

Language and International Health: Internship Paper

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Cruz Roja Española: Toledo

## **The Health Problem**

Coronavirus disease 2019, COVID-19, was a global pandemic because it was a global outbreak of an infectious disease caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) (WHO, 2024). Since the start of the pandemic, more than 2 million Europeans have died from [COVID-19] (WHO, 2024). The regions of Spain with the highest average of COVID-19 cases were Madrid, Galicia, Castilla y León and Castilla La Mancha, where my internship location was located (New York Times, 2023). The record that existed in January 2022 was 3,666,508 and due to the prevalence of the disease in our city, we were required to wear our masks in class at all times, in the dining room unless eating, in all means of transportation, while we were away and especially in our internship locations (JHU, 2023). In addition to a mandatory mandate for students studying abroad, we were also required to receive all COVID-19 vaccines and booster shots before our flight to Spain to have a barrier against contracting the virus and protect those we met. surround. While within the internship, my fellow study abroad students and I lived with host families or in the dorm and generally there were not many cases of COVID-19 reported within our internship locations or our school, but the cases outside our school were as serious as they were in the United States.

## **Background on the health issue in relation to my internship**

The population served at my internship site were elementary aged students who were refugees in Spain, in an after school program so their parents could work and get things in order for them to be comfortable in their new country. The nationalities of my elementary school students ranged from Guatemala, Mexico, Ecuador, Middle East like Syria, and Morocco. My young adult section of my internship served a population of young adults from roughly ages 16 to 26 who were Spanish Natives and Immigrants from South America. My elderly sector of my internship served elders from ages 70 to 96 of all Spanish natives who spoke the old catalan which was difficult to understand unless you were from the region. The Spanish Red Cross sector was based on public and community health rather than on medical care, diagnostics, and treatment. Due to this, the health issues were focused around prevention methods to public health. There weren't any prevalent health issues at the internship site, but at the time of my internship, COVID-19 was at its highest peak in the Region and Spain as a whole. January of 2022 was the month with the highest average COVID-19 cases, which was during the start of my

study abroad program when we arrived in Toledo on January 19, 2022 (New York Times, 2023). The questions now need to be investigated and analyzed: Why have COVID-19 cases reached extreme prevalence and incidence rates with little public concern? What could have been done to improve the prevalence and incidence rates of COVID-19 transmission and mortality?

### **Importance of the health issue in relation to Spain**

During our time in Spain, we saw many lax mask mandates, as workers were required to wear them, but they would be taken off, defeating their purpose. There was also an outcry against having the option to wear or not wear the mask similar to the United States as there was a population of people who did not believe strict rules or policies were needed as many other diseases exist but do not require protection. Public transportation was also considered a determining factor in the high COVID cases, as the subway required the use of masks in all cars, but people lowered them or took them off once they were seated. Restaurants, bars, clubs and large stores such as Primark and Nike, which were so densely packed with people that they couldn't maintain a 6-foot distance from each other, remained open. The fact that nightclubs also remained open was a major factor in the transmission of COVID-19 in 2022, as no occupancy capacity existed, as well as hostels remaining at their normal capacity, not requiring clients to be tested prior to their stay or had not received a COVID-19 vaccine. Although work became remote or hybrid, Spaniards still had to go to supermarkets, pharmacies or generally move around large crowds, which did not help incidence rates. The remaining factors that existed in 2023 were that travelers arriving in Spain from anywhere else in the world were no longer subject to the COVID-19 entry restrictions to which we were subject in 2022 such as: full vaccination certificate, test negative or a recovery certificate, and this was for entry and exit (CNN, 2022). Now we must investigate: Why have COVID-19 cases skyrocketed in Spain with little public concern? What could have been done to improve the prevalence and incidence rates of COVID-19 transmission and mortality rates?

Public health is a major priority in Spain, supported by a healthcare system that provides universal coverage and access to essential medical services (State of Health in the EU - Spain, 2021). However despite this, the country faces various public health challenges, including an aging population, rising rates of chronic diseases, and inequalities in access to healthcare (State of Health in the EU - Spain, 2021). These challenges are reflected in Toledo, where similar

health issues are prevalent, compounded by socioeconomic disparities and geographical factors (State of Health in the EU - Spain, 2021). Non-communicable diseases (NCDs) such as cardiovascular diseases, cancer, and diabetes are significant public health issues in both Spain and Toledo, driven by social determinants like lifestyle factors and environmental influences (State of Health in the EU - Spain, 2021). Spain has made significant efforts in promoting public health through initiatives aimed at tobacco control, vaccination campaigns, and health education programs. In Toledo, efforts to enhance healthcare infrastructure and expand primary care services have been implemented to address the needs of the local population. Collaborations between government agencies, healthcare providers, and community organizations play an important role in tackling public health issues at the national and local levels. Despite progress made, ongoing vigilance and investment are essential to address emerging health threats and ensure the sustainability of public health efforts in Spain and Toledo mainly by prioritizing prevention.

### **Analysis of the questions I posed to investigate**

Previously, I mentioned the questions I want to investigate and answer: Why have COVID-19 cases reached extreme prevalence and incidence rates with little public concern? What could have been done to improve the prevalence and incidence rates of COVID-19 transmission and mortality? In 2022, Spain faced a resurgence in COVID-19 cases, leading to high incidence and prevalence rates. One significant factor contributing to this surge was the constant influx of millions of tourists from all over the world, especially from other countries within Europe. According to statistics from the Spanish government, tourist arrivals reached record levels in 2022, with over 90 million international visitors. The influx of tourists likely facilitated the spread of the virus, as crowded tourist hotspots became breeding grounds for transmission. Another contributing factor was the lack of enforced lockdown mandates. Unlike previous years, when strict lockdown measures were implemented to subside the spread of the virus, Spain adopted a more relaxed approach in 2022. The government opted for targeted restrictions rather than nationwide lockdowns, allowing businesses to operate with less limitations. While this approach aimed to balance public health concerns with economic stability, it inadvertently provided opportunities for the virus to spread quicker and more easily. The combination of high tourist numbers and a less restrictive environment created ideal conditions

for COVID-19 to proliferate, ultimately leading to the escalation of cases in Spain during 2022 (CNN, 2022).

Public transportation and overcrowded spaces played a significant role in contributing to the high COVID-19 rates in Spain during 2022. Public transportation, such as buses, trains, and subways, are essential facets for movement within cities and regions, facilitating the spread of the virus when adequate precautions are not taken such as use of a mask or attempting social distancing. Despite efforts to implement safety measures like mask mandates and increased sanitation, the sheer volume of passengers in confined spaces just perpetuated the risk of transmission. With the influx of tourists and locals alike utilizing and needing public transportation, especially in densely populated urban areas like Barcelona and Madrid, the potential for virus spread amplified. Moreover, being in crowded spaces, whether indoors or outdoors, exacerbated the transmission risk. Tourist attractions, restaurants, bars, and entertainment venues, which are often crowded during peak tourist seasons, became hotspots for virus transmission. Despite efforts to enforce capacity limits and social distancing measures, maintaining adequate distance in crowded areas proved challenging. Additionally, the relaxed atmosphere in some regions may have led to complacency among both locals and visitors regarding preventative measures like mask-wearing and hand hygiene. As a result, these crowded spaces became breeding grounds for the virus, contributing to the surge in COVID-19 cases observed in Spain during 2022.

In conclusion, several factors contributed to the lack of adherence to necessary precautions against COVID-19 in Spain, both among the public and the government. One significant factor was pandemic fatigue, as people grew weary of prolonged restrictions and disruptions to daily life. With the passage of time and the gradual easing of lockdown measures, there was a sense of complacency and a belief that the worst of the pandemic was over. This led to a relaxation of vigilance and a decreased sense of urgency regarding preventive measures such as mask-wearing and social distancing. Additionally, misinformation and fatigue from contradictory messaging may have sowed confusion and skepticism about the severity of the virus and the effectiveness of precautions. Moreover, Spain's heavy reliance on tourism for its economy may have influenced the government's reluctance to impose stringent measures that could deter tourists, leading to a balancing act between public health and economic interests. This hesitation may have inadvertently conveyed a message of leniency to the public, further

undermining adherence to necessary precautions. Overall, a combination of fatigue, misinformation, economic concerns, and mixed messaging contributed to the lax attitude towards COVID-19 precautions in Spain in 2022.

### **Analysis of the Health System in Spain with the pandemic**

The COVID-19 pandemic had a higher prevalence and incidence in Spain, especially in the main and busiest regions of Spain, such as Madrid, Castilla LaStain and Castilla y León. With interventions such as health education about the public and global health benefits of receiving vaccines and wearing a mask in crowded public settings, as a collective society, we could have shortened the lifespan of the coronavirus. An interesting case study could also have been conducted in certain regions of Spain to see how cases and deaths could have been mitigated or prevented by receiving the vaccine. It would have been even more interesting to see if having an incentive will inspire other regions of the world to follow their example and see the result of that result. My analysis as to why COVID-19 cases speared in Spain with little public concern is in part due to lack of public knowledge and not having an importance on public health. Had the government of Spain prioritized educating the severity of the virus and making an effort to explain the benefits of vaccination, many lives would have been saved and less restrictions on lockdown would have existed. Another factor of all businesses remaining open, Clubs, Restaurants, and the metro not allotting for social distancing most definitely played a detrimental factor in reducing public concern and the population mimicking the Trump administration in regards to tackling the issue of COVID-19. Implementations of incentives for not only receiving the COVID-19 vaccines and boosters but also actively taking precautions of transmission such as simply wearing masks while in public and crowded areas could've potentially improved the prevalence and incidence rates that existed in Spain. The skyrocketing mortality rates of 2022 in Spain could've been lessened had the government encouraged simple regulations until numbers decreased enough to lessen the severity of the pandemic.

### **Improvement strategies that could be implemented**

Policy interventions that could have been implemented were more mandates and health education to explain the severity of the number of COVID-19 cases that existed in Spain, as well as the number of deaths in the country. To find out the numbers, you had to watch the news or

search for articles to better understand what was happening. The political party that cultivated lax mandates was following the Trump administration's move and had a laissez faire attitude in addressing the pandemic that only exacerbated the situation. The strategies that could have been implemented that work for the sociocultural determinants of Spain could be incentives to get vaccinated, wear the mask constantly until health professionals indicate otherwise, or even luckily not contracting the virus and having reliable evidence could be rewarded with various forms of compensation. The workforce in Spain struggles because it is difficult to find or be offered a good job, especially for young adults, so the country's economy is low in terms of equity and strength, as employment rates in Spain are extremely low. There is too much competition and supply, but not enough room for demand. Having an incentive would have been a positive form of conditioning for the Spanish and would have potentially helped avoid the mortality rates that resulted from the extreme number of cases that existed. Luckily, the internship organization I worked with focused on public health and implemented many strategies to prevent the incidence of COVID-19 within our facilities such as wearing our masks at all times, washing our hands, using hand sanitizer, having respectful social distancing, and having wall thermometers to keep an eye on everyone's temperatures at all times.

### **Background of my Internship**

My internship was with Cruz Roja Espanola. I was stationed at three locations: the Red Cross near Alcázar, the Red Cross on Calle Canarias, and an off-site location on Calle Panamá. On Wednesday mornings from 10 am to 1:30 pm, I was on Panama Street helping to teach an English class to young Spaniards, ages 17 to 26, looking for work in the restaurant industry. On Wednesday afternoons from 5 pm to 6:30 pm, I helped with an after-school program at the Red Cross near Alcázar. Here we helped the elementary students, who were mainly refugees, with their homework for the first part of the program and then did fun activities with them. Some of the activities included planting, the whispering game, playing statues, coloring, origami, dancing and hygiene activities to promote the importance of public health. On Thursday mornings from 10 am to 12:30 pm I interned at the Red Cross on Canarias Street where we go to the neighborhood park to walk and talk with the elderly to help with memory care. When the weather was rainy we would go to a local coffee shop and chat with one other. The mission statement of Cruz Roja Espanola is to support vulnerable people and offer the best solutions to

their needs in the fastest way possible. The Spanish Red Cross is an Humanitarian organization dedicated to “preventing and alleviating human suffering, and thereby contributing to the maintenance and promotion of human dignity and peace in the world” (CAFAmerica, et al).

### **My experience with the health issue of COVID-19 while in Spain**

My initial exposure to the health issue of COVID-19 was immediate because as soon as we arrived at our school in Toledo, we had an orientation meeting that listed all the requirements and expectations of the school and our time abroad. My reaction, and similar to that of other students within the program, was shock at the severity of the mask mandate for our program coordinators and teachers. We could not fully understand the severity, as in the United States we understood the prevalence and importance of not wanting to be vaccinated, but the mandates were so lax and the populations were so against getting vaccinated that it was difficult to go from one extreme to the other. An anecdote that I experienced about this health issue was when I was in my second internship where I was involved in an after-school daycare within the Spanish Red Cross. One of the students had her mask on and, as was customary before COVID-19, she had it under her chin and was playing with the other students and doing her usual social activities. When he approached the head teacher, who is the regular teacher of the program, to joke with her, the teacher gave him a look like a mother gives her child when she needs to correct a mistake. Immediately the little girl exclaimed “Madre Mia!” and quickly fixed his mask to place it correctly on his face. It was fascinating to see how the look immediately translated into “um, look at your mask,” while teachers in the US might allow the student to keep the mask under their chin or verbally call out the child in front of everyone.

This experience shaped my perspective on the COVID-19 virus and how easy it is to follow mandates for the sake of public and global health. It changed my perspective on America's protests about my body, my choice regarding getting vaccinated, wearing masks, and following lockdown protocols. Watching six to eleven year olds in our after-school portion of the internship follow a simple rule of wearing a mask effortlessly and without complaint, showed me how other countries, especially within Europe, view Americans so negatively and why. If adults followed simple mandates instead of believing they were a form of control, so many cases of COVID-19 and so many deaths as a result of those cases could have been avoided.



## **Conclusion**

In summary, the high incidence of COVID-19 cases in Spain during 2022 can be attributed to a combination of factors, including the significant influx of tourists, lack of lockdown mandates, public transportation, crowded spaces, pandemic fatigue, and mixed messaging from both the government and media. These conditions created a perfect storm for the rapid spread of the virus throughout the country. To alleviate the pandemic's impact, several health implications could have been implemented, such as maintaining strict mask mandates in crowded areas, enforcing capacity limits in public transportation and tourist attractions, implementing targeted lockdown measures in areas experiencing outbreaks, and ensuring consistent and clear communication about the importance of preventive measures. Additionally, investing in robust testing and contact tracing infrastructure could have helped identify and contain outbreaks more effectively. By prioritizing public health measures and adopting a proactive approach, Spain could have mitigated the spread of COVID-19 and minimized the associated health, social, and economic consequences.

In conclusion, my internship experience provided me with invaluable insights and skills that have shaped my understanding of the importance of health in all facets of life. Through hands-on experiences and meaningful interactions, I learned to apply communication, teaching, and caregiving skills in real-world settings, contributing to the well-being of others while enriching my own personal and professional growth. I gained a firsthand glimpse into the intricate dynamics of the healthcare system, witnessing the impact of access, quality, and coordination on individual health outcomes and overall community well-being. This experience underscored the interconnectedness of health with various aspects of life, from education and employment to social support and quality of life. As I transition from my internship to future endeavors, I carry with me a deeper appreciation for the multifaceted nature of health and a commitment to promoting wellness and equity in all aspects of society.

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