

Why is Spain once again on the frontline of the pandemic?

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Despite having imposed draconian coronavirus lockdown and making the use of face masks in public mandatory, Spain is once again a world hotspot for the COVID-19 pandemic.

The country has nearly 378,000 confirmed cases of the respiratory

disease, the highest amount in Western Europe, and one of the fastest growth rates on the continent.

Spain counted 143 new cases per 100,000 people during the past two weeks, compared to just 50 in neighbouring France, according to an AFP tally based on official figures.

Nearly 29,000 people have died because of the virus, one of the world's highest tolls.

Spanish authorities argue the rise in confirmed cases is partly because the country has ramped up testing.

Spain has tested more than 5.3 million people, or around 11.5 percent of its population, since the start of the pandemic.

But many of its main neighbours have an even higher testing rate—Germany has tested 12.2 percent of its population, Italy 12.8 percent and Britain 22.1 percent.

Some have suggested that [social norms](#) that stress physical contact and encourage families to live in larger, multi-generational households have encouraged contagion in Spain.

But these norms are also prevalent in Italy, which has a far lower virus growth rate.

So why has the pandemic worsened in Spain? Experts say a backlash against the strict lockdown which began in mid-March and was only fully lifted on June 21 is partly to blame.

'Not the best strategy'

At the height of the lockdown people could only go outside to buy food or medicine, seek [medical care](#) or go to work if they could not do so from home.

Exercising outdoors was not allowed until early April and for weeks children were not allowed outside at all.

This "severe" lockdown created a "desire to make up for lost time" once the measures were lifted that sparked COVID-19 outbreaks, said Salvador Macip, an expert in [health sciences](#) at Catalonia's Open University.

The authorities introduced rules on social distancing and wearing masks after the lockdown ended without stressing the need to remain "very careful", he added.

Jorge Ruiz Ruiz, a sociologist at the Institute for Advanced Social Studies, a public research institute, echoes this view.

"Months of total isolation was perhaps not the best strategy to promote [social responsibility](#)," once restrictions were lifted, he said.

Faced with a surge in infections, Spanish authorities earlier this month introduced a series of measures which targeted socialising, such as ordering the closure of nightclubs and reducing restaurant opening hours, as well as a ban on smoking outdoors if it is not possible to maintain a distance of two metres (6.7 feet) between people.

These rules, along with those limiting the size of social gatherings and requiring the use of face masks, are "extremely difficult" for youths to respect, Ruiz said.

"We are asking them not to let loose when they go out to have fun," he

added.

Lack of coordination

Spain's decentralised system of government which places responsibility for healthcare makes it hard to develop a common national strategy.

"Working cooperatively was difficult and it still is," said Pilar Serrano, the secretary of Madrid's public health association and a professor at the Autonomous University of Madrid.

Experts also blame Spain's decision to open its borders to tourists at the end of June to protect its key tourism sector for the rise in infections.

Over two million foreign visitors travelled to Spain by plane in July, according to the tourism ministry.

The opening up "happened very quickly" with more arrivals than in other countries, said Mancip.

The movement of seasonal agricultural workers, who follow the ripening of different crops across the country while living in crowded conditions, also favoured the spread of the virus, experts said.

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