



Research Article

THE THIRD SOCIAL SECTOR: CITIZEN SCIENCE IN THE FIELD OF DISAPPEARANCES IN SPAIN

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**Pedro Llorens Sellés
Captain of Guardia Civil**

**Academy of Corporals and Guardsmen of the Guardia Civil in Baeza
PhD student in Legal and Social Sciences at the University of Malaga.**

**Degree in Law (UNED)
pedro12345123@yahoo.es**

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-7030-9075>

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THE THIRD SOCIAL SECTOR: CITIZEN SCIENCE IN THE FIELD OF DISAPPEARANCES IN SPAIN

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Abstract: This article analyses the impact and nature of "citizen science" generated by the third social sector in the field of missing persons in Spain. The main objective is to demonstrate how family organisations have transcended the role of support to become producers of applied scientific knowledge, promoting structural reforms. The methodology employed is qualitative, combining a historical-legal analysis of the figure of the disappeared, the study of catalytic media cases, the review of official reports from the National Centre for the Disappeared (CNDES) and the examination of the proposals and documents produced by these organisations.

The most significant results show that the "knowledge born of pain" of these associations constitutes a fundamental source of empirical knowledge. They have achieved concrete advances such as the eradication of the "24-hour myth" for reporting, the reduction of legal deadlines for the declaration of absence and death, and the unification of police protocols. Likewise, its influence was key to the creation of the CNDES and the formalisation of its collaborative role in the 1st National Strategic Plan (2022-2024).

The main conclusion is that the third sector has transformed an initially patrimonial problem into a human rights issue, validating citizen science as an effective tool. A model of collaborative management between civil society and the state has been consolidated, whose main pending challenge is the creation of a "Statute of the Disappeared Person" that provides comprehensive legal security for victims.

Resumen: Este artículo analiza el impacto y la naturaleza de la "ciencia ciudadana" generada por el tercer sector social en el ámbito de las personas desaparecidas en España. El objetivo principal es demostrar cómo las organizaciones de familiares han trascendido el rol de apoyo para convertirse en agentes productores de conocimiento científico aplicado, impulsando reformas estructurales. La metodología empleada es cualitativa,

combinando un análisis histórico-jurídico de la figura del desaparecido, el estudio de casos mediáticos catalizadores, la revisión de informes oficiales del Centro Nacional de Desaparecidos (CNDES) y el examen de las propuestas y documentos elaborados por dichas organizaciones.

Los resultados más significativos evidencian que el "saber nacido del dolor" de estas asociaciones constituye una fuente de conocimiento empírico fundamental. Han logrado avances concretos como la erradicación del "mito de las 24 horas" para denunciar, la reducción de los plazos legales para la declaración de ausencia y fallecimiento, y la unificación de protocolos policiales. Asimismo, su incidencia fue clave para la creación del CNDES y la formalización de su rol colaborador en el I Plan Estratégico Nacional (2022-2024).

La conclusión principal es que el tercer sector ha transformado un problema inicialmente patrimonial en un asunto de derechos humanos, validando la ciencia ciudadana como una herramienta eficaz. Se ha consolidado un modelo de gestión colaborativa entre la sociedad civil y el Estado, cuyo principal reto pendiente es la creación de un "Estatuto de la Persona Desaparecida" que dote de seguridad jurídica integral a las víctimas.

Keywords: Third Sector, Citizen Science, Disappeared Persons, human rights, Spain

Palabras clave: Tercer sector social, Ciencia Ciudadana, personas desaparecidas, derechos humanos, España

ABBREVIATIONS

Art.: Article

CNDES: National Centre for Missing Persons.

et al.: and others.

INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of missing persons is one of the most painful and complex social and legal problems facing contemporary society. In Spain, although the legal figure of the "absent" has existed since pre-Roman times, in the sense of being considered for the purposes of duties, inheritance rights or obligations, the missing person being considered as deceased after a certain period of time has elapsed (Coronas González, 1983, p. 294), nevertheless, the human, social and criminal dimension of disappearances is a phenomenon which has emerged strongly in recent decades (Llorens Sellés, 2024, pp. 111-117).

Spain is currently facing a social crisis that generates profound and devastating repercussions, such as the disappearance of persons. Official figures paint a bleak picture: the annual report on missing persons drawn up by the National Centre for Missing Persons (CNDES) puts the number of missing persons reports filed in Spain in 2024 at 26,345 (Muniesa Tomás et al., 2025, p. 36). (Muniesa Tomás et al., 2025, p. 36).

Within this panorama, numerous associations, foundations and organisations of people emerge that either because of their proximity (family members, relatives, etc.), their sensitivity or their empathy with the phenomenon of disappearances, contribute in a remarkable way to promote improvements in the legislative, procedural or operational areas related to the disappearance of persons.¹

Such groups constitute what has come to be called the third social sector², although their action is not limited to the above-mentioned fields, but their "knowledge born of grief"³ constitutes what has come to be called "citizen science". This terminology was independently coined in the mid-1990s by the British sociologist Alan Irwin (1995)⁴, who approached it as a tool for civic empowerment, and by the American ornithologist Rick Bonney (1996), to describe citizen participation in scientific research.

Such a statement is not trivial, as the knowledge emanating from these organisations, far from being a testimonial contribution, represents a wealth of applied knowledge that has managed to modify operational protocols⁵ and promote legislative reforms.⁶

¹ This is recognised by the CNDES in its annual report 2022 (Muniesa Tomás et al., 2023, p. 15).

² The third social sector in the field of disappearances, according to the CNDES in its annual report of 2023, would be "composed of Foundations and Associations that bring together relatives and friends of persons disappeared without apparent cause..." (Muniesa Tomás et al., 2024, p. 22).

³ Term coined by Pereira Benítez et al. (2024, p. 107) in an article included in the book *Interpretar la naturaleza: ciencias aplicadas a la detección de inhumaciones clandestinas* (Quezada Esparza, 2024, pp. 107-132).

⁴ The term "citizen science" was first coined by Alan Irwin in his 1995 book *Citizen Science: A Study of People, Expertise, and Sustainable Development*.

⁵ During the 1st European Forum of Families with Missing Persons in 2015, one of the associations already called for the need to modify the operational protocols through its document "Charter of Rights and Urgent Demands" (European Foundation for Missing Persons - QSD Global, 2015).

⁶ Thus, for example, it is worth mentioning the demand of one of the associations for the shortening of deadlines for the declaration of absence and death, in the "III Charter of Rights and Urgent Demands" drawn up by an association, which was included in the IV European Forum of Families of Missing Persons held in 2019 (European Foundation for Missing Persons - QSD Global, 2019, p. 7).

The fundamental purpose of this study is to analyse in depth the nature and impact of "citizen science" promoted by the Spanish third social sector in the context of disappearances. It seeks to understand how these organisations not only contribute to the search, investigation and support to families, but also make an essential contribution to the scientific knowledge of the phenomenon of disappearances that has led to great progress in the field.

2. HISTORICAL AND SOCIAL BACKGROUND: BUILDING A COLLECTIVE CONSCIENCE

The phenomenon of disappearances is not new, but its treatment as a specific social and legal problem in Spain is relatively recent. Its visibility has been built through a painful succession of media cases and a slow institutional awakening.

2.1. FROM LEGAL ABSENCE TO MEDIA IMPACT

Legally, the figure of the "absentee" has existed in the Civil Code since 1889, but its focus was purely patrimonial, regulating the management of the assets, rights and obligations of those who disappeared without giving signs of life (Llorens Sellés, 2024, p. 108). The human and criminal dimension would not form part of the collective conscience until the second half of the 20th century. Cases such as the disappearance of a 13-year-old boy in Lanzarote in 1973 (Ortiz, 2023) or a boy of the same age in Málaga in 1987 (Rada, 2016) caused considerable concern in society.

However, it was the arrival of a television programme called "Quien sabe dónde" in 1992 that marked a turning point in public awareness. This programme, which reached massive audiences, not only gave visibility to hundreds of cases, but also demonstrated the importance of citizen collaboration in the field (Llorens Sellés, 2024, pp. 109-110).

The treatment of cases of enormous social impact, such as the disappearance and death of three minors in Alcàsser (Valencia) in 1992 (Migelez, 2019) or the kidnapping of a young girl in Alcobendas (Madrid) in 1993 (Morcillo and Muñoz, 2007), introduced the drama of disappearances into all Spanish homes, generating a national debate on security, police response and the role of the media in these cases (Llorens Sellés, 2024, pp. 109-111).

In this social context, the disappearance of a minor girl in Cornellà (Barcelona) in 1997 (Manzano, 2019), whose father was the driving force behind the Inter-sos association, symbolises the moment when the affected families themselves began to organise, laying the foundations for today's third sector in the field of disappearances.

2.2. THE 21ST CENTURY: CATALYSTS FOR INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE AND SOCIAL PRESSURE

The beginning of the new century continued the tragic path of cases that shocked society and acted as catalysts for change. The disappearance of a young Sevillian woman in 2009 (Pascual Marjanet, 2015, pp. 51-56), with the added anguish caused by the failure to locate her body "marked a before and after in everything related to disappearances" (Llorens Sellés, 2024, p. 112), posing unprecedented judicial and police challenges. Not

in vain, this case could be considered the trigger for Instruction 1/2009 of the Secretary of State for Security, which for the first time regulated police action in the face of high-risk disappearances.

Subsequently, cases such as that of the children who disappeared in Córdoba and were murdered by their father in 2011 introduced the concept of "vicarious violence" into the public debate (Ibáñez, 2021), while a disappearance in 2016 in A Pobla do Caramiñal (Quelart, 2019) and another in Almería in 2018 (Escobar, 2020) maintained social and media pressure, accelerating the creation of the institutional architecture in the framework of disappearances, as we know it today.

This chronology demonstrates that normative advances in Spain have been largely reactive, driven by tragedy and tireless pressure from families and civil society.

3. THE THIRD SOCIAL SECTOR IN THE FIELD OF DISAPPEARANCES: FROM CONCEPTUALISATION TO CITIZEN SCIENCE

3.1. WHAT IS KNOWN AS THE THIRD SOCIAL SECTOR IN THE FIELD OF DISAPPEARANCES?

The third social sector, as established in art. 2 of Law 43/2015, of 9 October, is made up of "*those organisations of a private nature, arising from citizen or social initiative, under different modalities, which respond to criteria of solidarity and social participation, with aims of general interest and non-profit making, which promote the recognition and exercise of civil rights, as well as economic, social or cultural rights of persons and groups suffering from conditions of vulnerability or at risk of social exclusion. In any case, the entities of the third social action sector are associations, foundations, as well as the federations or associations that integrate them, as long as they comply with the provisions of this Law*".

Transferring the definition to the field of missing persons, the third social sector would be understood as the different Foundations and Associations, which bring together relatives and friends of missing persons without apparent cause, and those who suffer the absence of a loved one over time (Muniesa Tomás *et al.*, 2023, p. 22).

The National Centre for Missing Persons recognises the following organisations as third sector of social action in the field of missing persons⁷ :

- AFADECOR - Asociación de Familiares y Amigos de personas Desaparecidas de Córdoba (Association of Relatives and Friends of Disappeared Persons of Cordoba)
- AFADES - Associació de Familiars de Despareguts i Desaparegudes (Association of Relatives of Disappeared and Disappeared Persons)
- QSDglobal- European Foundation for Missing Persons
- SOSDESAPARECIDOS - Association for help and dissemination of cases of Missing Persons
- Inter-SOS - Association of Relatives of Persons Disappeared without Apparent Cause

⁷ <https://cnedes-web.ses.mir.es/publico/Desaparecidos/Publicaciones.html>

- NON? NORK DAKI NON ELKARTEA- Association for Missing Persons without Apparent Cause
- NUN HAGO ELKARTEA - Association of Relatives of Victims of Disappearance and Violent Crime Abroad
- ANAR - Help for Children and Adolescents at Risk.

The role of these organisations is relevant to such an extent that the National Centre for Missing Persons itself recognises the need for a fluid and constant relationship with them, facilitating the exchange of information and receiving feedback on the needs of the families and relatives of missing persons through them (Muniesa Tomás *et al.*, 2023, p. 22). All of this is in accordance with the Strategic Plan approved by the same body (Ministry of the Interior-Secretariat of State for Security, 2022) which proposes the exchange of knowledge and experiences between the agents involved in the issue and the third social sector (Ministry of the Interior-Secretariat of State for Security, 2022, p. 19), and to increase knowledge on collaboration with the third social sector (Ministry of the Interior-Secretariat of State for Security, 2022, p. 31).

3.2. CITIZEN SCIENCE AND THE THIRD SOCIAL SECTOR

Citizen science, in its most generic conception, refers to scientific activity aimed at generating new knowledge with the voluntary (in the sense of conscious and intentional) participation of citizens, who can become involved at different levels of the scientific process (Oltra Codina *et al.*, 2022, p. 18).

Since the term citizen science was popularised in the mid-1990s by Alan Irwin (1995)⁸ and Bonney (1996), the field has undergone remarkable development in both theory and practice. Dedicated scientific journals, collaborative platforms and a growing number of initiatives have emerged around the world that integrate active citizen participation in various scientific disciplines (Bergerot, 2022; Storksdieck, 2016; Vohland *et al.*, 2021). However, the involvement of lay people in the production of scientific knowledge is not a recent phenomenon. Its roots go back more than three centuries, when amateur naturalists, especially in the field of botany, collaborated voluntarily through empirical observations and specimen collection to enrich the scientific studies of the time.

Is the third social sector therefore a generator of citizen science in the field of missing persons?

Undoubtedly yes, although citizen science has been commonly associated with environmental or biological research (Santana Castellón *et al.*, 2024, p. 137), its fundamental principles of public participation, data generation and problem solving (Oltra Codina *et al.*, 2022, p. 18) are robustly manifested in the context of disappearances in Spain. Mass dissemination activities, the collection of information by volunteers and relatives affected by disappearances, and the creation of collaborative platforms by associations that make up the social third sector, although not always formally labelled as "citizen science", are a practical application of its methodologies.

⁸ The term "citizen science" was first coined by Alan Irwin in his 1995 book *Citizen Science: A Study of People, Expertise, and Sustainable Development*.

4. THE THIRD SOCIAL SECTOR AS A GENERATOR OF CITIZEN SCIENCE IN THE FIELD OF DISAPPEARANCES

4.1. LARGE-SCALE DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Missing persons associations actively promote citizen solidarity through mass dissemination of cases via the internet and other means of publicity⁹. This dissemination is not just an alert, but a direct form of data collection, as every piece of information provided by a citizen can be crucial. Volunteers are fundamental to these third sector organisations, actively involved in relief and cooperation work, from disseminating posters to participating in search operations.¹⁰

Associations act as hubs for mass data collection. When the organisations that make up the third sector disseminate an alert through their extensive networks, they not only inform, but also set in motion thousands of "citizen scientists" who observe and report. Every sighting, every clue provided by a citizen is a piece of information. The associations receive, filter, cross-check and analyse this information, turning a massive, unstructured flow of data into actionable intelligence for law enforcement. This process is, in essence, a citizen science project of real-time data collection and analysis.

This operational model works remarkably similar to a distributed sensor network. Individual citizens act as geographically dispersed data collection points, providing real-time observations over a wide area. Associations, in turn, function as the central processing unit, aggregating, filtering, validating and analysing this vast decentralised dataset. This provides a scale and speed of intelligence gathering that traditional police forces, with limited personnel and centralised control, cannot easily replicate. This highlights the unique comparative advantage of citizen science in situations that require widespread observation and real-time data entry, particularly in geographically dispersed or time-sensitive searches. It also implies a pressing need for formal mechanisms and technological interfaces to seamlessly integrate this powerful "sensor network" with official state systems, optimising overall search efficiency.

4.2. GENERATING EMPIRICAL KNOWLEDGE (KNOWLEDGE BORN OF PAIN)

Citizen participation, channelled through the organisations that make up the so-called third social sector, allows for the generation of knowledge that is applied with unquestionable effectiveness in dealing with the disappearances of people in Spain. This knowledge is applied in the creation of protocols, in initiatives for legislative modifications, in the promotion of social and training initiatives, etc. This is what has come to be known as "knowledge born of pain" (Pereira Benítez, *et al.*, 2024, p. 137) and which generates citizen science.

The most profound and unique contribution of the third sector is the creation of a body of knowledge that could not be generated in a laboratory or office. This "knowledge born of pain" is the result of hundreds of hours of research, direct observation and comparison of cases. This knowledge, deeply rooted in the prolonged experience and visceral context of the search for a loved one, represents a form of "embodied

⁹ See the website of one of these associations, e.g. <https://sosdesaparecidos.es/> or <https://www.qsdglobal.com/>.

¹⁰ See as an example the following link: <https://sosdesaparecidos.es/busqueda-batida/>

epistemology". It is not primarily theoretical or acquired through formal academic training, but is developed through repeated observation in diverse settings and direct interaction with the search process. This tacit knowledge, while difficult to codify, has proven to be incredibly effective in practice.

Through direct contact with hundreds of families, these associations accumulate invaluable knowledge about patterns of disappearance, risk profiles, family dynamics and specific vulnerabilities that often escape official statistics. While official statistics are valuable for identifying general trends, they often lack the granular, qualitative details of individual cases and the complex social factors that contribute to disappearances. Qualitative data, derived from the direct and empathetic interaction of the third sector with families, provides a 'ground truth' that reveals hidden patterns and specific vulnerabilities. This constitutes a form of applied sociology and criminology from the ground up. This approach underlines the inherent limitations of purely statistical or top-down approaches to complex social problems. It advocates for a hybrid model in which qualitative data, derived from the experience of affected communities, informs and enriches official analyses, leading to more targeted, empathetic and ultimately more effective interventions that address the root causes and specific contexts of disappearances.

4.3. IMPACT AND VALIDATION THROUGH POLITICAL AND LEGAL ADVOCACY

Third sector associations and foundations do commendable and tireless work in recognising and exercising the civil rights of disappeared persons and their relatives. These citizens' organisations offer information and comprehensive help to families, addressing not only the search, but also the complex psychological and legal needs arising from the uncertainty.¹¹

The third social sector in the field of disappearances in Spain, consisting of organisations made up mainly of relatives and friends of disappeared persons, has managed to influence decision-making and policy-making, contributing its knowledge and experience for improvement, and channelling the demands of relatives affected by this phenomenon to public and private institutions.

Its work is therefore not limited to research, but extends to proposing structural solutions. The elaboration of drafts for a necessary "Statute of the Missing Person"¹² or the "proposal for an official register of voluntary absentees"¹³ are clear examples of how they transform lived experience into concrete legislative proposals.

¹¹ For the services provided by some associations, see:
<https://sosdesaparecidos.es/quienes-somos/>
<https://www.qsdglobal.com/>

¹² As an example, the document produced by the QSDglobal Foundation, which can be consulted at the following link: <https://www.qsdglobal.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/PUNTO-7.-BORRADOR-ESTATUTO-DE-LA-PERSONA-DESAPARECIDA.pdf>

¹³ As an example, the document produced by the SOSdesaparecidos Association, which can be consulted at the following link: https://sosdesaparecidos.es/wp-content/uploads/Propuesta-Registro-Oficial-de-Ausentes-Voluntarios-ROAV._signed.pdf

The very creation of the National Centre for Missing Persons¹⁴ or the declaration of a day (9 March) as "National Day for people who have disappeared without apparent cause"¹⁵, are citizen initiatives which have borne fruit in positive measures for the management and visualisation of a worrying social phenomenon.

Collaboration between the third sector and public institutions is increasingly formal and necessary. The National Centre for the Disappeared (hereafter CNDES) recognises a wide network of associations of missing persons which it describes as the third social sector. It actively collaborates with the CNDES in the elaboration of publications, reports and awareness-raising campaigns, as well as in the dissemination of information and prevention of disappearances.

In addition, these organisations channel citizens' demands on disappearances to public and private institutions and bodies with competencies in addressing these needs.

The 1st Strategic Plan on Missing Persons (2022-2024) of the Ministry of Interior (Ministerio del Interior-Secretaría de Estado de Seguridad, 2022, pp. 28-29) marks a turning point by formalising and consolidating the role of the third sector as a fundamental actor in the state response to this phenomenon. Far from being a mere recipient of information, the plan integrates family foundations and associations into the core of the strategy, recognising their trajectory, knowledge and commitment.

Collaboration is articulated in the Plan through four main axes:

Prevention and Awareness Raising: Social organisations will be co-participants in the design and dissemination of awareness-raising campaigns. Their direct involvement will ensure that the messages are effective and reach the public, taking advantage of their capillarity and proximity to the reality of families (Ministry of the Interior-Secretariat of State for Security, 2022, p. 12).

Specialised training: The plan establishes that the third sector will play an active role in the training of the security forces and other bodies. In this sense, foundations and associations will contribute their experience in seminars and round tables, offering the perspective of family members and their practical knowledge, thus guaranteeing a more humane and complete training for professionals (Ministry of the Interior-Secretariat of State for Security, 2022, pp. 15-19).

Research and Operational Coordination: Associations will be a key link in the dissemination of alerts, as in the case of the ANAR Foundation with the 116000 line. In addition, their participation is foreseen in the homogenisation of posters and in permanent

¹⁴ Professor Lorente Acosta introduced the idea of the creation of a National Centre for the Disappeared more explicitly during his appearance at the Special Commission for the study of the problem of people who have disappeared without apparent cause, held on 17 June 2013, attributing the idea to the journalist Francisco "Paco" Lobatón (Diario de Sesiones del Senado nº183 de 17/06/2013, pp. 34-35). The creation of the National Centre for Missing Persons was formalised in Instruction 2/2018 of the Secretary of State for Security.

¹⁵ Promoted by the Inter-sos Association, it was formalised by official publication in 2010 (BOCG no. 478 of 16/11/2010).

collaboration procedures, ensuring that information and efforts are coordinated among all actors involved (Ministry of the Interior-Secretariat of State for Security, 2022, p. 25).

Care, Support and Advocacy: Perhaps the area of greatest impact is attention to family members. The plan institutionalises the associations' dialogue with police officials and includes them in crucial working groups, such as those dedicated to "long-term" disappearances and the creation of the future "Statute of the Disappeared Person". Their collaboration is actively promoted to offer psychological support and to study unreported cases, strengthening the network of protection and assistance to victims (Ministry of Interior-Secretariat of State for Security, 2022, pp. 28-31).

Finally, the inclusion of the most representative foundations and associations in the Plan's Monitoring Commission ensures that their voice is not only heard, but also forms an integral part of the evaluation and continuous improvement of the national strategy, consolidating a collaborative management model in the face of one of the most painful social problems (Ministry of the Interior-Secretariat of State for Security, 2022, p. 32).

4.4. COMPARATIVE: LESSONS FROM OTHER CONTEXTS AND THEIR RELEVANCE FOR SPAIN

Although focused on Spain, it is useful to situate these developments in a global context. In Latin America, the incorporation of citizen approaches is remarkable. Mexico, with the highest number of recorded disappearances, has numerous search collectives (more than 230), where the work of the so-called "Search Mothers" has been academically studied as "citizen science" (Santana Castellón, 2024).

The Mexican "madres buscadoras", for example, have developed techniques of field prospecting, identification of clandestine burial indicators and analysis of patterns of disappearance that transcend traditional forensic training. This knowledge, forged in extreme adversity, is shared and systematised within the collectives, creating a collective database of "knowledge" that is validated by direct experience and, on occasions, by the discovery of remains. The relevance for Spain lies in the transfer of this epistemology of searching from the grassroots: the idea that direct experience and pain can be transformed into a legitimate form of forensic investigation. While the tools and resources may differ, the principle that those affected can become experts in searching and advocating for their rights is a fundamental lesson that has resonated in the Spanish context. This suggests that, beyond contextual differences, there is a universality in civil society's capacity to generate applied scientific knowledge when formal institutions are unable or unwilling to meet a critical need.

5. PROGRESS MADE: EVIDENCE OF CITIZEN SCIENCE IN ACTION

Much progress has been made as a result of the knowledge provided and proposals made by associations formed by relatives of missing persons, including the following:

1. Establishment of a specific day as the "day of the missing persons without apparent cause"¹⁶. In order to recognise missing persons as citizens with the right to be searched for, to not be forgotten and to promote coordination mechanisms that are truly effective in locating them and clarifying each case. Also to make visible the abandonment faced by their families and to demand comprehensive attention in all areas. Ultimately, with the commemoration of this day, the aim is for society as a whole to take ownership of a drama that should not be borne solely by the relatives of the disappeared.

2. Shortening the deadlines for the declaration of absence and death. In order to adapt times to the current situation, where the advance of information technologies, identity control systems and global interconnection make it increasingly difficult for a person to remain hidden indefinitely without leaving a trace. Except in those exceptional cases where there is a tragic end combined with extraordinary means of concealment or the collaboration of third parties, most cases of disappearance tend to be clarified in considerably shorter periods of time than those provided for in current legislation.

Thus, the time periods for declarations of absence and death have gone from 2 years for absence and 30 years for the presumption of death in Articles 184 and 191 of the original Civil Code of 1889, to one year for absence and 10 years for death¹⁷ in the most current version of our Civil Code.

3. Immediate response and eradication of the "24-hour myth"¹⁸. In order to guarantee immediate reporting, ruling out any waiting period, as the first few hours are crucial for tracing. This is one of the most significant victories of the incidence of the third sector, which is reflected in the official protocol for the search of missing persons (Cereceda Fernández-Oruña and Tourís López, 2019, pp. 38-40).

4. Single and binding police protocol¹⁹. Adoption of a unified protocol for all security forces (including regional and local police) to avoid lack of coordination and disparities during the action.²⁰

5. Management and unification of alerts²¹. Create a unified alert format and a clear protocol for its dissemination, optimising the visibility and effectiveness of citizen alerts.²²

¹⁶ Promoted by the Inter-sos Association, it was formalised by official publication in 2010 (BOCG no. 478 of 16/11/2010).

¹⁷ Including specific circumstances that shorten these deadlines.

¹⁸ Demand contained in the "Charter of Rights and Urgent Demands" within the I European Forum of Families with Missing Persons held in 2015 (European Foundation for Missing Persons - QSD Global -, 2015) and presented by an association at the I Conference of the National Centre for Missing Persons on the action of the FFCCS in cases of missing persons held in Madrid in 2019 (European Foundation for Missing Persons - QSD Global -, 2019, p. 3).

¹⁹ Demand contained in the "Charter of Rights and Urgent Demands" within the I European Forum of Families with Missing Persons held in 2015 (European Foundation for Missing Persons - QSD Global -, 2015) and also in the "Charter of Rights and Urgent Demands" within the II European Forum of Families with Missing Persons held in 2018 (European Foundation for Missing Persons - QSD Global -, 2018, p. 2).

²⁰ This Protocol will come into force in 2019 (Cereceda Fernández-Oruña and Tourís López, 2019).

²¹ Demand put forward by an association at the 1st Conference of the National Centre for Missing Persons on the action of the Security Forces in cases of missing persons held in Madrid in 2019 (European Foundation for Missing Persons - QSD Global -, 2019, p. 4).

²² Such a demand has been highlighted in the annual report on missing persons for the year 2025 (Muniesa Tomás et al., 2025, pp. 18-19).

6. Establishment of offices for the professional care and support of families of missing persons²³. In order to receive adequate treatment in terms of psychological, technical, economic, legal and international assistance.²⁴

6. CHALLENGES AHEAD: THE EVOLVING CHALLENGES OF CITIZEN SCIENCE

Much progress has been made, but nevertheless, much remains to be done, and in this regard, associations formed by relatives of missing persons call for further measures to be taken:

1. Creation of a Statute of the Missing Person. This is the central and cross-cutting demand, fundamental for the creation of specific legislation that guarantees legal coverage of disappearances, provides security for families and serves as an effective tool for legal operators²⁵. This proposal is the result of the realisation that the absence of a proper legal definition generates a cascade of practical and emotional problems for families, from asset management to access to support.³

2. Abolition of Fees and Free of Charges²⁶. In order to eliminate the economic costs associated with publication in official gazettes for the declaration of absence and death, which are an additional burden for already vulnerable families.

3. Free Legal Aid²⁷. The third sector proposes to modify the Law so that the intervention of a lawyer is mandatory in these procedures, thus allowing access to free justice.

4. Revision of the term "Declaration of Death"²⁸. In order to replace the term with a less painful one, more in line with the reality of uncertainty, such as "declaration of absence without return". This demand reflects a deep sensitivity to the psychological impact of legal language on families.

²³ Demand contained in the "Charter of Rights and Urgent Demands" within the 1st European Forum of Families of Missing Persons held in 2015 (European Foundation for Missing Persons - QSD Global -, 2015).

²⁴ Progress has been made in the implementation of legal, psychological and social assistance, aimed at the families of missing persons, within the offices for assistance to victims of crime (Muniesa Tomás et al., 2025, p. 22). To this end, a guide of recommendations for the care of indirect victims of missing persons in crime victims' assistance offices has been approved (Ministry of Justice, 2023).

²⁵ Demand contained among others in the "Charter of Rights and Urgent Demands" within the II European Forum of Families with Missing Persons held in 2018 (European Foundation for Missing Persons - QSD Global -, 2018, p. 2) and in the "III Charter of Rights and Urgent Demands" within the IV Forum of Families of Missing Persons held in 2019 (European Foundation for Missing Persons - QSD Global -, 2019, p. 7).

²⁶ Demand contained among others in the "Charter of Rights and Urgent Demands" within the 2nd European Forum of Families of Missing Persons held in 2018 (European Foundation for Missing Persons - QSD Global -, 2018, p. 2) and in a document of proposals and measures submitted to the Ministry of the Interior in 2020 (Asociación SOSDesaparecidos, 2020, pp. 2-3).

²⁷ Demand contained among others in the document of proposals and measures submitted to the Ministry of Interior in 2020 (SOSDesaparecidos Association, 2020, pp. 2-3).

²⁸ Demand contained among others in the "Charter of Rights and Urgent Demands" within the II European Forum of Families of Missing Persons held in 2018 (European Foundation for Missing Persons - QSD Global -, 2018, p. 2) and in the "III Charter of Rights and Urgent Demands" within the IV Forum of Families of Missing Persons held in 2019 (European Foundation for Missing Persons - QSD Global -, 2019, p. 7).

5. Creation of an Official Register of Voluntary Absentees²⁹. In order to establish a confidential register so that adults who are voluntarily absent can register to avoid unnecessary searches and optimise police resources.

6. Amendments to criminal legislation. With the aim of improving it with changes such as extending the penal type of Art. 224 of the Penal Code to punish not only the inducement to abscond, but also the conscious harbouring of absconding minors.³⁰

These have been mentioned by way of example, as they are not the only ones, they are a sample of the countless proposals made by the third social sector and which are progressively having an impact on improvements.

7. CONCLUSIONS

The study of the phenomenon of missing persons in Spain, as dealt with in this paper, confronts us with one of the most significant socio-political and legal-criminological transformations of recent decades. Beyond the human tragedy represented by each individual case, the analysis reveals a process of paradigmatic evolution in the relationship between the citizenry, the state and the production of valid knowledge for the resolution of complex social conflicts. The conclusions drawn from this examination are not merely descriptive, but prescriptive and shed light on the limitations of the traditional state model and the emerging power of organised civil society as an epistemic actor of the first order.

7.1. THE DEFINITIVE OVERCOMING OF THE PATRIMONIAL PARADIGM AND THE CONSOLIDATION OF A HUMAN RIGHTS APPROACH

The first conclusion, of a historical-legal nature, is the observation of an irreversible break with the past. The text has traced an evolutionary line that starts with the figure of the "absent person" in the Civil Code of 1889, a concept designed from the logic of patrimonial legal security, whose main concern was the administration and eventual transfer of assets. In this conception, the missing person was, in essence, a problem of asset management. The human dimension was secondary, subsumed in the need to give certainty to legal relations.

What this work irrefutably demonstrates is that this paradigm was demolished not by an internal reflection of the legislator, but by the force of the facts, by the unbearable social pressure generated by a succession of cases that became embedded in the collective conscience. The work of the media, and in particular programmes such as "Quien sabe dónde", was crucial, but not as an end in itself, but as the vehicle that brought the drama into every home, transforming indifference into empathy and passivity into a demand for action. The state was forced to react. Reforms, such as Instruction 1/2009, were not acts of clairvoyance, but belated responses to human tragedies that put the credibility of the system in check. The inescapable conclusion is that the current approach, focused on the search, criminal investigation and victim support, is a citizen's achievement. We have

²⁹ Demand contained in the document entitled "Proposal to the National Centre for Missing Persons for the creation of an Official Register of Voluntary Absentees (ROAV)", drafted by an association of relatives of missing persons in 2022 (Asociación SOSDesaparecidos, 2022).

³⁰ Demand contained in the document "Proposals and Suggestions of the Association SOSDesaparecidos for the First Strategic Plan on Missing Persons" drafted in 2021 (Asociación SOSDesaparecidos, 2021).

moved from a law that protected "things" to a law that, albeit imperfectly, aspires to protect people and to guarantee their fundamental right to be sought and the right of their families to know.

7.2. CITIZEN SCIENCE" AS AN EPISTEMOLOGY OF PAIN: LEGITIMISING A NEW KNOWLEDGE.

The most transcendental contribution of the analysis is the conceptualisation of the third sector as a generator of citizen science. This is not a metaphor, but a precise description of its function. The text forces us to expand our understanding of what constitutes "science". If we traditionally associate it with laboratories and quantitative methodologies, here we are faced with a form of qualitative, empirical and deeply contextualised knowledge production, which some authors rightly call "knowledge born of pain".

This "knowledge" is superior in some respects to official knowledge for several reasons. First, because of its scale and agility: the analogy of the "distributed sensor network" is perfect for describing how partnerships mobilise the community, creating a system of real-time monitoring and data collection that no state institution could replicate. Second, because of its qualitative depth: while official statistics offer a macro view, the third sector accumulates a wealth of micro knowledge, based on direct interaction with hundreds of families. They understand the dynamics of vulnerability, the patterns of behaviour prior to disappearance and the subtleties of social contexts that are often invisible to a purely formal analysis. They constitute, in practice, an observatory of sociology and applied criminology.

Recognising this "knowledge" as science is an act of epistemic justice. It means validating a form of knowledge that has been historically marginalised as "emotional" or "anecdotal". The text demonstrates that this knowledge is not only valid, but also effective: it has succeeded in modifying operational protocols, such as the eradication of the myth of the 24-hour wait, and has driven legislative reforms. The lesson for criminology is profound: victims and their families are not mere objects of study or recipients of services, but active subjects of knowledge, capable of producing vital intelligence for the prevention and resolution of cases.

7.3. THE INSTITUTIONALISATION OF DIALOGUE: TOWARDS A COLLABORATIVE MANAGEMENT MODEL

If the third sector was born out of necessity and grew in adversity, its maturity is evident in its progressive institutionalisation as an interlocutor with the State. The creation of the CNDES and, culminating in the 1st Strategic Plan on Missing Persons (2022-2024), represent the formalisation of this relationship. This Plan is not a document of good intentions, but an implicit social contract that recognises the inadequacy of the State to address this problem alone.

When analysing the Plan's axes cited in the text, a transfer of roles and a consolidation of collaboration can be observed:

In terms of prevention, it is recognised that the capillarity and credibility of associations are more effective in reaching out to citizens.

In the area of training, it is acknowledged that professionals (police, judges, prosecutors) need not only technical training, but also human training that can only come from those who have experienced the drama first-hand.

With regard to coordination, its capacity for mass dissemination is integrated into the national operational strategy.

And finally, in terms of care and rights, they are given a central role in supporting families and, crucially, in the architecture of future reforms such as the "Statute of the Missing Person".

The conclusion is that we are witnessing the birth of a collaborative management model. There is a shift from a vertical and hierarchical relationship (state-citizen) to a horizontal and networked, where state and non-state actors share information, responsibilities and decision-making. This model, forged in the field of disappearances, is a possible archetype for the management of other complex social problems.

7.4. THE FUTURE HORIZON: THE STATUS OF THE DISAPPEARED PERSON AS A CORNERSTONE

The analysis of progress and remaining challenges allows us to conclude that the road, although remarkable, is unfinished. The victories achieved are the basis on which future demands are built, and among them, one emerges as the cornerstone of the whole system: the creation of a Statute of the Disappeared Person.

This is not just another demand. It is the logical conclusion of the whole process. It is the proposal to create a unified and coherent body of law that gives a charter to the disappeared person and their families, taking them out of the legal limbo in which they often find themselves. Such a statute, as proposed by the associations, would comprehensively address the gaps identified through years of experience: from free procedures and specialised legal assistance to the creation of mechanisms such as the register of voluntary absentees. It would be the definitive materialisation of the paradigm shift, consolidating in a single norm all the rights and protections that have so far been achieved in a fragmented manner.

In short, this work presents us with a story of resilience, social innovation and legal transformation. It shows that pain, channelled through organisation and collective intelligence, can become a powerful force for change, capable of reforming laws, modifying protocols and humanising institutions. The Spanish experience in the field of disappearances is a living laboratory that offers fundamental lessons about the power of citizen science, the need for a more humble and collaborative management by the state, and the unquestionable truth that the most effective justice is that which listens to, respects and integrates the knowledge of those who have suffered most from their absence.

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