

Variation in motives for moving by distance: Evidence from Germany

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Short abstract

Moving home can mean a significant change to an individual's spatial, social and professional environment, particularly when moving long distances. However, few studies have examined why people move and how these reasons differ depending on the distance of the move. Furthermore, no such evidence exists for Germany. This paper uses data from the German Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP) from 2019 and 2020 (N=1,703 moves). We initially limited our analysis to moves that occurred before March 2020, given the potential changes associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. The results show that the proportion of work-/education-related moves increases with distance (from 3.7% within 20 km to 66.9% at 150 km or more), while housing- and family-related moves decrease with distance (from 49.3% and 47.1% within 20 km to 14.4% and 18.6% at 150 km or more, respectively). Nevertheless, work-/education-related moves only constitute the majority of moves when the distance is 80 km or more, and a significant proportion of non-work-/education-related mobility is observed even at long distances. These findings call into question simplistic assumptions about the relationship between motives for moving and distance. Subsequent analyses will utilise moving distance as a continuous variable and disaggregate the moving distance categories, paying particular attention to the 0–20 km category, which accounted for two-thirds of the moves in our sample and is a category that is neglected in prior work. Furthermore, earlier (2001–2017) and later (from 2020 onwards) periods will be included, and a pre/post-COVID comparison will be carried out.

Extended abstract

Background

It is imperative to comprehend the motivations underpinning residential mobility, a prerequisite for both scientific and political analysis, in order to gain a more profound understanding of migratory patterns. Research frequently assumes that short-distance moves are made for housing-related reasons and long-distance moves for education and work-related reasons (e.g. Clark & Huang, 2003). Nevertheless, this may be an oversimplification and is called into question by more detailed analyses explicitly measuring migration motives. However, the extant literature on this topic is extremely limited and draws only on moves of more than 20 km (Niedomysl, 2011; Thomas et al., 2019). Additionally, since these papers focus on data from Sweden, Australia, and the United Kingdom, it remains an open question whether their conclusions are applicable to the German context. Despite the Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP) providing a detailed measurement of relocation distance, no analysis of this relationship has been conducted for Germany. In contrast to the studies mentioned for other

countries, the SOEP also allows conclusions to be drawn about the motives for moves of less than 20 km, which make up approximately two-thirds of the moves in the examined sample.

Data and methods

We use data from the SOEP (DOI: 10.5684/soep.core.v38.1r), a representative sample of private households in Germany that has been conducted annually since 1984. In order to base our analyses on a broader sample, we have pooled the two survey waves from 2019 and 2020 (N=1,703 moves). Given the potential changes associated with the COVID-19 pandemic (Stawarz et al., 2022), we have initially limited our analysis to moves that occurred before March 2020. Moves are defined as changes in residential status since the last survey wave, meaning that moves from January 2018 are included in the study. In the event of a move, respondents were asked to report the main reason for this move.

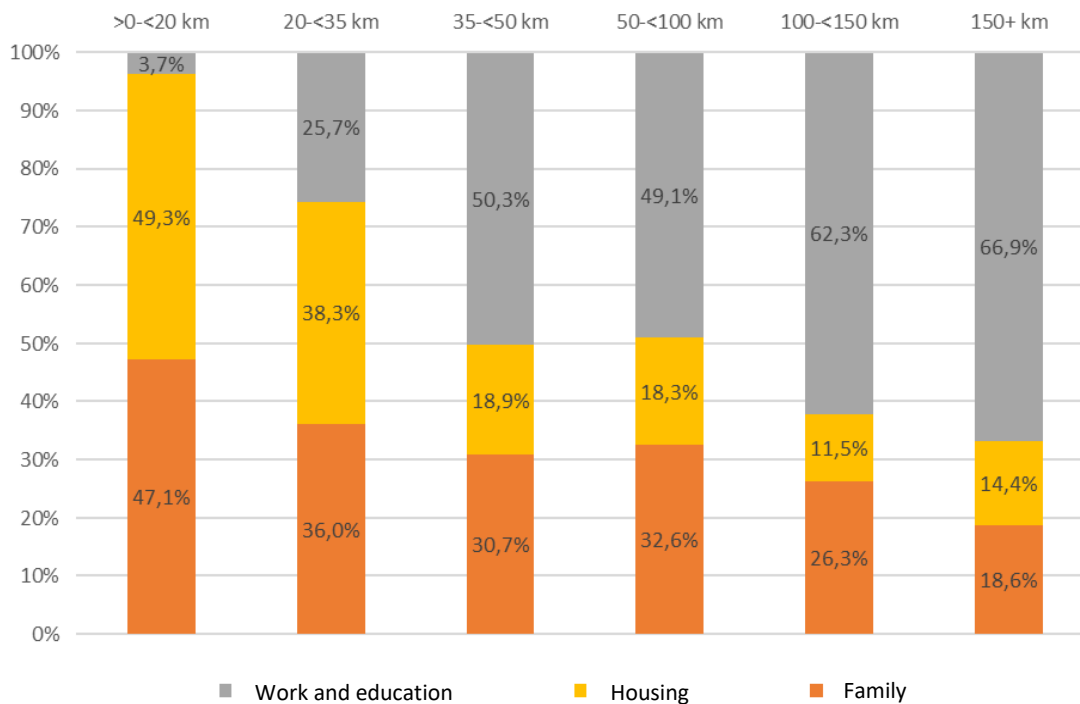
The present analysis focuses on the following categories of motives: education-/work-related (e.g. changes in job, education or study), family-related (e.g. change in partnership, moving out of the parental home or inheritance) and housing-related moves. The latter category comprises various sub-motives, namely termination of lease and uncertain tenancy agreements, costs, size or amenities of the flat, and the residential environment. A further category comprises movements for which the underlying reason could not be identified ('other' reasons for moving). However, these movements are excluded from the analysis on the relationship between moving motives and moving distances. The moving distances are divided into six categories ('more than 0 to 20 km', '20 to 35 km', etc., see Fig. 1). When interpreting the results, it should be noted that the reasons for moving were recorded at the household level and not at the individual level.

Results

The analysis indicates that the majority of moves in Germany are attributable to family reasons (35.7%), closely followed by housing-related reasons (35.3%). These can both refer to significant life events, such as setting up home or having a child. By contrast, work- and education-related motives are only cited in around one in six moves (15.9%). In these cases, relocation serves as an alternative to commuting, thereby enabling individuals to access employment and educational institutions that are located at greater distances from their original residence. A further 13.1% of moves are for 'other' reasons that could not be assigned to these three groups of motives.

The data indicates that family- and housing-related motives prevail for shorter moving distances (47.1% and 49.3% of moves between 0 and 20 km, respectively), while work and education-related reasons predominate for very long distances (62.3% of moves between 100 and 150 km, Fig. 1). While the share of work-related reasons for relocation increases almost continuously with increasing distance, there is a significant overall decline in housing- and family-related moves (although the decline in family-related moves is less pronounced).

Figure 1: Reasons for moving by distance (km) in Germany



Data source: SOEP v38, survey years 2019 and 2020 (moves between January 2018 and February 2020, excluding moves for "other" reasons), N=1,490 moves, weighted, own calculations.

The reasons for moving over relatively short distances are often family- or housing-related. It can be assumed that short moving distances are chosen in order to maintain existing social and professional relationships at the previous place of residence. Conversely, individuals are often willing to move to locations that are farther away in order to access employment or educational opportunities. However, detailed analyses indicate that these work- and education-related moves only constitute the majority of moves when the distance is 80 km or more. This figure is significantly higher than the commonly assumed threshold of 30 to 50 km for long-distance mobility (e.g. Lersch, 2014), where in our analysis approximately two-thirds of households cite other reasons for mobility as decisive. An examination of the motives for moving over very long distances (150 km and more) reveals that in this case, too, approximately one third of moves are not motivated by work or education.

Discussion and outlook

This project is the first to provide detailed insights into the different motives behind moves of various distances in Germany. Unlike previous studies, our research considers very short moving distances of less than 20 kilometres and reveals that moves within this range already differ from those over slightly longer distances. Furthermore, the study found that the majority of long-distance moves are in fact job- or education-related. However, caution is required when drawing conclusions on the reasons for moving based solely on distance. For instance, it is only possible to speak of a dominance of job- and education-related mobility from distances of 80 km and above. Even at distances of 150 km and above, the proportion of non-job-/education-related moves remains significant, making up around one third of all moves over these distances. In the presentation, we will discuss how these results compare with those obtained in other countries, including Sweden, Great Britain and Australia, where some evidence

already exists. Furthermore, subsequent analyses will involve the utilisation of moving distance as a continuous variable. A potentially fruitful avenue for future research would be the disaggregation of the moving distance categories, with particular attention to the 0 to 20 km category, which accounts for two thirds of the moves in our sample. In further analyses, we also plan to include earlier and later periods (2001–2017 and from 2020 onwards) and carry out a pre/post COVID comparison.

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