

THE LOST GENERATION

In Spain, nearly half of those under 30 – almost 2 million people – cannot find a job. Suicide rates are up and the young fear they have no future in their own country. **Anthony Ham** reports from Madrid.

When Alvaro Garcia left school in 2008, his future looked bright. Spain's economy was booming. Unemployment had fallen below 10 per cent for the first time in living memory. And for the first time since records began, Spain went from receiving far more immigrants in search of a better life – 600,000 in 2006 alone – than there were emigrant Spaniards leaving Spain for the same reason.

Six years later, a university graduate and unemployed in Madrid, Alvaro belongs to Spain's lost generation.

In January this year, one out of every four adult Spaniards was out of work. Even after five years of recession, the International Monetary Fund warned that it may be five years more before the unemployment rate falls below 25 per cent and the number of unemployed people in Spain falls below 6 million.

Suicide rates are on the rise, Spain's young professionals are fleeing the country and Oxfam has predicted that 18 million Spaniards – a staggering 40 per cent of the population – are at risk of social marginalisation within the next decade. Even the Spanish government acknowledges that it will be 10 years before the economy can recover the more than 4 million jobs lost during the recession.

"I call this Spain's Great Depression," says Francisco Comin, professor of economic history at the University of Alcalá de Henares, near Madrid.

"In terms of duration and decrease in activity, it is only comparable to the Civil War [1936-1939] and the postwar era."

But it is Spain's young people in particular for whom the most recent figures are truly apocalyptic: 57.7 per cent of Spaniards aged between 15 and 24 cannot find work. Move the goal-posts a little and the improvement is negligible – about 45 per cent of those under 30, almost 2 million young

people, are unemployed. "The damage is done," says Alvaro Garcia. "Ours is a lost or wasted generation. Lost because we naively believed the politicians when they told us that things would get better. Wasted because we have lost so many who had no choice but to leave Spain in search of a better life."

"The hope of finding work is next to zero. What used to be normal – a job that allowed you to be happy and independent, to live in your own home – these things are chimeras, shadows from a recent past that now seems utterly unattainable."

"Every day I talk with my friends, all of whom have university degrees. And we always finish the conversation in the same way, with the same question: 'How on earth did it come to this?'"

If one moment came to symbolise the fragility of the Spanish economy's boom years, it came late in 2008. For months, the socialist government of prime minister Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero, newly re-elected to a second four-year term in March of that year, had been refusing to admit that Spain's economy was in trouble, as if hoping

that the looming global financial crisis would all go away. And then, in just one month, Spain's unemployment rate leapt from seven to 16 per cent.

In truth, however, the perfect storm that would sweep away the prosperity of an entire nation had been brewing for far longer. For more than a decade, about a quarter of Spain's economic output revolved around tourism and construction, two industries highly susceptible to downturns in the international economy.

In the Extremadura region in Spain's west, where a massive fall in tourist numbers hit especially hard, the base unemployment rate is 33 per cent, with two-thirds of Extremadura's young people without work.

"It has been a terrible few years, a catastrophe, especially here in Cáceres where the economy is built around the services industry," says Rafael Navas, a hotel worker in Extremadura's regional capital.

"There's nothing else here. There are plenty of young people here – people with a university education – who have simply given up hope."

But it was construction and a lucrative, if unsustainable property boom

'We have our values but we no longer believe in the politicians. We have our qualifications but we have no way to use them. What other choice do we have but to resign ourselves to our fate and become bitter.'

Eva Caballero, 28



that drove the Spanish economy's spectacular growth.

"We spent a lot of talent and resources generating a productive capacity that we didn't need and we are now left with skeletons of buildings and infrastructures," says Jose Antonio Herce, professor of economics at Madrid's Complutense University.

"The dismal allocation of resources during the boom years is coming back to haunt us horribly now."

Symbols of the boom years are everywhere visible across Spain's urban landscape, from entire suburbs of empty apartment blocks to massive infrastructure projects that remained unfinished after the money ran out.

Take, for example, Spain's first private airport that was built near Ciudad Real, a provincial town of 75,000 people about 200 kilometres by road south of Madrid.

Amid as much unease as fanfare, the airport opened in December 2008 at a cost of €1.1 billion. Its 4.4-kilometre runway was Europe's longest, long enough even for an Airbus 380, and the airport had a carrying capacity of 10 million passengers a year.

The only problem was that no one could quite work out why 10 million people would want to fly to Ciudad