


Article

Residential and Social Vulnerability in the San Francisco Neighbourhood of Villena (Alicante, Spain)

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Abstract: Residential vulnerability in urban spaces is a complex phenomenon subject to a variety of social and economic factors. An example of this scenario is the San Francisco neighbourhood in Villena (Alicante, Spain). This is an area of residential vulnerability because of low levels of education among the population, low income, precarious housing and public insecurity. The main goal in this study was to analyse the profile of the neighbourhood using a mixed methodology based on statistical consultations with several official bodies and a qualitative method derived from surveys conducted with experts and interviews with focus groups made up of specialists, politicians and residents. The most significant results included the demographic stagnation of the local population and, conversely, a rejuvenation of the population thanks to foreign immigration, shaping a multicultural space not free of conflict, exclusion and residential precariousness. New challenges for integration towards a more participatory and safer coexistence emerged, with strategies aimed at curbing abandonment, preventing unlawful occupation of properties and contributing to residential and social regeneration.

Keywords: social vulnerability; urban development; marginalisation; housing; Alicante



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1. Introduction

The San Francisco neighbourhood in the city of Villena (Spain) is a prime example of an area associated with low-income people living in dilapidated housing aggravated by the passage of time, while facing problems such as insecurity, minor drug dealing and social isolation within the urban environment of a medium-sized city. It is, along with the El Raval neighbourhood or the old town, a stigmatised area where people are experiencing residential and social exclusion.

This paper focuses mainly on the study of the San Francisco neighbourhood as an example of a space with increasing residential and social vulnerability, based on indicators such as lack of employment, precarious housing, squatting, shortage of collective facilities, crime and low levels of education. It is a case of a marginal area where urgent recovery and transformation plans need to be put in place that could lead to a holistic improvement of the neighbourhood and its current conditions.

This paper offers a rather general answer to the following question: how can we analyse the residential and social vulnerability in neighbourhoods with these problems and what measures can be taken to address these issues? To this end, we rely on basic

sources such as a review of scientific literature, an analysis of the social context and suggest actions for improvement in order to make the right decisions. This study, therefore, presents an analysis section and a section on proposals for action, both of which can be transferred to other similar urban spaces suffering the same fate. In fact, more often than not, urban segregation does appear and has a clear impact on the coexistence of citizens, their behaviour and on how they interact with each other.

2. Theoretical Background

The relationship between access to housing and belonging to a certain social group has been extensively studied. In this regard, the Chicago School itself can be taken as a starting point, with research relating urban areas with a certain residential content and different social groups [1]. Previously, in the 1960s, Park, Rex and Moore (1967) [2] introduced the concept of “housing classes”, establishing a social stratification depending on the type of residence inhabited [3]. The concept was based on the Weberian assumption that social class division is rooted in consumption. It became clear, therefore, that different types of consumption related to housing access and tenancy entailed belonging to different social classes. This approach is justified for two reasons: the first, because housing is the object of consumption par excellence given the substantial resources required to access properties, whether owned or rented. The second, because of its stable, durable character and for the variety of types, sizes and forms of occupancy of residential areas [4].

Other authors such as Topalov (1974) [5] and Preteceille (2007) [6] warned of the relationship between the type of housing provision and the social content of neighbourhoods in the new urban peripheries. In the same line, Maloutas & Fujita (2012) [7] argued how the unequal distribution of the urban population was linked to the characteristics of the housing stock. These are a number of issues that Harvey (1977) [8] had also noted previously regarding levels of comfort, facilities, accessibility or safety.

The social structure of European cities, with Villena [9] as an example, has been influenced by policies that have encouraged social fragmentation in different areas depending on the characteristics of the population, residential conditions and resources, especially income [10]. On the other hand, and in parallel, there has been a generalised increase in urban social inequality, which in many cases has led to higher levels of poverty in many cities [11].

In studies of recent years on the social and economic segregation of cities, indices are usually established both for individual spaces and for the city as a whole. This makes it possible to cross-check them and also to establish a comparison between cities, and we can define those that are segregated to a greater or lesser extent according to their social characteristics or income distribution [12].

In this context, residential vulnerability is understood as the possibility that a given population in a specific space is affected by adverse circumstances related to conditions of risk, fragility and disadvantage in situations of deprivation and exclusion that may become consolidated and aggravated [13].

Although the main goal of this paper is to analyse residential vulnerability, we also refer to the concept of social vulnerability linked to the former and defined as “the inability or difficulty of certain groups of people to cope with a threatening phenomenon and/or to recover from it afterwards” [14].

People in potentially vulnerable communities cannot themselves mitigate these weaknesses, as their own lack of resources prevents them from coping with disadvantage [15]. A disadvantageous situation may be caused by various social problems such as unemployment, low expectations for the future, an ageing population, substandard housing, lack of accessibility to public services and a shortage of care resources for people with dependency,

among others [16]. People in situations of social vulnerability are those who, in any case, suffer from limited social welfare [17].

Studies on residential vulnerability include the social variable and seem to be the most efficient way to support decision-making on new policies to redirect the development of an equitable society. Groups identified as vulnerable should be included in the distribution of public funding aimed at correcting social weaknesses [18]. In this regard, councils should seek to develop projects and actions geared towards reducing inequality with a multi-sectoral approach. At the academic level, an increasing number of studies have been published on vulnerability in its various meanings in both socio-economic [17] and socio-demographic contexts [19].

Notions such as threat, risk, vulnerability and resilience have become part of urban studies and city management [20]. Therefore, there is no universally efficient strategy to address residential vulnerability applicable to any place or time. Consequently, the success of plans and strategies applied to these areas depends on how clearly these urban spaces are identified and outlined. The “struggle against vulnerability requires concrete actions that lead to improvements in the economic, social, environmental and territorial conditions of every citizen and every household” [21].

In a nutshell, there is no single method to quantify residential vulnerability, as the indicators are not invariant and depend on the geographical area of study and the research team [22]. This is a phenomenon with several dimensions with complex interactions. It is also the result of the impacts triggered by the prevailing pattern of development, although it expresses the inability of the weakest groups in society to cope with the problems brought about by a lack of income and low levels of education [23].

The European Commission (2017) [24] highlights several indicators that foster social inequality, including a lack of housing and the inability to access secondary, tertiary and higher education. Other elements of vulnerability are job insecurity, occupational risk prevention and the lack of resources for financing, all of which result in difficulty to purchase or rent decent housing [25].

Urban growth in recent decades has resulted in certain urban areas being subject to processes of physical and social degradation [26], especially in neighbourhoods concentrating the least qualified and most socially disadvantaged population [27]. This differentiation of hierarchical urban space based on the social status of its inhabitants [28], according to the transformation processes generating different urban typologies [29], has the effect of reproducing inequalities. The mechanisms of resource distribution are thus made according to their differential social position, leading to the creation of a hierarchical relationship between the different urban areas and neighbourhoods [30].

As a result of this differentiation, urban spaces are alienated in terms of opportunities and access to the city's goods and services, serving as a stage for the social and economic inequality of the population. Therefore, it is not unusual for correlations between urban morphology, income levels, housing prices and dominant social categories to occur. In this context, the differences in social spaces are another representation of inequalities that are also manifested abstractly and in the collective imagination in terms of education, activity, income or wealth and type of housing: owned or rented, social, shared or state of conservation and use [31], as well as the so-called theory of urban verticality [32].

The consequence of this phenomenon is an unequal development of urban spaces with differential neighbourhood dynamics. Some are characterised by processes of vulnerability while others continue to enjoy a concentration of wealth and greater alienation from the rest [33]. Recent research refers to urban resilience [34] as the capacity of cities to prepare for, withstand, adapt to and recover from natural and human-induced shocks and stresses [35]. To address this resilience, cities must develop plans to mitigate risks and seek

transformation in the face of future challenges. In the case of the neighbourhood under study, this capacity would be further justified by the consequences of urban vulnerability generated among its inhabitants and the quest for much-needed prosperity and sustainable growth [36]. Finally, the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted on new dimensions of urban vulnerability with a combination of subjective analysis, statistical data and surveys to propose comprehensive solutions, a good example of which is the case of the Madrid neighbourhood of San Isidro [37].

3. Area of the Study

The San Francisco neighbourhood, also known as “El Poblado”, emerged as a group of social housing units built to facilitate the evacuation of the population residing in very dilapidated cave-houses in the medieval El Raval neighbourhood. It also housed the population arriving in Villena drawn by the flourishing shoe industry.

The factors outlined above that determine the phenomenon of residential and social vulnerability characterise the urban space covered by our paper—a case study identifying the minimum level of education, low income, precarious housing and public insecurity. It is located in the peripheral area of Villena (Alicante, in the Autonomous Community of Valencia), east of the city, next to the road to the neighbouring town of Biar (Figure 1).

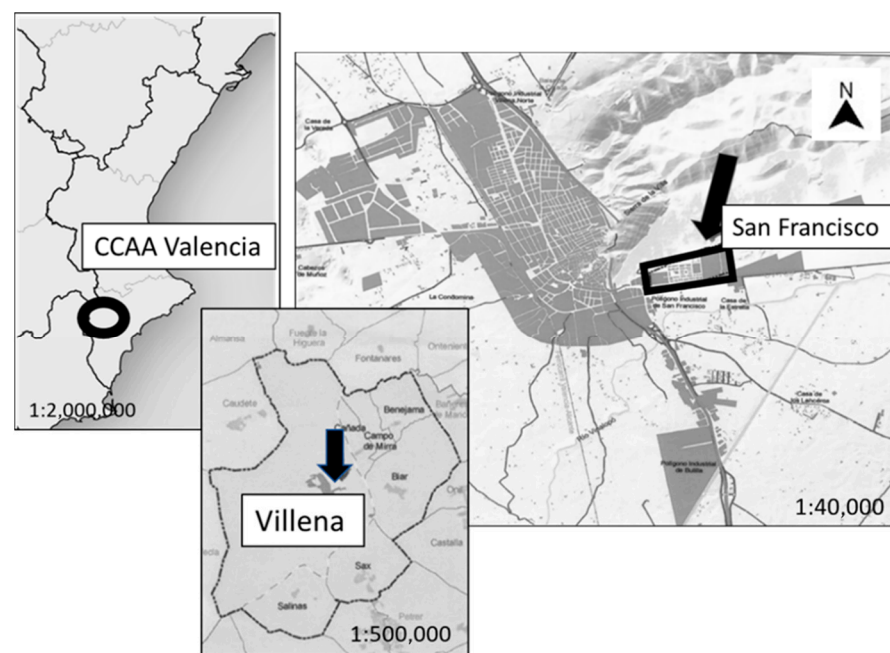


Figure 1. Location of the municipality of Villena and the San Francisco neighbourhood. Source: [38].

San Francisco is the most northerly of the neighbourhoods that make up Villena. It was constructed in the 1960s (Figure 2). In 2023, it had a population of more than 1040 inhabitants, amounting to 3% of the total population of the municipality (35,210 inhabitants in total). The boundaries of the neighbourhood are morphologically well-defined [39]. Its limits have been established by an urban polygon formed by the Calle Carretera de Biar (south); the prolongation of Bloques José Antonio (west); Sierra de La Solana (north); and Calle Mayor La Solana (east). In total, it covers a built-up area of 35,373 m² and comprises 431 housing units.

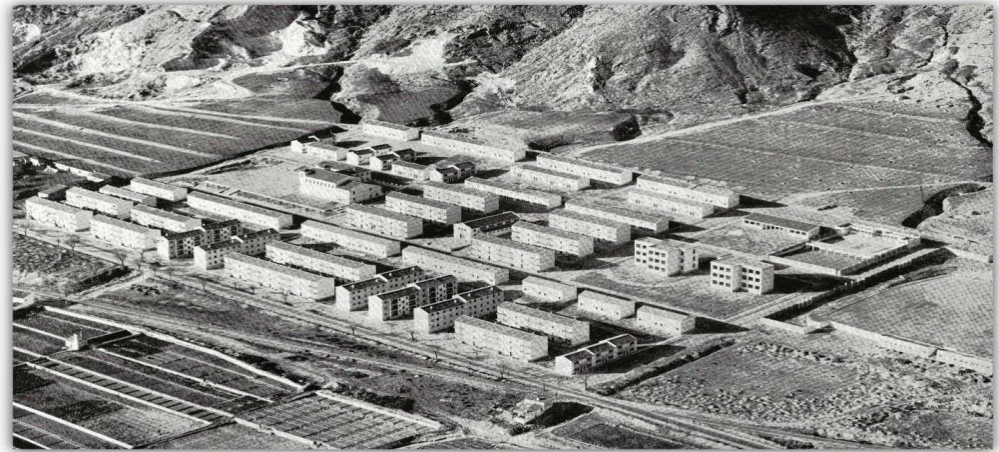


Figure 2. Aerial view of the San Francisco neighbourhood in the 1960s. Source: [40].

The neighbourhood is spatially separated from the city centre of Villena. Although it forms part of the urban fabric, the A-31 motorway separates it from the rest of the city. Figure 3 illustrates that the neighbourhood did not exist back in 1956—at the time it was farmland. It is currently isolated, separated from the rest of the city by the A-30 motorway (Madrid–Alicante).



Figure 3. Aerial photos of the San Francisco neighbourhood between 1956 and 2024. Source: [41].

The San Francisco neighbourhood is made up of many short streets, arranged in an orthogonal grid, forming an extension adjoining the rest of the city. Broadly speaking, the neighbourhood is very well connected to the outside world, given its proximity to the Biar road (CV-799). Practically parallel to the eastern boundary of the neighbourhood, at a

distance of 200 metres, runs the A-31 motorway (Alicante to Madrid). At its eastern end, its upper vertex meets the Avenida Juan Carlos I, main access to the city of Alicante from the north, which links the centre along its north–south axis to the old town (Figure 4).

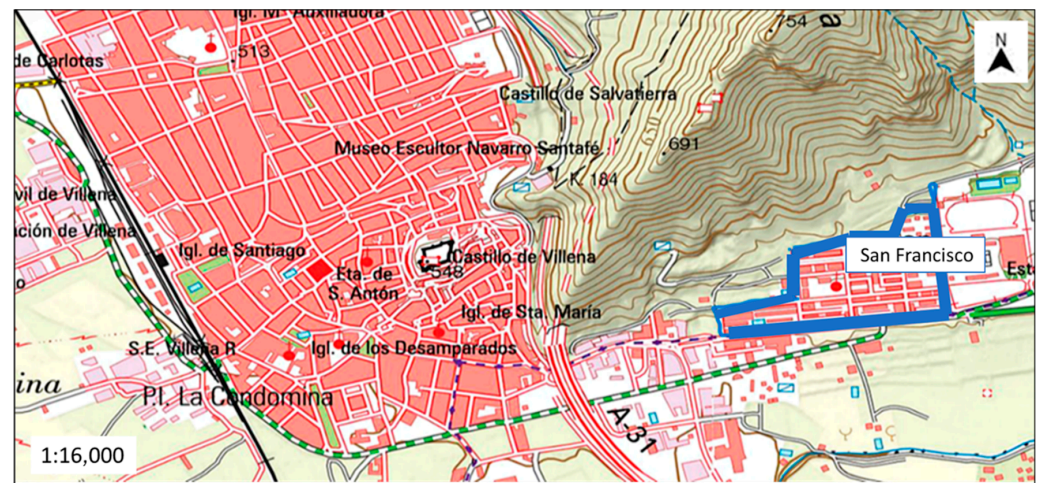


Figure 4. Main communication routes in the area around the San Francisco neighbourhood (2024). Source: [41].

4. Materials and Methods

This was an exploratory study, using descriptive and analytical case study methodology from a demographic and social perspective. The scope of the study was confined to the urban area of the San Francisco neighbourhood in the municipality of Villena (Alicante). An innovative methodology alternating quantitative and qualitative techniques was used. The quantitative methods were based on official statistics extracted from the municipal census of inhabitants, the housing census and other data from the social affairs department of the city council of Villena. With these data and the subsequent statistical processing using Excel and SPSS 23 programmes, comparative tables were drawn up to establish the variations between different territorial areas: the San Francisco neighbourhood, the municipality of Villena and the province of Alicante.

From a qualitative point of view, a script of open questions was designed, and in-depth interviews (a total of 10) were conducted with experts based on their profession and proximity to the territory. The sample size was significant in regard to the study area and allowed for sufficient reliability to avoid gender or age bias ($n = 13$). Participants were categorised into groups of community action centre workers, politicians, NGO volunteers and residents with local knowledge. Coincidence or divergence in the questions helped, together with the addition of textual paragraphs, to gain a better understanding of the situation in the neighbourhood. These informants participated in two focus groups, an effective method that helped to gain a real understanding of the situation in the neighbourhood, as it reflected the particular circumstances of the people linked to it, whether by residence or work (Table 1).

For a better spatial knowledge, we used the cartography from the town planning department of the City Council, the Iberpix viewer of the Spanish National Geographic Institute (Instituto Geográfico Nacional—IGN), the Valencian Cartographic Institute and in turn, the photographs from fieldwork.

Table 1. Selected sample of interviews and focus group.

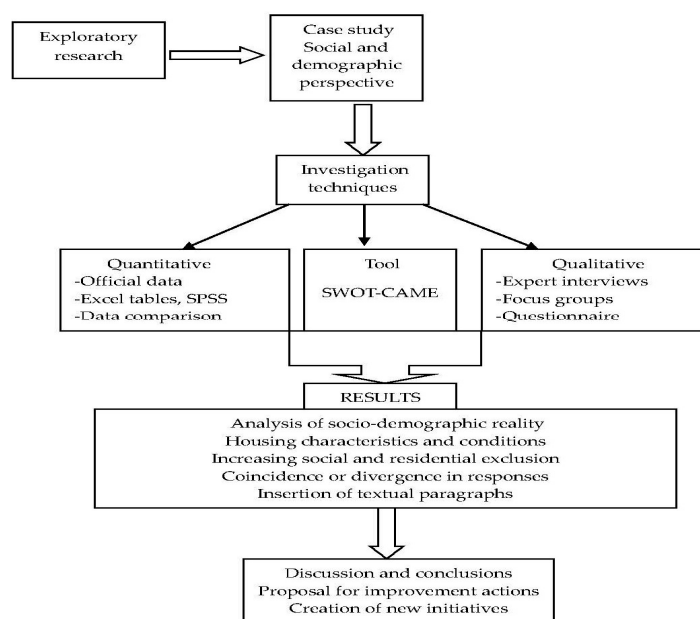
Group	Interviews	ID	Age	Gender
City council social services	6	V1-V6	20–74	4/2
City council councillors	2	SS1-SS2	37–52	2/0
NGO Cáritas	2	TU1-TU2	41–55	2/0
NGO Red Cross	1	CAR-1	69	0/1
Local police	1	CR-1	72	1/0
Total	1	PL-1	34	0/1
City council social services	13			

Source: [42].

The triangulation of the results (interviews with people from social services, perception interviews with neighbours and an overview from the focus groups) made it possible to gain better insight into the characteristics of the geographical area under study, to diagnose the real state of the issues raised and to draw up potential proposals for improving the social integration of the neighbourhood.

The aim of this research was also to help the residents of the San Francisco neighbourhood improve their living conditions, raise awareness among them of their precarious situation and intra-urban isolation and consequently explore solutions and alternatives. This could have an impact on the social development of this disadvantaged area, with social dynamics that differ from other urban areas of the city of Villena. Moreover, this situation is also replicated in other cities and urban agglomerations in Spain and abroad.

Based on the collection of statistical data and the qualitative analysis of the interviews and focus groups held, a series of results divided into four sections was obtained. The first was related to social conditions, the second to housing, the third to population structure and the last to mobility and the effect of immigration. Figure 5 represents a flow chart summarising the methodological procedure followed.

**Figure 5.** Flow chart of the research process. Source [43].

5. Results

5.1. Social Conditions of the Population

After analysing the interviews and tabulating the results of the focus groups, a total of 15 items emerged, rated on a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being the lowest and 10 the highest. The lowest-rated items or issues were school absenteeism (6.7 points), hidden economy (7.4) and conflict (7.5).

In contrast, the most highly rated items were presence of Roma and immigration (9.4), unemployment (9.7) and job insecurity (9.8). Obviously, when there is an absence of employment or job instability, the chances of exclusion are higher (Figure 6).

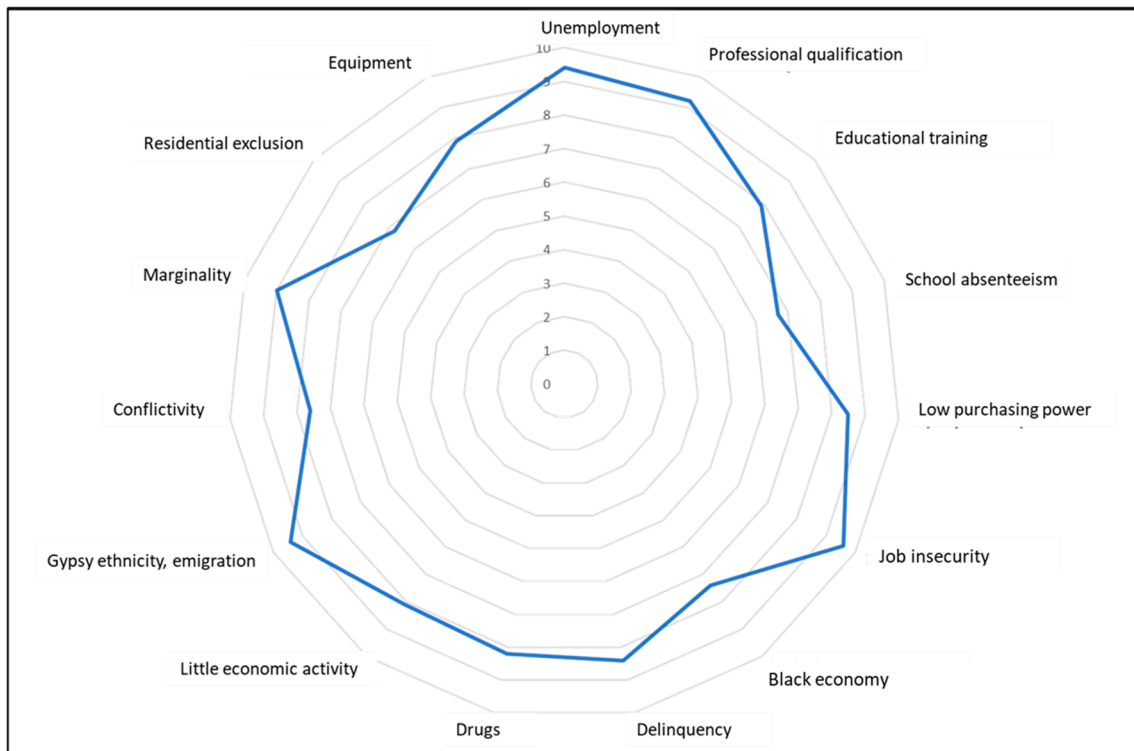


Figure 6. Perception of the most significant social indicators. Source: [42].

In this regard, municipal investments and the implementation of the EDUSI plan (Sustainable Urban Development Strategies), carried out between 2014 and 2020, provided the neighbourhood with significant funding. It should be remembered that these plans belonged to a European Community programme that proposed a set of urban, social, economic, educational and employment measures to solve problems in cities with struggling neighbourhoods and a poor quality of life.

Figure 6 highlights the perception of citizens in relation to a high unemployment rate, which, according to the sampling carried out, corresponded to 51% of the active population of the neighbourhood. This contrasted with the ARGOS information portal of the Generalitat of Valencia, which put this unemployment rate at 23.8%, and data recorded by the INE (Spanish Statistical Office), which, for the municipality of Villena, was 18.6%, nearly the same as in the Community of Valencia (18.0%). This was aggravated by the low quality of the type of work, which was temporary or precarious and did not guarantee a stable, year-round income. A significant fact illustrating the economic situation of the San Francisco neighbourhood was the gross income per inhabitant, which stood at EUR 6954, well below Villena's average of EUR 20,460 or the average of the Alicante province of EUR 21,040. A sample of the interviews conducted (2024) illustrates the above results:

A large part of the population is unemployed, or carries out precarious activities such as scrap metal collection, seasonal work in the fields and, unfortunately, illicit activities such as drug trafficking. (SS-2)

I work for the council cleaning services, I got the job thanks to a job programme and I'm very grateful. (V3)

5.2. Housing Characteristics and Conditions

Housing is one of the most important indicators of the residential vulnerability of inhabitants.

The housing census (2022) indicated a total of 431 registered residences in the San Francisco neighbourhood, with a built-up area of 35,873 m² and a total population of 1040 inhabitants. The socio-urban diagnosis showed that 78.5% of housing units were primary dwellings (the habitual residence of at least one person) and 18.9% were empty, with hardly any secondary residences (2.6%). Regarding the age of the housing stock, 76.8% were old constructions (1970s or earlier). As a result, the average age of the housing was 52.4 years, which was higher than the average recorded at municipal level (27.4) and regional level (29.7). Housing stock is therefore relatively old, despite the 20.5% of new buildings constructed in the last three decades (Figure 7).

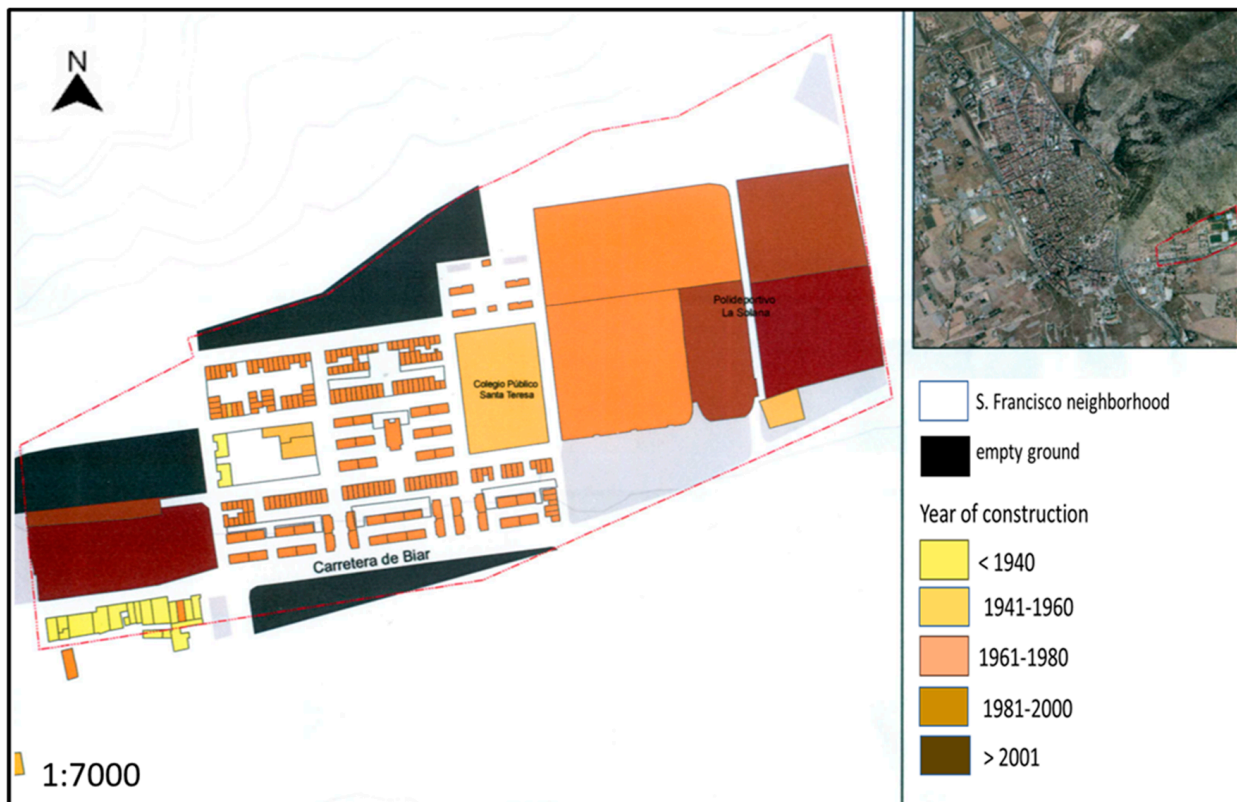


Figure 7. Year of construction of the neighbourhood housing (2024). Source: [9,38].

The average surface area of the main housing units in the San Francisco neighbourhood was 70.50 m², somewhat below the values for the municipality of Villena as a whole. This was reflected in the average surface area per resident, 17.5 m², a figure once again lower than those of the municipality of Villena (88.5 m² and 22.1 m² per inhabitant) and the province of Alicante (90.3 m² and 22.5 m²) (Figure 8).



Figure 8. State of deterioration of the neighbourhood housing and public facilities. Source: [44].

With regard to the tenancy system, the census data did not provide exact information as these properties were originally State transfers. It was estimated that 36% were freehold, 15.5% were the result of inheritance or donations, and 10% were mortgaged, while the remaining 38.5% were considered to be either not registered or their tenants simply resided illegally or were squatting. We extracted some feedback on this matter from the interviews carried out between October and December 2024.

The neighbourhood has deteriorated housing—buildings over 50 years’ old that were made as “cheap houses”. Rather than rehabilitating them, they should be considered for demolition and adapted to present times, which is somewhat difficult as the owners have low income and cannot afford to repay a loan nowadays. (SS-2)

There are quite a lot of occupied houses as their residents are not the owners, and they even sublet the houses and get income without legally being the owners—the case of Villena Hills is textbook. (TU-2)

Regarding the state of conservation, 5.6% were in a dilapidated state, 27.8% were in a poor state, 63.5% were in a sub-standard state and in need of improvement, while only 3.1% were in a good state, and only 3.1% were renovated.

Properties in poor condition represent a heavy burden that translates into an increase in squatting. Although we did not have specific data, unlawful occupation is a proven fact in the neighbourhood, with no prospect of a short- or medium-term solution.

Most of the built-up plots were for residential use. Therefore, there were certain differences in terms of the typology of existing dwellings—a combination of multi-family buildings of up to three storeys with low-rise single-family buildings, the latter being the majority. The centre of the neighbourhood was very neglected. The bus stops, church and a small park were located there. The only landmark building rehabilitated by the municipality was the civic centre (former food market), housing a library and venue for cultural activities. In the city as a whole, the degree of socio-demographic vulnerability in San Francisco was very high, similar to other peripheral neighbourhoods, such as El Raval located next to the Cerro del Castillo in Villena (Figure 9).

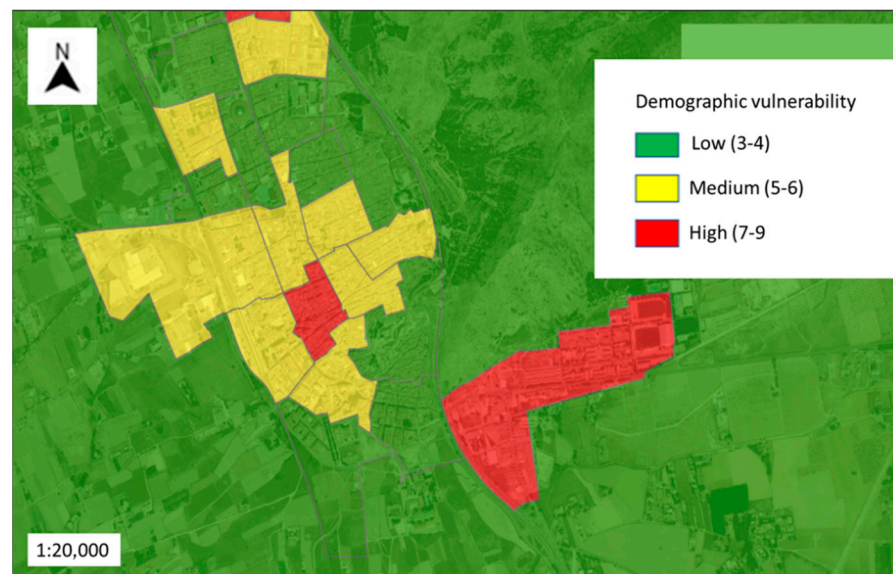


Figure 9. Socio-demographic vulnerability (Grade) in Villena (2019). Source: [45].

In terms of the typology of existing real estate, 69.4% was for residential use, with warehouse-parking being the second most common (22.6%), followed by gardens (3%). This distribution of the use of built-up space varied, with residential use accounting for 55.2% in the municipality and 60.3% at the regional level. Noteworthy was the high proportion of residential units compared to warehouses and unbuilt spaces (22.6% in the neighbourhood), while in the municipality, it was 30.7% and at the regional level 24.7%. Cultural, office and leisure uses were minimal (Figure 10).

Figure 11 specifically highlights the great scarcity of commercial establishments in the neighbourhood. There were only ten, including a pharmacy and some restaurants and food shops.

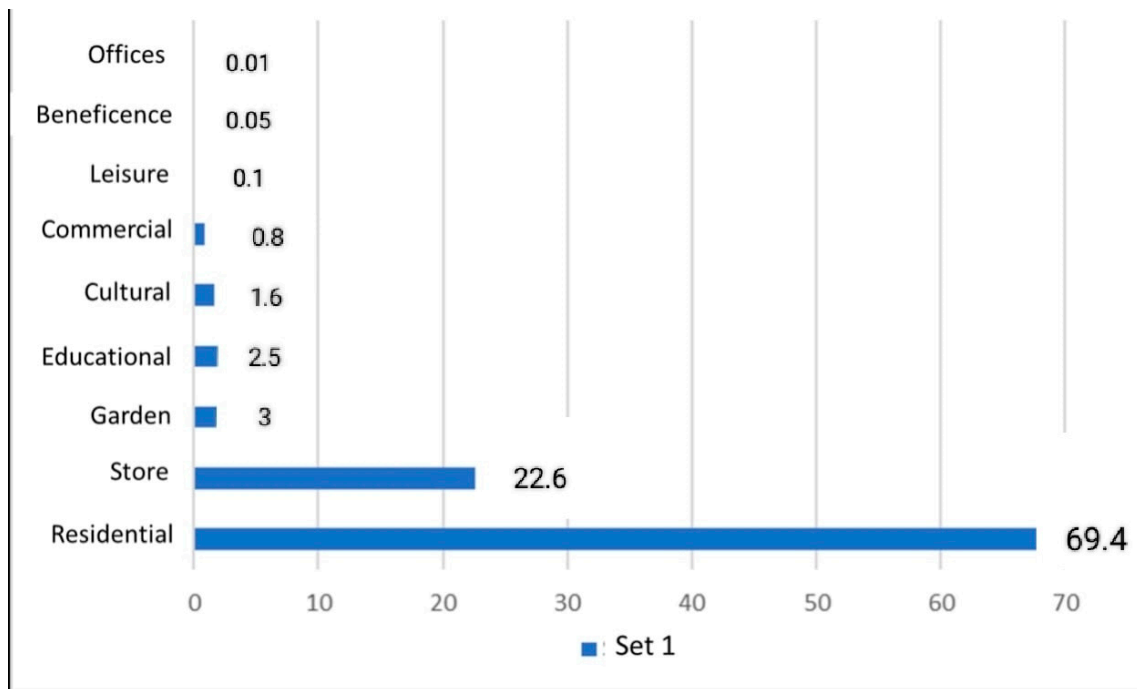


Figure 10. Percentage distribution of real estate, according to use, in the San Francisco neighbourhood (2022). Source: [46].



Figure 11. Location of commercial spaces (2024). Source: [9,38].

5.3. Population Structure

The main feature of the population of the municipality of Villena was undoubtedly a clear trend towards demographic stagnation, with an average age of 41.3 years compared to the national average of 43.3 years. In this regard, the resident population of the San Francisco neighbourhood was even younger, with an average age of 32.6 years. Therefore, this neighbourhood was more dynamic and coped better with this downward population trend than the rest of the municipality.

The demographic structure by sex and age showed a still relatively broad base, with a large share of younger age cohorts with regard to older ones. Also noteworthy was the high percentage of the male population in the 20–29 age bracket, greater than at the municipal level. In contrast, the percentage of the population aged between 40 and 54 was relatively small. If the main demographic indicators are analysed, it is possible to characterise in greater detail the population structure of this geographical space [9], where blue (men) and red (women) correspond to the San Francisco neighbourhood and white to the municipality of Villena (Figure 12).

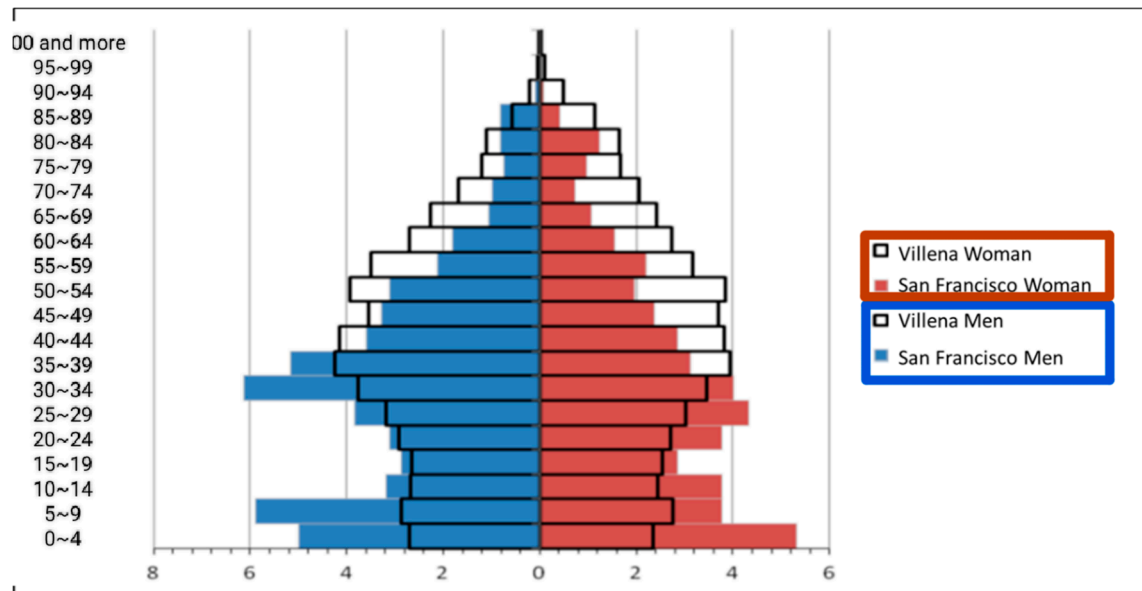


Figure 12. Population pyramid of the San Francisco neighbourhood and Villena (2023). Source: [9,47].

With regard to the dependency rate, the neighbourhood had a value significantly above the rest of the territories analysed, with 63.1% of the potentially active population (between 16 and 64 years of age) represented by people of non-productive age (under 16 and over 64 years of age).

When we compared the population structure of the neighbourhood with that of the whole of the municipality of Villena, the San Francisco neighbourhood was clearly younger: 26.9% was the under 15 age group; 64% was 15–64, and 9% was over 65, whereas in Villena, it was 15.8%, 67.5% and 16.6%, respectively.

5.4. Foreign Population

The influx of foreigners has been a very common phenomenon in the majority of Spanish cities over the last thirty years, and even the actual population growth is specifically due to foreign immigration.

The San Francisco neighbourhood had a total of foreign residents (2021) making up 25.8% of the total population. This rate was very high compared to the city of Villena (9.9%), the province of Alicante (19.8%), or the Autonomous Community of Valencia (14.1%). With regard to the origin of the immigrants, they came mainly from North Africa, Algeria and Bulgaria, while in terms of ethnicity, the main group was Roma, with 69.8%, the non-Roma Spanish population accounted for 20.3%, and Muslims 18.9% (Figure 13).

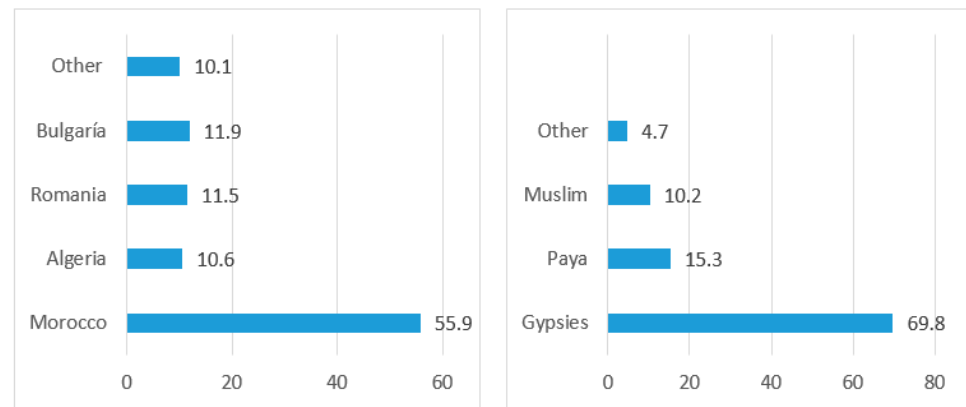


Figure 13. Percentage distribution of the foreign population, by country of origin and ethnicity in the San Francisco neighbourhood (2024). Source: [42].

Regarding the composition of the foreign population, most people came from North Africa, especially Morocco. This distinguished it from the rest of the municipality, where an immigrant population from Latin America prevailed. Here are some excerpts from the interviews in which significant comments were expressed with regard to the immigrant population:

Roma residents are the ones with most children, we monitor their schooling and reduce absenteeism as much as possible. (CAR-1)

North Africans have gradually moved into the neighbourhood and are living in some houses in the neighbourhood as tenants. It's a minority group, poorly integrated and with quite a lot of children in every family. (CRZ-1)

With the onset of the economic recession in Spain from 2008 onwards, a widespread return of this immigrant population to their country of origin was recorded, a phenomenon that was also observed in the rest of the territorial areas analysed. Despite this return, a high number of foreigners settled in this neighbourhood, and this number even increased significantly in the last three years. The following testimonial illustrates the frequent precariousness of the immigrant population in the labour sector, generally in seasonal jobs, at low wages, and the need for part of their income to be sent to their families in the country of origin for their own subsistence.

I'm a seasonal field worker, I save for the times when I don't earn anything and have to keep on living, I also have to send money to my family, who are in Morocco and need help. (VE-1)

5.5. SWOT-CAME Analysis

The SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats and Opportunities) is a useful tool for assessing social and residential vulnerability. Weaknesses identify internal factors that limit the capacity of individuals or communities to improve their situations. For example, a lack of access to basic services, low levels of education or inadequate housing conditions regarding hazards are recognised as external factors that can worsen vulnerability. This may include a lack of employment, ineffective public policies, or natural disasters. Strengths signal internal resources and capacities that can help overcome vulnerability. This could be a strong and close-knit community, access to social support programmes or specific skills and knowledge of residents. Finally, opportunities seek to identify external conditions that can be exploited to improve the situation. Within the scope of this research, we used the SWOT analysis to develop strategies that would strengthen

the capacities of people and communities, mitigating weaknesses, taking advantage of opportunities and reducing threats (Table 2 and Figure 14).

Table 2. SWOT-CAME analysis results from the San Francisco neighbourhood.

Weaknesses	Strengths
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Low levels of education and qualifications among inhabitants - Poor upkeep of dwellings - Abandonment and squatting - Disrepute of the neighbourhood - Low income - High unemployment - Uncleanliness due to lack of civic-mindedness - Lack of green spaces - Lack of retail trade - School absenteeism - Poor road safety - Significant hidden economy - Peripheral location in the city - Lack of associative network - Lack of street furniture - Lack of police control 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Proximity to sports complex - City council social centre - Proximity to the Solana mountain range - Help from social entities such as Caritas - High birth rate compared to the rest of the city - Neighbourhood identity for some residents - Good accessibility from the Biar road - Existence of a fire station
Threats	Opportunities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Drug trafficking - Squatting - Public insecurity - Housing in structural danger - Illegal power connections that cause blackouts - Problems of coexistence between cultures - Crime - Aluminosis in homes and public buildings - Occupation of public roads: barbecues, swimming pools, etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Public investments by the City Council, Autonomous Communities and European funds - Integration policies - Literacy classes - Learning to integrate three cultures: Roma, Non-Roma Spanish and Muslim - Purchase of housing to promote social housing - Reopening of infant and primary schools

Source: [42].



Figure 14. Quantitative assessment according to the SWOT analysis of the San Francisco neighbourhood. Source: [42].

Following the SWOT analysis, we obtained the complementarity offered by the CAME analysis (Correct, Adapt, Maintain and Exploit), a series of results presented in Table 3. Correcting weaknesses and addressing threats is possible by taking the necessary short- and medium-term actions that will yield favourable results in sustaining the activity and building on the strengths and opportunities that emerge.

Table 3. CAME analysis results from the San Francisco neighbourhood in Villena.

<i>Correct Weaknesses</i>	<i>Adapt Threats</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Improve work qualifications - Promote associative networks - Support housing rehabilitation works - Increase urban cleanliness - Expand police presence - Demolish dilapidated houses - Provide green spaces - Control school absenteeism - Offer tax exemption for businesses - Foster associative networks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Control drug trafficking and cultivation - Control illegal occupation of homes - Remove illegal electrical connections - Expand social activities - Monitor the status of the housing stock
<i>Maintain strengths</i>	<i>Exploit opportunities</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Promote local sports facilities - Maintain council activities - Increase aid to NGO Caritas - Retain the location of the fire station - Promote the nursery school and the Santa Teresa school - Improve urban bus service - Expand social assistance to large families 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Channel public aid from the city council, Autonomous Communities and European funds - Run workshops for social integration - Offer social coexistence activities - Attract training for young people - Establish the possibility for squatters to purchase housing

Source: [42].

6. Discussion

Political will and engagement are key factors in regenerating these urban spaces, which, far from initiating processes of improvement, are distancing from adequate levels of quality of life and the sustainable development goals set by the UN for the 2015–2030 period. At least eight of them are directly related to this territory: No Poverty (1), Zero Hunger (2), Good Health and Well-being (3), Quality Education (4), Gender Equality (5), Decent Work and Economic Growth (8), Reduced Inequality (10) and Sustainable Cities and Communities (11). However, in other neighbourhoods of the municipality of Villena, both leading up to 2008 and today, a great municipal effort has been made to improve facilities and investments, especially in the provision of tram lines, accessibility, the construction of administrative buildings and the improvement of public roads—ironic, given the progressive degradation of the San Francisco neighbourhood, which has barely improved despite public investment (EDUSI strategy, among others). In fact, compared to the rest of this municipality in Alicante, inequality has been on the rise, similar to other medium-sized cities in Spain [48] and urban segregation in French cities [49] and in the rest of Europe.

Hernández [50–52] reports that residential exclusion is associated with people on low incomes and with low vocational qualifications, characteristic factors of the urban space analysed. This is also corroborated by the studies by Alguacil et al. (2014) [16], García & Janoschka (2016) [11] and Garrido & Jaraíz (2017) [27] in that low qualification levels among the foreign immigrant population have increased instability and have even given rise to the illegal occupation of buildings in a precarious state of conservation.

The lack of housing renovation leaves a significant mark both on the external appearance of the neighbourhood, giving it a decadent appearance, and on the way the housing units are fitted out. It is perceived that the lack of higher incomes prevents households from undertaking renovation work. This is highlighted in the studies by Cutter, Boruff & Shirley (2003) [53], Maloutas & Fujita (2012) [7] and Andújar (2020) [31], who stress the need to implement European aid schemes and projects such as the internal reform plan initiatives. Precisely, the San Francisco neighbourhood hosted a cultural revitalisation strategy (Figure 15) [54].



Figure 15. Posters for the project “El poblao suena”. San Francisco neighbourhood in Villena (2021). Source: [54].

The lack of improvement in infrastructures and urban development is an urgent need to be addressed in an urban space that is heading towards severe decline and conversion into a marginalised area that is difficult to reverse. In Spain, there have been major advances in the creation of a new urban development based both on the regeneration of neighbourhoods degraded by economic activity or lack of renovation/rehabilitation projects, and the introduction of the so-called “eco-neighbourhoods” that have aroused so much interest in recent decades. This is the case of La Pinada, Valencia; Sarriguren, Navarra; Impulso Verde, Lugo; Martiricos, Málaga; or the “Poblenou Superblock”, Barcelona. Regarding the URBAN projects, noteworthy is the case of GreepUP in Valladolid (Castilla-León), or in Europe, the examples of İzmir (Turkey) and Liverpool (UK).

Rolling out new initiatives to curb the physical deterioration of the San Francisco neighbourhood and improving the residential housing stock is fundamental. This would prevent, on the one hand, the population from leaving because of an increase in income and, on the other hand, it would draw others attracted by the possibility of having a housing solution. The aim is to seek measures to achieve greater spatial justice for all citizens, irrespective of their social, cultural or economic status [55]. The situation in this area is comparable in terms of its problems, but not in its extent, to neighbourhoods in other parts of our country—such as Cañada Real in Madrid [12], “3000 Viviendas” in Seville [33], Palma-Palmilla in Málaga [21] or Los Rosales in Murcia [52], with aspects including exclusion due to lack of work, precarious housing, growing insecurity caused by drug dealing and a cluster of people who squat, commit crime and lack opportunities to change their livelihoods.

Once again, the flexibility of the interviews was an essential tool in the study to cross-check the different data analysed. These opinions and experiences served to underline and

support the results, as illustrated in the following extract referring to the low impact of the current socio-cultural project in the neighbourhood:

In the afternoons we have reading and writing classes and the kids have activities, but that isn't enough to compensate for the lack of work, the condition of our houses and being shunned by the people of Villena. (VE-2)

7. Conclusions

The San Francisco neighbourhood arose from a decision by public authorities in the late 1950s to provide an alternative for the population living in very precarious conditions in the old part of the El Raval neighbourhood, located on the slopes of Cerro del Castillo, a medieval quarter with cave houses in a state of imminent ruin. The new San Francisco neighbourhood offered an opportunity for the inhabitants of El Raval to access housing in better conditions at a very low rent, thanks to it being a public social initiative. It was also a welcome option for immigrants moving to the city to work in the incipient shoe industry in the 1960s in the Vinalopó region (Elda, Petrer, Elche or Villena).

Nowadays, this area is home to low-income families, frequent recipients of social benefits, with high rates of unemployment and precarious jobs related to agriculture, collecting scrap metal and household goods and selling at popular street markets. It also houses a large group of retired people, with low pensions, but generally with their basic needs met.

The indicators analysed in this research reported a high rate of precarious employment and the hidden economy. We identified an urban area that, because of its morphological characteristics and the state of its buildings, as well as the socio-economic and cultural level of its residents, should be further considered by local public decision-makers to develop initiatives to alleviate the ongoing and growing problem of residential and social exclusion that has existed for decades.

Information was obtained about the existence of social assistance programmes, the participation of municipal technical experts and even the NGO Caritas, which works in these vulnerable urban areas. Clearly, despite the efforts made, effective solutions to most of the new urban and social problems have not yet been found. Most visible are residential exclusion, the precariousness of some urban services, public insecurity and a lack of accessibility to other spaces. This situation has led to the creation of a neighbourhood attractive only for people who accept these deficiencies and, at the same time, has generated dynamics of abandonment for those who can purchase housing in other areas of the city with better urban quality and public security.

Public–private investment and incentive policies are needed to improve the current state of the housing stock and public spaces: green areas, pavements, lighting and access to public transport. Concerning both the local and foreign immigrant population, there is a need to increase the vocational qualifications of workers with a view to employment. Increased control of illicit drug-related activities is also a priority.

A particular feature of the area studied is just how fast these urban and social changes have taken place, both in terms of urban degradation and demographic shifts, although the study is also limited by a lack of information on housing occupation data or certain reticence on the part of neighbours who have participated in the interviews and have concealed or ignored the existing problem of drug cultivation and trafficking.

While public attention must continue, associative networks and citizen participation are also needed to reverse this situation of marginalisation, vulnerability and social exclusion. For the time being, from a prospective point of view, we can foresee an uncertain future with scarce opportunities. This topic will undoubtedly continue to be of interest to sociological research and other social science studies.

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