

Between Staying and Moving: Understanding Residential (Im)mobility in Lisbon and Porto

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Abstract

This article examines who moves and who stays in Portugal's two largest metropolitan areas, Lisbon and Porto, using 2021 Census microdata for six municipalities. By analysing recent movers relative to their residence at the end of 2019, the study identifies the determinants of residential (im)mobility within a Southern European housing regime characterised by high homeownership, limited rental supply, and growing affordability pressures. Results from multinomial logistic regression models show that mobility is strongly associated with age, education, and marital status, while migration background emerges as the main dividing line between movers and stayers. Foreign-born and foreign-national residents dominate among recent movers, confirming that international migration has become a central driver of metropolitan demographic change. Yet, the results also reveal that mobility often reflects relative privilege within a highly constrained housing system, while immobility increasingly signals structural barriers to residential change. In Portugal, as in other Southern European contexts, residential (im)mobility thus operates simultaneously as a mechanism of social differentiation and a symptom of the broader transformations reshaping urban housing systems.

Keywords: Southern Europe, residential (im)mobility, socioeconomic determinants, Portugal, metropolitan areas

Introduction

Residential mobility and migration reflect the interaction between life-course decisions, household resources, and the structural conditions of housing markets and welfare regimes. Examining who moves and who stays reveals how these forces shape access to housing, patterns of (im)mobility, and the social and demographic transformation of urban populations (Hochstenbach & Musterd, 2021; Bayona-i-Carrasco et al., 2018). These processes operate across multiple scales: intra-urban and inter-municipal relocations adjust households within metropolitan housing systems, while international inflows introduce new populations and accelerate demographic turnover.

In Southern European metropolitan areas, where rising housing prices and limited rental options constrain access, mobility outcomes expose how individual's agency and structure intersect. These regions share high homeownership rates, weak rental sectors, limited public housing, and familistic welfare systems (Arbaci, 2019; Maloutas, 2020). Meanwhile, gentrification and touristification intensify affordability pressures, reshape neighbourhoods, and heighten the social selectivity of movement. Recent movers—often younger and better educated—differ from long-term residents in their socioeconomic and housing attributes, whereas immobility increasingly signals constraint, particularly among older or lower-income households (Kull et al., 2015).

This article analyses residential (im)mobility and migration in Portugal's two main metropolitan areas—Lisbon and Porto—using 2021 Census microdata for six municipalities. The Census identifies each individual's place of residence on 31 December 2019, allowing us to distinguish movers from non-movers and identify intra-municipal, inter-municipal, and international moves. Mobility is defined broadly in this study to encompass both local and national relocations, as well as cross-border inflows, all of which contribute to reshaping metropolitan demographics.

The study examines the determinants of residential mobility and migration in Portugal's metropolitan areas, focusing on how individual, household, and housing characteristics interact within a system that has historically favoured stability over movement. It asks: (1) Who are the recent movers in Lisbon and Porto, and how do they differ from long-term residents? (2) How do the determinants of residential (im)mobility vary across spatial scales—intra-municipal, inter-municipal, and international? (3) To what extent do the factors identified in international research hold under the institutional and cultural specificities of the Portuguese housing system?

Our contribution is twofold. First, by placing movers at the centre of the analysis, we show how their profiles—compared with long-term residents—reveal the rapid reshaping of metropolitan populations even within constrained housing markets. Second, by examining the understudied Portuguese case, we contribute to comparative debates on Southern European housing regimes and how their structural features influence residential (im)mobility.

The paper proceeds as follows. The next section reviews the literature on residential (im)mobility, situating Portugal within the broader framework of Southern European housing regimes and providing context for the current housing crisis, while also outlining the research questions and hypotheses. We then describe the data and methods, drawing on 2021 Census microdata and multinomial logistic regression models estimated separately for Lisbon and Porto. After this, we present the results, first identifying who the recent movers are and how they differ from long-term residents, and then examining how the determinants of mobility vary across spatial scales of movement—intra-municipal, inter-municipal, and international. The discussion situates these findings within international and Southern European scholarship, assessing how far the determinants identified elsewhere hold under Portugal's institutional and housing context. Finally, the paper concludes by summarising the main contributions and reflecting on the implications for urban inequality and housing policy.

Theoretical Background

Residential mobility and migration are key processes reshaping demographics and the social fabric of urban centres (Coulton et al., 2012; Coulter et al., 2016), representing different spatial scales of population movement that reflect both life-course decisions and structural constraints. Studying residential mobility—the moves of individuals and households within urban or metropolitan areas—and their access to the local housing stock reveals who is able and willing to move, how they differ from those who stay, and what these patterns disclose about social change in neighbourhoods and cities. Internal and international migration—respectively referring to movements within national borders and cross-border relocations—alter demographic and social composition in similar ways but add an important dimension: the capacity to change the size and age structure of local populations, accelerating population turnover and influencing both the pace and trajectory of demographic change (Billari, 2022). Together, these processes shape the spatial expression of demographic change, producing patterns of concentration, displacement, and segregation that reconfigure the social geography of cities (Bayona-i-Carrasco et al., 2018; Hochstenbach & Musterd, 2021).

Research on residential mobility has evolved from an early view of mobility as a spatial adjustment process, through which households seek equilibrium between housing consumption and family composition (e.g. Rossi, 1955; Brown & Moore, 1970), to approaches emphasising life-course transitions, linking moves to demographic and family events such as leaving the parental home, union formation, childbearing, and separation (e.g. Mulder & Hooimeijer, 1999; Coulter et al., 2016; Kulu et al., 2021). In parallel, a growing strand of studies embeds individual trajectories within housing systems, welfare regimes, and structural constraints, showing how institutional settings and market dynamics shape both the opportunities for and the barriers to moving (e.g. Musterd et al., 2016; Coulter et al., 2016; Bayona-i-Carrasco et al., 2018; He,

2022). Collectively, these perspectives highlight that residential mobility is at once a life-course event, a market-mediated adjustment, and a socially structured process.

While these theoretical approaches provide a comprehensive framework for understanding why people move or stay, empirical research identifies consistent determinants of mobility across individual, household, and structural levels.

Understanding who moves and who stays

Following multilevel frameworks that distinguish between micro, meso, and macro determinants of residential mobility (Mulder & Hooimeijer, 1999; Coulter, 2015; Musterd et al., 2016), this section examines the factors shaping who moves and who stays in urban contexts. Because “there is no simple way to distinguish migration from residential mobility” (Coulter et al., 2015:17), these determinants are also relevant for migration processes, although their influence may vary in magnitude and direction depending on distance, institutional barriers, and the scale of movement.

At the micro level, mobility decisions are closely tied to the life course, with age, marital status, and the presence of children acting as key turning points that influence whether people move (Mulder, 2007). Younger adults display the highest mobility rates, as this stage of life is marked by transitions such as leaving the parental home, entering the labour market, or forming new partnerships (Feijten & Mulder, 2002). As people age, residential moves become less frequent and more selective, reflecting both the accumulation of location-specific capital, such as stable employment, social networks, and homeownership, and rising moving costs, in financial and emotional attachment terms (Clark & Lisowski, 2017). Marital transitions also play a critical role: union formation often triggers moves, while separation or divorce typically lead to more frequent, shorter-distance, and financially constrained relocations (Mulder & Wagner, 2010; Kulu et al., 2021). Parenthood further reduces mobility, as families with young children tend to prioritise residential stability and proximity to childcare, schools, and family support networks

(Mulder, 2007). In lower-income households with children, residential moves are often driven by necessity rather than choice, reflecting housing instability and limited access to affordable dwellings (Clark, Deurloo, & Dieleman, 1986; Kull et al., 2015).

Gender dynamics further differentiate these patterns. Women's mobility trajectories are often shaped by family responsibilities and gendered divisions of labour, which can constrain their residential choices or link them more closely to their partner's employment and household location (Cooke, 2008). Female-headed households face stronger economic and institutional barriers to moving, often resulting in residential immobility or relocation to lower-quality housing following separation (Clark & Dieleman, 1996; Feijten & Mulder, 2002). Conversely, in dual-earner households, women's participation in the labour market increases the likelihood of joint decision-making about mobility, thereby moderating traditional gender effects (Boyle et al., 2001; Mulder & Malmberg, 2011). These gendered patterns highlight that residential mobility is embedded not only in life-course transitions but also in social norms and economic inequalities that shape who has the power and resources to move.

At the individual level, other sociodemographic and socioeconomic characteristics substantially influence residential mobility. Place of birth and nationality are strong predictors of moving behaviour. Foreign-born individuals generally display higher mobility rates, particularly over short and medium distances, as they continue to adjust their housing and locational choices during the process of settlement and integration (Coulter et al., 2016; Musterd et al., 2016). In contrast, native-born populations often exhibit greater residential inertia, reflecting stronger local attachment, family proximity, and homeownership stability (Mulder, 2007).

Educational attainment also plays a critical role: individuals with higher education are more mobile, as they are better positioned to access employment opportunities and housing markets across wider geographical areas, while those with lower education levels tend to be spatially constrained (Vlist et al., 2002; Clark & Lisowski, 2017).

Mobility patterns are further conditioned by employment status. People in stable and higher-skilled jobs are more likely to relocate voluntarily to improve living standards, whereas the unemployed or those in precarious work situations often experience forced or constrained immobility due to limited financial resources and credit access (Pendakur & Young, 2013; Coulter, 2015). Finally, sector of economic activity shapes the spatial flexibility of workers. Employees in dynamic and knowledge-intensive industries, such as technology or services, typically exhibit higher residential mobility, while those in manufacturing, construction, or public-sector employment are more geographically anchored (Kronenberg & Carree, 2012).

Beyond individual and household characteristics, meso-level relations and macro-level structures play a decisive role in shaping residential (im)mobility. At the meso level, social and familial networks often anchor individuals in place or guide short-distance moves. Proximity to parents or adult children can encourage co-residence or local moves, while strong neighbourhood ties and community attachment tend to reduce residential mobility, reinforcing local rootedness (Mulder, 2007; Mulder & Cooke, 2009). Conversely, weak social capital or limited family support may increase the likelihood of moving, especially among younger or recently arrived populations seeking employment or affordable housing (Coulter, 2015).

At the macro level, institutional and structural conditions fundamentally determine how far residential aspirations can be realised. Comparative research demonstrates that housing systems and welfare regimes shape both the frequency and selectivity of moves: in liberal, market-oriented contexts, mobility tends to be higher but also more socioeconomically polarised, whereas in more regulated or familistic systems, limited rental supply and the dominance of homeownership constrain residential options (Kulu et al., 2021; Musterd et al., 2016). These patterns are closely intertwined with housing conditions, particularly tenure status, dwelling quality, and affordability. Tenure strongly structures residential mobility: homeowners, who face higher transaction costs and often stronger place attachment, tend to be less mobile

than renters, whose greater flexibility allows them to respond more rapidly to changes in income, employment, or family circumstances (Clark & Dieleman, 1996; Clark et al., 1986). Moreover, housing satisfaction mediates these effects, residents who perceive a good match between their housing conditions and expectations are significantly less likely to plan a move, while dissatisfaction with space, quality, or affordability remains one of the strongest predictors of relocation (Pagani et al., 2021).

Recent studies have further expanded this framework by integrating subjective perceptions of neighbourhood context. Individuals' sense of social distance—how they perceive their socioeconomic position relative to their neighbours—affects satisfaction and moving intentions, but this effect is moderated by tenure and economic resources, producing distinct forms of adaptive mobility or enforced immobility (He et al., 2022). Together, these meso- and macro-level processes show that residential mobility reflects the interplay of social ties, housing conditions, and institutional structures. The next section examines Portugal, where residential (im)mobility occurs within a housing system characterised by stability and familistic support.

Portugal's structural residential immobility

Portugal is described in the literature as a country of low residential mobility (Pinto, 2012; Bell et al., 2015; Azevedo, 2020). Immobility is particularly marked among older cohorts, with people aged 65 and over spending nearly half of their lifetime (48 %) in the same dwelling—one of the highest averages in Europe (Fernández-Carro, 2012). This enduring stability reflects a housing system long centred on homeownership, reinforced by policies that subsidised mortgage credit between 1976 and 2003 and by the rent freeze re-introduced in the mid-1970s (Alves et al., 2023; Azevedo, 2024). Prioritising ownership left social housing severely underdeveloped (Santos, 2019)—only 3 % of the national stock in 2021 Census—and contributed to the Southern European housing regime, characterised by extensive homeownership, weak rental markets, residual social housing, and strong reliance on family support (Allen, 2004, 2006;

Arbaci, 2007, 2019). The prevalence of ownership has also produced widespread under-occupation, with 63.6 % of dwellings containing more rooms than household needs (INE, Census 2021). Within this structure that promotes residential stability rather than change, mobility becomes the exception, raising the question of whether its determinants mirror those found in more mobile housing systems.

Pinto et al. (2016) analyse the residential trajectories of individuals born between 1945 and 1975 in the Lisbon Metropolitan Area (LMA), revealing limited household mobility. Their study identifies socio-economic profiles linked to different mobility levels, showing that a strong preference for homeownership, together with family and class dynamics, constrains movement. Similarly, Jorge et al. (2018), using survey data for Lisbon, identify five profiles of residential (im)mobility—non-movers, intra-parish movers, long-term residents, new residents from other parts of Portugal, and foreign residents. Recent movers (less than ten years) were mostly young, highly educated adults in upper socio-professional groups, typically couples with children living in rented housing, and were mainly motivated by housing costs and residential quality. Together, these studies illustrate how (im)mobility reflects both the legacies of past housing structures and new dynamics reshaping mobility in Lisbon.

Over the past decade, Portugal's housing system has been transformed, shifting from a financial to a housing crisis (Seixas et al., 2016; Santos et al., 2022). A key turning point was the 2012 revision of the New Urban Lease Act (NRAU), introduced under the Troika bailout programme. The reform liberalised rental contracts, ended rent control, and expedited evictions to increase market flexibility, but also intensified tenure insecurity and affordability pressures in urban centres (Alves et al., 2023). Simultaneously, processes of gentrification and touristification—particularly in Lisbon (Lestegás, 2019) and Porto (Carvalho et al., 2019)—combined with the expansion of short-term rentals (Gonçalves et al., 2022) and rising foreign real-estate investment (Rodrigues et al., 2023) to reshape housing markets. The consequences include

sharp price increases (124.4 % between 2015 and 2024; Eurostat 2025), declining affordability (Santos & Strohmaier, 2024), contraction of the private rental stock (Garha & Azevedo, 2022), and the displacement of older residents (Cócola-Gant & Gago, 2019; Sequera & Nofre, 2019). Housing has become increasingly financialised (Santos, 2019), while local economies are transformed by the gentrification of retail (Guimarães, 2018) and the conversion of traditional businesses to tourism (Cruz et al., 2024). Within this reconfigured context, residential (im)mobility reflects both voluntary moves to improve living conditions and constrained mobility, where households are compelled—or prevented—from moving by market pressures.

Population distribution in Portugal is highly uneven, with the Lisbon and Porto metropolitan areas acting as the country's main demographic poles (Azevedo, 2020; Fonseca, 2024). In 2021 these regions concentrated 45.5 % of the population (4.6 million). Between 2011 and 2021, the LMA grew 1.7 % to 2.87 million people, while the Porto Metropolitan Area (PMA) declined 1.3 % to 1.74 million. In the LMA, Cascais, Lisbon, Loures, and Sintra account for nearly half the population, whereas in the PMA, Porto and Vila Nova de Gaia represent about one-third—the six largest municipalities in Portugal, all marked by high residential turnover. Residential mobility, however, remains limited: in 2021, only 13.2 % of PMA residents and 15.2 % of LMA residents had moved since 2019 (excluding those not yet born). Over half of recent movers arrived from another municipality, indicating inter-municipal mobility and internal migration, while more than one-third moved within the same municipality; a significant share came from abroad, linking residential mobility to broader immigration dynamics—especially in the LMA (Figure 1).

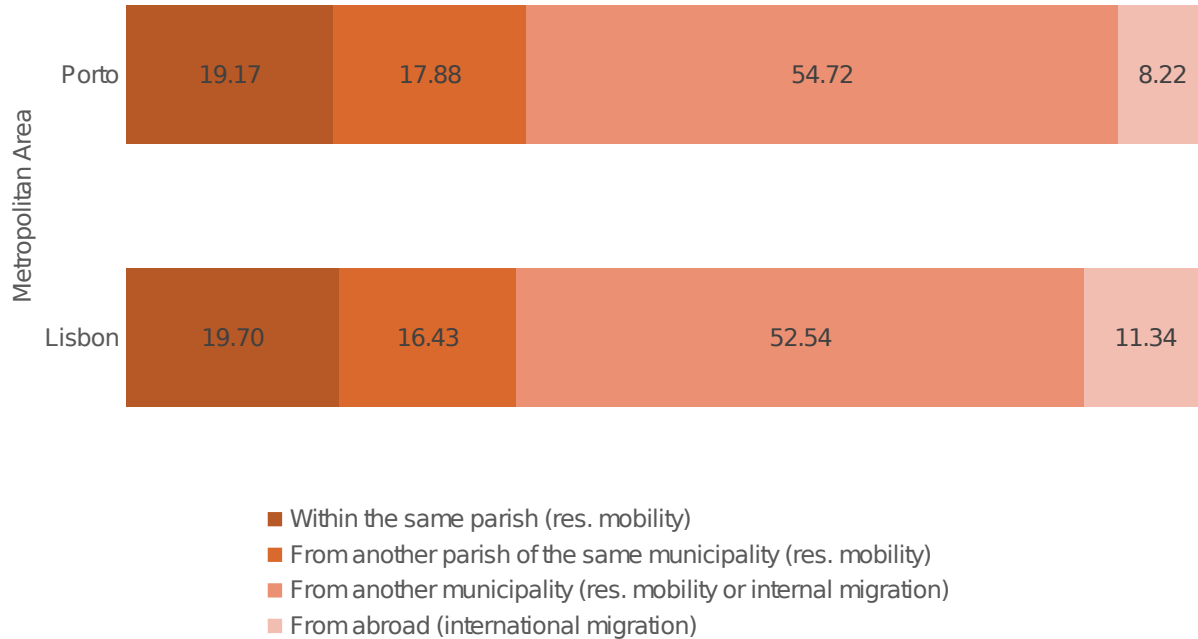


Figure 1. New residents in 2021 by place of residence on 31 December 2019 (%), Lisbon and Porto Metropolitan Areas. Source: Authors' calculations based on 2021 Census data, INE.

These metropolitan trends unfold amid widening housing inequalities. Between 2019 and 2023, housing prices rose far faster than incomes: in Lisbon, prices increased 23.2 % to €4,086 per m² against a 10.7 % rise in income; in Vila Nova de Gaia, prices surged 72 % to €1,932 per m² compared with 20.7 % income growth. Properties purchased by foreign taxpayers remain consistently more expensive than those bought by Portuguese residents. The growing presence of foreign residents further reflects this transformation: between 2011 and 2021, the share of foreigners rose 22.8 % in the LMA and 90.6 % in the PMA, with Porto and Vila Nova de Gaia more than doubling their proportions of foreign nationals (6.3 % and 3.4 %, respectively). In Lisbon, foreigners reached 10.1 % of residents, approaching levels in Cascais (11 %) and Sintra (9.9 %). Together, these dynamics underscore Portugal's low levels of residential mobility and

illustrate how housing constraints and uneven market restructuring may be sustaining new forms of immobility and inequality in metropolitan areas.

Objective, research questions and hypotheses

This section outlines the study's guiding objective, research questions, and hypotheses.

Drawing on the reviewed literature and the specific features of the Portuguese housing system, it specifies how individual, household, and structural factors are expected to shape residential (im)mobility and migration across metropolitan Lisbon and Porto.

The objective of this study is to examine the determinants of residential mobility and migration in Portugal's metropolitan areas, focusing on how individual, household, and housing factors relate within a housing system that has historically favoured stability over movement. Building on the literature and the Portuguese context, the study asks:

- (1) Who are the recent movers in Lisbon and Porto, and how do they differ from long-term residents?
- (2) How do the determinants of residential (im)mobility vary across spatial scales of movement—intra-municipal, inter-municipal, and international?
- (3) To what extent do the factors identified in the literature hold under the institutional and cultural specificities of the Portuguese housing system?

The analysis tests the following expectations:

Hypothesis 1. Residential mobility decreases with age, as younger adults move more often due to life-course transitions such as leaving home, employment entry, or partnership formation, while older adults exhibit stronger place attachment and higher moving costs.

Hypothesis 2. Among those not living in a couple, women are less mobile than men, reflecting gendered divisions of labour, family responsibilities, and economic constraints.

Hypothesis 3. Foreign-born individuals and foreign nationals are more likely to move than Portuguese-born and Portuguese nationals, as they adjust to housing and labour-market conditions during settlement.

Hypothesis 4. Individuals not living in a couple and couples without children are expected to be more mobile than families with children, since partnership and parenthood promote residential stability.

Hypothesis 5. Higher education increases mobility by expanding access to employment opportunities and housing markets across wider spatial scales.

Hypothesis 6. Unemployed and inactive individuals are less mobile than the employed, who have greater financial capacity and career-related incentives to relocate.

Hypothesis 7. Workers in the tertiary sector are more mobile than those in the primary and secondary sectors, as they often move in response to career advancement opportunities and the spatial concentration of service-sector employment in metropolitan areas.

Hypothesis 8. Renters are more mobile than homeowners, as ownership entails higher transaction costs, stronger place attachment, and reduced flexibility to respond to change.

Data and Methods

Data Sources

Quantitative research on residential (im)mobility in Portugal has long been constrained by limited data availability. Unlike Spain and Italy, which maintain continuous population registers of residential moves (Bayona-i-Carrasco & Rubiales, forthcoming; Lucciarini et al., forthcoming), Portugal lacks an equivalent system. This study therefore relies on 2021 Census microdata (INE – Statistics Portugal), the best available source to analyse who moves and who stays in the

Lisbon and Porto metropolitan areas. The dataset includes representative samples for six municipalities: Lisbon, Cascais, Loures, and Sintra in the Lisbon Metropolitan Area, and Porto and Vila Nova de Gaia in the Porto Metropolitan Area.

The census identifies each individual's place of residence on 31 December 2019, enabling the differentiation between immobility (remaining in the same dwelling) and three types of mobility: intra-municipal, inter-municipal, and international. Moves within or across municipalities capture residential mobility, while moves from abroad represent international migration.

A limitation is that this variable captures only one temporal change, between December 2019 and April 2021, and lacks information on the precise origin of movers. However, using 2019 as the baseline ensures that results are unaffected by COVID-19 disruptions. The analytical sample includes the household reference person and, where applicable, their partner, recognising that residential mobility decisions are typically made at the household rather than individual level.

Methodology

To examine the determinants of residential mobility, we estimated separate multinomial logistic regression models for the Lisbon and Porto metropolitan areas, accounting for contextual differences in housing markets, demographics, and spatial structure. This approach allows us to assess whether the drivers of mobility operate similarly across the two contexts. The dependent variable distinguishes four outcomes—non-movers, intra-municipal, inter-municipal, and international movers. Multinomial logistic regression is appropriate because these categories are nominal and mutually exclusive, allowing estimation of the probability of each outcome as a function of individual and household characteristics.

The general model can be expressed as:

$$\ln\left(\frac{P(Y_i=j)}{P(Y_i=r)}\right) = \beta_{0j} + \sum_{k=1}^p \beta_{kj} X_{ki}$$

for $j=1,2,\dots,m-1$,

Where $P(Y_i=j)$ is the probability that individual i experiences outcome j , $P(Y_i=r)$ is the probability of the reference category, X_{ki} represents the k -th independent variable, and β_{kj} are the estimated parameters for each outcome j relative to the reference category. Parameters were estimated using maximum likelihood estimation (MLE).

The models include independent variables commonly identified as key determinants of residential mobility: sex and age (life-course and gender dimensions); place of birth and nationality (migration background); education (socioeconomic resources); marital status and presence of children under 25 (household composition); employment status and economic sector (labour-market position); and housing tenure (residential flexibility or constraint). Categorical variables were entered as dummies, and continuous variables were mean-centred to aid interpretation and reduce multicollinearity. Table 1 summarises the distribution of these variables for LMA and PMA, outlining the main socio-demographic and housing characteristics of the study population.

Separate multinomial logistic regression models were estimated for the Lisbon and Porto metropolitan areas. To aid interpretation, Average Marginal Effects (AMEs) were calculated, showing the change in the predicted probability of each mobility outcome associated with a one-unit change in each predictor, holding other factors constant. This allows direct comparison of the relative influence of determinants across contexts. Model diagnostics showed no multicollinearity (all VIFs < 6), and model fit was assessed using log-likelihood, Akaike Information Criterion (AIC), and McFadden's pseudo- R^2 , with lower AIC and higher pseudo- R^2 indicating better fit.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of dependent and independent variables by metropolitan area (Lisbon and Porto)

Variables	Lisbon		Porto	
	No.	%	No.	%
Residential Mobility				
Not-Moved	33251	86.4	13885	87.2
Inter-Municipal	2138	5.6	912	5.7
Intra-Municipal	2443	6.3	953	6.0
International	654	1.7	169	1.1
Sex				
Men	16974	44.1	7011	44.0
Women	21512	55.9	8908	56.0
Birth Place				
Other	7209	18.7	1445	9.1
Portugal	31277	81.3	14474	90.9
Nationality				
Foreigner	3323	8.6	670	4.2
Portuguese	35163	91.4	15249	95.8
Education				
ESO	24862	64.6	11171	70.2
Higher	13624	35.4	4748	29.8
Marital Status				
Married	21506	55.9	9690	60.9
Separated	4493	11.7	1772	11.1
Single	8862	23.0	2977	18.7
Widow	3625	9.4	1480	9.3
Employment				
Employed	20714	53.8	7849	49.3
Inactive	16857	43.8	7605	47.8
Unemployed	915	2.4	465	2.9
Economic sector				
Primary	17583	45.7	7960	50.0
Secondary	2641	6.9	1570	9.9
Tertiary	18262	47.5	6389	40.1
Housing Tenure				
Owner	23883	62.1	9756	61.3
Tenant	14603	37.9	6163	38.7
Children in Household				
With children	13330	34.6	5319	33.4
Without children	25156	65.4	10600	66.6
Total (N)	38486	100.0	15919	100.0

Source: Authors' calculations based on 2021 Census microdata, INE, Portugal

Results

Who moves? Profiling recent movers and stayers

This subsection addresses the first research question—who are the recent movers in Lisbon and Porto, and how do they differ from long-term residents—and tests hypotheses (H1–H8) on how individual and household attributes shape residential (im)mobility. Mobility is expected to decrease with age and be lower among women, the unemployed, and homeowners, while increasing among the foreign-born, higher-educated, single, and tenant populations. Comparing the two metropolitan areas highlights which relationships are consistent and which reflect their distinct demographic and housing contexts.

Tables 2 and 3 present the average marginal effects (AMEs) for LMA and PMA, identifying the determinants of residential (im)mobility between 2019 and 2021. Age is a consistent predictor: each additional year increases the probability of staying (LMA 0.39 pp; PMA 0.44 pp) and reduces all forms of mobility, confirming that younger adults are the most mobile (H1 supported). Gender also matters—women are less likely than men to move internationally (LMA -0.65 pp; PMA -0.38 pp), reflecting persistent gendered constraints (H2 supported).

Migration background is the strongest dividing line between movers and stayers. Being Portuguese-born or holding Portuguese nationality raises the likelihood of immobility (LMA 10.56 pp; PMA 13.20 pp) and sharply reduces international moves (born in Portugal -2.35 pp and -2.23 pp; nationals -2.58 pp and -1.74 pp, respectively). Foreign-born and foreign nationals thus dominate among recent movers, especially in Lisbon (H3 supported).

Education further differentiates mobility. In LMA, tertiary-educated individuals are more likely to move within municipalities (1.49 pp) and from abroad (1.17 pp). In PMA, higher education lowers inter-municipal (-0.97 pp) but raises international mobility (0.58 pp), indicating that skilled mobility is broader in Lisbon and more selective in Porto (H5 partially supported).

Marital and family status also shape (im)mobility. In LMA, singles, separated, and widowed individuals move more within municipalities (0.84 pp, 1.86 pp, 2.32 pp), while separated and widowed move less internationally (-0.53 pp, -0.95 pp). In PMA, separation raises intra-municipal mobility (2.80 pp) but reduces international moves (-0.66 pp); singles are also less likely to move abroad (-0.39 pp). Households without children are more mobile across scales in LMA, but only inter-municipally in PMA (1.52 pp), partially supporting H4.

Employment and economic sector effects are mixed. In the LMA, inactivity slightly increases the probability of international mobility (+0.52 pp), whereas unemployment reduces inter-municipal moves (-1.84 pp) and moves from abroad (-0.70 pp). In the PMA, unemployment similarly

lowers the likelihood of intra-municipal (−1.82 pp) and international moves (−0.63 pp).

Hypothesis 6 is therefore only partially supported. Workers in the tertiary sector are less mobile internationally in the LMA (−0.97 pp) and less mobile across municipalities and from abroad in the PMA (−1.45 pp; −0.59 pp), contrary to H7.

Housing tenure remains the strongest structural factor. Tenants are far more mobile than owners, confirming H8. In LMA, tenancy increases intra-municipal (3.38 pp) and inter-municipal (2.84 pp) moves; in PMA, intra-municipal (3.37 pp) and international (0.64 pp) moves. Renting therefore remains the main entry route into metropolitan housing markets and a marker of high turnover, while ownership anchors households and reinforces immobility.

Overall, residential (im)mobility in both metropolitan areas is highly selective. Age, migration background, education, and tenure are the main axes of differentiation. Lisbon shows stronger international and educational selectivity, reflecting a more globalised housing and labour market, while Porto's mobility is more modest and internally oriented. Together, they reveal how similar drivers—age, family transitions, and migration background—operate within a shared institutional regime yet produce distinct metropolitan geographies of movement and constraint.

Table 2. Average Marginal Effects of residential mobility in the Lisbon Metropolitan Area (2019-2021)

Determinant	Not Moved	Not Moved p-value	Intra-Municipal	Intra-Municipal p-value	Inter-Municipal	Inter-Municipal p-value	International	International p-value
Sex (ref. men)	1.41 [0.74, 2.08]	< 0.001	-0.35 [-0.82, 0.11]	0.135	-0.41 [-0.92, 0.09]	0.110	-0.65 [-0.91, -0.38]	< 0.001
Age	0.39 [0.36, 0.42]	< 0.001	-0.23 [-0.25, -0.21]	< 0.001	-0.11 [-0.13, -0.09]	< 0.001	-0.05 [-0.06, -0.04]	< 0.001
Born in Portugal (ref. other)	10.56 [9.38, 11.73]	< 0.001	-1.29 [-2.02, -0.57]	< 0.001	-6.91 [-7.86, -5.97]	< 0.001	-2.35 [-2.80, -1.90]	< 0.001
Portuguese nationality (ref. foreigner)	3.94 [2.63, 5.25]	< 0.001	-2.21 [-3.19, -1.23]	< 0.001	0.85 [0.08, 1.63]	0.031	-2.58 [-3.15, -2.01]	< 0.001
Tertiary education (ref. education)	-2.97 [-3.69, -	< 0.001	1.49 [1.00,	< 0.001	0.31 [-0.23,	0.259	1.17 [0.89,	< 0.001

lower)	2.25]		1.98]		0.84]		1.45]	
Separated (ref. married)	-0.73 [- 1.84, 0.37]	0.193	1.86 [1.00, 2.72]	< 0.001	-0.59 [- 1.36, 0.17]	0.129	-0.53 [- 0.98, - 0.08]	0.022
Single (ref. married)	-1.00 [- 1.85, - 0.15]	0.021	0.84 [0.27, 1.40]	0.004	0.44 [- 0.21, 1.09]	0.181	-0.28 [- 0.58, 0.03]	0.073
Widow (ref. married)	-2.52 [- 4.31, - 0.74]	0.006	2.32 [0.75, 3.89]	0.004	1.15 [- 0.04, 2.34]	0.059	-0.95 [- 1.59, - 0.31]	0.004
No children (ref. with children)	-2.46 [- 3.19, - 1.73]	< 0.001	0.84 [0.34, 1.33]	< 0.001	1.27 [0.72, 1.82]	< 0.001	0.35 [0.09, 0.62]	0.009
Inactive (ref. employed)	-0.55 [- 1.85, 0.74]	0.404	0.40 [- 0.49, 1.29]	0.375	-0.37 [- 1.34, 0.60]	0.456	0.52 [0.05, 0.98]	0.029
Unemployed (ref. employed)	3.01 [1.08, 4.93]	0.002	-0.47 [- 1.85, 0.91]	0.507	-1.84 [- 3.22, - 0.46]	0.009	-0.70 [- 1.20, - 0.21]	0.005
Secondary sector (ref. primary)	1.95 [0.34, 3.57]	0.018	-0.09 [- 1.13, 0.96]	0.873	-0.79 [- 2.04, 0.47]	0.219	-1.08 [- 1.67, - 0.49]	< 0.001
Tertiary sector (ref. primary)	1.13 [- 0.15, 2.41]	0.082	0.79 [- 0.04, 1.63]	0.061	-0.96 [- 1.95, 0.03]	0.058	-0.97 [- 1.46, - 0.48]	< 0.001
Tenant (ref. owner)	-6.62 [- 7.36, - 5.88]	< 0.001	3.38 [2.87, 3.88]	< 0.001	2.84 [2.29, 3.39]	< 0.001	0.41 [0.13, 0.68]	0.004

Note: Average marginal effects (AMEs) expressed in percentage points. 95% confidence

intervals in brackets. Non-significant results ($p > 0.05$) are displayed in grey.

Source: Authors' calculations based on 2021 Census microdata, INE.

Table 3. Average Marginal Effects of residential mobility in the Porto Metropolitan Area (2019-2021)

Determinant	Not Moved	Not Moved p-value	Intra-Municipal	Intra-Municipal p-value	Inter-Municipal	Inter-Municipal p-value	International	International p-value
Sex (ref. men)	1.65 [0.62, 2.67]	0.002	-0.53 [- 1.27, 0.21]	0.158	-0.73 [- 1.49, 0.03]	0.059	-0.38 [- 0.70, - 0.06]	0.020
Age	0.44 [0.40, 0.49]	< 0.001	-0.25 [- 0.29, - 0.22]	< 0.001	-0.16 [- 0.20, - 0.13]	< 0.001	-0.03 [- 0.04, - 0.01]	< 0.001
Born in Portugal (ref. other)	13.20 [10.44, 15.96]	< 0.001	-1.98 [- 3.62, - 0.33]	0.019	-9.00 [- 11.32, - 6.68]	< 0.001	-2.23 [- 3.20, - 1.25]	< 0.001

Portuguese nationality (ref. foreigner)	4.32 [1.46, 7.19]	0.003	-1.67 [- 3.77, 0.42]	0.118	-0.91 [- 2.70, 0.88]	0.320	-1.74 [- 2.66, - 0.82]	< 0.001
Tertiary education (ref. lower)	0.14 [- 0.97, 1.24]	0.809	0.25 [- 0.55, 1.04]	0.539	-0.97 [- 1.78, - 0.16]	0.019	0.58 [0.24, 0.93]	< 0.001
Separated (ref. married)	-2.00 [- 3.71, - 0.29]	0.022	2.80 [1.43, 4.17]	< 0.001	-0.14 [- 1.35, 1.08]	0.824	-0.66 [- 1.14, - 0.19]	0.006
Single (ref. married)	-0.99 [- 2.39, 0.41]	0.165	0.75 [- 0.20, 1.71]	0.122	0.62 [- 0.45, 1.70]	0.256	-0.39 [- 0.77, - 0.00]	0.048
Widow (ref. married)	-0.61 [- 3.17, 1.96]	0.642	1.74 [- 0.50, 3.98]	0.128	-0.81 [- 2.42, 0.81]	0.327	-0.32 [- 1.34, 0.69]	0.533
No children (ref. with children)	-1.80 [- 2.92, - 0.67]	0.002	0.14 [- 0.67, 0.94]	0.736	1.52 [0.68, 2.35]	< 0.001	0.14 [- 0.19, 0.47]	0.409
Inactive (ref. employed)	-0.58 [- 2.61, 1.45]	0.577	0.13 [- 1.31, 1.57]	0.858	0.25 [- 1.25, 1.75]	0.743	0.20 [- 0.36, 0.75]	0.489
Unemployed (ref. employed)	2.64 [- 0.12, 5.41]	0.061	-1.82 [- 3.61, - 0.02]	0.048	-0.20 [- 2.38, 1.99]	0.860	-0.63 [- 1.17, - 0.09]	0.021
Secondary sector (ref. primary)	-0.81 [- 3.34, 1.71]	0.528	-0.22 [- 1.90, 1.46]	0.799	1.27 [- 0.73, 3.28]	0.213	-0.24 [- 1.01, 0.53]	0.539
Tertiary sector (ref. primary)	2.15 [0.16, 4.14]	0.034	-0.12 [- 1.53, 1.30]	0.872	-1.45 [- 2.91, 0.02]	0.053	-0.59 [- 1.16, - 0.02]	0.043
Tenant (ref. owner)	-4.55 [- 5.65, - 3.46]	< 0.001	3.37 [2.57, 4.17]	< 0.001	0.54 [- 0.25, 1.34]	0.181	0.64 [0.30, 0.97]	< 0.001

Note: Average marginal effects (AMEs) expressed in percentage points. 95% confidence

intervals in brackets. Non-significant results ($p > 0.05$) are displayed in grey.

Source: Authors' calculations based on 2021 Census microdata, INE.

Table 3 summarises overall support for the research hypotheses. Most expectations from international studies hold in both metropolitan areas: age, gender, migration background, and housing tenure are strong, consistent predictors of residential mobility. Exceptions include mixed effects for education, marital status, and children, and the weaker influence of unemployment and tertiary-sector work, reflecting how Portuguese housing and labour structures mediate otherwise well-established relationships.

Table 4. Hypothesis testing for Lisbon and Porto metropolitan areas

Hypothesis	Supported?		Observation / Interpretation
	Lisbo n	Port o	
H1 – Age decreases mobility	Yes	Yes	Strong and consistent negative effect across all scales; mobility concentrated among younger adults.
H2 – Women move less	Yes	Yes	Lower mobility, especially in international.
H3 – Foreign-born/nationals move more	Yes	Yes	Clear and strong effect; foreign-born and foreign nationals dominate recent inflows.
H4 – Non-coupled/childless more mobile	Partial	Partial	Supported for short-distance moves; not supported for international mobility.
H5 – Higher education increases mobility	Yes	Partial	Significant across all scales in LMA; negative for inter-municipal and positive for international mobility in PMA.
H6 – Unemployed/inactive move less	Partial	Partial	Unemployed less mobile; inactive sometimes more mobile (students, retirees).
H7 – Tertiary-sector workers more mobile	No	No	Opposite direction observed; tertiary-sector employment anchors residents.
H8 – Renters move more	Yes	Yes	Strong effect across all scales; renting remains the main channel of residential movement.

Note: A hypothesis is considered supported when the average marginal effect (AME) is statistically significant ($p < 0.05$) and in the expected direction; “partial” indicates mixed or marginally significant effects.

Source: Own elaboration.

Spatial scales of movement: intra-municipal, inter-municipal, and international

This subsection addresses the second research question—*how the determinants of residential (in)mobility vary across spatial scales*—by comparing intra-municipal, inter-municipal, and international mobility in the Lisbon (LMA) and Porto (PMA) metropolitan areas.

Intra-municipal moves reflect short-distance adjustments within local housing markets and are primarily driven by younger adults and renters. Age shows the steepest negative effect, while tenancy more than triples the probability of moving within municipalities (LMA 3.38 pp; PMA 3.37 pp). Being born in Portugal or having Portuguese nationality reduces intra-municipal mobility in LMA (−1.29 pp; −2.21 pp), while only birthplace matters in PMA (−1.98 pp). Higher education increases intra-municipal mobility in LMA (1.49 pp).

Inter-municipal mobility is higher among tenants and households without children in LMA (2.84 pp; 1.27 pp) but lower among those born in Portugal (−6.91 pp). Portuguese nationality has a small positive effect (0.85 pp), likely reflecting labour migrants. In PMA, native-born residents are less mobile (−9.00 pp), while childless households move more (1.52 pp). These patterns suggest that family structure and tenure mediate relocation capacity within metropolitan regions.

International moves are dominated by men, foreign-born residents, and tenants. Women (LMA −0.65 pp; PMA −0.38 pp) and Portuguese-born/nationals (LMA −2.35 pp; −2.58 pp; PMA −2.23 pp; −1.74 pp) are less likely to move from abroad. Tenancy facilitates international mobility (0.41 pp LMA; 0.64 pp PMA), confirming rental housing as the main entry route for recent movers.

Overall, LMA shows sharper contrasts between international and local mobility, while PMA's movements are more evenly distributed across spatial scales.

Discussion

This section addresses the third research question—*to what extent do the determinants of residential (im)mobility identified in international research hold under the institutional and cultural specificities of the Portuguese housing system*—and situates the findings from Lisbon and Porto metropolitan areas within broader European debates. The results confirm that the main determinants highlighted in the literature—age, education, family transitions, migration background, and housing tenure status—also structure residential (im)mobility in Portugal. Yet, their magnitude and interaction are strongly mediated by the characteristics of the Portuguese housing regime, where high homeownership rates, a constrained rental sector, and familistic welfare arrangements shape opportunities and constraints to move.

Across both metropolitan areas, life-course processes remain the central determinants of mobility. The age gradient, whereby younger adults are far more likely to move, is consistent with classical models of residential adjustment (Rossi, 1955) and with contemporary evidence highlighting the link between youth transitions, employment, and family formation (Coulter, 2015; Kulu et al., 2021). Similarly, the higher mobility of individuals not living in couple underscores that housing choices continues to accompany key family events (Mulder & Hooimeijer, 1999). In Portugal, these transitions now unfold within tight housing constraints.

Our results also align with the literature that shows that education enhances mobility (Kulu et al., 2021; He et al., 2022), particularly for international moves. However, the contrast between LMA—where tertiary education increases all forms of mobility—and PMA—where it matters mainly for international inflows—suggests that structural opportunities for skilled mobility are unevenly distributed across metropolitan housing and labour markets. These contrasts illustrate the complementary roles of Lisbon and Porto within Portugal's metropolitan system, where global integration and regional embeddedness coexist as parallel dimensions of urban change.

The influence of migration background is particularly distinctive. Comparative research has shown that migration is a key driver of urban demographic renewal (Hochstenbach & Musterd, 2021; Booi, 2020). In the Portuguese case, migration background plays a pronounced role, closely intertwined with processes of gentrification, touristification, and foreign real-estate investment, which together make access to housing increasingly selective. Foreign-born and foreign-national residents account for a relevant share of all recent movers, confirming that international migration has become the main source of population turnover in urban spaces. Lisbon's stronger attraction of lifestyle migrants, students, retirees and foreign professionals contrasts with Porto's smaller but increasingly diversified inflows. This asymmetry highlights how international migration both sustains population growth and reshapes housing demand in metropolitan Portugal.

At the same time, housing tenure introduces a distinctive Southern European dimension. The positive association between renting and all types of mobility replicates what is known from previous studies (Sánchez & Andrews, 2011; Coulter et al., 2016), but its meaning diverges. In Portugal, tenancy is not only a temporary tenure choice but also a marker of vulnerability in a context of scarce and increasingly financialised rental housing (Alves & Azevedo, 2024). Homeownership, conversely, anchors residents and reinforces immobility, producing enduring spatial and social divides. Thus, mobility and immobility operate as two sides of the same coin: both are outcomes of a housing system that restricts access and flexibility.

Our findings show that the main determinants of residential (im)mobility identified in the literature hold in the Portuguese case but manifest through the filters of housing-market dynamics and, more broadly, within the framework of the Southern European housing regime. The interaction between demographic and socio-economic selectivity and structural constraint is particularly evident: the young, educated, and foreign-born are most likely to move, but their opportunities and motivations differ depending on tenure regimes, market pressures, and

metropolitan scale. Portugal's pattern of high residential immobility and selective mobility therefore represents a specific articulation of broader European trends within a familistic welfare system and a heavily owner-occupied housing market.

Conclusions

This study brings residential (im)mobility to the centre of debates on demographic and urban change in Southern Europe. Using 2021 Census microdata, it provides a much-needed quantitative analysis of who moves and who stays within Portugal's two main metropolitan areas, in a period marked by a deep housing crisis. By focusing on recent movers rather than aggregate migration flows, the analysis captures the fine-grained demographic and social dynamics reshaping Lisbon and Porto metropolitan areas.

The findings extend classical demographic and geographic approaches, concerned with life-course mobility, family transitions, and migration, into urban contexts where residential immobility has long been the norm. The results reposition Portugal within broader debates, showing that under housing regimes centred on homeownership, the capacity to move becomes a marker of advantage, while remaining in place increasingly signals constraint rather than stability. Foreign-born residents emerge as the principal agents of metropolitan renewal, particularly in Lisbon, where international migration intersects with processes of gentrification, touristification, and foreign real-estate investment, well documented in the literature (see Lestegás 2019; Carvalho et al. 2019; Cocola-Gant & Gago 2019; Sequera & Nofre 2019).

The contrast between tenants and owners further illustrates the asymmetry of residential opportunities, even if tenure status at the previous dwelling cannot be observed. Tenants are substantially more mobile than owners—a well-established relationship in the literature (Sánchez & Andrews 2011)—yet in Portugal renting also entails growing insecurity in overheated housing markets (Alves et al., 2023). Homeownership, conversely, anchors

households and reproduces immobility, reinforcing social and spatial divides. These dynamics confirm that mobility and immobility are complementary forces: both reveal how the housing system mediates inequality.

Portugal thus exemplifies the Southern European regime of (im)mobility, shaped by high homeownership, residual public housing, familistic welfare systems (Allen et al. 2004; Arbaci 2019), and the financialisation of housing (Santos 2019). Within this configuration, decisions to move or to stay are filtered through family support, policy legacies, and market exclusion. Even within a shared regime, metropolitan trajectories diverge: Lisbon displays a more globally connected mobility pattern, while Porto's mobility dynamics are increasingly international but rooted in regional and national processes. These contrasts expose the uneven geographies of urban change within a common institutional framework.

While these results highlight the demographic and socio-economic selectivity of recent movers, they should not obscure the vulnerabilities that also shape residential (im)mobility. Many young adults face increasing barriers to leaving the parental home in the current housing context, while a growing number of elderly tenants are being forced to leave long-term rental dwellings (Alves et al., 2023). Likewise, many foreign residents in urban Portugal are labour migrants living in precarious and overcrowded housing conditions. What the results show is that the profile of recent movers is more often associated with situations of relative privilege, reflecting the capacity to act within a highly constrained housing system rather than the absence of constraint itself.

From a policy perspective, addressing housing inequality in Portugal requires engaging with both sides of the mobility spectrum. Expanding affordable and social rental options is essential to answer to forced displacement, while supporting ageing in place can ensure that residential im(mobility) does not turn into exclusion. As the housing crisis continues to reshape

metropolitan life, the ability—or inability—to move remains one of the most revealing indicators of urban inequality.

Ultimately, residential (im)mobility in Lisbon and Porto embodies the paradoxes of Southern European urban change: it is both a sign of vitality and a symptom of inequality. By showing how housing regimes mediate who moves and who stays, this study bridges demographic, geographic and urban scholarship, demonstrating that (im)mobility is an expression of broader divides. In placing Portugal within comparative Southern European debates, it underscores the need to view population in space not only through the lens of movement, but through the interdependence of mobility and immobility as forces shaping the future of urban contexts.

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Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are derived from the 2021 Census microdata provided by Statistics Portugal (INE). Access to anonymized census data can be obtained through the *Public Use Files (Ficheiros de Uso Público, FUPs)* available on INE's microdata webpage (www.ine.pt). Access requires acceptance of INE's terms of use and is intended to meet detailed information needs while ensuring that observation units cannot be directly or indirectly identified.

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