Work in Spain suffered greatly the consequences of the pandemic, being also a profession that drags a high need for recognition (Kisnerman, 1998). Throughout the interviews, the lack of recognition of Social Work is intertwined with the lack of institutional support for the Social Services system. Thus, allusions to the invisibility of the social protection system are identified, referring to feeling little or no recognition as professionals. In order to make themselves understood, they mention the job insecurity of social workers, the unbearable overload of tasks or the abandonment of emotional care to the work teams.

“We have already started the pandemic at a disadvantage, because Social Services and Social Work have always been very discredited. You can see the exhaustion of the health workers, but in our case, it is not visible” (Social worker from Andalusia).

One of the key elements to understand the situation of Social Services in Spain has to do with the rate of replacement of jobs due to retirement or sick leave, as well as the failure to comply with the professional ratios. “The profession itself has suffered layoffs, non-renewal of contracts, decreased wages or working hours” (Arredondo, 2017, p. 111). The social workers denounce that it is generalized and sustained over time, that the lack of personnel is not covered, but the failure to cover the sick leaves of Covid has highlighted the structural deficits of the system. The result is that Covid sick leave has been followed by sick leave due to physical and, above all, emotional discomfort, which has ended up collapsing social intervention.

“Some colleagues have been infected for more than twenty days and there is no replacement. We have been left with only three professionals for the whole center” (Social worker from Castile and Leon).

“People are breaking down, bodies are breaking down. We have several colleagues on sick leave, one who has broken her back, the other one her neck, even problems with blood pressure and sugar, and it’s all due to stress. I have the hypothesis that if you don’t stop, the body stops you” (Social worker from Madrid).

The emotional distress of social workers is increasing in Social Services, the need for professional care and supervision is a claim that has intensified during the hardest months of the pandemic crisis. While there is a minority that can benefit from some kind of emotional support of professional teams, “we have ten hours per group of emotional support, it is not much, but it is a gesture to the teams” (Social worker from Madrid), practically 90% of the more than 50 social workers interviewed report feeling abandoned, isolated and fragile because they consider that there is never enough time, budget or space to assist the emotional care of the professionals.

“I have felt overwhelmed and helpless. We were left alone, we had no support. The feeling was the same in other centers: feeling alone” (Social worker from Balearic Islands).

“I don’t know what it must have been like in other centers, but here we have missed being listened to, someone telling us that we were doing well” (Social worker from the Basque Country).

The lack of care for work teams intensified notably during the pandemic because Covid19 also brought the loss of daily, spontaneous and close spaces such as mid-morning breakfasts, sharing a conversation in the hallway or a beer on Fridays at the end of the day, customs deeply rooted in the work dynamics of Spain and that the pandemic took away.

“Now you get into the office and you don’t have time for anything. Before this, the mid-morning coffee break gave me a very important respite” (Social worker from the Basque Country).

“Before we had the relief of beer on Fridays, it was something simple, but it helped us to build our team and to take care of each other, but now we don’t even have that anymore. We are very tired” (Social worker from Andalusia).

Faced with this situation of isolation, social workers innovated by implementing informal care mechanisms such as receiving emotional support sessions from the centers’ psychology professionals, or by restructuring where possible the tasks, functions and procedures assigned to them. In short, by organizing protocols and workflows.

“Since nothing is organized from higher levels, we are evaluating the workloads, distributing the tasks, organizing everything a bit as a way of taking care of the team. (Social worker from Madrid).

The psychologist from our center has care sessions with the social workers, but this is the center’s own initiative, nothing has been done from outside” (Social worker from Aragón).

“I’ve been helping people for months whose faces I don’t even know”. The irruption of telematic care in Social Services

The most visible effect of the pandemic on the day-to-day running of Social Services was the recommendation to professionals to work from home and the consequent irruption of teleworking. Most of the centers closed their face-to-face services, with the exception of emergencies, maintaining the presence of only one or two social workers per center. The arrival of telematic attention has been one of the greatest challenges faced by Social Services in recent years, as it is an eminently face-to-face service whose nature is characterized by the possibility of offering people direct treatment (Morilla et al., 2021). The first few weeks of telematic attention were an amalgam of feelings of uncertainty, anxiety and uneasiness. In addition to these situations of discomfort, there was the fact of attending from a distance, a fact which, as the social workers affirm, directly affects the meaning of the profession and which, in the experience of many of them, ends up causing strange situations, lack of trust

and dehumanization of the interventions. They state that a bureaucratic relationship is imposed, seeing the user as a client requesting a service and the social worker as a professional who manages resources and numerical files.

“Right now, we have lost direct attention, I am not a social worker, I am a social administrator” (Social worker from Madrid).

“The fact that now more attention is given by telephone is reducing the social intervention as we understood it because, for example, there are hardly any home visits and the possibility of establishing a relationship of trust with the other person is lost” (Social worker from Balearic Islands).

“Right now, there are situations of helping to people you have never seen before, the call from someone who has never seen your face before is a very managerial task and very strange situations arise, the intervention is dehumanized, and I think we must be careful because we can lose the sense of Social Work” (Social worker from Madrid).

In addition, the social workers interviewed emphasized, on the one hand, the constant situation of doubt and discomfort of not knowing what was going to happen and, on the other hand, the difficulty of being able to differentiate between professional and personal space. This claim is more evident in a highly feminized profession such as Social Work. Thus, the difficulty to reconcile, the imposition of a third working day, the feeling of not being able to disconnect from the responsibilities and demands of users, etc. accompanied professionals during the first months of the pandemic, completely blurring the difference between professional and personal space. “The work has been really hard and also with very little disconnection, being at home does not mean disconnecting from all that intense work” (Social worker from Aragon).

However, despite being generally dissatisfied with the loss of face-to-face intervention from Social Work, there were also professionals who in their speeches alluded to the benefits that teleworking brought, because they understood that it streamlined

the modernization of public administration in Spain and that without a situation such as the one experienced, this would not have been seen in the coming years. In this sense, in Social Services they recover positive perspectives such as flexibility in bureaucratic processes and care strategies (for example, accepting the sending of documentation via WhatsApp); giving a faster telephone response at least to offer a first orientation to the demands; telematic meetings of professional teams (especially valuable in territories with many small towns of high geographical dispersion) or the possibility of coordinating with other organizations telematically to, in effect, be able to realize the longed-for and sometimes, utopian- inter-institutional coordination.

“We have moved the entire system to Teams. This is causing a lot of effort, but in the end, they are process modifications. As you learn how Teams works, it has many possibilities and I think it will be positive” (Social worker from Madrid).

“We realized that for some users email was difficult and we made it more flexible with WhatsApp by accepting documents, and this is a way to make life easier for them too” (Social worker from Andalusia).

“The more technological Social Work with good heads can be good, for example, for team meetings or to meet with other social organizations, we see each other online and we no longer have to be hundreds of kilometers on the road” (Social worker from Castile and Leon).

“For us, being in Social Services has been a challenge and an opportunity”. Responses from Social Work to emergency situations caused by the pandemic

Being a social worker in Social Services during the global crisis caused by Covid19 has not been an easy position, nor a desirable one. All the professionals interviewed from the very beginning identified the first months of the confinement as the hardest months of their working career, illustrating it with situations that were impossible to believe. It is a verifiable fact that the local Social Services centers were not prepared to

respond to a situation such as the one experienced. From one day to the next, many social workers had to take their folders full of files, their agendas and, in some cases, their computers, and start attending to requests from their homes. In other cases, they had to continue going to the center in person, but to offer all interventions telematically, except in cases of urgent need. In addition to this novel situation, there was precisely what these professionals have already mentioned, the fact of obeying political decisions, which did not always correspond to the needs of the system or of the professionals, once again highlighting the evident gap between political and technical decisions.

“And no one has consulted us, because I could be working from home, but they force me to be at the center, even though we do not attend in person, but by telephone. Sometimes politicians make decisions without consulting us and they are counterproductive” (Social worker from Andalusia).

In addition to this evident fragmentation in the way of understanding social intervention in Social Services, it should be added that during the first months of the year, the demand for assistance increased significantly, even tripling or quadrupling the social needs of users in similar time periods in other years. This increase in demand meant that in many centers, in the first months of the year, the annual municipal budget allocated to social care and protection was depleted, since practically all the demands received in the first months of the pandemic were focused on urgent economic needs (assistance for the payment of rents, domestic supplies, basic food and hygiene products, etc.).

“The increase in demand has been brutal, with a very large demand, we have spent almost the entire annual allocation of social emergency (75%) in a few months. We have spent the entire budget in 6 months” (Social worker from Madrid).

“I can’t spend as much time as I think I need to; I’m plugging holes and putting out fires” (Social worker from Andalusia).

“I have never felt so overwhelmed with work. Now I open my mail and find 80 pending emails” (Social worker from Aragon).

As the months went by, the demand and pressure for care stabilized, among other reasons because of the relaxation of the health measures and because the considerable effort made by the Spanish Ministry of Labor to cover workers who had lost their jobs. An effort valued both in the national and international context. Moreover, with the arrival of Autumn 2020, the professionals experienced a sense of adaptation to the new dynamics, thus being able to adapt to the new situation with a peculiar hybrid return to normality (combining teleworking and face-to-face). On the other hand, institutions were able to articulate different social emergency benefits thanks to the Covid19 Solidarity Fund of the European Union. In some of the narratives analyzed, once the first six months had passed (from March to August 2020), it is possible to note positive discourses that also speak of a certain sense of satisfaction and pride in the work developed, even going so far as to affirm that it has been an opportunity for Social Work in that it has forced it to reorganize and prioritize the meaning of its practice, innovating beyond the imaginable.

“For me this period has been a challenge and an opportunity. During the pandemic it became clear that we, the social workers of Social Services, are here to attend to the difficulties, and I see that this has helped us to assert ourselves and give meaning to what we do” (Social worker from Aragon).

“After these months, I feel enthusiastic, satisfied and proud of my team. Tired because of the dedication in hours, but eager to go to work and continue intervening” (Social worker from Andalusia).

DISCUSSION

The research has made it possible to understand the effects of a global pandemic context on the organizational dynamics of Social Services. On the one hand, and throughout the text, issues related to organizational changes have been exposed, especially the implications of the telematic irruption in the field of social

intervention. On the other hand, it has been studied how the changes have been lived and experienced at a relational level in the day to day of the professional teams. It can be affirmed that the pandemic has demonstrated Social Work's capacity for immediate response to novel and ever-changing situations. The results show that the role of social workers during the almost two years of the pandemic has verified the fundamental contribution they make to the social order as facilitators of social cohesion, and on some occasions, they also act as retaining walls for the uneasiness of citizens. Covid19 has posed a global challenge for organizations dedicated to social intervention, leading to an unprecedented increase in their workload. The work overload and the working conditions faced by Social Work, at a time of strong de-professionalization of social intervention in Spain, require a collective struggle beyond the individual and immediate needs of each professional to try to establish stable workforces with decent working hours, salaries, and work-life balance. The pandemic has also made evident the emotional discomfort faced by Social Services professionals, as there are many speeches in which they refer to and explain situations of exhaustion and stress sustained for months under the premise of not leaving without attention to the users, even causing somatization disorders and emotional discomfort to the point of turning them into physical discomfort.

One of the most significant innovations in an eminently face-to-face work context has been the irruption of the telematic world, the arrival of the online to the direct accompaniment of people. The complementarities of new technologies with analogical uses pose a challenge for society as a whole, but specifically for Social Services, because although the speeches analyzed identify possibilities for improving and streamlining procedures, especially administrative ones, and many of the Social Work professionals identify the possibilities of improvement that the telematic allows them in terms of the expansion of a Social Services model more adapted to future needs, the inclusion of the digital world in social intervention cannot and should not be done in an uncritical way, it requires a deep reflection on the effects of this technologization

in social assistance. According to King et al. (2021), social workers are challenged to learn about technological tools to put them at the service of promoting social justice and achieving well-being, always examining what new and emerging interventions can benefit individuals and communities, without denigrating or forgetting traditional modes of intervention that have demonstrated potentially positive results for certain groups.

In conclusion, Social Work in Social Services after a global context of pandemic has many and varied challenges ahead for the coming years. There are many Spanish territories and regions that are thinking and debating on the models of social intervention to be followed from the Social Services. Perhaps it is too soon since we are still during the pandemic to affirm issues that can be modified, but throughout this text we have tried to identify those issues that clearly do not work, as well as aspects that have made possible an improvement in the day-to-day professional practice. All these proposals for improvement and these changes, based on the analysis of the speeches of the professional protagonists, bring to the table the need for changes in the reorganization of Social Services, modifications in working conditions, as well as new ways of relating to users and responding to the increase in demands. In short, reflections on the procedures, resources, and ways of being in Social Services, unavoidable issues for the conception of these as a key system of welfare and social cohesion. Ultimately, the study has made it possible to reflect on the procedures, resources and ways of being in Social Services, unavoidable issues both in the new legislative texts on the subject that are being developed at the state and autonomous community level, as well as issues to be considered for reflection and new models of Social Services, developing them as a key system of welfare and social cohesion.

DECLARATIONS

DATA AND MATERIAL AVAILABILITY

This article is part of a national research, you can find all the data and research materials on the following website:

Acciones e investigaciones Sociales. ISSN: 1132-192X. n.º 43 (2022). Páginas 235 a 258
https://doi.org/10.26754/ojs_ais/accioninvestigsoc.2022437428

<https://www.ucm.es/monitorss>.

DECLARATION OF INTEREST STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

FUNDING

We are grateful to the National Institute of Public Administration (INAP) for funding the research project "The Impact of Covid19 on Social Services". This work was also supported by the Ministry of Universities (aid for university teaching training FPU19/03510).

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to thank all social workers who took the time to participate in the interviews. We also thank our fellow researchers for their work and generosity.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Virginia Páez Izquierdo: Degree in Translation and Interpreting. PhD Candidate at the Faculty of Social Work, Complutense University of Madrid. Researcher at Department of Sociology: Methodology and Theory (Faculty of Sociology and Political Sciences, Complutense University of Madrid). <https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Virginia-Paez-Izquierdo>

Mercedes Muriel Saiz: Degree in Journalism, Social Work and Master in Community Social Work, Management and Evaluation of Social Services. PhD Candidate by Ministry of Universities of Spain at the Department of Social Work and Social Services (Faculty of Social Work, Complutense University of Madrid). <https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Mercedes-Tuca-Muriel-Saiz>

REFERENCES

- Arredondo, R. (2017). El Trabajo Social, de la austeridad a la invisibilidad. *Servicios Sociales y Política Social*, 34, 107-115. <https://www.serviciosocialesypoliticassocia.com/-9>
- Ben-Ezra, M., and Hamama-Raz, Y. (2020). Social workers during Covid19: Do coping strategies differentially mediate the relationship between job demand and psychological distress? *British Journal of Social Work*, 00, 1-17. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcaa210>
- Bright, C. (2020). Social Work in the age of a global pandemic. *Social Work Research*, 44(2), 83-86. <https://doi.org/10.1093/swr/svaa006>
- Calzada, I., et al (2021). *Los Servicios Sociales ante la pandemia. Monitor de impacto de Covid19*. [Technical report]. <https://www.ucm.es/monitorss/informes>
- Carballeda, A. (2020). *El Trabajo Social en tiempos de pandemia. Una mirada a las posibilidades de intervención del Trabajo Social en la pandemia y algunas reflexiones sobre el contexto*. [Video]. https://www.margen.org/pandemia/carba_charla.html
- Carmona, D., and Fernández, R. (2020). El concepto de profesional de referencia en los Servicios Sociales. *Encuentros en Psicología*, 157-187. https://copao.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/copao_devf6_es_old_dmdocuments_encuentros_monogpsiiiv3.pdf
- Castañeda, L., Salinas, J., and Adell, J. (2020). Towards a contemporary vision of Educational Technology. *Digital Education Review*, 37,240-268. <http://greav.ub.edu/der/>
- Consejo General del Trabajo Social (2020). *Actuaciones del Trabajo Social ante el Covid-19*. [Technical report] https://www.cgtrabajosocial.es/files/5f213639cbc10/COVID_II_WEB.pdf
- Cruz Roja Española (2021). *Qué es la brecha digital y cómo evitar que provoque desigualdad*. [Technical report] <https://www2.cruzroja.es/web/ahora/brecha-digital>
- De las Heras, P. (2020). Desafíos y retos del sistema público de Servicios Sociales. *Tiempo de paz*, 137, 46-56. <http://revistatiempodepaz.org/revista-tiempo-d-paz/pandemia-covid-19-desafios-y-retos-del-sistema-publico-de-servicios-sociales-ma-patrocinio-las-heras/>
- Dominelli, L. (2021a). *Social Work during the health pandemic*. International Associations of Schools of Social Work. <https://www.iaassw-aiets.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Social-Work-in-Times-of-the-Covid-19-Pandemic-18-March-20-1.pdf>
- Dominelli, L. (2021b). A green social work perspective on social work

- during the time of Covid-19. *International Journal of Social Welfare*, 30, 7-16. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1111/ijsw.12469>
- EAPN España (2021). Análisis de los Servicios Sociales. Las personas atendidas y la perspectiva autonómica. [Technical report] https://www.eapn.es/ARCHIVO/documentos/documentos/1640249921_eapn-servicios-sociales_20211222.pdf
- Epstein, L. (2001). *La cultura del Trabajo Social en Foucault y el trabajo social*, A. Chambon, A. Irving y L. Epstein (Ed). Maristan.
- Instituto Nacional de Estadística (2021). *Encuesta de población que usa internet*. [Technical report] https://www.ine.es/ss/Satellite?L=es_ES&c=INESeccion_C&cid=1259925528782&p=1254735110672&pagename=ProductosYServicios%2FPYSLayout
- King, E., Chelsea, S., and Colleen, M. (2021). How the Covid19 pandemic can and must expand social worker e-interventions for mental health, family wellness and beyond. *National Association of Social Workers*, 1-10. <https://doi.org/10.1093/sw/swab043>
- Kisnerman, N. (1998). *Pensar el Trabajo Social. Una introducción desde el construccionismo*. Lumen Humanitas. https://www.fhyce.edu.py/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Pensar_el_Trabajo_social.pdf
- Lázaro, R. (2021). Entrevistas estructuradas, semi-estructuradas y libres. Análisis de contenido. En Tejero, M. (Ed.) *Técnicas de investigación cualitativa en los ámbitos sanitario y sociosanitario*. Ediciones de la Universidad de Castilla La Mancha.
- Martínez, L., and Pérez, B. (2015). La austeridad intensifica la exclusión social e incrementa la desigualdad. *Revista Española del Tercer Sector*, 31, 65-88. https://academica-e.unavarra.es/bitstream/handle/2454/33264/101_Mart%C3%ADnez_ExclusionSocial.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y
- Ministerio de Servicios Sociales e Igualdad (2013). *Catálogo de referencia de Servicios Sociales*. [Technical report] <https://www.sanidad.gob.es/ssi/familiasInfancia/ServiciosSociales/docs/CatalogoSociales.pdf>
- Melo, F., Mendes, J., and Cabral, H. (2021). Burnout in Social Work professionals during the Covid pandemic. *Portuguese Journal of Behavioral and Social Research*, 7(1), 25-40. <https://doi.org/10.31211/rpics.2021.7.1.204>

- Moesby, C., and Schjellerup, N. (2014). Emotional labor in social worker's practice. *European Journal of Social Work*, 18(5), 690-702. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691457.2014.981148>
- Moreno-Manzano, N., and Ordiales, I. (2020). Salud, trabajo y cohesión social: impacto de la pandemia en la Unión Europea. *ICE: Revista de Economía*, 916, 11-35. <http://www.revistasice.com/index.php/ICE/article/view/7104>
- Morilla, A., Muñoz, R., Chaves, A., and Vázquez. (2021). Telework and Social Services in Spain during the Covid-19 pandemic. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 18, 1-14. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18020725>
- Negro, M. (2022). Los Servicios Sociales de Madrid comienzan el año en desbandada. *El País*. <https://elpais.com/espana/madrid/2022-01-08/los-servicios-sociales-de-madrid-comienzan-el-ano-en-desbandada.html>
- Redondo, G., Matulic, V., Munté, A., and Vicente, I. (2020). Social Work during the Covid19 crisis: responding to urgent social needs, *Sustainability*, 12, 1-16. <https://dx.doi.org/10.3390/su12208595>
- Ruiz, P. (2021). Covid-19: teletrabajo en tiempos de pandemia. *Historia y comunicación social*, 26, Special Issue, 11-18 <https://dx.doi.org/10.5209/hics.74237>
- Schlemenson, A. (1998). *Dimensiones relevantes para el análisis organizacional*. Paidós.