

# Economic crisis and child maltreatment in Spain: the consequences of the recession in the child protection system

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – *This study aims to examine the consequences of the last great recession on the child protection system (CPS) in Spain, to estimate whether there is any kind of relationship between the conditions of socio-economic crisis and its protective activity.*

**Design/methodology/approach** – *Data on child protection legal measures issued by the CPS and socio-economic data from 8 of the 17 regions of the country were cross-checked. Using the chi-square test, it was possible to determine the significance and intensity of the relationship between the different variables in each of the regions of the study.*

**Findings** – *During the crisis, the number of recorded cases fell most sharply in those regions with the worst socio-economic indicators. The study shows that there is a significant relationship between the socio-economic conditions of the regions and families and the activity of the CPS in each of them, so that the worsening of the former reduces the protective activity of their protection system.*

**Practical implications** – *The results ask about the influence of the socioeconomic situation in the decision-making of the CPS in Spain and the need to deepen in its study.*

**Originality/value** – *To the best of the author's knowledge, this is the first longitudinal study on the effects of the economic crisis on CPS activity in Spain.*

**Keywords** *Spain, Economic crisis, Child maltreatment, Socio-economic conditions, Child protections system, Measures of protection*

**Paper type** *Research paper*

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## Introduction

The past economic recession of period 2008–2014 was the longest in modern Spanish history. During those years, the inter-annual unemployment rate (UR) climbed from 11.25 to 24.44%. The average personal income decreased by 8% and the rate of families who declared having a hard time reaching the end of the month went from 13.7 to 18.6% (National Institute of Statistics [INE], 2018). Consequently, the severe material deprivation rate, which indicates the number of people living in households that cannot afford four or more basic consumer goods, as it is defined by the European Union, increased from 3.8% in 2008 to 7.1% in 2014. Also, the intensity of poverty, that is, how poor were the poor as a whole, which stood at 25.6% in 2008, shot up to 31.6% by the end of 2014.

Numerous investigations have analyzed the consequences of the crisis for the child population in Spain. Some research has focused on the material effects (Ayllón, 2015; Navarro and Clua-Losada, 2012), others on its effects on health (Gili *et al.*, 2012; Rajmil *et al.*, 2015; Sánchez, de la Fuente and Gallardo, 2019) and education (Save the Children, 2016; Díaz and Hervella, 2017). However, no attention has been paid to the impact the crisis had on child maltreatment and specifically on the mechanisms established for their prevention, detection and intervention.

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Only data from the Foundation to Help Children and Adolescent at Risk's (ANAR Foundation) report is available, which, by analyzing the child care hotline received in Spain between 2009 and 2016, showed that among other forms of violence, the cases of physical maltreatment reported had increased during said period by 304.8%, that of psychological maltreatment by 604.1% and that of sexual abuse by 177.8%. That report concluded that there was "some coincidence in time between the worst economic indicators and the increase of phone calls about domestic violence cases" (Fundación ANAR, 2018, p. 303). This statement corresponds itself with several studies that have shown a strong link between family socioeconomic status and the emergence of child maltreatment (Berger and Waldfogel, 2011; Brooks-Gunn *et al.*, 2013; Cancian *et al.*, 2013; Frioux *et al.*, 2014).

The absence of official statistics continues to make it impossible to establish the incidence, prevalence and evolution of the different types of child maltreatment during the years of the crisis (2008–2014) in Spain, although some research has attempted to do so partially (Ministerio de Sanidad, Consumo y Bienestar Social, 2011; Pereda *et al.*, 2015). Consequently, there are difficulties in assessing the effectiveness of social policy toward child protection in this area and specifically about one of its most important devices: child protection system (CPS). This is defined as a set of formal elements (legal measures, human, material and technical resources, procedures, etc.) and informal elements (values, norms and social practices) that work together to prevent and respond to situations in which a child under the age of 18 is at risk and/or in a situation of maltreatment, in accordance with the legislation in force, assessing, proposing and acting to guarantee his/her rights and well-being. In the Spanish case, its competences and attributions correspond to the different administrative regions, in collaboration with local entities and third-sector organizations, while it is the state that dictates the basic legislation, coordinates the regions and centralizes the data registry. This system, on which 47,493 children are in care and/or guardianship depended during 2017 in Spain (Ministerio de Sanidad, Consumo y Bienestar Social, 2018) and which is estimated to serve approximately 5–10% of the Spanish child population through other social intervention programs (prevention, monitoring and/or risk containment), is influenced in its activity by a series of contextual factors, including the quality of governance, the effectiveness of its legal system, its level of development and the cohesion and strength of the country's economy (UNICEF, 2013).

The aim of this study is to examine the evolution, during the years of the crisis, of three indicators of the performance of the CPS in eight Spanish regions through the analysis of the Basic Statistics on Child Protection Measures (EBMPI), and to relate them to the evolution of different socioeconomic indicators that affect the well-being of families in those regions, to estimate if there is any kind of relationship between both. The main hypothesis is that if there is a relationship between the family's socioeconomic situation and the emergence of maltreatment, as some of the scientific literature maintains and the data and conclusions of the Fundación ANAR (2018) suggest, we should find an increase in the number of legal child protection measures implemented by the CPS in those regions. On the other hand, if such a correlation was valid, we should find a different behavior between those regions with worse socioeconomic indicators and those that presented a better socioeconomic situation throughout the crisis, so that in the former ones, we would observe a greater increase in the cases in which the CPS took protective measures with regard to the latter.

### **Arguments that link socio-economic factors to child maltreatment**

From ecological framework, child maltreatment is approached as the result of the interaction of several factors, including the characteristics of children and parents, the family environment and the socio-economic and cultural ecosystem of the family. Successive studies have tried to show the influence of each of them as a trigger for maltreatment. With respect to the economic ecosystem, the first studies in this area

(Gil, 1970; Elder, 1974; Pelton, 1978; Wolock and Horowitz, 1979) showed the relevance of the socio-economic position of families and their prevalence in the occurrence of child maltreatment. Further research (Berger and Waldfogel, 2011; Brooks-Gunn *et al.*, 2013; Cancian *et al.*, 2013; Sedlak *et al.*, 2010) have corroborated the indications of a correlation between situations of poverty and child maltreatment, although that does not mean that the majority of families with low available income do not take good care of their progeny.

The primary socio-economic factors that seem to increase occurrences of childhood maltreatment are, according to Berger (2004), family unemployment situations, single parenting and limited access to economic and social resources. It has been found that the correlation between a family's economic situation and maltreatment is mainly produced in two ways: first, a lack of resources could limit the parents' ability to satisfy the material goods necessary for the proper development of their children and, secondly, low economic success could become a source of stress for parents, which affects parental behavior and family relationships. Studies have shown that there is a high correlation between three factors of socioeconomic status (poverty, employment and family structure) and the occurrence of child abuse and/or child neglect in the family (Berger, 2004; Berger *et al.*, 2017; Dubowitz *et al.*, 2011; Paxson and Waldfogel, 2002, 2003; Tobey *et al.*, 2013). There is also evidence linking low-income scenarios and a greater possibility for situations involving child maltreatment, particularly in families with minimum wage work (Raissian and Bullinger, 2017) or those with welfare benefits (Cancian *et al.*, 2013; Berger *et al.*, 2017; Shook, 1999).

Regarding the relationship between insufficient income availability and stress and parental behavior, the evidence suggests that it can negatively affect parents' interactions with their children. Likewise, low incomes may imply an increase in relational stressors and even decrease parents' abilities to address inherent childhood risks (Cobb-Clark *et al.*, 2019; Conger *et al.*, 2009; Crouch and Behl, 2001; Elder and Conger, 2000). There is also some evidence with regards to the relationship between low-income availability and the increase in corporal punishment as a means to regulate child behavior (Slack *et al.*, 2003; Weinberg, 2001). In Spain, Simón *et al.* (2000) and Garrido and Grimaldi (2009) have demonstrated the interaction between economic difficulties and a lack of social support for families with various indications of child maltreatment. Recently, Gracia *et al.* (2018) analyzed the geographic distribution of child maltreatment cases over 552 divisions of a large Spanish city and found that 98% of the reports were produced in neighborhoods suffering from low incomes, poor educational results, a high concentration of an immigrant population and residential instability. Despite all the accumulated evidence, there is no causal relationship between the lack of sufficient income and the occurrence of child maltreatment (Cancian *et al.*, 2013; Berger and Waldfogel, 2011; Berger *et al.*, 2017). Additionally, there are authors who observe certain biases in some of the previous studies on this topic, namely, that they mostly come from Anglo-Saxon countries such as the USA (Cameron and Freymond, 2006) and that they only focus on families in poverty who are already under scrutiny by child protection services (Coulton *et al.*, 2007; Yang, 2015).

In recent years, several studies have analyzed the relationship between the UR and incidents of child maltreatment in periods of recession. Brown and De Cao (2017) have found a strong link between parental unemployment and child maltreatment in the USA during the period 1990–2010. They argue that that each 1% increase in unemployment precedes an increase of between 0.21 and 0.46% of child maltreatment incidents in the following year. The results of Frioux *et al.* (2014) and Schneider *et al.* (2017) point in the same direction. Using various indicators such as unemployment, consumer confidence and foreclosures, the authors show that the number of investigated cases of child maltreatment increased when those indicators got worse. However, there is inconsistent evidence on the matter. For example, Millett *et al.*'s (2011) study on the consequences of the crisis sought to correlate URs, child abuse rates and child neglect in seven federal states of the USA,

meanwhile, [Nguyen \(2013\)](#) studied the relationship between unemployment and child maltreatment in the state of California. In both cases, the authors concluded that the cause–effect relationships were inconsistent and therefore it could not be firmly stated that there was a direct cause–effect relationship between these variables. Despite this, there is some evidence that suggests that economic factors influence the likelihood of situations of child maltreatment in high-income countries ([Berger and Waldfogel, 2011](#); [Cancian \*et al.\*, 2013](#); [Gilbert \*et al.\*, 2009](#); [Sell \*et al.\*, 2010](#)).

## Methodology

### *Data*

This study was based on official administrative data from two primary sources of information, taking 8 of Spain's 17 regions as the unit of analysis. The research consisted in the cross-analysis of data on the legal measures for child protection issued by the CPS and registered in the EBMPI of the Ministry of Health, Consumption and Social Welfare (MSCBS) and the socio-economic data registered by the National Institute of Statistics (INE) in eight of the country's administrative regions: Andalusia (R1), Castile and León (R2), Valencian Community (R3), Basque Country (R4), the Canary Islands (R5), Castile and La Mancha (R6), Extremadura (R7) and Murcia (R8). The selection criteria for these regions were that they had published all the data for the indicators and years covered by the study. The regions finally selected accounted for more than half of Spain's child population and 60% of the cases with child protection measures registered in the country. The time interval was between the years 2008 and 2014 as it corresponded to the period of crisis in Spain, according to the accounting of the INE. Two sets of indicators were crossed: those referring to child protection measures and those related to socioeconomic conditions of each of the regions. All the indicators used are public and accessible, and have an annual character and specifically reflect the situation in each administrative region.

### *Indicators*

The legal measures taken by the CPS in each region are published in the EBMPI report under the MSCBS. Each year, the bulletin records the number of open cases files and legal measures of children under the age of 18 (guardianship and/or care and residential and/or family placement) that have been resolved by each administrative region and the national total. The following three indicators were included in the analysis:

1. The rate of new records of protection measures (RPM), which reflects the total number of files opened at the end of each annual period, of minors under any protection measure established by law (guardianship and/or wardship, residential care and/or foster care) from among the total population under 18 years of age.
2. The rate of new rulings of child custody (RCC), which specifically indicates the resolutions adopted by the public entity in cases of abandonment of a minor and who is under one of the protection measures contemplated by the law.
3. The rate of new foster care rulings (FCR) determined by the public entity, which expresses the number of minors who have been placed in administrative or judicial care by a person or family unit other than their parents.

All rates are annual, expressed on the scale of 1/100.000 individuals not considered an adult legally and referred to each administrative region.

The second group of indicators reflects the socio-economic situation of the eight selected regions through variables that have already been used in other studies in relation to child maltreatment: unemployment, poverty and disposable income. The main source of the data was the Living Conditions Survey and the Economically Active Population Survey. Thereby,

congruent data series were obtained on each specific territorial area for the established temporal frame of the following indicators:

- The at risk of poverty and/or exclusion (AROPE) European indicator measures each year the number of people living in households in which one of three situations exists: being at risk of poverty (income per consumption unit below 60% of the median disposable income equivalent); having a severe material deprivation (defined as the lack of at least four of the nine concepts designated by EUROSTAT); and low employment intensity (households in which their working-age members did less than 20% of their total working potential).
- The UR, which sets the annual level of unemployment in relation to the active population of a territory.
- The indicator of average personal disposable income (API), which shows the annual income from which people can make use after subtracting taxes and social security charges, and which can be used for consumption or savings, expressed in thousands of euros.

### *Data processing*

Firstly, a descriptive analysis of the corresponding variables of the eight administrative regions was completed (see [Appendix](#)). Two categories (lower and upper) were established on the socio-economic situation of each region, allowing a comparison with the selected protection indicators. After this, the program SPSS 26 was used to analyze the correlations between the socio-economic and child protection indicators. The chi-square test was used for two purposes: to determine the independence between variables and to assess the goodness of fit. In this sense, the indicators could either fall above or below the national average. The chi-square test of independence allowed us to determine the intensity of the relationships with a 99% confidence interval. However, the results did not imply causality between variables, which would need more precision to determine what aspects of the socio-economic situation have a greater impact on the evolution of EBMPI dates. Furthermore, it was not possible to carry out an ordinary least squares regression analysis because there were not enough cases for the selected variables and also because the variable time could not be considered an independent variable.

### **Results**

The descriptive analysis indicates the presence of a sharp increase of the UR and the AROPE in all regions during the period of the study but a decrease in the average of API. Both results reflect the profound impact of the crisis in Spain. Only two out of the eight regions Castile and Leon (R2) and Basque Country (R4) stood below the national average in the UR and the AROPE and placed above regarding the API during 2008–2014, which shows a more solid situation compared to the other six regions. With regards to the indicators of CPS, there was a general reduction in the number of registered cases and only one region (R4) was positioned above the national average in the rate of new RPM. Three of the regions (R2, R3 and R4) were placed over the national mean in the rate of new RCC and two regions (R2 and R3) exceeded the average of the rate of new FCR determined by the public entity. [Table 1](#) summarizes the initial and final figures for each indicator and administrative region over the period considered. The graphs can be found in the [Appendix](#).

These results show that the crisis in Spain did not produce an increase in the rate of child maltreatment cases being reported to the CPS. As a matter of fact, the overall number of cases was reduced by 6.5% during those years ([Table 1](#)). The reduction of the RPM and RCC was especially severe in those administrative regions that had higher UR and AROPE

**Table 1** Difference in socio-economic and child protection indicators (2008–2014)

Region	Year	UR	AROPE	API (in thousands of €)	RCC	RPM	FCR
R1	2008	17.3	31.6	9.007	83.1	437.6	23.7
R1	2014	34.78	42.3	8.079	64.7	611.7	36.3
R2	2008	9.62	21.4	10.488	109.7	372.0	41.5
R2	2014	20.77	26.1	10.406	90.4	429.1	98.9
R3	2008	11.99	27.5	9.864	113.6	559.0	59.9
R3	2014	25.82	34.7	9.144	118.2	365.1	103.7
R4	2008	6.63	13.9	14.038	214.7	805.6	17.7
R4	2014	16.33	15.3	14.281	59.4	324.5	17.4
R5	2008	17.25	34.8	8.902	55.8	361.9	37.9
R5	2014	32.41	37.0	8.302	95.7	612.7	70.1
R6	2008	29.00	28.8	9.064	115.8	332.3	38.3
R6	2014	11.67	36.9	8.545	55.2	403.0	30.2
R7	2008	29.79	37.9	8.107	61.5	428.8	43.5
R7	2014	15.35	39.8	7.729	78.5	519.9	19.1
R8	2008	12.44	27.5	9.119	112.4	178.4	30.4
R8	2014	26.59	44.9	7.767	77.00	459.2	33.1
National average	2008	11.25	23.8	10.737	105.9	573.9	34.0
National average	2014	24.44	29.2	10.391	75.8	483.4	49.7

figures and lower API during the crisis. In addition, the intense rise in the UR did not relate with the behavior of the RPM and the RCC. Statistically unique and significant results were observed in some of the relationships that were established by the chi-square test of independence. The AROPE and API indicators had statistically significant results in both the RPM and the RCC [ $\chi^2(1, N = 63) = 9.289, p < 0.01$ ], while the UR only presented significant results in the RCC [ $\chi^2(1, N = 63) = 6.924, p < 0.01$ ]. There were no significant results between any of the socio-economic indicators and the FCR [ $\chi^2(1, N = 63) = 0.233, p > 0.1$ ] or with UR [ $\chi^2(1, N = 63) = 0.695, p > 0.1$ ].

A chi-square test of goodness-of-fit was performed to determine if the fit is different from 0. The API was the socio-economic indicator with the strongest relation with the RCC [ $\chi^2(1, N = 63) = 9.672, p < 0.01$ ] and the RPM [ $\chi^2(1, N = 63) = 22.468, p < 0.01$ ]. The AROPE indicator correlated with the RCC [ $\chi^2(1, N = 63) = 14.542, p < 0.01$ ] and the RPM [ $\chi^2(1, N = 63) = 9.672, p < 0.01$ ]. The UR presents the lower degree of relationship with respect to the RPM [ $\chi^2(1, N = 63) = 2.671, p > 0.1$ ].

There was a positive relationship between the API and the RCC, therefore, when the values of the former were above the national average, the latter also tended to be over the mean (76.5%). In the opposite case, when the API was lower than the national average, the RCC tended to be below the average (67.4%). Similar results were found when analyzing the relationship between the API and the RPM: when the first was placed above the national average, the second was over the mean as well (70.6%) and when the values of the API were less than the national average, the RPM tended to be below the average (89.1%). Hence, the regions with higher income (R2 and R4) were the ones that reported the highest number of files and guardianship rulings because of maltreatment in comparison to the regions that were placed below the mean. The latter would suggest that when the API increases, so should the RCC and the RPM.

The results also show a negative relationship between the AROPE indicator and the RCC and RPM. Thus, when the AROPE was above the national mean, the values of the RPM were below the average (88.1%). At the same time, when the AROPE was lower than the national average, the RPM was located to a greater extent on the upper level of the mean (57.1%). Additionally, when the AROPE indicator was above the national mean, the RCC was lower than the average (69%). In those cases where the AROPE indicator was below the national

mean, the RCC was placed to a greater extent in the upper level of the mean (71.4%). The implications of such relationships are twofold: on the one hand, those regions in which the AROPE was higher than the national average (R1, R3, R5, R6 and R7) experienced a decrease in the RPM and the RCC during the period of the study, while, on the other hand, those regions with the lowest incidence of poverty and exclusion (R2 and R4) showed an increase in the RCC and RPM. According to this analysis, it is possible to say that when the AROPE indicator increases, the RCC and the RPM will tend to decrease.

Finally, it did not matter whether the UR was lower or higher than the national average, as the RPM was always located lower than the national mean. When the UR was above the national average, the RPM was below the mean (87.5%) and when the UR was lower than the national mean, the RPM was placed in the lower part of the national average (58.1%). These results would indicate that there is no direct relationship between the increase in the UE and the behavior of this CPS indicator in Spain.

## Discussion

Although numerous studies associate poor socio-economic conditions with child maltreatment, no data have been found to suggest that the deterioration of socio-economic conditions in Spain during the crisis caused an increase in the reporting of child maltreatment. The EBMPI indicators used do not show significant relationships with the socio-economic indicators that would allow this hypothesis to be confirmed. These findings are similar to those stated in the study by [Rajmil et al. \(2015\)](#), which found no significant changes in the number of child hospital care cases for maltreatment or unintentional injuries during the crisis period in Spain, and with those already noted by [Millett et al. \(2011\)](#) and [Nguyen \(2013\)](#) with regard to the US case. On the contrary, they collide with data of the [Fundación ANAR \(2018\)](#), as if the strong increases indicated in its report had occurred, they should have meant an increase, even minimal, in the figures of some of the regions under study. Regarding regional differences, we also do not observe a differentiated behavior between those with better socio-economic indicators (Castile and Leon [R2] and the Basque Country [R4]) and the weaker ones (Andalusia [R1], Valencian Community [R3], the Canary Islands [R5], Castile and La Mancha [R6], Extremadura [R7] and Murcia [R8]). Rather, the opposite effect to that expected has been observed: the indicators of legal measures for child protection recorded by the EBMPI were more reduced in those regions of the study where the indicators of the crisis were most alarming, while those regions with less pressing socio-economic conditions did not exhibit an established pattern of the rates.

This result opens up several questions. In the first place, the fact that there is an inverse behavior to that expected between the regions with better and worse socioeconomic conditions makes us wonder about the influence that the robustness of the CPS of each region may have, its extension, capacity and intervention criteria.

Related to this fact, it has been considered the possibility that this was connected to a decrease in the number of professionals in the CPS in some of the regions, as a result of the financial restrictions arising from the crisis, as in [Sell et al. \(2010\)](#) and [Nguyen \(2013\)](#) with regard to the US case. The latter study determined that between 2005 and 2011, there was a 36.8% decrease in personnel assigned to protection services, without this having a positive or negative effect on the evolution of child maltreatment figures.

In the case of Spain, the data indicate that the staff of local public social services – which are mainly responsible for detecting and reporting cases of maltreatment – grew by 67% between 2008 and 2014, with very insignificant reductions in some of their regions between 2013 and 2014 ([Ministerio de Sanidad, Consumo y Bienestar Social, 2015a, 2015b](#)). Meanwhile, the number of people employed in Spain's private social services increased until 2011, at which point a slight decline began ([Fundación PriceWaterhouseCoopers, 2014](#)) but without any of these staff reductions being clearly transferred to the EBMPI data.

On the other hand, the analysis of the demand for SIUSS – acronym for the system for recording the activity of social services at the municipal level – by childhood-related topics in regions R1, R2, R3, R7 and R8, for which data are available ([Ministerio de Sanidad, Consumo y Bienestar Social, 2014](#)), shows that the predominant trend, with the exception of the region of Extremadura (R7), was a reduction in the number of applications, while interventions related to the deterioration of family relations decreased in all of them in the period 2008–2012.

Other authors ([Fluke \*et al.\*, 2010](#); [Maguire-Jack and Byers, 2013](#)) point to the possibility that the perception that CPS professionals have of the available protection resources and their effectiveness, or of the socioeconomic context of crisis of the families they work with, may influence their decision to take protective measures. Therefore, it could be argued that the perception of the inadequacy of resources makes the opinion/evaluation of child maltreatment cases more flexible, leading to the replacement of the most drastic measures with palliative measures in their immediate environment, limiting the former only to the most serious cases, which would explain the results of the study. This idea, which for the moment lacks sufficient scientific evidence, is however already pointed out in [Munro's \(2005, 2011\)](#) work and would explain why those regions in the study with higher rates of AROPE and lower RPM are those that show lower rates of implementation of measures by their protection system.

Finally, we do not know exactly what the role of social spending may have been in cushioning the crisis and consequently the deterioration of the socioeconomic situation of families that could have precipitated the adoption of drastic measures by the CPS.

Scientific literature has generally found a correlation between wider economic aid distributions with a decrease in the factors that tend to precipitate maltreatment. Some studies suggest that social subsidies have a protective effect in relation to child welfare, and especially in the prevention of maltreatment ([Berger \*et al.\*, 2017](#); [Cancian \*et al.\*, 2013](#); [Shook, 1999](#); [Yang, 2015](#)). Other results show that the loss or reduction of social aid increases the risk of maltreatment and its consequences ([Paxson and Waldfogel, 2003](#); [Wildeman and Fallesen, 2017](#)). Spanish data indicate that the beginning of the crisis meant a significant increase in social spending ([The Valencian Institute of Economic Research \[IVIE\], 2015](#)). Although we did not have disaggregated figures of every region of the country, we know that the global social protection expenditure of the entire public administration increased in the country by 25% between 2007 and 2013. Social spending came close to 18% of the gross domestic product (GDP), which was an important increase in comparison to previous years in the crisis, during which GDP remained stable at around 13% ([IVIE, 2015](#)). The expenditure on unemployment benefits, which in 2008 represented a disbursement of €21bn, exceeded to €32bn in 2010, i.e. a 35% increase ([INE, 2018](#)). Several aids from the public social services system that depend on the regions grew strongly during the crisis. Although its volume and scope were lower, the number of people benefiting grew by 57% between 2008 and 2014 and expenditure increased by 62% in the same period ([Ministerio de Sanidad, Consumo y Bienestar Social, 2015a, 2015b](#)). At the same time, the benefits of economic social aid increased their volume of expenditure by 221% and the beneficiaries increased by 95% ([Ministerio de Sanidad, Consumo y Bienestar Social, 2015a, 2015b](#)). Therefore, it should be noted that social spending may have played an important role as a “protective mattress” for some of the conditions that can trigger maltreatment, especially in those families with higher socio-economic risk factors. This point is interesting because of the numerous criticisms for the low coverage capacity of the Spanish system compared to other European countries.

However, this study is subject to several limitations. It has already pointed out the nonexistence of other reliable sources and the absence of longitudinal studies on this subject in Spain, which would allow a more rigorous study of the activity of the CPS during the economic crisis. The further limitation would therefore be related to the use of EBMPI as



the only source of information. This official state register only records those cases of child maltreatment that are associated with an administrative or judicial protection decision, not the open procedures and nor the possible unreported cases of maltreatment. It is estimated that only 10% of cases of violence against children are reported, either because of the vulnerability of those who suffer it or because of the difficulty in reporting it ([World Health Organization, 2013](#)). But, in addition, some discrepancies persist regarding when to determine that child maltreatment exists, and when a protective measure should be taken among the regions and professionals involved in CPS. Finally, Spain is subject to constant migratory flows that affect its protection system. The most important one is the arrival of unaccompanied migrant minors who must be protected by CPS. Their figures, however, do not explain the behavior of the global data of the regions studied during the period 2008–2014, so we consider that their influence has been marginal.

Finally, another of the study's limitations is related to the factors that influence SIP. This is an inter-sectoral system, closely related to the judicial, police, educational and health fields, which is influenced by any legislative, economic and social changes. Despite some studies ([Munro, 2005, 2011](#)), it is still not known exactly how each of these factors influences their activity. Our results have not been able to shed light on this issue either, as the relationships have proved to be inconsistent with the initial hypotheses.

Regarding the report of the [Fundación ANAR \(2018\)](#) on violence against children in Spain used in this study, it refers only to the telephone calls received, which also includes other typologies (school violence, cyber-bullying and extra-family aggressions) not contemplated by the EBMPI and which are not the object of action by the CPS so its validity would be indicative.

## Conclusion

In the light of findings, although the association between poverty and child maltreatment is widely documented, it would not seem so obvious with regards to the consequences of the recession in the eight Spanish regions that have been the subject of the study. Certainly, there are many social, economic and political factors that can condition the effects of a crisis from one region or country to another. These factors are difficult to separate when seeking to analyze their influence on the behavior of CPS. The study shows how the decline in the rates related with protection measures and child custody was severe in those administrative regions that presented high figures of unemployment and AROPE and lower available personal income. Despite these results, there has been a change in trends during the past period. From 2014 to 2017, while the socioeconomic situation of the country improved, there was a steady increase in the RCC, RPM and the absolute number of child protection records registered in Spain. All of it could suggest that there is a strong relationship between the socio-economic conditions of the regions and the increase or decrease in the protective activity of their protection systems and consequently the number of protective measures issued.

The study also reveals the weakness of the current systems for registering child maltreatment in Spain, a system which is of limited availability. This makes it difficult to analyze in greater detail the development of child maltreatment rates over time and, also, to identify possible trends in the interaction between socio-economic variables and child maltreatment. It would be enlightening to know whether the decline in CPS protective activity affected in the same way those families that were more vulnerable than those that were not, or if there were changes in the motivations that led the CPS to take protective measures in certain types of maltreatment such as neglect, on which it is often more difficult to make a decision. We hope that the obligation to register in detail the cases of maltreatment in the Unified Record of Child Maltreatment by the regions will make it possible to advance in the knowledge of how socio-economic variables affect maltreatment and to establish policies aimed at reducing and eliminating its consequences.

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## Further reading

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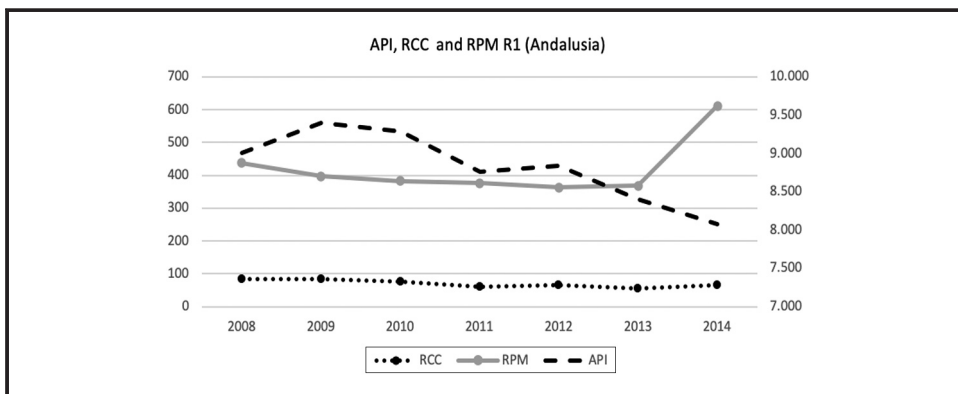
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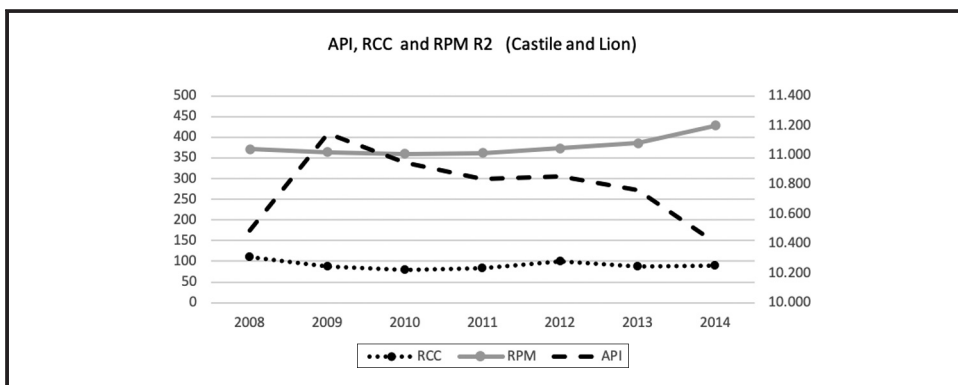
## Appendix

Figures related to API (in thousands of €), RCC and RPM (1/100.000) of administrative regions of study

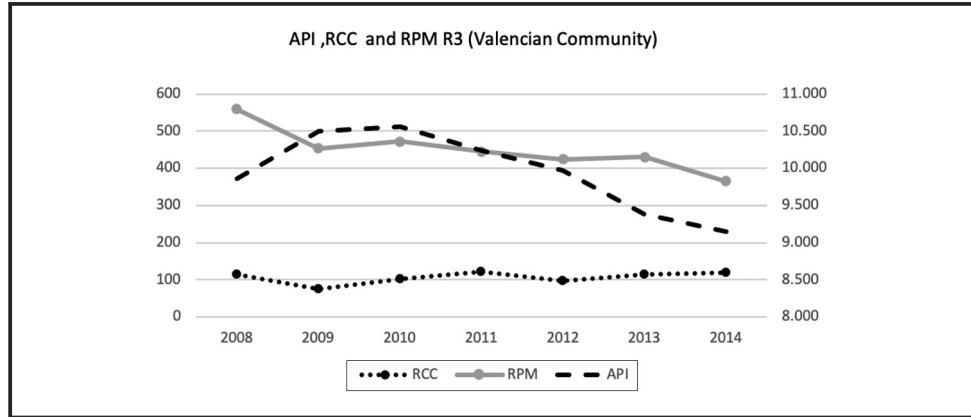
**Figure A1** Andalusia (R1)



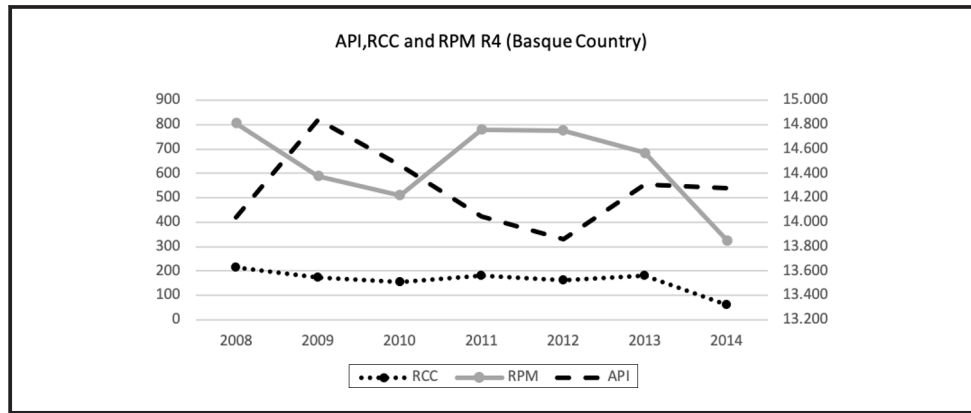
**Figure A2** Castile and León (R2)



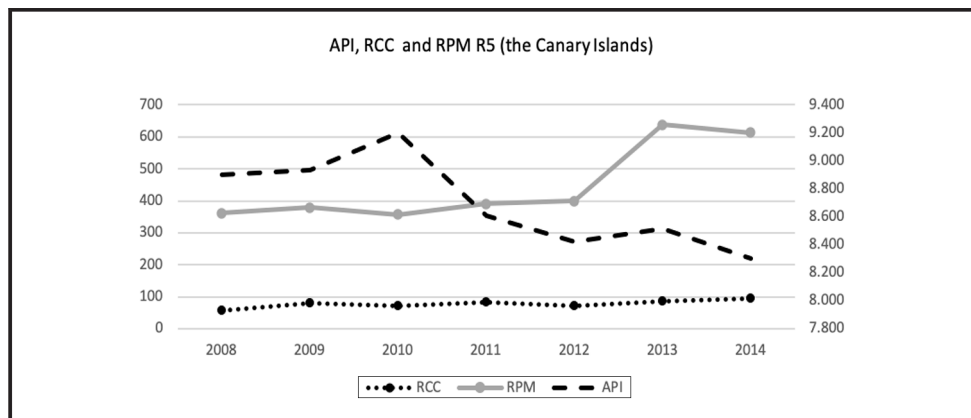
**Figure A3** Valencian Community (R3)



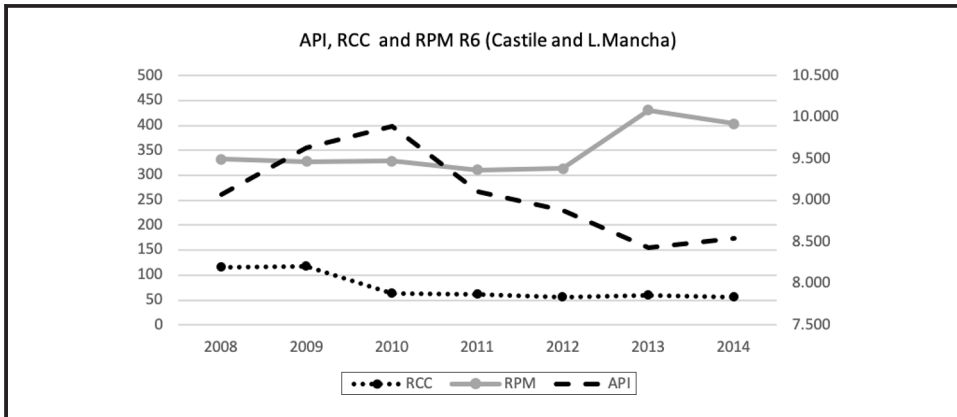
**Figure A4** Basque Country (R4)



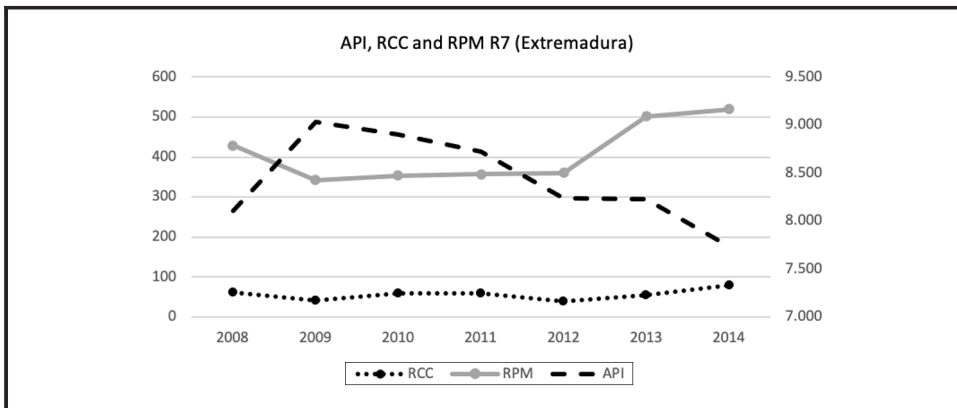
**Figure A5** The Canary Islands (R5)



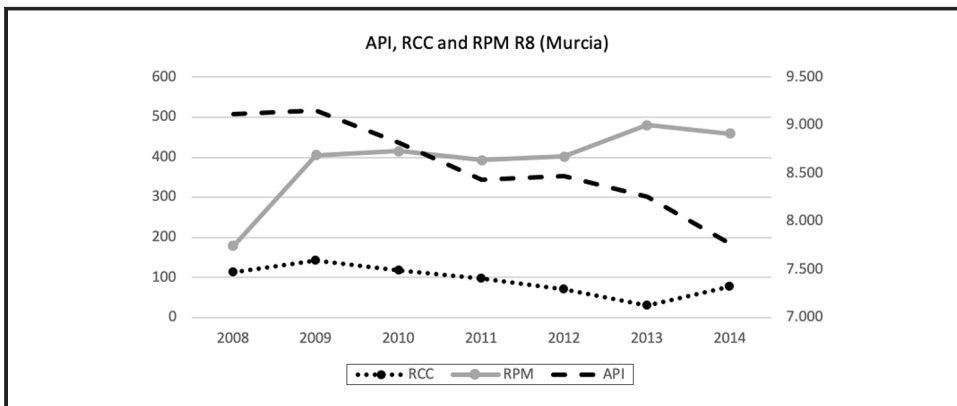
**Figure A6** Castile and La Mancha (R6)



**Figure A7** Extremadura (R7)



**Figure A8** Murcia (R8)



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