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Supporting people with disabilities in the fight against labour market exclusion in the context of Covid-19

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The pandemic has affected the labour market for people with disabilities. It has led to higher unemployment, a general drop in hiring and changes in the proportion of people employed in the protected and ordinary labour market. The support network for people with disabilities in Barcelona has intervened to counteract negative trends while offering alternatives to hiring in the ordinary labour market. It is necessary to consolidate some of the measures carried out to offer employment alternatives to people with disabilities.

The precariousness and financial insecurity already suffered by many people was exacerbated by the declaration of the state of alert due to the Covid-19 pandemic and the lockdown measures decreed by the Government of Spain in March 2020. People with disabilities were no exception. The inclusion of this group in the general job market already had weak foundations built on a poor adaptation of jobs and employers' ignorance of the pertinent skills and opportunities. The outcome of the existing barriers to the labour market for people with disabilities is an employment rate of 37.1%, half that of the general population which, according to the Employment and Productive Model Observatory, stood at 79.7% in 2021. In other words, on average only slightly more than one in three people of working age with a disability is employed. The rate for women, at 34.7%, is particularly low.

The economic crisis caused by the health emergency has jeopardised the job placement of people with disabilities, who were the last to enter the labour market and practically the first to be forced to leave it.

The obstacles to job retention have been particularly significant in the case of people with disabilities, increasing job losses for this group and hindering their career progress.

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According to the report “Observatory on Disability and the Labour Market in Spain”, published by Odismet in response to the Covid-19 crisis, 60% of employed people with disabilities were at risk of losing their jobs due to the pandemic. Closing the doors to work inclusion is a problem for everybody in this group. In this context, job placement services had to significantly increase their legal advice and support work.

The protected market is made up of the Special Employment Centres (CETs). The employment of people with disabilities has a dual dimension: the protected market and the general labour market. These centres were designed to facilitate the transition to the labour market for the job placement of people with intellectual disabilities or disabilities stemming from a mental disorder of a degree of 33% or more, and people with physical or sensory disabilities with a degree of 65% or more¹. CETs provide assistance in many different ways, including but not limited to encouraging employers to hire people with disabilities (subsidising employment and social security costs), promoting the creation or expansion of centres, maintaining jobs (discounts on employers' social security contributions and salary cost subsidises of up to 50% of the minimum wage), and workplace adaptations². A total of 75% of contracts specifically designed for people with disabilities are concluded by CETs³, with salaries that are rarely far above the minimum wage. There is also the CET-derived concept of supported employment ("*enclavament laboral*"), referring to the contracts between an ordinary employer in the general labour market - the partner company - and a special employment centre (CET) for the provision of works or services directly related to the company's activities. This is known as an "alternative measure" and is available to companies with 50 employees or more who have not directly hired the minimum percentage of people with disabilities provided by law. In supported employment, a group of workers with disabilities employed at a CET work at a partner company's site on a temporary basis⁴, although the work itself is arranged by the CET with whom the workers have signed their employment contracts.

Oppositely to the protected employment provided through CETs, people with disabilities also work in the general market, playing an active role alongside their colleagues. Both the protected and general markets have been particularly hard hit by the pandemic.

In Catalonia just prior to the pandemic, CETs were already in a position of underfunding due to a 35% increase in wages in three years, the lack of funding caused by increases in the minimum wage between 2017 and 2019. Special employment centres were particularly hard hit by the pandemic due to this weak starting position. Entities such as AMMFEINA, the members of which are social initiative entities that promote the inclusion of people with mental health problems and fight against the exclusion of this group from the labour market, and Dincat, which represents the intellectual disability sector in Catalonia, have highlighted the problems suffered by CETs due to the pandemic⁵. According to a survey carried out among its member entities, 77.6% of CETs

1. CETs have often been accused of having a segregating effect. They were originally based on the belief that people with disabilities, and particularly intellectual disabilities, were unable to work in the general labour market (Parmenter, 2011). CETs initially offered people with disabilities employment for a salary that covered only their accommodation. The employment of CET workers and their employment contracts has only started to be regulated relatively recently, and workers are usually paid at the minimum wage.

2. <https://www.sepe.es/HomeSepe/Personas/encontrar-trabajo/empleo-para-personas-con-discapacidad/centros-especiales-empleo.html>.

3. Contracts designed specifically for people with disabilities do not account for all contracts in this group, but between 30% and 40% per year out of the whole contracts of labour market, both protected and ordinary, depending on the year (Odismet, 2022).

4. Following the publication of the Act on the Social Integration of People with Disabilities, supported employment was promoted as an alternative measure for employers that had failed to meet the 2% quota under Royal Decree 364/2005, of 8 April, regulating exceptional alternative compliance with the quota in favour of workers with disabilities.

5. According to Dincat and AMMFEINA, the 205 CETs operating in Catalonia in 2018 employed 16,333 people with disabilities. Of these, 9,500 had mental health disorders or intellectual disabilities, the two groups with the lowest global employment rates.

closed 2020 with losses and below forecasts, with a drop in turnover of around 25%. This has led several entities to call for a shock plan for the protected market involving specific items of public spending.

The inclusion situation in the general market has been no better. The Barcelona Labour Inclusion Network (XIB), which is led by the Municipal Institute for Persons with Disabilities (IMPD) and includes the entities working for inclusion in Barcelona's general market, monitored a thousand people with disabilities who were in employment in March and April 2020. A total of 90% of them originally retained their contract with their employer, but this figure changed on a daily basis. Of these, 27% continued working in essential services, 11.6% started teleworking, and 24% were included in temporary layoffs (ERTOs)⁶. In this situation of change and adaptation, the labour inclusion support services actively provided companies with legal advice and increased the remote monitoring and support provided to working people. Support was provided to both people who provided essential services and those who remained in employment but had to adapt to working remotely. In both cases, professional support and assistance were key to adapting to the restrictions in place, complying with the health rules and helping a group of people who are particularly affected by the digital gap with the transition to teleworking⁷.

In short, Covid-19 had an impact on an already complicated reality brought about by CETs' economic difficulties and the barriers to the open labour market. In view of this situation, in 2020 the Municipal Institute for People with Disabilities implemented an emergency action through the IMPD's Employment Advisory Team for the labour inclusion of people with disabilities and the provision of job placement support through all the Barcelona Labour Inclusion Network member entities.

The labour market data comparison shown below provides additional information about the pre-existing situation, what happened, and how the Municipal Institute for People with Disabilities has adapted public policies on job placement support in view of the pandemic.

1. Employment and the labour market for people with disabilities in a Covid-19 context

The pandemic has increased the unemployment rate of people with disabilities, with a general fall in contracts and a higher proportion of contracts being drawn up through special employment centres.

First, the stagnation and crisis resulting from Covid-19 is reflected in the unemployment and labour market data provided by the Employment and Productive Model Observatory of the Ministry of Enterprise and Employment⁸.

- There were 14,506 unemployed people with disabilities in Barcelona province on 31 December 2021, accounting for 67% of all unemployed people with disabilities in Catalonia.
- At 2021 year-end, there were a further 8,364 people with disabilities registered as unemployed in Catalonia (136.2% more than in 2020).
- Most of the people registered as unemployed - 55% of the total annual average at metropolitan level in 2021- were female.

6. ERTOs enable companies to suspend employment contracts or temporarily reduce employees' working days for economic, technical, organisational or productive reasons or due to events of force majeure. When a company applies an ERTO, the affected employees become unemployed and receive unemployment benefit. The employer, for their part, undertakes to allow the workers to go back to their jobs when the ERTO has come to an end, and it can benefit from exemptions from employers' social security contributions.

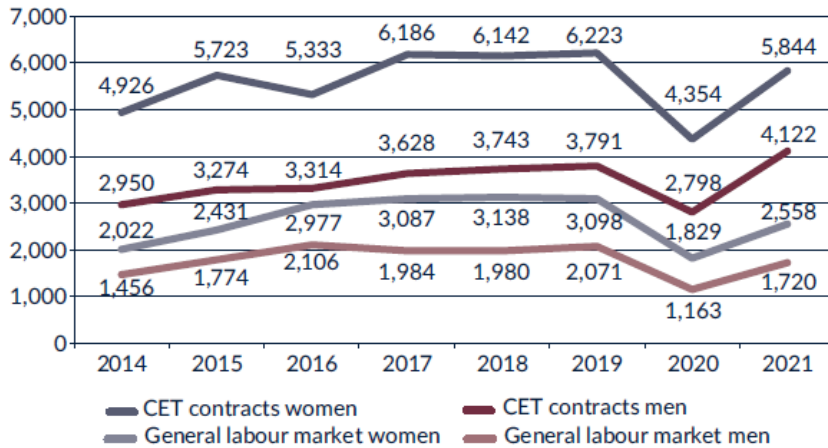
7. See "The digital gap in the city of Barcelona 2020" a <https://bithabitat.barcelona/bretxadigitalbarcelona/ca/>

8. Data not available for the City of Barcelona.

- There were 25,405 job seekers with disabilities in the metropolitan area in 2021.

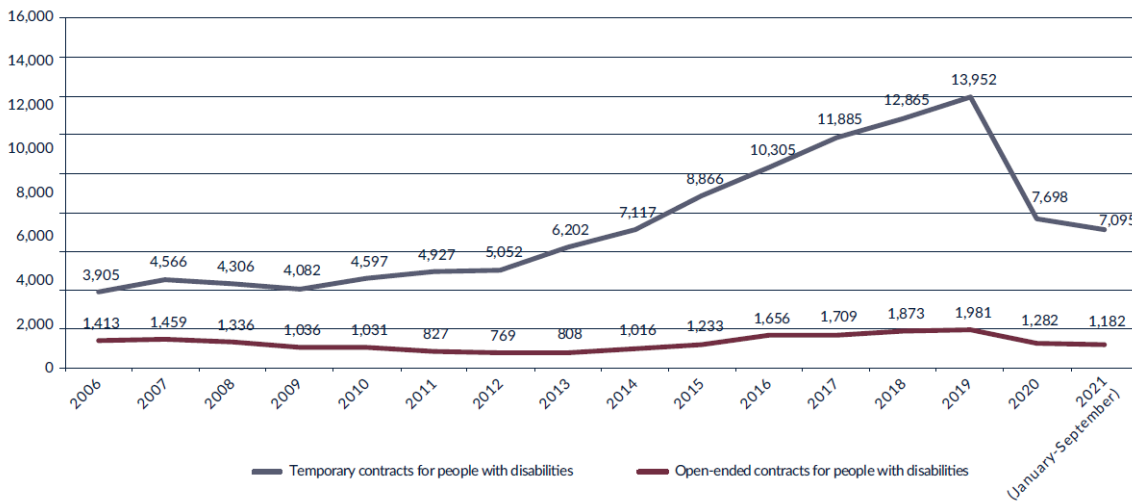
Second, the general fall in new employment contracts must also be considered. Prior to the pandemic, between 2014 and 2019 there was a cumulative increase in new contracts both at special employment centres and in the general market. There was a gender imbalance in the increase in new contracts, with more men than women were being hired. The rise in the number of new contracts for women was slower, particularly in the general market. In contrast, the number of new contracts in Catalonia in 2020 fell by 33.65%.

Graph 1. Evolution of employment contracts concluded with people with disabilities in special employment centres and the general market in Catalonia by gender, 2014-2021



Source: Employment and Productive Model Observatory, Ministry of Enterprise and Employment, 2021.

Graph 2. Evolution of employment contracts concluded with people with disabilities by typology. Barcelona, 2006-2021



Source: Barcelona National Public Employment Service Observatory, 2021.

In Barcelona, people with disabilities account for around 1% of all employment contracts, and there is a significant margin for increasing hiring⁹. The activity tax —the relationship between of those active and the population of working age— was 37,1 % for population with disabilities and of 60,3% for the general population in 2020. In this regard, the hiring figures for people with disabilities are very low and public actions could have a significant effect.

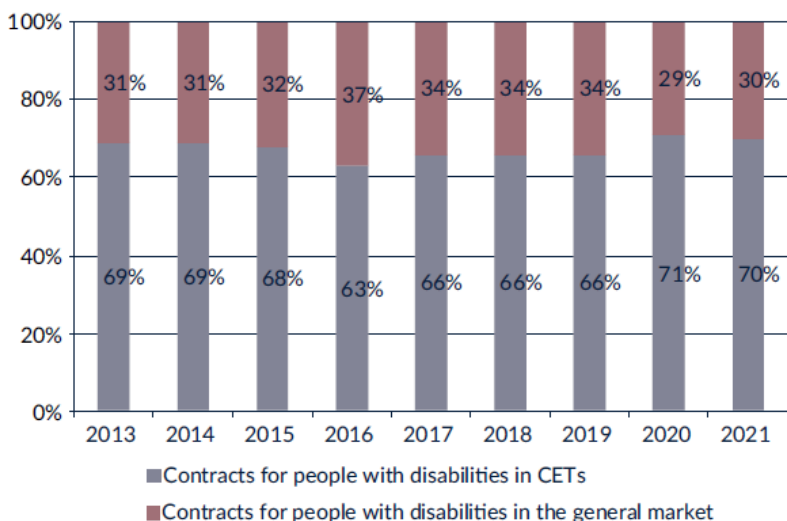
9. The city's hiring figures show that a total of 824,220 contracts were concluded in 2021.

All the above explains why the Employment Advisory Team and the Barcelona Employment Inclusion Network continued their efforts to provide assistance and employment to people with disabilities during the following years of the pandemic, while also carrying out important support and stability work.

Third, the increase in the proportion of contracts concluded in special employment centres must also be mentioned. The number of contracts concluded with people with disabilities at special employment centres in Barcelona had previously stood at around 66% of all contracts with people with disabilities concluded in the city in 2019 (SEPE, 2019). The number of contracts in the protected market had risen by around 17 percentage points in ten years, a significant proportion of which were temporary contracts¹⁰.

Despite this context of an increasing number of contracts with special employment centres, the proportion of this type of contract fell slightly to around 66% in the five years leading to the pandemic due to increased inclusion efforts in the general market. This trend was reversed during the pandemic: in 2020, 70% of contracts in Barcelona were concluded at special employment centres. The proportion of contracts concluded at special employment centres (CETs) has thus risen significantly because of the pandemic in a context, as mentioned above, of an overall fall in the hiring of people with disabilities.

Graph 3. Percentage of contracts concluded at special employment centres and in the general market in Catalonia, 2013-2021



Source: Employment and Productive Model Observatory, Ministry of Enterprise and Employment, 2021.

2. Labour inclusion support in the context of Covid-19

2.1. The Employment Advisory Team of the Municipal Institute for People with Disabilities

The Employment Advisory Team (EAL) of Barcelona City Council's Municipal Institute for People with Disabilities (IMPD) significantly increased its legal and other support during lockdown.

The EAL strives to increase the labour inclusion of people with disabilities by providing reception services, training, individual plans and employment law advice to people with disabilities. The legal advice provided usually relates to the rights of people with disabilities, the law, the assistance available and, above all, the compatibility between employment and the benefits system.

The matter of compatibility between employment and the benefit system is a complex one. Furthermore, there is the counterproductive or deterring effect of employment due to the high

¹⁰ 72% of employment contracts with people with disabilities are temporary. This trend is sharper in the case of special employment centres (88%) than in the general market (46%).

proportion of temporary job offers, in addition to the relative sluggishness of the benefits system regarding registering and de-registering for benefits, which often leads people with disabilities to reject a job opportunity for fear of losing their benefits for several months as a result of accepting a job offer lasting only a few weeks. There are many significant cases of people receiving non-contribution-based disability benefits refusing to work because accepting paid work could result in the loss of their benefits¹¹. And then there are people with what is classified as total disability often deciding not to work for fear of having their classification, and its applicable benefits, reviewed. This is an unwanted effect of the benefits system that discourages people from working and does not balance the financial suffering of people with disabilities¹². This is certainly an undesirable effect on the rise in the low employment rates of people with disabilities.

The EAL also advises companies, the public administration and any institutions that approach them on matters of legal compliance.

Since 14 March 2020, the day when the Government of Spain declared the state of alert and lockdown for most of the population due to the pandemic, the demand for employment law advice rose due to people struggling to understand their employment, personal and family situation and the nature of the measures ordered by the government for the entire population, and how to implement them.

During that time, the Employment Advisory Team was unable to carry out its usual legal advice work in person, so non-face-to-face alternatives were sought instead. These included phone calls, online messages and/or video calls, which became the way to remain in close contact during the strictest moments of lockdown and restrictions on social interaction.

A significant number of enquiries were made by people who had been temporarily laid off under an EERTO, who expressed their great concern and feelings of insecurity given the situation that was gravely affecting their personal and/or family life. Many people lost their jobs, and many others saw a reduction in their household income due to temporary layoffs (EERTO). Some people were already in a situation of vulnerability pre-pandemic and, vis-à-vis the new labour market circumstances, were reconsidering their situation and contacting the Employment Advisory Team to see whether they were eligible for more stable financial benefits, such as early retirement or permanent disability. Consequently, they needed to check whether they met the necessary requirements, as they felt this was the only way to ensure they would have the necessary income to live relatively worry-free.

In view of the situation caused by the pandemic, efforts were increased at all Employment Advisory Team services to provide support and assistance (assessment and/or guidance, training, employment, monitoring and support, and legal advice), in addition to the usual personal assistance service. Furthermore, the added complexity of the rise in online procedures for people with disabilities, who are particularly affected by the digital gap, must be considered. To this effect, the Employment Advisory Team's services were adapted, going beyond simply providing legal advice by adding technological support to procedures and to the assistance provided to people in relation to their personal situation.

11. Although paid work can be undertaken while in receipt of benefits for four years after starting work, it depends on whether the income from work exceeds the Government of Spain's Public Income Indicator with Multiple Effects (IPREM) plus the maximum non-contribution-based benefit (PNC) in force. For more information on the limits and conditions applicable to non-contribution-based benefits, see:

https://dretssocials.gencat.cat/web/content/03ambits_tematics/11discapitat/ajuts_i_prestacions_economices/columna_dreta/documents/triptic_pensio_no_contributiva.pdf

12. The study "El greuge econòmic de les persones amb discapacitat de la ciutat de Barcelona" [The economic inequality of people with disabilities in Barcelona] measures the additional financial cost of disability, which is not taken into account in the design of income and support policies for people with disabilities https://ajuntament.barcelona.cat/dretssocials/sites/default/files/arxiu_documents/greuge-economic-persones-discapitat-barcelona-ca.pdf.

The members of the Employment Advisory Team were thus instructed to be proactive with all the cases assigned to them to ensure that everyone with an active file was attended to. To this end, a telephone support service was provided, and e-mail support channels were boosted to meet new demand.

To this effect, the social and family data of around 250 people with active files were collected during the strictest part of lockdown, and the workers included in the Parks and Gardens supported work project and the members of Diverscoop, the project for the recovery of disused kiosks in the city, were monitored. Some of the adaptations made during this time, such as using channels and time slots requiring prior appointment, have now become part of the Employment Advisory Team's standard operation and are still in place two years on.

Table 1. Type of action taken by the Employment Advisory Team during the first state of alert (March, April and May 2020)

Response	Marzo	Abril	Mayo
Emotional	84	182	85
Training	40	104	38
Employment	161	371	418
Health	53	74	63
Social and family	26	83	72

Source: author's own elaboration with data from IMPD, 2021.

These adaptations, the increase in legal advice provided, the rise in the number of people looking for work and the drop in new cases handled by the reception and recruitment service are reflected in the annual data on the work carried out by the Employment Advisory Team in 2020. In a qualitative sense, the complexity of the cases handled and the exclusion of members of this group from the labour market during the pandemic are notable. The restrictions prompted by the pandemic on holding on-site job placement-related group training sessions must also be mentioned, given that their interruption has been an added barrier to inclusion.

Table 2. Work carried out by the Employment Advisory Team

	2019	2020	2021
People assisted by the reception service	326	191	244
Course enrolments	245	118	182
Contracts	245	148	153
People looking for work, attending training and in job placement processes	407	481	454
Legal advice consultations	203	235	171

Source: author's own elaboration with data from IMPD, 2021.

Last, and notably, the Employment Advisory Team has carried out two specific projects, mainly in the last quarter of 2020 and throughout most of 2021. In 2020, as a shock plan against the Covid-19 crisis, an Employment Plan was drawn up to hire up to 50 people with disabilities for data collection work to assess the accessibility of children's play areas. The hiring of the 48 best-rated

applicants started in January 2021, covering vacancies for assistant coordination experts, data collectors and data collection assistants¹³.

The Employment Advisory Team has also been involved in the design, selection and training of professionals to realise Barcelona City Council's first public call specifically for people with intellectual disabilities. This pioneering offer provides the basis for people with intellectual disabilities to join the public sector. The tasks involved have included identifying jobs, making contact with all the municipal departments wanting to hire an ancillary service assistant and, above all, helping Barcelona City Council's HR department to set out the duties involved in the 27 positions available in 2021.

3. The Barcelona Labour Inclusion Network

The Barcelona Labour Inclusion Network (XIB) was created in 2014 to promote the labour inclusion of people with disabilities and/or mental health disorders in the general labour market. This strategy is promoted by the Municipal Institute for Persons with Disabilities (IMPD) in partnership with ten entities specialising in employment and disability in the city¹⁴. It helps people with different types and degrees of functional diversity and/or mental health disorders who are looking for work, as well as providing support and assistance to companies in Barcelona through the Inclou Futur service.

The XIB's goals and lines of action revolve around a key pillar: the creation of a management model common to Barcelona City Council (through the IMPD) and the social entities involved in labour inclusion that specialise in this area.

Its working method is based on the active involvement of the professionals from the entities working for the inclusion of people with all kinds of disabilities. Each professional and service can thus contribute and share its inclusion processes, constraints, roles, responsibilities, and opportunities for people with disabilities in the labour market, creating and adding to a body of knowledge or collective knowledge. The collaborative work carried out has allowed a relational space to be built from which work synergies emerge and relationships of mutual respect, trust and recognition are formed, thus opening pathways, easing tensions, and designing plans to improve intervention processes and ensure that everyone's contribution is useful¹⁵. Notably in this regard, maintaining the network and the exchange of information on the advice provided in the context of Covid-19 were both very helpful in supporting all services in their activities.

Companies play a key role in this process as active agents in the inclusion process. New forms of cooperation between the world of business and the social, public and private sectors are needed. This collaboration is vital for ensuring that shared responsibility and the joint creation of new corporate social responsibility scenarios are fully effective for all parties.

The above data on the behaviour of the labour market in the last few years and the above-mentioned impact of Covid-19 suggest the need for an active policy to increase inclusion in the general labour market. The resulting actions must ensure that the business sector is involved and committed to labour inclusion as a process that generally involves three types of agents: companies with vacancies that wish to add value to their business activities; people with functional

13. The outcome is that the city now has an accessibility analysis of 891 play areas, an analysis of 60 communication accessibility plans for the city's municipal public spaces and facilities and an inventory of the operating status of Barcelona's acoustic traffic lights.

14. It is made up of the following entities: Catalan Association for the Promotion of Deaf People (ACAPPS), Catalan Association for Integration and Human Development (AcidH), Association for the Rehabilitation of People with Mental Health Problems (AREP), Associació Centre d'Higiene Mental de les Corts [Les Corts Centre of Mental Hygiene], AURA Foundation, Fundació Catalana Síndrome de Down [Catalan Down Syndrome Foundation], ECOM Foundation, Els Tres Turons Foundation, Multiple Sclerosis Foundation (FEM), Joia Foundation, and the Employment Advisory Team of the Municipal Institute for People with Disabilities.

15. *Governanza colaborativa para la inclusión social*. Ed Catarata, 2019.

diversity or mental health issues searching for work; and last, the labour inclusion support and assistance services. It is vital that this support and assistance for companies is provided by a specialist and experienced team that is a leader in the field of open labour market inclusion and is able to respond to employers' needs.

Notably regarding the working method decided by the XIB, it always includes "monitoring and support in the workplace" for both workers and employers, taking both party's needs into account. This monitoring sometimes requires an adjustment to the working method with support used, which has specific characteristics aimed at particular needs and a certain context. It also sometimes requires other types of action based on the needs of the people being assisted by the XIB and the circumstances of the labour market.

The consensus reached on the XIB's working method thus aims to ensure the provision of effective support in the inclusion process. It would therefore be more appropriate to state that the network method includes "monitoring and support for the inclusion process before, during and after hiring". This "support for the inclusion process" is not a rigid method but one that must be constantly under review and adaptable to circumstances, while always at the service of the needs of people and employers and suited to the relevant work circumstances.

3.1. Networking and knowledge exchange

The following table sets out the total activity figures for the members of the XIB. The addition of three new services in 2020 is particularly noteworthy. However, the drop in actions in 2020 caused downturns of 11% in the number of people assisted, 40% in the number of employment contracts and 34% in the number of new recruits. For the 11 services as a whole, the figures show an increase in people attended to and a sharp fall in the number of people hired.

Table 3. Evolution of the XIB activity indicators

	2019	2020	2021
People assisted	1,903	2,261	2,286
People hired	815	650	804

Source: author's own elaboration with data from IMPD, 2021.

4. Conclusions

Covid-19 has increased the employment instability and precariousness of people with disabilities, for whom market access barriers were previously offset by employment protection measures.

With a view to improving the future situation, the proposal involves deploying a set of support policies for the labour inclusion of people with disabilities that apply both to public administrations and to companies and work inclusion services.

1. Promoting a set of laws and regulations that enable people to receive benefits while working, either through universal basic income policies or by offsetting the financial harm suffered by people with disabilities.
2. Ensuring that direct hiring quotas for people with disabilities are fully met in the public administrations.
3. Implementing specific public offers for people with intellectual disabilities.
4. Promoting specific employment plans for people with disabilities in the various administrations.
5. Including social clauses in public procurement contracts for the job placement of people with disabilities in companies that conclude contracts with the administration, while ensuring that such

companies meet the 2% quota of people with disabilities in their workforces, by excluding those companies that fail to do so.

6. Promoting job placement services for people with disabilities in the general labour market through subsidies.

7. Consolidating the network of general market inclusion services to exchange knowledge, improve the exchange of information on the employment of people with disabilities and provide better support. Working together to achieve better employment and disability figures so that specific employment situations can be identified and employment policies can be put in place in accordance with each type of disability.

8. Fighting the digital gap that particularly affects people with disabilities, and providing technology skills training as a basic skill for the development of career paths.

9. Developing policies specifically aimed at helping women with disabilities to join the labour market.

10. Working to break the rigid habits of the protected and general markets, reducing the number of temporary and precarious jobs, and focusing on the career paths of people with disabilities and on improving their skills and professional development.

In short, we need to offset the effects of Covid-19 by means of policies aimed at complying with the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in the field of work and employment¹⁶ and ensuring that people with disabilities can live independently by including them in the labour market.

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