

The influence of socioeconomic deprivation on the recovery of urban mobility after COVID-19 in Latin America

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Abstract

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1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic globally resulted in disruptive shocks to the human mobility system. Governments stringency measures and the economic downturn caused by the pandemic constrained international migration (“International Migration 2020: Highlights” 2021; González-Leonardo and Spijker 2022; González-Leonardo et al. 2023) and population movements within countries (Nouvellet et al. 2021; González-Leonardo, Rowe, and Fresolone-Caparrós 2022; Wang et al. 2022; Rowe, González-Leonardo, and Champion 2023). During early stages of the pandemic, big cities became the main epicentres of COVID-19 infections and deaths (Pomeroy and Chiney 2021) due to their higher connectivity via air travel, higher population density and concentration of public-facing jobs (Brandén et al. 2020; Bhadra, Mukherjee, and Sarkar 2020). As a result, governments implemented non-pharmaceutical interventions, such as lockdowns and business closures, leading to increases in unemployment and removing the urban vibrancy (Blustein et al. 2020; BBC news 2023). In addition, remote work and online teaching reduced the need for commuting, living close to work and education centers, and added pressure for individuals living in small and crowded spaces to move out of cities and look for more affordable and comfortable housing (Nathan and Overman 2020; US Bureau of Labor Statistics 2021). These changes are believed to have reduced the attractiveness of cities during the pandemic, while suburbs and rural areas have gained popularity (Florida, Rodríguez-Pose, and Storper 2021). As a result, a number of headlines have claimed the emergence of an ‘urban exodus’ to areas with lower population densities (e.g. (The Guardian 2020)).

Despite their potential rise in popularity, remote locations offer limited availability and diversity of job opportunities, and tend to lack infrastructure and services, such as schooling and health, to effectively accommodate a large population influx (Pinilla and Sáez 2021; *OECD Regions and Cities at a Glance*, n.d.). They generally lack high-speed Internet connection which is vital for teleworking (Chen and Wellman 2004). Additionally, most jobs cannot be done remotely “OECD Social, Employment and Migration Working Papers” (n.d.), and some companies have returned to in-person office work or have implemented hybrid forms of work, following the relaxation of stringency measures (McKinsey & Company 2021). Schools and universities have also returned to face-to-face teaching. Therefore, living close to work or study places remains relevant. Businesses and leisure activities in cities have gradually returned to normal, reinvigorating the economic functioning and urban life. Collectively, these arguments suggest that a potential increase in counterurbanisation movements during the pandemic was concentrated during periods of stringency measures and is likely to be short term. Big cities have successfully weathered previous pandemics (Huremović 2019; Glaeser 2020) and are likely to remain attractive places to live. Thanks to agglomeration economies, cities are normally regarded as centres for economic growth, clusters of talent, consumer bases and spaces for face-to-face interaction and diversity (Storper and Venables 2004; Florida, Rodríguez-Pose, and Storper 2021).

Recent empirical evidence has shown a decline on human mobility during periods of severe stringency measures, coupled with a rise of movements from cities to less populated areas and a slowdown of urbanisation movements across some countries of the Global North: the United States (Ramani and Bloom 2021), United Kingdom (Rowe, González-Leonardo, and Champion 2023; Wang et al. 2022), Spain (González-Leonardo et al. 2022; González-Leonardo, Rowe, and Fresolone-Caparrós 2022), Germany [Stawarz et al. (2022)], Sweden (Vogiazides and Kawalerowicz 2022), Norway (Tønnessen 2021), Australia (Perales and Bernard 2022) and Japan (Kotsubo and Nakaya (2022)). The majority of movements away from cities headed to their suburbs (Vogiazides and Kawalerowicz 2022; Stawarz et al. 2022) or rural areas in their close proximity (González-Leonardo et al. 2022; González-Leonardo, Rowe, and Fresolone-Caparrós 2022) showing in some instances a “doghnut effect”, with a decline in population movements directed to cities and a rise in the inflow of people to less dense surrounding areas (Ramani and Bloom 2021). Studies demonstrated that professionals (Tønnessen 2021) and individuals with a high income (Haslag and Weagley 2021), those who are potentially able to practice remote working, underpinned movements away from large cities. In addition, research has shown that a large share of counterurbanisation movements is headed to touristic locations with a high concentration of second homes,

suggesting that middle and high class individuals may have been key actors in movements from cities to less populated areas during the pandemic (González-Leonardo, Rowe, and Fresolone-Caparrós 2022). However, most studies suggested that variations in internal population movements during the pandemic are likely to be temporary and have not altered previous macro-structures of human mobility across the rural-urban hierarchy (Rowe, González-Leonardo, and Champion 2023).

In Latin America and the Caribbean, a reduction in internal population movements was documented during periods of high stringency (Aromí et al. 2023), but there is no evidence on how human mobility has changed across the rural-urban continuum. Anecdotal reports have shown that movements away from cities seem to have accelerated in two countries of the Global South, India (Irudaya Rajan, Sivakumar, and Srinivasan 2020) and South Africa (Ginsburg et al. 2022), while urbanisation trends have decelerated. However, lack of suitable up-to-date data has prevented us from properly assessing the “urban exodus” hypothesis in Global South countries, as well as the extent, spatial patterns, and durability of potential changes on internal population movements. The evidence for these two countries suggested that increasing counterurbanisation movements during the pandemic in India and South Africa could be underpinned by internal migrants residing in cities who returned to their hometowns due to a rise in unemployment (Irudaya Rajan, Sivakumar, and Srinivasan 2020; Ginsburg et al. 2022). However, recent studies have shown that urban residents from wealthy neighborhoods were more likely to move to rural areas than those from low income neighborhoods during the first wave of the pandemic in Brazil, Colombia, Mexico, Indonesia, Philippines and South Africa (Lucchini et al. 2023).

It is known that human mobility within countries tends to vary in systematic ways with development levels (Bell et al. 2015). In Latin America and the Caribbean, 28.6% of the population was living on less than \$6.8 per day in 2020 (World Bank 2023) and the informality rate was about 53% in 2016 (Salazar-Xirinachs 2018). Thus, we could expect different pandemic impacts on the patterns of internal population movements between countries in the Global North and the Global South. The way in which COVID-19 unfolded in each country, with varying levels of stringency measures, may have also produced different outcomes on human mobility.

Traditionally, censuses have been used to analyse human mobility patterns within Global South countries, which lack register data (Bell et al. 2015; Bernard et al. 2017). Censuses, however, are normally updated every 10 years, lacking the temporal granularity to explore population movements over yearly, monthly or short-time intervals.

Digital traces data from mobile phone applications, on the other hand, provide a unique opportunity to capture internal population movements with small spatial and temporal granularity in multiple countries (Green, Pollock, and Rowe 2021; Rowe 2021). Drawing on geographically granular Meta-Facebook data from March 2020 to March 2022, we aim to analyse how the pandemic has changed the patterns of human mobility across the rural-urban hierarchy in four Latin American countries: Argentina, Chile, Colombia and Mexico. We aim to address the following research questions: 1) To what extent did people leave cities and move to less populated areas in these countries? 2) Which are the spatial patterns of potential changes on internal population movements? 3) How have the patterns of human mobility changed over the course of the pandemic? 4) Are potential changes likely to endure the pandemic?

The rest of the paper is structured as follows: ...

2. Background

2.1. What do we know about internal population movements during the pandemic?

The COVID-19 pandemic led to an overall decline in human mobility within countries (Nouvellet et al. 2021). Research has shown that internal population movements across the rural-urban continuum decreased in the United States (Ramani and Bloom 2021), several European countries, Japan and Austria during 2020 (Rowe, González-Leonardo, and Champion 2023). Declines ranged from 2.5% in Spain to 8.5% in Australia. The largest drops

occurred during periods of national lockdowns and the implementation of other stringency measures, such as mobility restrictions, work and school closing, while levels of internal population movements recovered or exceeded pre-pandemic figures when lockdowns were lifted. Declines were partially attributed to a reduction in involuntary migration during lockdowns, a loss of labour market dynamism due to the pandemic, fewer people changing jobs and increasing remote work (Perales and Bernard 2022).

COVID-19 has also altered patterns of internal population movements across the rural-urban hierarchy (Rowe et al. 2022). In large metro areas across the United States, population movements, as well as households and businesses, shifted from central cities to suburbs and exurbs during 2020 (Ramani and Bloom 2021). These authors label this trend as a “doughnut effect”, reflecting a decrease in population inflows and activities in city centers and a growth in suburban rings. They found a sizeable “doughnut effect” in large cities, a smaller effect in medium-sized cities and almost no effect for small cities. A similar trend was observed in Norway (Tønnessen 2021), Germany (Stawarz et al. 2022), Sweden (Vogiazides and Kawalerowicz 2022) and Japan (Fielding and Ishikawa 2021; Kotsubo and Nakaya 2022), where net migration rates in big cities declined, while population movement to their suburbs increased. In addition, this trend was accompanied by a deceleration of urbanisation trends and unusual population gains in rural areas due to an acceleration in counterurbanisation movements, mostly in rural locations which are known to be holiday destinations with a high concentration of second homes and are generally located in the close proximity to big cities. An increase of counterurbanisation was the main pandemic outcome on human mobility in Spain (González-Leonardo et al. 2022; González-Leonardo, Rowe, and Fresolone-Caparrós 2022), the United Kingdom (Wang et al. 2022; Rowe et al. 2022) and Australia (Perales and Bernard 2022), where there is no evidence of a “doughnut effect”, since substantial variations in suburbs were not found across these countries.

However, studies suggest that variations are likely to be temporary (Rowe, González-Leonardo, and Champion 2023). In Spain, the urbanisation movement returned to pre-pandemic levels when the lockdown ended in mid-June 2020 (González-Leonardo et al. 2022) and unusually high levels of counterurbanisation persisted over 2021, although the majority of movements continued to occur between and within urban areas (González-Leonardo, Rowe, and Fresolone-Caparrós 2022). In Australia, the pandemic has caused minor changes in spatial patterns of internal migration, and its effects were minimal by the end of 2020 (Perales and Bernard 2022). In the United Kingdom, mobility patterns returned to those registered prior to the pandemic after the easing of non-pharmaceutical interventions (Rowe et al. 2022; Wang et al. 2022). These findings suggest that COVID-19 generated shock waves leading to temporary changes in the patterns of internal population movement across the rural-urban continuum, but it has not significantly altered the prevalent macro-structures of population movement within countries.

Despite some evidence in the Global North, less is known about the impact of COVID-19 on human mobility in the Global South countries. In Latin America and the Caribbean, internal population movements declined by 10% during periods of severe stringent measures, from 16-19% in Bolivia, Ecuador and Argentina to less than 3% in Paraguay and Venezuela (Aromí et al. 2023). However, there is no evidence about pandemic outcomes on human mobility across the rural-urban continuum. To date, surveys carried out in India (Irudaya Rajan, Sivakumar, and Srinivasan 2020) and South Africa (Ginsburg et al. 2022) have shown anecdotal evidence suggesting that urbanisation trends declined during the pandemic, while movements from cities to rural areas increased. Both studies pointed out that a number of rural residents initiating a migration decreased during 2020 and some labourers in major cities seem to have returned to their hometowns due to job losses, since stringency measures have extensively impacted the functioning of the economy (Ghosh, Seth, and Tiwary 2020). Many internal migrants residing in Indian cities lost their jobs and were unable to afford basic necessities (Nair and Verma 2020). Collectively, these findings suggest that vulnerable populations seem to have played a role in increasing counterurbanisation movements in Global South countries. However, recent work has shown that high-wealth groups residing in cities across Mexico, Colombia, Brazil, Indonesia, Philippines and South Africa were on aver-

age 159% more likely to have moved to rural area compared to those of low-wealth groups during early stages of the pandemic (Lucchini et al. 2023), in line with the evidence found for Global North countries.

Despite anecdotal evidence suggesting pandemic impacts on the patterns of human mobility across the rural-urban hierarchy in the Global South, lack of suitable data has not allowed us to identify and quantify the magnitude of these impacts. In this paper, we use Meta-Facebook data to provide evidence on the effect of the pandemic on the patterns of internal population movements across four Latin American countries.

2.2. Contemporary trends of human mobility across the rural-urban hierarchy in Latin America

Until 1980, rural to urban migration dominated internal population movements in Latin America with significant levels of population redistribution, especially during the rapid industrialisation process between the 1950s and 1970s when a critical mass of individuals moved from villages and towns to urban areas (Firebaugh 1979; A. Lattes 1995; J. Sobrino 2012). Urban growth due to internal mobility was primarily concentrated in large urban centres resulting in a significant population imbalance between the chief cities and other settlements (Pinto da Cunha 2002; A. E. Lattes, Rodríguez, and Villa 2017). As a consequence, Latin America shows high rates of urbanisation with more than 81% of the population living in cities, the highest figure after North America, and about 46% of urban residents settled in cities with more than 1 million inhabitants (Nations" 2019).

Currently, internal population movements amongst cities dominate the migratory system in Latin America, while rural to urban flows are of less importance (Bernard et al. 2017; Rodríguez-Vignoli and Rowe 2018; Nations" 2019). According to the 2010 census round, 80% of internal migrants moved between cities (Rodríguez-Vignoli and Rowe 2018). Contrary to the period preceding the 1980s, medium-sizes cities (those between 500K and 1 million inhabitants) experienced the highest net migration rates, while large cities (>1 million) presented balanced rates and small cities (>500K) lost individuals by internal population movements (Rodríguez-Vignoli and Rowe 2018). Changing patterns in human mobility within Latin American countries were driven by a decline in internal migration since the 1980s crisis (Chávez Galindo et al. 2016) and deconcentration dynamics in large urban centres, such as Mexico City (Jaime Sobrino 2006) or Santiago de Chile (González Ollino and Rodríguez Vignoli 2006), where long distance inflows have declined over time. At the same time, there has been an increasing domestic and foreign investment in export-oriented activities or tourism industries in certain middle-sized cities, fostering the geographic dispersal of employment opportunities and increasing the attractiveness of these cities (Brea 2003; Pérez-Campuzano 2013; Chávez Galindo et al. 2016).

Suburbanisation also represents an important type of internal population movement and has increased over time due to the growing expansion of Latin American cities (Graizbord and Acuña 2007; Chávez Galindo et al. 2016). These movements are underpinned by flows of middle- and upper-class families moving away from central cities to surrounding auto-segregated areas of wealthy individuals (Borsdorf 2003; Rodríguez Vignoli and Rowe 2017). Low-income populations also settle in specific areas within suburbs where the cost of living is usually cheaper than in cities (Janoschka 2002; Rodríguez Vignoli and Rowe 2017). A large proportion of both wealthy individuals and low-income residents commute daily to central cities, mainly for work reasons (Chávez Galindo et al. 2016). Recently, reurbanisation dynamics have also been observed due to gentrification processes in specific central areas (J. Sobrino 2012; Chávez Galindo et al. 2016). In this paper, we analyse how the COVID-19 pandemic has changed patterns of internal population movements across the rural-urban hierarchy in Mexico, Colombia, Perú, Chile and Argentina.

3. Data

The analysis proposed in this paper is based on several data sets. Firstly, Facebook Population and Facebook Movements are data sets based on the Facebook users' location history. The data sets were created by Facebook's owner company Meta and can be accessed through their Data for Good programme (<https://dataforgood>).

facebook.com/). Prior to releasing the data sets, Meta applies three techniques to ensure privacy and anonymisation. First, a small undisclosed amount of random noise is added to ensure that precise location cannot be identified for small population counts in sparsely populated areas. While removing small counts may lead to an underrepresentation of the population in these places, the geographic distribution of population is still reflected in the data. Second, spatial smoothing is applied to produce a smooth population count surface using inverse distance-weighted averaging. Third, any remaining population counts of less than 10 are removed from the final data set (see Maas et al. Maas et al. (2019) for details).

Both data sets Facebook Population and Facebook Movements contain data corresponding to a time period comprising approximately two years, starting from March 2020, and to four Latin American countries, Argentina, Chile, Colombia and Mexico. The data in both data sets is temporally aggregated into three 8-hour windows (00:00–08:00, 08:00–16:00 and 16:00–00:00) for every day in the aforementioned two-year period. It is spatially aggregated into tiles according to the Bing Maps Tile System. This geospatial indexing system was developed by Microsoft and it partitions the world into square cells at various levels of resolution. The Facebook Movements and Facebook Population datasets are aggregated into various levels of resolution depending on the country, and the length of the Bing tile sides vary also by country according to the country’s distance to the Equator, even when two countries use tiles at the same level of resolution.

The Facebook Population data set provides information on the number of active Facebook users in each tile. The data set Facebook Movements captures the total number of Facebook users moving between pairs of origin and destination Bing tiles. We note here that due to the nature of the Facebook Movement data, we cannot distinguish between different types of movements, for example, daily commutes to work or permanent changes of address. However, we are still able to detect the evolution of movements between origin-destination pairs of Bing tiles and hence, we are able to capture the impact that COVID-19 has on mobility patterns.

On top of the data for the two-year period, each entry in the Facebook Population and Facebook Movements datasets include data for baseline levels before COVID-19. The baseline values are computed based on a 45-day period ending on the 10th of March of 2020. The data sets also include a ‘quality’ score indicating the number of standard deviations by which the observed data at specific locations and time windows differ from the baseline values, hence highlighting statistically significant changes.

An additional data set from WorldPop was used to capture the spatial distribution of population density in the different countries analysed here. The WorldPop dataset is in raster format and contains gridded population data at 1 sqkm resolution.

4. Method

4.1. Data pre-processing

Ultimately, we work with a dataset where each entry represents a population flow between an origin and a destination pair. For each entry, we consider when the movement took place, the population density at the origin and destination, the number of active Facebook users at the origin and destination and?

4.1.1 Spatial aggregation

The working dataset is aggregated at the same level as the Bing tiles used to track the movements in a given country. To each Bing tile, we aggregate WorldPop population data and use it to estimate the population density of each Bing tile.