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## **Navigating Spaces of Transnational Gentrification: Insights from the Everyday Geographies of Barcelona's New Global Residents**

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### ABSTRACT:

The increasing attraction of Southern European cities for highly qualified international migrants is a significant driver of recent sociodemographic changes. This phenomenon has drawn attention to its impact on housing markets, commercial landscapes, social cohesion, the displacement of lower-income populations, and urban segregation.

Given the emergent nature of this phenomenon in the region, there remains a substantial gap in understanding the spatial patterns of this group. Existing literature primarily consists of neighborhood-level studies focused on central areas, often historic centers, where highly qualified international migrants tend to settle alongside tourism activity. However, there is little evidence on their spatial distribution following the extraordinary and rapid expansion of this population. Additionally, little is known about their everyday geographies beyond their places of residence and the way they interact with urban space.

Employing a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative data from population registers and surveys and qualitative insights from mental mapping workshops, this study measures the evolution of the spatial patterns and explores the living spaces of highly qualified international

migrants in Barcelona. By doing so, we identify not only where they reside but also where they work, socialize, exercise, and engage in leisure activities—as well as how they engage with urban spaces.

Our findings highlight two key aspects: first, despite significant growth, highly qualified international migrants remain highly concentrated in central urban areas; second, mapping their living spaces allows us to better understand how they integrate into, perceive, and impact the city, emphasizing the critical issue of urban segregation.

**Keywords:** Urban Segregation; Transnational Gentrification; Skilled migration; Living Spaces, Mental mapping

## 1. Introduction

The diversification of migration profiles in the 21st century has led to the emergence of new forms of mobility while diminishing the prevalence of earlier flows. Until recently, migration to Southern European cities was primarily composed of lower-income populations aiming for long-term settlement, often concentrating in peripheral metropolitan areas with limited accessibility and services.

However, in recent years skilled migration has surged, particularly to large cities that are well integrated into global networks. In these shifting mobility patterns, highly qualified international residents (HQIR) make choices based not only on labor market opportunities but also on destination-specific factors, with “livability” and lifestyle playing a key role—what academic literature defines as “lifestyle migration” (Benson and O’Reilly, 2009). Distinctive features of these new transnational residential flows are their increasingly transitory nature, which represents a new phenomenon in the historical migratory context of Southern Europe. Within these new mobility paradigms, hyper-mobile profiles emerge such as that of the digital nomad, whose presence has been driven by the dual global trends of increasing mobility and the digitalization of labor.

This phenomenon is particularly visible in central cities of the Iberian Peninsula, with Barcelona presenting a paradigmatic case for Southern Europe. The concentration of HQIR, predominantly from high-income countries, along with the impacts this trend implies for urban and socio-demographic transformation, has been subject to growing academic interest revolving around the theme of transnational gentrification (Hayes and Zaban, 2020). The potential of HQIR to strain the housing market, modify the commercial offer, weaken social cohesion, and deepen socio-spatial segregation have been noted in various Southern European cases. Specifically, these processes contribute to the concentration of economically advantaged populations in certain central urban areas, displacing lower-income residents—whether autochthonous or lower-income migrants—to more peripheral areas (Brollo and

Celata, 2022). Moreover, this spatial phenomenon overlaps considerably with the urban transformations driven by intense tourism pressure (Cocola-Gant and López-Gay, 2020). Despite growing academic interest in international skilled migration and its impacts, there are many underexplored questions about this heterogeneous group and its impact on urban socio-spatial dynamics. This article analyzes the living spaces of HQIR in the city of Barcelona, considering not only their residential distribution, but also the places that condition and contextualize their everyday lives. To pursue this comprehensive perspective, we adopt a mixed methodology, combining the analysis of official statistical data with evidence obtained through surveys and focus groups.

The hypothesis of the study is that, despite the increase of these new migratory flows, the settlement of HQIR remains concentrated in the most central and tourism-dominated areas of the city. This pattern contrasts with the more dispersed distribution of their highly-qualified Spanish-born counterparts, as well as with the outward territorial expansion that has characterized the residential patterns of their less qualified international counterparts which had defined previous migratory stages of the city.

This study contributes to the literature in three key aspects: it quantifies the magnitude of these flows and their role in the demographic dynamics of a central metropolis such as the municipality of Barcelona, it updates their spatial patterns by addressing the post-pandemic acceleration of this phenomenon, and it broadens the view on the spaces that structure their everyday life beyond residential settlement patterns.

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

### **2.1. Skilled Migration, Transnational Gentrification, and Urban Spatial Dynamics**

Global higher education expansion, the internationalization of trade and investment, together with the demand for talent and the flexibilization of work permits, drove the boom in skilled migration towards the end of the 20th century (Salt, 1997). The magnitude of this type of movement continued growing in the 21st century with the impetus of technological development in an increasingly globalized and interconnected international context,

contributing to more complex and varied relationships between migratory movements, workplaces and residential patterns (Sassen, 2011). From the perspective of the mobilities paradigm (Sheller and Urry, 2006), these movements should be understood not only in terms of changes of residence, but also as part of broader circulation networks characterized by flexible labor practices, digital technologies and telecommunications, and new ways of inhabiting urban and transnational space. This dynamic has been accentuated following COVID-19, with the reinforcement of lifestyle mobilities and the rise of remote work (Domínguez-Mujica et al., 2021). In this regard, several countries, particularly in Southern Europe, have introduced legislative measures to attract these groups. Greece, Italy, Portugal, and Spain, for example, now offer digital nomad visas for remote workers. Spain has also promoted residency through the Golden Visa (available until 2025 for foreign property investors) and the long-standing Beckham Law, which provides tax incentives to highly skilled foreign professionals working for companies registered in Spain.

Studies about skilled migration have focused primarily on the level of the nation state, focusing on the positive effect on economic development, knowledge generation and circulation, and taxation that these labor mobilities have offered, though negative effects have also been identified, particularly the “brain drain” from the Global South (Chiswick, 2005). Critical analyses of the local implications of this phenomenon have emerged more recently. With the acceleration of these types of movements, some authors posited that these new arrivals would be the key to local economic prosperity, prescribing strategies for cities to compete in attracting international talent (Florida, 2002). However, several scholars critiqued this approach, warning about the tensions brought by this sort of municipal entrepreneurialism, particularly its impacts on local housing and labor markets, accelerating gentrification processes and exacerbating socio-spatial exclusion (Peck, 2005; Atkinson and Easthope, 2009). The decisions of highly qualified migrants, as well as expansion strategies of multinational corporations, are highly influenced by the characteristics of the destination, making place marketing and city branding play central roles. Amorphous attributes of livability, wellness,

and quality of life are highly valued, and the desire for a new lifestyle may lead to individuals' relocation to another country, what the literature has referred to as lifestyle migration (Benson and O'Reilly, 2009). Such individuals partaking in these international residential mobilities are often from high-income countries who relocate to comparatively lower-income countries (Huete and Mantecón, 2012).

Research on skilled migration has often been operationalized through the analysis of highly educated populations, usually those with university qualifications. This approach reflects methodological considerations, relying on the nature of available register data and the need for cross-national and temporal comparability. For the purposes of this research, we adopt this operationalization, while acknowledging its well-documented limitations: it excludes qualified professionals without university degrees, overlooks processes of overqualification and downward mobility, and conceals substantial internal heterogeneity (Salt, 1997).

One key dimension of such heterogeneity lies in the temporality of residence. Early research on skilled migration underscored its transient nature among expatriates, or "expats"—a term always marked by some ambiguity, but historically referring to internationally mobile professionals who relocated for corporate, diplomatic, or business reasons while maintaining ties to both home and host countries (Cohen, 1977). Subsequent scholarship highlighted the rise of "self-initiated expatriates", individuals who relocate abroad on their own initiative (Cerdin & Selmer, 2014). More recently, the transient character of these groups has intensified, with increasingly mobile trajectories that blur the boundaries between travel, leisure, tourism, and migration (Cohen et al., 2015). Within this expanding spectrum, hypermobile forms such as international exchange students (Malet Calvo, 2018) and digital nomads—whose professional activity is decoupled from fixed workplaces—have become particularly visible (Hannonen, 2020).

The high spatial concentration of HQIR and their roles in the socio-demographic, economic, and physical transformation of cities has received increasing attention in recent years. In the Netherlands, researchers have identified different settlement patterns between national and

international highly-qualified residents (Sleutjes and Boterman, 2016). The latter displays a notable preference for central, more high-income neighborhoods with an intensity of urban cultural life (Beckers and Boschman, 2019). These residential choices also shape the everyday spaces and relational practices of HQIR, influencing their opportunities for social interaction and their levels of belonging. In some cases, the formation of foreign-dominated enclaves allows migrants to reproduce lifestyles and networks in relative detachment from local communities, privileging amenities and cosmopolitan milieus over integration with residents. Such dynamics contribute to symbolic segregation and can foster feelings of exclusion among both migrants and locals (Cocola-Gant and López-Gay, 2020). At the same time, the transitory character of many HQIR trajectories can hinder local rootedness and generate ambivalent attachments to place, often marked by fragile or provisional forms of belonging (Plöger and Kubiak, 2019).

Recently, urban and sociodemographic transformations of neighborhoods where HQIR concentrate have been conceptualized under the term transnational gentrification, which emphasizes that the circulation of international middle classes lead to the resignification of urban spaces and neighborhoods (Sigler and Wachsmuth, 2016). A key example of these processes has been the increasing pressure on housing markets, driven by global real estate investment and disparities between spending power of locals and HQIR (White and Hurdley, 2003) and the increasing dominance of mid-term rental contracts (Orozco-Martínez and Gil-Alonso, 2024).

Southern Europe has established itself as a preferred destination for skilled migration. Even though countries like Spain, Portugal, and Italy, have traditionally attracted lifestyle migrants in less dense (often coastal) areas, such as retirees, in the past decade these flows have increased to various urban centers, such as Barcelona, Lisbon, Malaga, Rome or Seville (Hayes and Zaban, 2020). In these cities, the high presence of HQIR tends to be superimposed over areas of intensive tourist activity (Jover and Díaz-Parra, 2020a; Sequera and Nofre, 2020). In fact, both processes have become interconnected, as the concentration of tourist services and

infrastructures also attract these new residents, particularly the more floating population. Their everyday practices are often indistinguishable from those of tourists, with similar capacities to transform changes in the life of localities (Cocola-Gant and López-Gay, 2020; Brollo and Celata, 2022). Nevertheless, it is necessary to deepen analysis of the relationship between these growing migratory flows and the intensification of overtourism, along with their implications on increasingly conflictual local perceptions about the impacts of tourism in urban destinations (Jover and Díaz-Parra, 2020b).

In Spain, migration has been a key driver of urbanization since the Industrial Revolution. Historically, these flows were largely lower-skilled and working-class, tending toward long-term settlement in segregated peripheral areas with limited services and infrastructure. This pattern also defined lower-skilled international migration, which began to increase in the late 1990s (Bayona and Gil-Alonso, 2012; Benassi et al., 2020). Meanwhile, until the 2008 financial crisis, gentrification in major Spanish cities remained largely confined to specific zones of historic centers undergoing previous waves of disinvestment, often framed as successful cases of urban regeneration despite reinforcing patterns of social inequality (Arbaci and Tapada-Berteli, 2012; Sorando and Ardura, 2018). However, since the mid-2010s, these processes intensified and spread to more peripheral, inner-ring neighborhoods which had previously remained on the outer margins of gentrification (López-Gay et al., 2020).

Research on transnational gentrification in the Spain has largely focused on the neighborhood scale, particularly in Barcelona's historic center (Cocola-Gant and López-Gay, 2020; Mazorra and López-Gay, 2024) and Poblenou (de Jongh et al., 2024), as well as in Seville's historic core (Jover and Díaz-Parra, 2020a). Studies on HQIR at the city level and its segregation patterns remain scarce. In Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, co-working spaces have been geolocated (Parreño-Castellano et al., 2021), while in Barcelona, distinct settlement patterns were identified for this group, but research only covered data until 2017, before migration flows intensified (López-Gay et al., 2020). Moreover, most studies focus on residential locations, overlooking other spatial interactions—one of the key aspects this study examines.

## 2.2 Beyond Residential Location: Living and Lived Spaces

The concept of “living space” refers to quotidian activities within a defined and regularly visited territory, encompassing domains such as work, leisure, education, and social relationships (Chevalier, 1974). Once residency is established, a network of places linked to everyday life is formed. Courgeau (1980) used this concept to differentiate everyday mobilities from residential changes, which involve reconfiguration of living spaces and are conceptualized as migrations. Living space can be understood as socially produced through daily practices, routines, and material arrangements, shaped by interactions, exchanges, and the meanings people attach to places (di Méo, 1990; Lefebvre, 1974). In contrast, lived space emphasizes how these material and social configurations are experienced, remembered, and emotionally inhabited, contributing to a sense of place (Massey, 1995). These dynamics, of course, are deeply intertwined.

A wide range of scholarship has examined everyday geographies, showing how urban life is structured through daily practices, encounters, and attachments. Early debates underscored how neighborhood diversity and social ties sustain vibrant forms of urban life (Jacobs, 1961), and how public settings create opportunities for repeated encounters and everyday familiarity (Lofland, 1998). Cities and their neighborhoods are particularly valuable scales for analyzing living spaces, as they provide insights into everyday practices and the material and relational resources that structure urban life. Neighborhoods can be understood as urban laboratories where global processes—such as economic crises, migration, and urban transformations—manifest, interpenetrate, and reconfigure (Brey et al., 2023).

Recent work has drawn attention to the ways in which migration and mobility reshape the ordinary geographies of home, neighborhood, and city, generating multiple belongings and forging translocal connections through practices of care, communication, and movement (Brickell & Datta, 2023). In this globalized context, local spaces continue to play a crucial role in articulating identities and senses of belonging on a human scale. Place not only shapes social relationships but also contributes to belonging, identity, and care. How people occupy and

experience everyday spaces, such as neighborhoods, is essential for understanding how these spaces transform into sites of belonging, identity, mutual support, and resistance (Vaiou & Lykogianni, 2006). These experiences unfold both inside and outside the home, encompassing productive and reproductive spheres. Such inclusive forms of belonging, however, require coordinated efforts across social, cultural, educational, and urban domains, alongside collaboration between public administrations and civil society (Subirats, 2000).

This background informs our analysis of HQIR in Barcelona, highlighting how everyday geographies provide a lens to capture the spatial practices and forms of belonging that unfold beyond their residential locations.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1 Data sources and methodology**

This article employs a mixed methodology drawing upon official population registers, a survey, and focus groups.

Most of the quantitative analysis relies on data from the Population Register, specifically records of new registrations due to immigration and dwelling changes provided by Barcelona City Council. This dataset covers the period 2011–2023 and enables an analysis of the evolution and spatial distribution of HQIR arrivals and housing changes in Barcelona based on three sociodemographic variables: age, place of birth, and education level. We operationalize “highly qualified international residents” (HQIR) as foreign-born individuals with university-level education, given that this is the only socioeconomic variable consistently available in the Population Register. Despite its acknowledged limitations, this approach adequately captures the core dynamics of skilled migration and allows comparison with other studies.

Our geographic units are Barcelona’s 233 Basic Statistical Areas (BSA), with an average of around 7,250 inhabitants. Movements without a fixed address, which the City Council began recording in 2018 primarily for social service purposes, are excluded. The Population Register has limitations in capturing the entire study group, particularly the more transient population, who often do not register their residence. According to Barcelona’s 2022 Sociodemographic

Survey, approximately 6% of the foreign-born population with university education was not officially registered in the city. Additionally, census data have been used at certain points to provide total population figures. However, these data also have limitations, as individuals moving abroad often fail to deregister. In such cases, the City Council removes them from the register two years after their last update if they do not confirm their residency (five years for EU nationals).

To analyze spatial patterns, we have calculated the location coefficient (LC). This measure assesses the over- or underrepresentation of a specific group within a given territory compared to a random distribution (in this case, total population's distribution). The formula is as follows:

$$LC_{ik} = \frac{\left(\frac{F_{ik}}{F_{Tk}}\right)}{\left(\frac{P_i}{P_T}\right)}$$

Where:  $LC_{ik}$  is the location coefficient for unit  $i$  and group  $k$ ;  $F_{ik}$  is the population flow of group  $k$  in unit  $i$ ;  $F_{Tk}$  is the total population flow of group  $k$  across all units;  $P_i$  is the total population in unit  $i$ ;  $P_T$  is the total population across all units. If  $LC_{ik} > 1$ , unit  $i$  receives more people from group  $k$  than expected by random distribution (e.g., if it is 2, it receives double). If  $LC_{ik} < 1$ , unit  $i$  receives fewer than expected by random distribution (e.g., if it is 0.5, it receives half).

Between July, 2023 and February, 2024, we completed a digital ethnography through social media and forums in English and Spanish (Facebook, Reddit, Twitter, LinkedIn, WhatsApp, and Telegram) focusing on different discussions linked to HQIR in the Barcelona area (neighborhoods and schools, housing, meet-ups, entrepreneurship and networking, etc). These platforms were used to recruit study participants for a 15-minute online survey, available in English and Spanish, running from November, 2023 to February, 2024. Dissemination was extended through in-person events (Barcelona International Day, at co-working spaces), chain sampling, and flyer distribution in areas identified as having a strong presence of international residents. A total of 382 surveys were completed. For consistency with sociodemographic data, only the 366 cases where respondents reported having university-level studies were utilized.

The questionnaire comprised approximately 60 questions structured into six thematic blocks: (1) sociodemographic characteristics, migration trajectories, and self-identification, (2) occupational and economic conditions, (3) housing access and residential mobility, (4) motivations for relocation and the impact of Covid-19, (5) urban practices, sociocultural integration, and sense of belonging, and (6) long-term residential and migratory intentions. The survey combined closed, multiple-choice, and open-ended questions, enabling both quantitative and qualitative analysis. The median survey duration was 16 minutes. While the sample is not representative (see Table 1 for the main characteristics of the participants), it provides the largest data set of its kind and allows us to capture dynamics and experiences that cannot be accessed through official sources. Its novelty lies in offering an explanatory approach to the profiles, trajectories, and residential strategies of (HQIR), while serving as a foundation for more in-depth qualitative analysis.

Those HQIR surveyed were invited to leave their email addresses for follow-up questions. Among respondents who did so, we generated a list of potential focus group participants who lived within the city limits. Within focus groups, we sought diversity in terms of gender, country of origin, income levels, family responsibilities, and migratory identities. In total, 25 individuals participated in 7 focus groups of between 2 and 5 participants, with one facilitator and at least one notetaker/observer. The sessions included an initial mental mapping exercise in which each participant drew on a map of Barcelona, using a different colored marker, their everyday places in the city through points, lines, and zones, following a shared legend and labeled each element accordingly.

After transcribing the focus group discussions, we employed a thematic coding strategy to categorize the different issues emerging from the narratives. These categories were not completely predefined but also inductively derived from the material, ensuring that recurrent themes—such as housing, neighborhood life, or mobility—were consistently identified across participants.

In contrast, the categories used in the mental mapping exercise were predefined on the basis of the literature on everyday spaces (e.g., neighborhoods, public spaces, workspaces, leisure sites) and served as a structured reference throughout the focus groups, as participants repeatedly drew on the map when discussing issues such as housing, neighborhood life, cultural integration, tourism, gentrification, and migration trajectories, among others. To construct the results of the mental mapping exercise, participants' sketches were digitized and classified in a Geographic Information System (QGIS). Categories were partly aggregated to enable comparability and to distill shared representations of everyday spaces in Barcelona. The final typology comprised four domains: home, workspace, neighborhood as experienced, and places of socialization (including leisure, study, child-related, public, and preferred spaces). Overlapping polygons across participants were merged, allowing us to highlight collective spatial patterns and recurrent geographies of daily life.

The high participation of members of Facebook groups such as Barcelona Expats-International BCN suggests a bias toward English speakers (native or otherwise) and, potentially, toward people who identify as "expats". Self-selection may indicate that participants are more likely to feel attached to, involved in, or opinionated about life in the city than HQIR as a whole.

Table 1 here

### 3.2 The study area: Barcelona

This study focuses on Barcelona, a municipality of approximately 100 km<sup>2</sup> with a stable population of between 1.5 and 1.7 million inhabitants since the 1980s. It is the core of a metropolitan area of more than 150 municipalities and around 5 million residents.

Geographically constrained by the Mediterranean Sea to the east, the Collserola mountains to the west, and the Llobregat and Besòs rivers to the south and north, Barcelona is one of Europe's most densely populated cities, encapsulating many attributes of urban cores.

Administratively, the city consists of 10 districts and 73 neighborhoods (Figure 1). To contextualize the analysis, we have included data on median individual income, rental prices, and the concentration of tourist rentals. Barcelona's socio-spatial structure reflects its historical development. Ciutat Vella, or historic center, combines low and high incomes, reflecting its heterogeneous housing stock, and has been heavily impacted by tourist pressure in recent years. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the demolition of the city walls allowed for a planned expansion of the Eixample district, traditionally home to middle and upper classes. Large parts of the Sant Martí district, historically industrial and working-class, has undergone widespread transformation focused on technology and the creative and knowledge economies in recent decades. Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, urban expansion followed a pattern of higher-income areas to the west, while lower-income groups, including internal migrants from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, concentrated in parts of Ciutat Vella, the north, the southwest and along the Besòs River.

Internal migration drove Barcelona's urban and demographic growth during the twentieth century, peaking in 1915–1930 and 1945–1970. Around the turn of the century, in-flows intensified once again, this time driven by international arrivals mainly from Latin America, North Africa, China, and Pakistan. These new residents predominantly settled in northern neighborhoods and along the Besòs axis with the notable exception of migrants from Pakistan, who concentrated in the central neighborhood of El Raval. International migration to Barcelona resurged after the 2008 crisis, and by the mid-2010s displayed greater heterogeneity in origins, socioeconomic profiles, and spatial patterns—dynamics further analyzed here through the lens of highly qualified international residents.

Figure 1 here

## **4. Results**

### **4.1. The rise of international skilled migration in Barcelona**

According to the population register of the Barcelona City Council, the relocation of HQIR to the city has accelerated markedly in recent years, emerging as the fastest-growing educational attainment profile and surpassing the inflows of individuals with lower levels of education (Figure 2). By the early 2010s, the number of arrivals in this group (around 17,000 annually) was similar to those possessing primary education. Since 2014 these trends diverged: the arrival of individuals without university education stagnated or grew slightly, while HQIR doubled by the decade's end. The COVID-19 pandemic represented a short-term slowdown of migration, particularly from abroad. However, from 2022 the upward trend resumes and surpasses pre-pandemic figures, with arrivals of this sociodemographic profile rising to around 45,000 people annually in 2023, nearly tripling figure of a decade earlier. In 2023, more than half of the adults arriving in Barcelona hold a university degree, and 80% of them were born abroad—figures that confirm the Barcelona's attractiveness for individuals fitting this profile. The overall proportion of HQIR within the city has grown significantly, based on the last three Spanish population censuses: in 2001, around 30,000 HQIR were recorded (2.0% of the overall population), rising to 95,000 (6.0%) in 2011 and exceeding 200,000 (12.4%) by 2021. This percentage is higher than all other central Spanish city, and is followed by Palma de Mallorca (10.0%), Madrid (7.6%), Valencia (5.8%), and Malaga (2.9%). This phenomenon is primarily concentrated in the central municipality, whereas in the broader Barcelona Metropolitan Region, this group represents only about 4% of the population. However, their presence is especially pronounced in specific neighborhoods and age groups. For instance, in Sant Pere, Santa Caterina, and La Ribera—located in Ciutat Vella—they represent 30% of the population and 55% of residents aged 25–39.

Comparing flow and stock data suggests a high population turnover: although 250,000 HQIR were registered, the net increase was only 110,000. Our survey results further confirm the transitory nature of these migration trajectories. Among HQIR who arrived in the past two years, a quarter considered it very unlikely that they would still be living in Barcelona in three years, while only about half viewed staying in the city as very or quite likely.

Figure 2 here

This quantitative growth is underpinned by Barcelona's strong appeal as a destination. Survey respondents and discussion group participants consistently emphasize the city's quality of life, walkability, human-scale urban fabric, vibrant cultural life, and mild climate as central attractors (Table 2). The everyday accessibility of public spaces, inclusive design, and the possibility of achieving a better work–life balance further reinforce this appeal. These features help explain why Barcelona stands out not only as a city that attracts large numbers of HQIR but also as an urban environment perceived as cosmopolitan, diverse, and livable. Crucially, such amenities shape the residential choices, working arrangements, leisure practices, and everyday geographies of HQIR, dimensions that will be explored in greater detail in the following sections.

#### 4.2. Residential space

It is well established that population tend to concentrate in, and be filtered towards, certain urban spaces according to their socioeconomic characteristics, a pattern also observed in migration flows to Barcelona between 2011 and 2023. The data analyzed confirm that the spatial distribution of newcomers varies according to their educational level and origin (Figure 3). Those with lower educational attainment predominantly settle in low-income areas, both in central areas (such el Raval in Ciutat Vella) and in the periphery (including the axis of the Besòs River and various neighborhoods in Nou Barris). Regarding origin, Spanish-born residents exhibit lower spatial concentration than their foreign-born counterparts, as evidenced by Location Coefficient values. The highest concentration is found among HQIR: in 27 geographical units, more than twice as many of these individuals arrived compared to what would be expected under a random distribution. This number drops to 17 units for foreign

residents without university degrees, 6 for Spanish-born university graduates, and just 1 for Spanish-born residents without higher education.

The contrast in the residential patterns of skilled migrants based on place of birth is specifically significant. International university graduates cluster in the historic center at much higher rates than the rest of the city, with LC values exceeding 3 in some units. Some stretches of the Mediterranean shoreline also stand out, while the Eixample district attracts both Spanish and foreign-born skilled residents. However, Spanish-born university graduates largely avoid the historic center, favoring wealthiest neighborhoods of the city in the districts of Gràcia, Les Corts, and Sarrià-Sant Gervasi. In any case, the concentration of the HQIR is considerably higher than that of their Spanish-born counterparts.

Figure 3 here

One of the objectives of this article is to examine how residential patterns of HQIR have evolved as the in-flow has multiplied. In previous flows of predominantly less qualified migrants, population increases led to territorial expansion (Bayona-Carrasco and Gil-Alonso, 2012). However, this does not seem to be the case for HQIM over recent years, as arrivals remain concentrated in the same areas as ten years earlier (Figure 4). Neighborhoods receiving more than double the expected number of newcomers are still located in Ciutat Vella, while areas with lower concentrations of this group have seen little change. The transitional zone between these two realities remains roughly at the boundaries of the Eixample district. Analysis of residential movement within the city reinforces this pattern. HQIR maintain similar residential preferences once settled, with a high concentration of moves in and between central neighborhoods, maintaining a relatively stable border with areas where they are less represented. Although the LC slightly decreases in the historic center compared to the in-flows, values remain high, suggesting a notable persistence in the spatial distribution of this group.

It should be noted that the LC is a relative indicator: as the absolute number of arrivals nearly tripled between 2011 and 2023, the overall presence of HQIR has expanded. While central neighborhoods remain the primary destinations, the sharp increase in arrivals has also made HQIR more visible in areas previously less associated with this group, gradually extending their residential footprint beyond the historic core.

Figure 4 here

#### 4.3. Spaces of work and leisure

To locate the work and leisure spaces of HQIR in Barcelona, we refer primarily to the results of the survey, which reveals information unavailable in official statistics.

In terms of workplaces, approximately half of those surveyed said their primary workspace was their home, while the hybrid format was highly prevalent and the population working exclusively from an office is a minority, around 10% (Table 3).

Table 3 here

In addition to workplaces, we inquired about the neighborhoods they frequented for work-related purposes, which revealed a strong concentration in central neighborhoods, particularly Poblenou (an emerging tech hub in the Sant Martí district) and Dreta de l'Eixample (high density of offices and business activity) (Figure 5). Remarkably, close to 20% of respondents commute for work to other metropolitan municipalities, being more likely “reverse commute” than travel into the city from suburbs, attesting to the desire to live in central areas.

Regarding leisure spaces, including activities such as shopping, exercise, dining, and socializing, responses reflect a greater diversity of locations. The concentration continues most markedly in the urban core, with a strong presence in the Ciutat Vella, parts of the Eixample and Gracia districts, and seaside neighborhoods.

Focus group testimonies highlighted the central role of public space in Barcelona, closely linked to its favorable climate. The importance of socializing in outdoor environments and the possibility of enjoying the cafe-bar and restaurant terraces year-round is particularly attractive. Not only the diversity of gastronomic and leisure establishments is emphasized, but also their proximity and accessibility facilitated by high density and mix of uses.

Participants also emphasized that Barcelona's climate encourages outdoor sports and physical activity. They often participate in activities organized through specialized applications, concentrated on the seafront, but also in green areas such as Montjuïc and the Collserola mountains. Although the latter is accessible from various neighborhoods, mentions are concentrated in areas of higher socioeconomic status.

Figure 5 here

#### 4.4. Everyday geographies of highly qualified international migrants in Barcelona

This section explores how HQIR living spaces are shaped through everyday experiences and interactions with the city. Drawing on focus group discussions, we analyze key dimensions such as perceptions of quality of life, frequented places, mobility patterns, place attachment and belonging, and tensions linked to gentrification and tourism. These narratives offer deeper insight into the relationship between the urban environment and their living spaces. As described in the methodological section, the individual narratives discussed here were selected to illustrate the range of perspectives identified in the thematic coding process, while everyday geographies reflect both inductive themes from the interviews and the predefined dimensions of the mental mapping exercise.

The spatial logic of the living spaces of HQIR is strongly marked by the very attributes that brought them to the city, previously addressed and mostly revolving around the vague yet highly valued notion of quality of life. Compared to cities worldwide, Barcelona is perceived as

having a “friendly human scale” and a strong mixed-use urban vitality (Delclòs-Alió and Miralles-Guasch, 2018). Walking accounts for over 40% of journeys, and while “walkability” only appeared in one survey question, it was commonly encountered in open-ended responses and focus group discussions, emerging spontaneously as a key theme in all focus groups, suggesting that this planning and city ranking jargon has filtered into everyday parlance.

Lieke, a Dutch woman who lived in Rio de Janeiro (“too dangerous”) and Toronto (“too cold and expensive”) with her Brazilian partner, compared these cities with Barcelona and valued its walkability most. Lina, a Lithuanian who moved from Sweden with her Argentinian husband and child, reported that she happily lives in a “little bubble” in Poblenou (district of Sant Martí), appreciating that she can complete daily tasks without a car. The complexity and confluence of uses, functions, facilities, and services in the city allow the conciliation of work and social reproduction (Cioccoletto and Col·lectiu Punt 6, 2014), an element frequently highlighted, especially by parents.

Barcelona’s walkability is identified by several participants as offering a newfound “level of spontaneity”: doing what one wants in public spaces, neighborhoods, and, by extension, the city, without prior planning or great expense. Many participants sought a change in lifestyle and work-life balance—sometimes precipitated by COVID-19. Overall, Barcelona was perceived as a “human scale” city that is navigable and legible to for active mobilities.

This identified “human scale”, as described in focus groups, refers to the accessibility and proximity of businesses, services, and facilities required for everyday tasks, but also to the quality and character of the built fabric, including public spaces that encourage socialization.

For Morty, an Englishman who moved to the El Putxet i el Farró neighborhood (in Sarrià-St. Gervasi district bordering Gràcia) with his wife and children, this allowed his family to enjoy city life affordably, unlike his experience in Manchester. He and other parents emphasized that playgrounds serve as key intergenerational social spaces.

“Everywhere [in Manchester] is a commodified space (...). You see all these generations in the square having food and the kids are playing, and the grannies are there (...). That is also how we experience space and our relationships here”

Feeling cared for and included in public spaces was a common sentiment. Although some noted missing amenities—such as baby changing tables in public bathrooms or better bicycle lanes—they consider that the pedestrian-friendliness and vitality of public spaces make up for these shortcomings. Participants routinely noted that, compared to other countries in Europe and North America, public space and café-bars are used intensely, with socialization (especially with locals) less likely to occur in domestic spaces. This was generally appreciated, though some expressed longing for house parties. The intensive use of public spaces offers a sense of security, especially among women and LGBTQ+ respondents, contributing to an inclusive and convivial atmosphere for groups of all ages and people with disabilities. As Julieta, a Chilean teleworker who recently relocated from Italy to the Sagrada Familia neighborhood (district of Eixample), noted:

“I've never ever seen so many blind people on their own, walking through the streets of a city. I think it's a very accessible city, even though there are some issues. You see disabled people on their own without anyone helping them.”

Another attractive aspect for relocating to Barcelona was the quality of public transport, frequently cited in focus groups as central to quality of life. According to Emilia, an Argentinian woman who moved from Uruguay, quality of life was reflected in “this kind of urban fabric and the public transport and the metro is open all night on Saturdays”. In general, the breadth and quality of public services were considered attractive, particularly for participants from the Americas, who also rated the city’s safety higher than Europeans.

The most frequented places for participants were within what they identified as their neighborhoods, where much of their everyday life occurred. As many respondents worked partially or fully online, their living spaces were within, or proximate to, their homes. Their trips outside their neighborhoods—usually by public transit or bicycle— were principally for

shopping, leisure, nightlife, work, exercise, or socialization in friends' neighborhoods.

Margaret, a single mother from the USA living in the Hostafrancs neighborhood (in Sants-Montjuïc district), highlighted friendships as the main reason for visiting other neighborhoods; otherwise, she would stay close to home.

Though participants valued Barcelona's accessibility and compactness, their everyday life tends to occur in circumscribed areas (Figure 6). These living spaces closely align with the spatial distributions discussed earlier, forming clear boundaries around the most central neighborhoods. These extend northeastward toward Gràcia, along the coastal axis of the Sant Martí district, and westward toward Sants-Montjuïc. The Vila de Gràcia neighborhood was among the most common for participants to live, frequent, be familiar with, and carry out their everyday life. Poblenou was another, a pole for work and leisure due to its proximity to tech and knowledge economy hubs and the beach.

Mental mapping exercises revealed extensive "blank spots" where participants were unfamiliar. These areas were often dismissed as less attractive because of their predominantly residential character. In reporting that their spaces of everyday life were so proximate to their homes, some found this alternately desirable and embarrassing. Anneke, a Dutch mother of three who moved to Gràcia from Germany with her husband, laughed as she admitted, "My area is so small!".

#### Figure 6

Places dominated by tourists and large crowds tended to be avoided by participants whenever possible. On collaborative maps, the most avoided areas included Plaça Catalunya, the Ramblas, the Sagrada Família, busy metro interchanges, and parts of the historic center. Tourism and the cost of living were identified by survey participants as the most undesirable aspects of relocating to Barcelona, though most had first visited as tourists. This dominant attitude mirrors emerging anti-touristification sentiments of autochthonous residents (Milano

et al., 2019). Focus group participants often discussed strategies for not being perceived as tourists and distinguishing themselves as residents (principally, knowing where they're going). Yet survey evidence suggests that this boundary is not always clear-cut. Around 30% of HQIR reported that they did not feel more like residents than tourists. Moreover, fewer than half (46%) felt connected to the social and cultural life of their neighborhood, while a higher proportion (57%) stated they felt connected to the city's international community.

Though the interviews preceded major anti-tourism and housing demonstrations in 2024, participants were acutely conscious of their own roles in gentrification and rising anti-“expat” and digital nomad sentiment. Across narratives, this awareness was often accompanied by feelings of ambivalence, powerlessness, and guilt. As Jeni, a Puerto Rican who moved from England to the Vila Olímpica (Sant Martí district) with her Spanish husband, noted when she spoke English to her son in a local store:

“I was moving to a gentrified area. As I walked in, the owner was talking to another neighbor in Catalan [...]. They were talking about gentrification and said ‘oh, like this girl, you know.’

Hearing it this way, it felt so violent, and really hard. Because I felt, like ‘oh, you know, yes.’” .

Patrick, an Irishman who lives with his Irish girlfriend in El Born, pointed out that, while most people protesting about gentrification and touristification were Catalan, so were most of those profiting from these processes.

“I find it a really confusing question, morally [...]. But why are you not complaining about the landlords? I think gentrification is a really bad problem, and I feel slightly guilty, however I am on a Spanish wage and so is my partner” .

Numerous participants, such as Patrick, noted that they had been priced out of cities such as London, New York, Dublin, and Paris, a push factor to relocate to a comparatively less expensive city. Though survey participants moving from the aforementioned cities found the cost of living appealing, respondents were much more likely to consider the cost of living and access to housing the least appealing element of relocating to the city, noting that they are required to pay higher rents than Spanish nationals, often with more precarious contracts and

prevalent scams, while sometimes being required to pay up to a year of rent upfront. The term most often used to describe this experience was being “targets”, contradicting the common perception that affordability is a major draw for HQIR in Barcelona.

## **5. Discussion and conclusions**

Barcelona has emerged as a key pole in Southern Europe for international skilled migration, a phenomenon also observed in other cities such as Lisbon, Madrid, Malaga and Valencia. This migratory profile has already acquired a central role in the city's demographic dynamics, with significant growth in the past decade. These flows have tripled, accelerated by the boom in international teleworking in the post-pandemic context, now representing nearly half of total new arrivals. Their presence within the resident population has increased, exceeding 10% overall and reaching 30% in the 25-39 age group. A distinctive feature of these movements is their often transitory nature, in contrast to traditional migration strategies centered on long-term settlement.

This research shows that, despite sustained growth, the residential distribution of highly qualified international migrants has remained largely unchanged and highly concentrated in central areas, including those with a strong presence of tourism. In certain neighborhoods, they make up as much as one-third of the total population. This pattern contrasts with that of incoming highly qualified residents born in Spain, who have a more dispersed distribution, avoid tourism-dominated areas, and favor traditional high-income neighborhoods. These differences coincide with previous studies that have evidenced variations in the location patterns of different groups of skilled migrants (Sleutjes and Boterman, 2016; Beckers and Boschman, 2019). Unlike previous waves of less-qualified domestic and international migrants, they have not significantly expanded across the metropolitan region (Bayona-Carrasco and Gil-Alonso, 2012).

Our mixed method approach has made it possible to transcend classical analyses of residential segregation to understand how the living spaces of HQIR are configured. Findings indicate that their quotidian lives take place in clearly circumscribed central areas characterized by high

supplies of services, public spaces, and specific urban environments. Despite the flexibility afforded by teleworking, this population maintains a strong preference for neighborhoods with what we call *mediated authenticity*: areas that blend elements of a Mediterranean city—such as fine-grained historical neighborhoods, walkability, and proximity to the beach—with prior gentrification-driven transformations, such as new plazas and green spaces and a diverse leisure and dining scene.

In what amounts to a large central area, the living spaces of HQIR are configured around their place of residence, but with great ease in mobility to nearby neighborhoods for various activities without the need for prior planning. This behavior suggests a high degree of flexibility and mobility, facilitated by the accessibility and supply of services in the area. However, even within the municipality of Barcelona, there are largely swathes of unexplored areas, perceived as merely residential and therefore less attractive. This perception contrasts with studies on urban vitality, which identify many of these unknown areas as having high mixity of uses (Gómez-Varo et al., 2024). This apparent contradiction opens a future research line on the perception and use of space in these sectors.

Another focus of the study has been the relationship between these groups and urban areas with greater tourist pressure. While previous work has indicated that this population tends to settle in areas dominated by tourism or in high-income core areas (Pareja-Eastaway et al., 2009; López-Gay, et al. 2020), there remains little evidence on the evolution of this trend after the intensification of these flows. And, although skilled migrants seek to discursively and behaviorally distinguish themselves from tourists, in practice their everyday geographies overlap considerably. Examples of this intersection include the proliferation of hotels and private clubs offering memberships targeted to skilled migrants for access to coworking, physical activity or catering spaces, as well as the common use of tourist apartments as initial accommodation in the city. While at the micro level HQIR may avoid certain highly touristed spaces of leisure and transit, the proximity between the HQIR and tourists remains significant. This dynamic reflects ambivalent attachments to place: although many HQIR seek to distance

themselves from tourist imaginaries, their sense of belonging often remains anchored in transnational rather than local networks.

The arrival of this population carries significant implications for the city. Research on transnational gentrification has documented the effects of these flows on destination areas, and this study has explored the perception of the migrants themselves about their role in these processes. Participants were generally aware of their impact and of the critical gaze of the local population, who may perceive them negatively as agents of transformation in access to housing, demographic composition and commercial offerings in the neighborhoods where they are concentrated, as well as for other cultural and linguistic concerns. The clearest manifestation of these transformations has been the widespread conversion of housing into monthly rentals, a modality that occupies a regulatory grey zone between tourist accommodation and conventional long-term contracts, increasingly oriented toward HQIR. This transformation must also be understood in the broader context of housing financialization and the role of state-led policies in facilitating these dynamics (Alexandri and Hodkinson, 2025).

As for future trends, if the flow of skilled migrants maintains its current pace or accelerates, it is foreseeable that their residential distribution will expand outward at a faster pace. Some of our participants already evidence this process, following paths set by local-led gentrification, particularly among those seeking to purchase a home. Interest is growing in well-connected areas outside Barcelona's central neighborhoods but still within the municipality, particularly those characterized by a compact, predominantly low-rise urban fabric. It is also key to consider that, as some of these migrants stay in the city and advance in their life course, their residential trajectories may converge with those of the local population with higher socioeconomic status. As suggested in focus groups, some will follow internal mobility patterns towards higher income suburban areas, where there is a larger and higher quality housing supply.

Migration has been a central element in the development of large cities in Southern Europe. The arrival of HQIR represents a relatively new phenomenon, reinforced by an increasingly global and hyper-mobile context, which is generating new social and spatial dynamics linked to urban transformation, residential exclusion, and expulsion. It is necessary to deepen strategies to mitigate these impacts, while at the same time coming to terms with the highly transitory nature of this migratory profile and its potential weakening effect on the sense of belonging and community relations in the spaces where they are concentrated.

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Tables

Table 1. Sociodemographic characteristics of the survey and focus groups participants

Variable	Categories	Survey (N=366)	Focus Groups (N=25)
Gender	Female	227 (62.0%)	18 (72.0%)
	Male	133 (36.3%)	7 (28.0%)
	Non-binary/Non-conform.	6 (1.7%)	0 (0.0%)
Age Group	21-29	64 (17.5%)	3 (12.0%)
	30-39	185 (50.5%)	10 (40.0%)
	40-49	88 (24.0%)	10 (40.0%)
	50-64	25 (6.9%)	2 (8.0%)
	65+	4 (1.1%)	0 (0.0%)
Place of Birth	Europe	173(47.3%)	12 (48.0%)
	Latin America and the Carib.	82(22.4%)	5 (20.0%)
	USA + Canada	59(16.1%)	6 (24.0%)
	Asia	37(10.1%)	1 (4.0%)
	Africa	12(3.3%)	1 (4.0%)
	Oceania	3 (0.8%)	0 (0.0%)
Educational level	Completed BA or equiv.	162(44.3%)	8 (32.0%)
	Completed MA or equiv.	169(46.2%)	10 (40.0%)
	Completed PhD	35(9.5%)	7 (28.0%)
Arrival in BCN	<2020	122 (33.3%)	8 (32.0%)
	2020-21	94 (25.7%)	8 (32.0%)
	>2022	150 (41%)	9 (36.0%)

Source: Own survey data.

Table 2. Factors that made Barcelona an attractive relocation destination

Factors (multiple responses allowed)	
Quality of life	75.4%
Climate/weather	66.9%
Cultural Life	51.6%
Quality of public transport, cycling, and/or walkability	46.7%
Better work/life balance	46.2%
Connectivity to other cities/countries (by airplane)	41.0%
My ability to communicate in Spanish	36.1%
Cost of living	31.4%
My ability to communicate in English	29.5%

Source: Own survey data. Displaying responses >25% (N = 366). The questionnaire included additional response options, covering factors such as healthcare services, job opportunities, safety, nightlife, friendliness toward foreigners, technological and startup ecosystems, remote-worker communities, and environmental sustainability

Table 3. Primary workspace and proportion of remote work among surveyed respondents in Barcelona

<b>What is your primary workspace in Barcelona?</b>		<b>What proportion of your work is completed remotely (outside an employer's office)?</b>	
I work from home	45.4%	None	8,6%
Workspace belonging to my employer (office, campus, etc.)	37.7%	Less than 25%	16,4%
A co-working space	5.5%	26-50%	23,0%
Other	3.8%	51-75%	13,5%
My own office/facilities outside my home	3.6%	More than 76%	38,5%
A public library	2.2%		
A café/bar	1.4%		
A private club	0.3%		
Public space (park, beach, etc.)	0.3%		

Source: Own survey data. The first question was answered by all respondents (N = 366), whereas the second question was restricted to those who identified as contracted employees (N = 244).

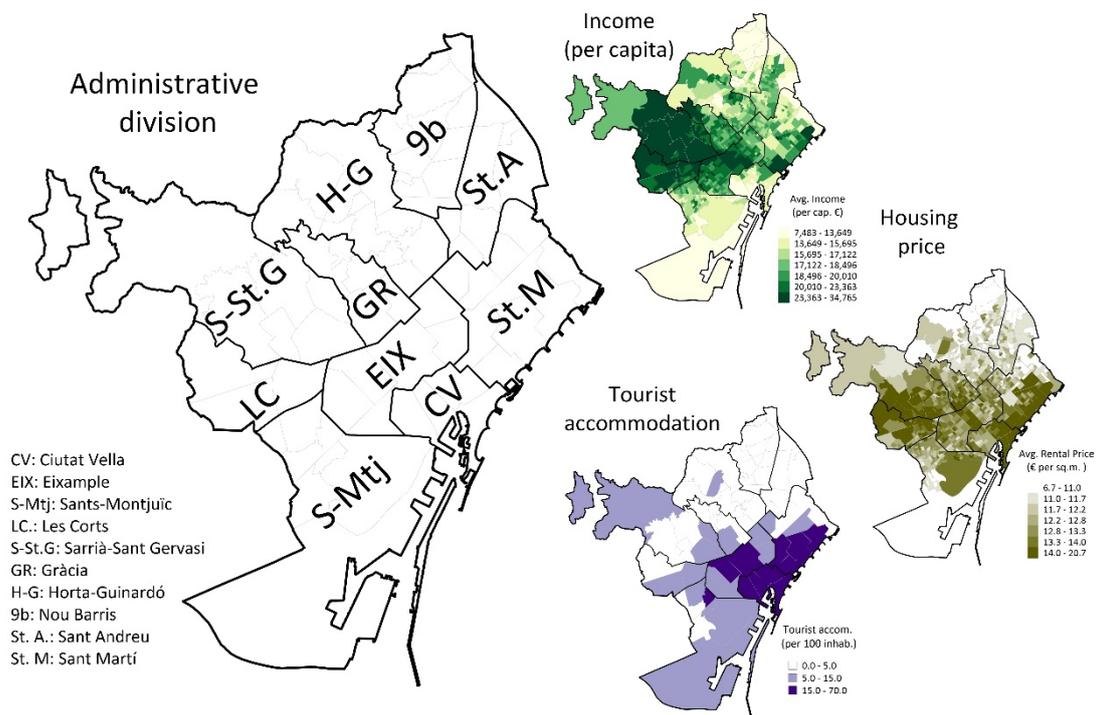


Figure 1. Administrative division and contextual maps: Income, housing price and tourist accommodation

Source: Own elaboration based on data from: Income (Atlas de Distribución de Renta de los Hogares); Housing Price (Sistema Estatal de Referencia del Precio del Alquiler de Vivienda); Tourist Accommodation (Barcelona City Council).

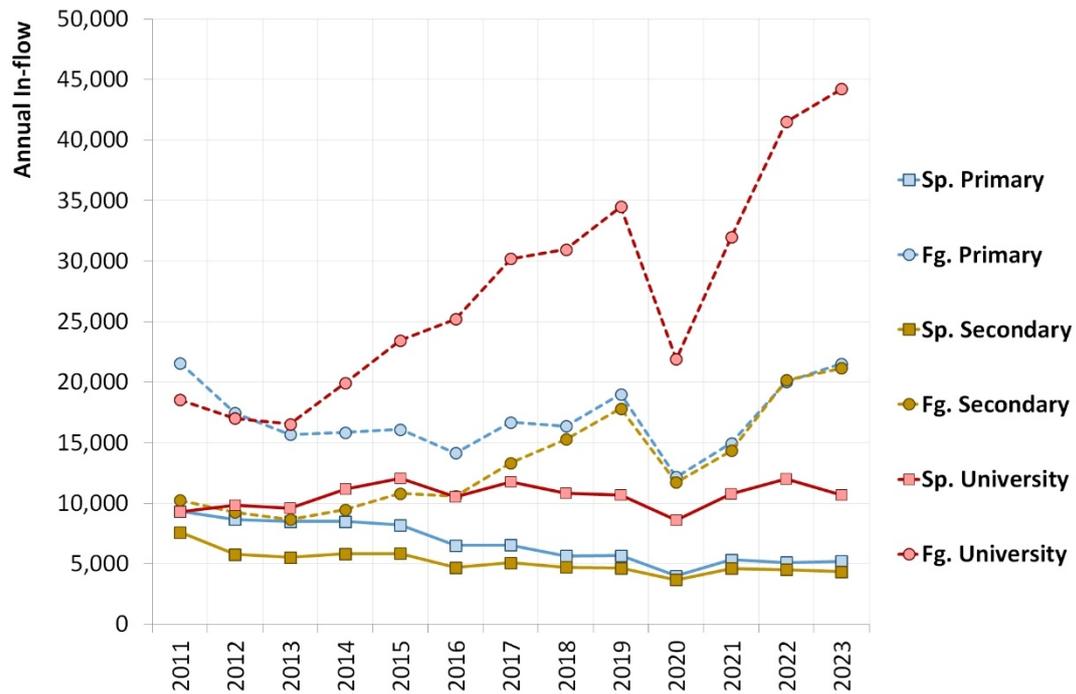


Figure 2. Immigration flows into the municipality of Barcelona by place of birth (Spain or foreign) and highest attained education level, 2011-2023 / Source: Population Register (arrivals). Barcelona City Council

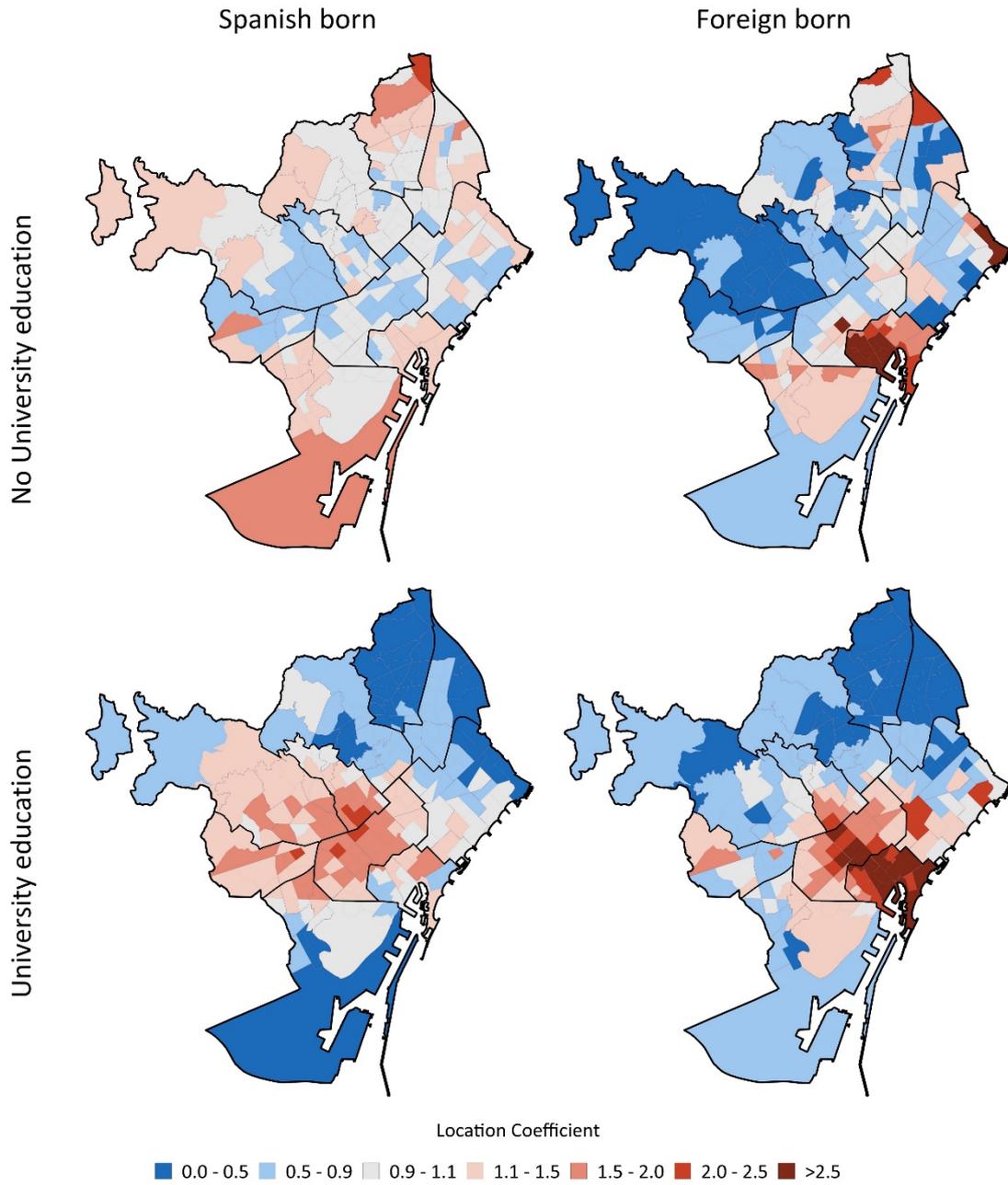


Figure 3. Location coefficient of migratory flows in the city of Barcelona based on country of birth and educational attainment level, 2011-2023 / Source: Population Register (arrivals).

Barcelona City Council

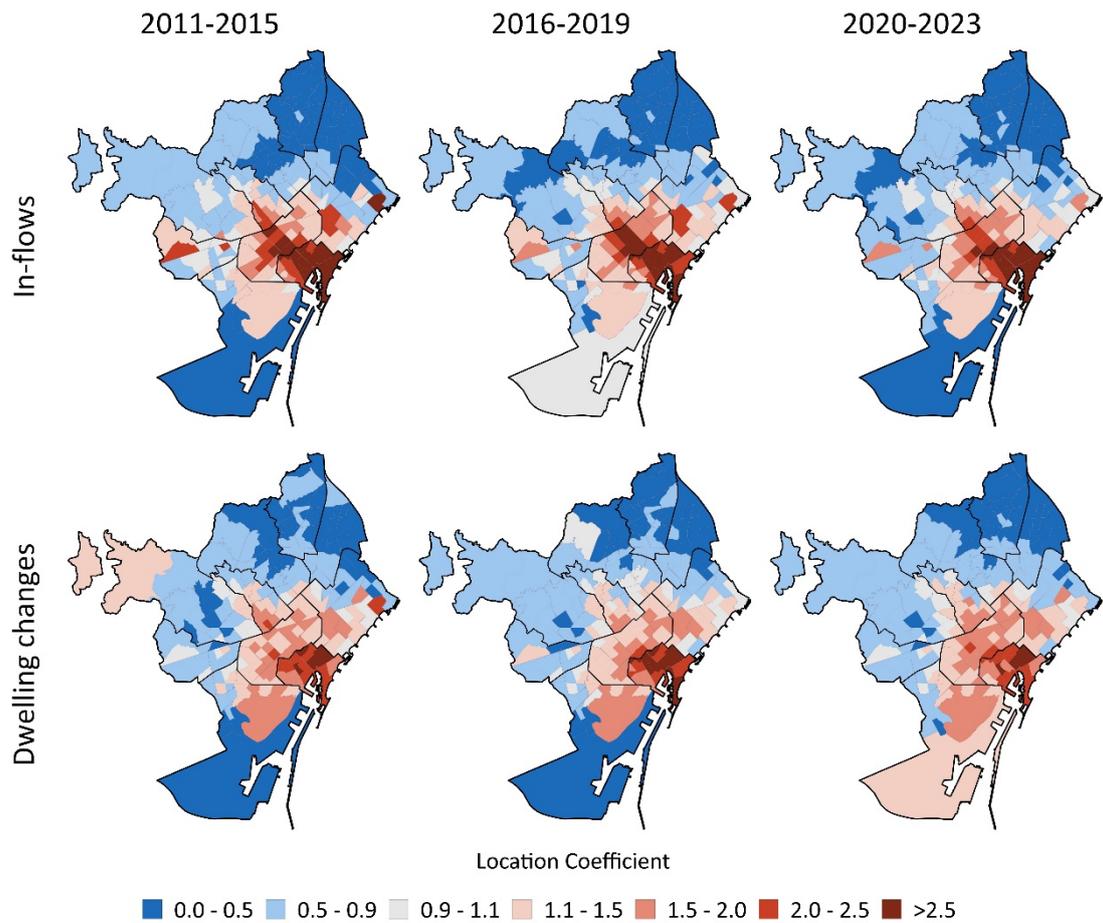


Figure 4. Evolution of the location coefficient of immigration flows and dwelling changes of the foreign-born population with university studies, 2011-2023. / Source: Population Register (arrivals and dwelling changes). Barcelona City Council

In which neighborhood(s) do you work or visit often for work-related reasons?

In which neighborhood(s) do you often spend your leisure time, shop, socialize, and exercise in Barcelona?

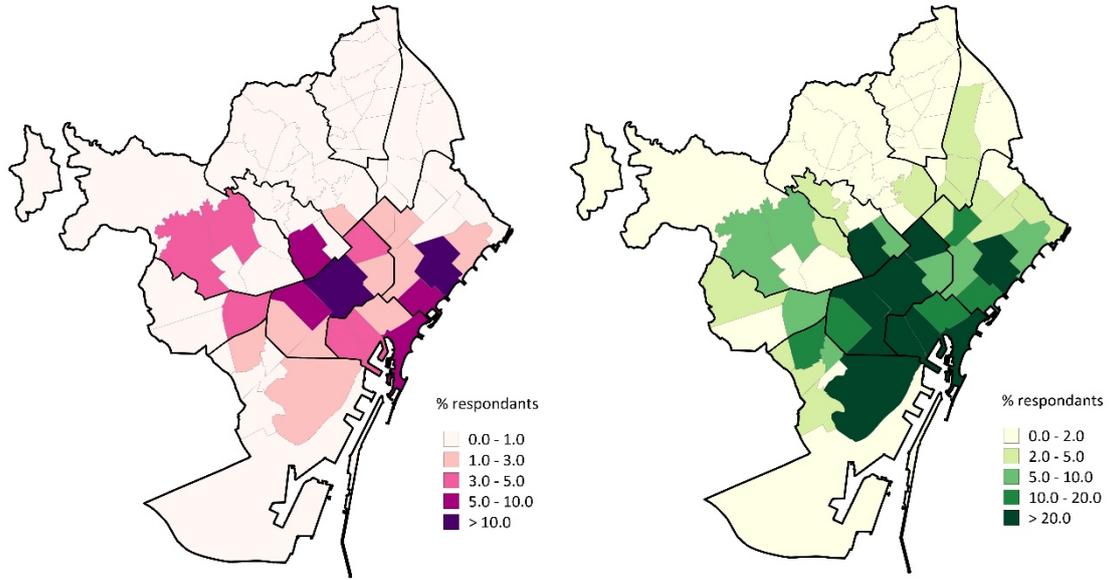


Figure 5. Location of work and leisure spaces of those surveyed / Source: Survey developed by authors. Note: Values represents the percentage of times a neighborhood was selected among respondents who selected at least one neighborhood.

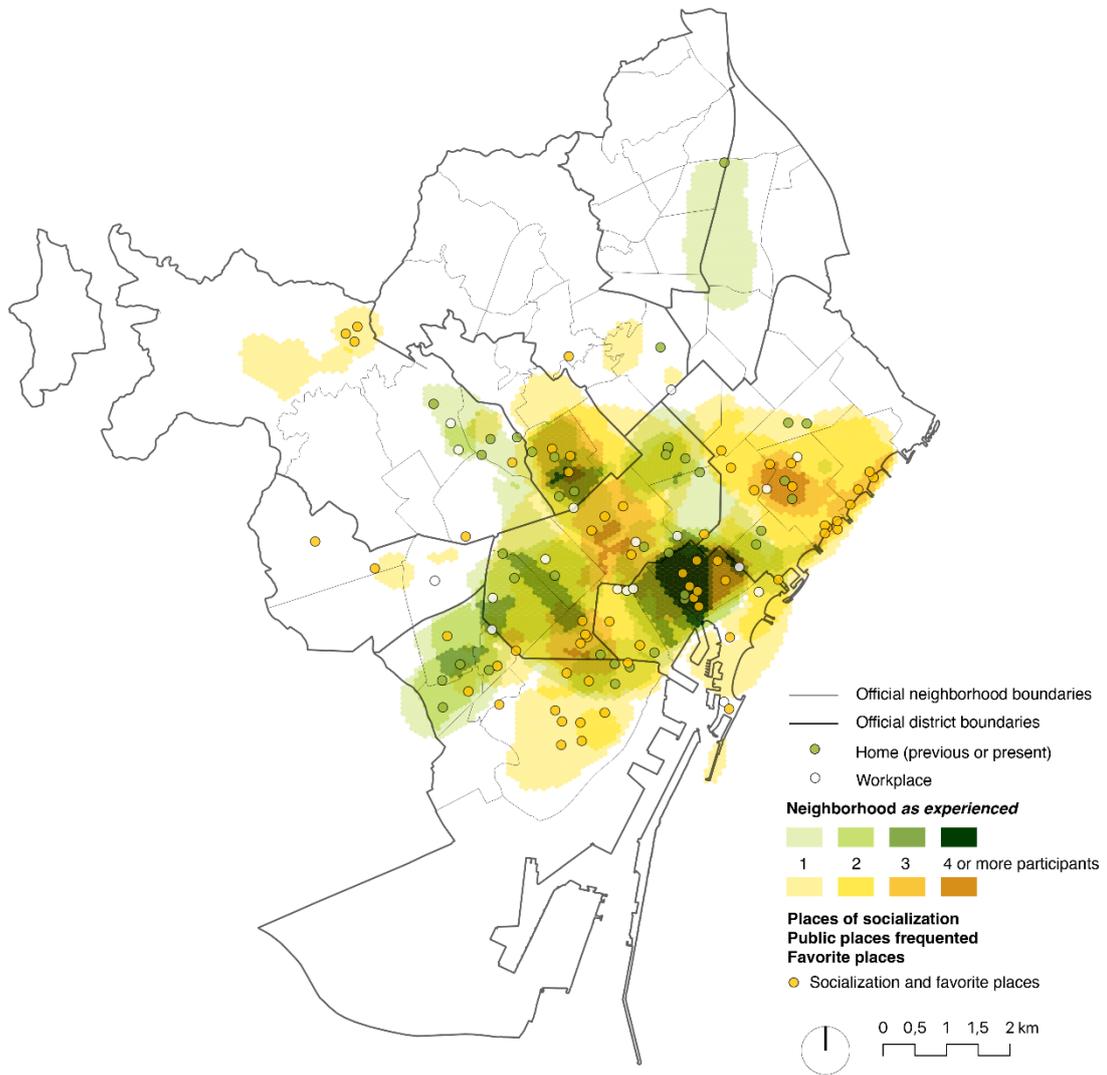


Figure 6. Results of the mental mapping exercise in focus groups / Source: Own elaboration, based on data drawn on maps by participants during focus groups