

# The COVID-19 Pandemic: A Brake or an Accelerator of the Decision to Leave the Parental Home?

## 1. Introduction

When Covid-19 spread and lockdown measures were imposed all over Europe in 2020, individuals were forced to take decisions such as where and whom to live with in a short amount of time, without knowing how long such measures could have lasted. Whether and how the propensity to engage in certain behaviours such as leaving the parental home, cohabiting, getting married, or having a child have changed is thus of paramount importance to understand the short-term consequences of the pandemic on families and social relationships.

This study focuses on leaving home behaviours. Specifically, it aims (1) to identify how leaving home patterns have changed in 2020 compared to the previous years, in all European countries, (2) to assess how the Covid-related restrictions affected the event of leaving home in Southern European countries, and how this effect varies by parental socio-economic background. This group of countries (Spain, Portugal, Greece, and Italy) can be considered homogenous in various respects: welfare states have similar characteristics, the family culture is characterized by strong family ties, the transition to adulthood follows a “latest-late” pattern (Billari et al., 2002), the governmental response to Covid-19 has been comparable, and the economic repercussions particularly serious.

## 2. Theoretical framework

For young adults living with their parents, stringent restrictions may have divergent effects: on the one hand, they may prevent young adults from leaving as they worsen expectations about the future (“protection effect”), while on the other they may encourage them to leave, in order to escape from a forced co-residence or to safeguard parents from Covid-19 contagion (“independence effect”).

This effect may vary according to the parental socio-economic background: young adults from advantaged backgrounds may be more likely to gain residential independence from their parents, even in difficult times, because they are more in control of their own possibilities and more opportunities are open to them (Billari et al., 2019). On the contrary, an advantaged family background may delay young adults’ independence because of the availability of comfortable spaces where to live (Avery et al., 1992). Further, young adults’ own employment status affects home-leaving choices, as it is strongly linked with financial resources; for those who are attending university, the chances of leaving could be higher, as they can relocate for study reasons.

## 3. Data and methods

The longitudinal component of the European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) covering 2017-2020 was used to answer the research questions. Young adults are individuals aged 18-35 at their first observation.

In descriptive analyses, home-leaving rates have been calculated by country for each pair of consecutive years, i.e., the number of young adults leaving the parental home at  $t+1$  divided by the number of young adults living with their parents at  $t$ . Regression analyses are limited to Spain,

Portugal, Greece, and Italy: beyond being a rather homogeneous group of countries, the survey fieldwork was conducted here in the second half of 2020, hence covering the period after the enforcement of Covid-related restrictions. Discrete-time event history models have been deployed to estimate the likelihood of leaving the parental home for all the individuals living with their parents at their first observation ( $n = 21,282$ ). Data has been restructured into person-quarters ( $n = 106,318$ ) and logistic regression models were used. Survival time was calculated since individuals entered the panel.

Our main explanatory variable is the Stringency Index (Ritchie et al., 2020), a measure summarising the stringency of nine policy measures calculated on an everyday basis for a broad range of countries. The index was transformed into a categorical variable (absence of restrictions, low, or high level of restrictions). Control variables include the equivalised disposable household income (in within-country quintiles), crowding index (number of people living in a household by room), own employment status, country and quarter fixed effects, gender, and age.

#### **4. Preliminary findings and discussion**

Descriptive analyses show that the 2019-2020 home-leaving rate has been lower than that of the previous years, except for some countries where rates have been higher or equal to the previous ones: in Southern Europe, in Sweden, Austria, Luxembourg, Czech Republic, Estonia, and Poland.

Results from regression analyses conducted on Spain, Portugal, Greece, and Italy suggest that the more stringent the policy measures, the more likely young adults were to leave the parental home, providing support for the “independence effect”. This association holds irrespective of the characteristics of the household or of employment status. When the characteristics of the household are included, two opposite mechanisms seem to be at play: compared to the middle quintile, the probability of leaving home is higher for individuals whose households belong to the highest or to the lowest income quintile. Interestingly, for young adults grown up in high-income households, being a student increases the probability of leaving, while for those coming from lower-income households, unemployment or inactivity decrease this probability.

Due to the survey design, we are not able to distinguish first-time movers from those having “boomeranged” back to the parental home before 2020. Further research should establish whether this increased probability to leave home in Southern Europe is a temporary phenomenon or a long-term trend.

#### **References**

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