

# All Things Equal? Heterogeneity in Policy Effectiveness against COVID-19 Spread in Chile\*

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## Abstract

A number of variables affect the evolution and geographic spread of COVID-19. Some of these variables pertain to policy measures such as social distancing, quarantines for specific areas, and testing availability. In this paper, I analyze the effect that lock-down and testing policies had on new contagions in Chile, specially focusing on potential heterogeneity given by population characteristics. Using an Augmented Synthetic Control Method, I find substantial differences in the impact that quarantine policies had for different populations: While lock-downs were highly effective in containing and reducing new cases of COVID-19 in higher-income municipalities, I find no significant effect of this measure for lower-income areas. These differences could be partially attributed to heterogeneity in quarantine compliance, as well as differential testing availability for higher and lower income areas.

*Keywords:* Augmented Synthetic Control; Causal Inference; COVID-19;  
Observational Study

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## 1. Introduction

Like in most countries, the COVID-19 pandemic in Chile has deeply disrupted all aspects of daily life, starting from the health care system, to the

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\*For invaluable research assistance, I thank Nicole Rogers. All errors are my own.

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economy, education, and transportation patterns, among many others. Mitigating measures have become essential for preventing massive outbreaks and reducing systemic stress in hospitals and clinics. However, some of these measures may have had differential effects depending on the population characteristics.

In this paper, I provide evidence of heterogeneity in the effectiveness of quarantines or lock-downs at the municipality level in Chile during the first two months of the pandemic. I also shed light on some of the reasons that could explain these differential effects, such as the probability of compliance with lock-down measures by area, as well as differences in testing availability. The Chilean context provides a particularly rich setting to analyze the effectiveness of lock-down measures, as quarantines were implemented during the first two months of the pandemic at the municipality level. Municipalities are some of the smallest areas that have experienced quarantine in comparison to other countries, and allows me to analyze differential effects even within a city.

Understanding the effectiveness of containment measures is of critical importance during a pandemic, but not only its impact *on average*, but also for specific populations of interest. If certain populations are less likely to comply with lock-down measures due to differences in opportunity costs of staying at home, or asymmetry in information in terms of infections, then it is important to put in place complementary measures that will improve compliance.

Evidence related to the effectiveness of lock-down or shelter in place measures has been mixed: While some research has found overall positive effects of these policies (Dave et al., 2020; Fowler et al., 2020; Ullah & Ajala, 2020; Coven & Gupta, 2020), others find little evidence supporting these claims (Born et al., 2020; Gupta et al., 2020). In Chile, Cuadrado et al. (2020) find a positive effect related to quarantine measures, but like previous studies, it analyzes changes for a general population in a specific region, which does not necessarily identify the heterogeneity within smaller areas that differ in socioeconomic conditions. Given that measures that are effective for certain groups might not have the same effect on others, estimating the impact of some of these measures by income level can provide relevant feedback for policymakers.

<sup>35</sup> In this paper, I use an Augmented Synthetic Control Method approach to build a counterfactual for higher and lower-income municipalities that entered quarantine from a pool of untreated areas that resemble the evolution pattern of municipalities that experienced lock-downs before the policy was implemented. [COMPLETE]

<sup>40</sup> This paper is structured as following. Section 2 provides context of the Chilean case and the measures implemented to fight the spread of COVID-19. Section 3 outlines the augmented synthetic control method used for estimating the effects of lock-down policies by income at the municipality level and its results. In section 4, I discuss potential mechanisms that could explain part of <sup>45</sup> the differential effectiveness of quarantines. Finally, section 5 concludes with some final remarks and further discussion.

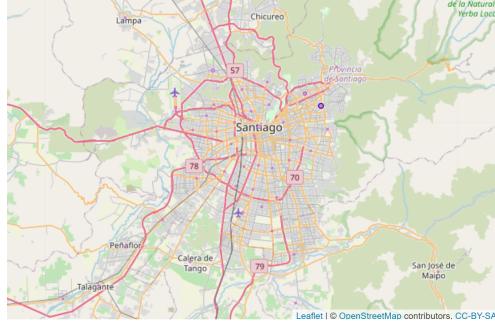
## 2. COVID-19 and the Chilean Context

The spread of COVID-19 in Chile started slowly, with its first confirmed COVID-19 case on March 3rd, 2020. During the first weeks of the pandemic, <sup>50</sup> most of the spread of the virus was contained in the east side of Santiago, in the Metropolitan Region, which is the most affluent area of the city. However, by mid-April, the virus had already spread throughout the city, as it can be seen in Figure 1.

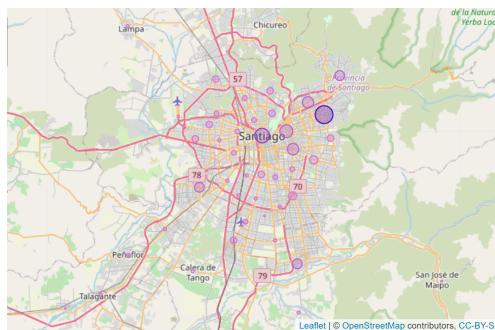
To try to mitigate the spread of the virus, the Chilean government declared <sup>55</sup> the first lock-downs during the final week of March<sup>2</sup> in 7 municipalities of the Metropolitan Region, and a few other cities across the country. The second wave of quarantines were around mid-April, which included three municipalities. Finally, by the end of April (and up to May 4th), three additional municipalities

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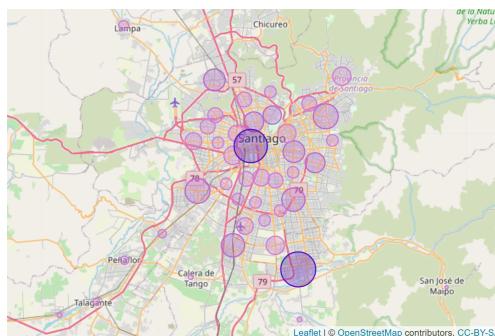
<sup>2</sup>Only two other municipalities had been in quarantine before March 25th: Caleta Tortel and Rapa Nui. Caleta Tortel is a remote and small southern municipality which declared an early quarantine due to cruise ship arriving with a confirmed case. Rapa Nui, or Easter Island, is an island far from the coast of Chile, and took early precautions after its firsts confirmed cases.



(a) Week 03/01/20 to 03/07/20



(b) Week 03/15/20 to 03/21/20



(c) Week 04/12/20 to 04/18/20

Figure 1: Number of total confirmed cases for different weeks during the COVID-19 pandemic in Santiago, Chile

in Santiago entered lock-down. Figure 2 shows the location of the different  
60 quarantines in the Metropolitan Region by timing, and Table 4 in the Appendix  
shows the exact dates municipalities went into and out of lock-down. To provide

some context on the units of analysis, Chile has 346 municipalities in total, which drastically vary in size: from a couple of hundred residents to over 500,000 in 2017 (Biblioteca del Congreso Nacional de Chile, 2017). The capital city,  
65 Santiago, is composed of 40 municipalities and concentrates the majority of the country's population.



Figure 2: Municipalities that were in lock-down at different times during March and April in the Metropolitan Region (First lock-downs: started March 26th; Second lock-downs: started April 9th-16th; Third lock-downs: started April 23rd-30th)

In terms of the restrictions that lock-down measures posed on residents, if a municipality (or part of a municipality) was declared on quarantine, people that lived in that area could not leave their residence without a legal authorization.  
70 Additionally, non-residents were not allowed to transit in quarantined areas either. Essential services were still open during this time.

### 3. Effect of Quarantines

#### 3.1. An Augmented Synthetic Control Method Approach

To assess the effect that quarantines had on the evolution of new cases at  
75 the municipality level, a natural approach would be to compare treated areas with those that are similar, but were not affected by lock-downs, assuming that conditional on some observable features, the assignment of quarantines

was random. In this context, Synthetic Control Method lends itself nicely to estimate a causal effect of these policies.

80 Synthetic Control Method (SCM) is a popular approach in causal inference settings that, under certain assumptions, provides a valid counterfactual for a unit which was treated at a specific point in time (Abadie & Gardeazabal, 2003; Abadie et al., 2010, 2015). SCM uses a weighted combination of untreated units from a donor pool to build a “synthetic” version of the treated one that resembles 85 its behavior prior to the intervention. Some of the main advantages of the SCM are that it does not rely on extrapolation (weights are non-negative and sum to one), and that it is a transparent method in the sense that makes differences between treatment and its counterfactual explicit, as well as the contribution of each of the control units (Abadie, 2019).

90 Following the same line as traditional SCM, but also leveraging the fact that I have multiple municipalities that entered lock-down at different points in time, I use the Augmented Synthetic Control Method (ASCM) proposed by Ben-Michael et al. (2020). The main advantage of ASCM over traditional synthetic control methods is that it provides a “bias-correction” when pre-treatment fit 95 is imperfect. This means that even when the synthetic control does not closely follow the path of the treatment group in the pre-intervention period, ASCM provides a method to correct for that bias using a ridge-regularized linear regression as an outcome model. The trade-off in this case is that ASCM allows non-negative weights to improve pre-treatment fit, but the method focuses on 100 minimizing extrapolation outside the convex hull.

In SCM and ASCM settings, three assumptions need to hold to estimate a valid average treatment effect on the treated: i) assignment of the treatment is random conditional on the donor pool, observable covariates, and pre-intervention path of the outcome, ii) Stable Unit Treatment Value Assumption (SUTVA), and iii) the intervention had no effect prior to its start date.

The first assumption relates to the idea that synthetic control methods use a weighted average of units from the donor pool to build an estimate of the missing potential outcome, and those units are chosen based on pre-intervention

fit. Overall, the decision of declaring quarantine in a municipality depended on  
110 diverse factors, but the most important one was the progression of the spread:  
Areas with higher number of total cases and increasing number of new cases  
were likely candidates for this policy. However, decisions had a political compo-  
nent as well, which provides a level of exogeneity to the decision that makes the  
conditional ignorability assumption likely to hold in this setting. For example,  
115 when the first lock-downs were declared, there were three other municipalities  
that had the same or more total cases than six of the ones that entered quar-  
antine, and actually Independencia, which entered early lockdown, was just top 30  
in number of cumulative cases. The story is similar when I look at daily new  
cases: three out of the top 10 municipalities with the highest number of daily  
120 cases on March 25th did not experience quarantine. These three municipalities  
were also located high in the ranking of total cases.

To improve the quality of the counterfactual, I also use additional covariates  
as population and income per capita at the municipality level.

The second assumption, SUTVA, implies that the intervention only affects  
125 the treated units and does not affect non-treated municipalities. The geographic  
nature of lock-downs, however, might make this assumption less likely to hold:  
If residents from a municipality on lock-down were more likely to leave and  
mobilize to nearby areas that were not subjected to quarantines, these spillovers  
would break SUTVA. To avoid potential effects on neighboring municipalities,  
130 I build a buffer zone around treated units using the areas that would be more  
likely to experience spillovers due to quarantines, and exclude these zones from  
the donor pool. I also exclude two coastal municipalities (Vina del Mar and  
Concon), given that they are a common second-home destination for residents  
of Santiago.

135 Regarding the final assumption, anticipation effects could potentially play  
a role in the estimation of the effect of lock-downs if there is an important lag  
between the announcement of the measure and the start of quarantines. Given  
that people usually need to prepare for a quarantine, it is not uncommon to see  
surges in mobility in the period between the announcement and the beginning

<sup>140</sup> of lock-downs. In the case of Chile, the first and second waves of quarantines were announced one and two days before their implementation, respectively.<sup>3</sup> Even though the period between announcement and enforcement is short, I use the day of announcement as the starting period of treatment, to avoid potential confounding.

<sup>145</sup> *3.2. Main Results*

To estimate effects of lock-downs on new cases over time, I use publicly available data from the Ministry of Health (Departamento de Epidemiología, 2020) on number of new cases by municipality over time. However, because these reports are only delivered every 2 to 3 days, I rely on interpolation to build daily data based on daily regional contagion rates.<sup>4</sup>

In terms of groups of analysis to implement the ASCM, I take three sets of municipalities: 1) high-income areas that had quarantines prior to April 30th, 2020 in the capital city, 2) lower-income areas that had quarantines prior to the same date in the Metropolitan Region, and 3) other large municipalities that did not have lock-down measures before April 30th.<sup>5</sup> The latter set serves as the “donor” pool or counterfactual pool for the first two. Characteristics for these different groups are shown in Table 1.

Table 2 and Figure 3 show the overall effect of quarantines on number of new cases over time for all municipalities that had quarantines in the Metropolitan Region. I use a 12-day mark to assess the effectiveness of the quarantine, because that is the number of days needed for most people to develop symptoms (Lauer et al., 2020). Figure 3 shows that after the 12 days since the start of the lock-

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<sup>3</sup>For Puente Alto, the measure was announced on April 7th and enforced on April 9th.

<sup>4</sup>The idea of interpolation and its implementation was first suggested by Jorge Pérez, who also made his data publicly available.

<sup>5</sup>Municipalities in the high-income group include: Las Condes, Lo Barnechea, Nunoa, Providencia, and Vitacura, while the areas in the lower-income group include: El Bosque, Independencia, Puente Alto, San Bernardo, and Santiago. The donor pool consists of municipalities that did not have quarantine at any point before April 30th, and that have a population of 70,000 residents or more.

Table 1: Characteristics for municipalities groups

	Quarantined		Donor Pool	
	High-income	Low-income	Met. Region	Not in Met. Region
Population	191,910	296,713	164,470	181,845
Income per capita	\$1,161,548	\$331,131	\$354,091	\$310,308
Poverty rate	0.009	0.077	0.053	0.085
Public health care rate	0.321	0.774	0.775	0.808

Source: Observatorio Social (2017)

down period, treated municipalities experience lower number of new cases over time, though the difference is not statistically significance at conventional levels.

Table 2: Estimated Average Treatment Effect on the Treated using ASCM for days 12 to 18 after start of lock-down

Days since Lock-Down Started	All	High-income RM	Lower-income RM
12	0.595 (2.939)	-3.768 (1.601)	5.996 (6.185)
13	-0.623 (3.043)	-4.653 (2.912)	4.184 (6.568)
14	1.16 (3.308)	-4.994 (5.545)	4.399 (6.993)
15	0.48 (5.769)	-4.405 (7.622)	5.3 (7.527)
16	-1.623 (4.847)	-9.897 (4.712)	4.779 (6.436)
17	-2.512 (3.28)	-6.717 (2.67)	1.95 (5.005)
Scaled L2 Imbalance	0.157	0.312	0.131
Num. leads	19	41	19
Num. lags	32	10	32

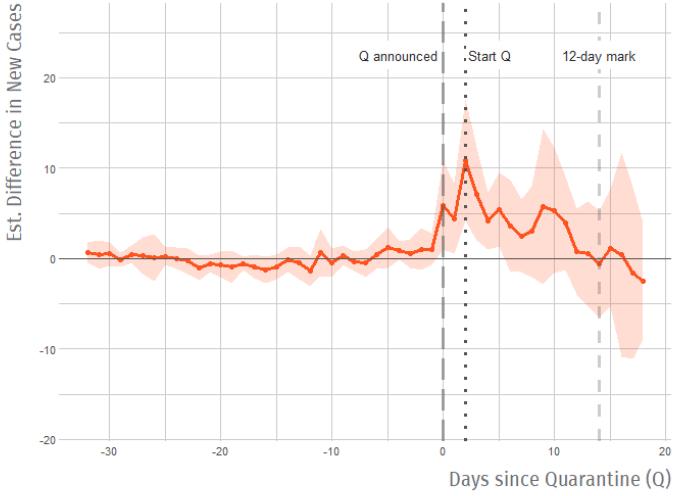
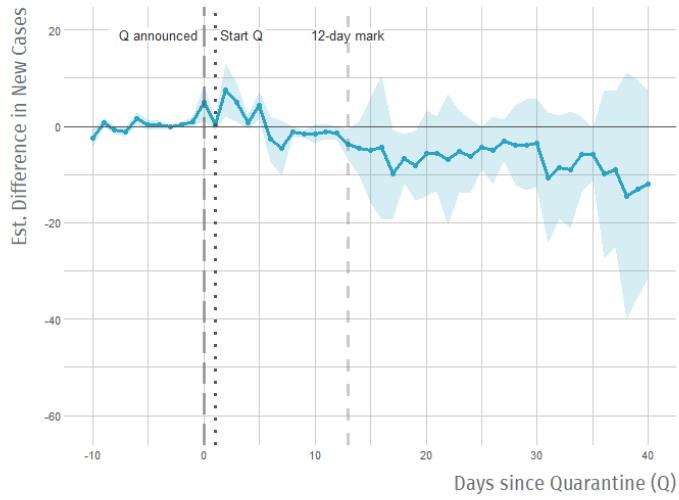


Figure 3: Estimated difference in number of new cases pre- and post-quarantine for municipalities in Chile using Augmented Synthetic Control Method

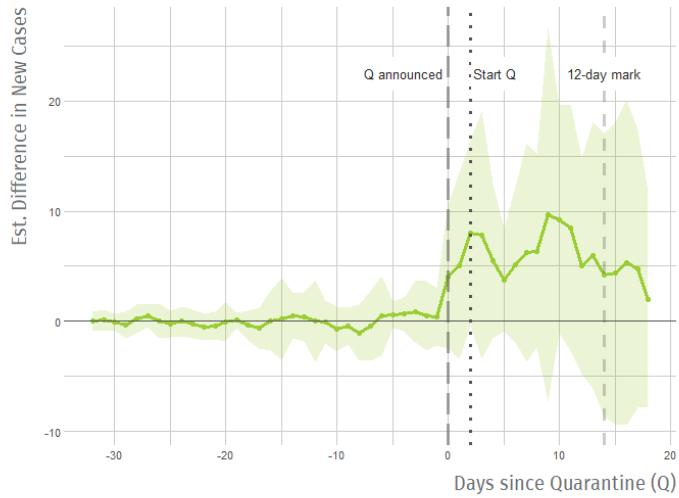
165 This seemingly positive result, however, hides an important degree of heterogeneity in terms of effectiveness of quarantines. When I analyze higher-income municipalities in Santiago compared to other municipalities, we can see that the results are very different (Figure 4).

170 Figure 4a shows the effect in difference of new cases over time for high-income municipalities. After the 12-day mark, we can see a significant decrease in the number of new cases in comparison to the synthetic version of high-income municipalities.

175 However, Figure 4b shows another side of the story. In this case, even though the effect is not statistically significant at 5% level, the estimate is opposite to what we would expect: there is an increase in number of new cases over time.



(a) Estimated difference in number of new cases pre- and post-quarantine for high-income municipalities in the Metropolitan Region



(b) Estimated difference in number of new cases pre- and post-quarantine for lower-income municipalities in the Metropolitan Region

Figure 4: Estimated difference in number of new cases pre- and post-quarantine by income using Augmented Synthetic Control

### 3.3. Robustness Checks

One potential concern for the identification of causal effects in this case would be that people change their mobility patterns from one municipality in lock-down to a neighboring area which is not in quarantine, breaking SUTVA.  
<sup>180</sup> To avoid confounding the effect with potential spillovers, I run a robustness check of the ASCM by including a buffer zone around treated municipalities, which are excluded from the control pool (see Appendix for a map of the buffer zones). Results are shown in Table 3, and they are very similar to the original estimated ATT.

Table 3: Estimated Average Treatment Effect on the Treated using ASCM for days 12 to 18 after start of lock-down excluding buffer municipalities

Days since Lock-Down Started	High-income RM	Lower-income RM
13	-3.661 (2.063)	5.329 (8.525)
14	-5.638 (3.536)	1.789 (12.211)
15	-5.171 (9.727)	3.421 (14.12)
16	-4.815 (12.777)	8.606 (12.259)
17	-6.496 (5.905)	7.624 (9.777)
18	-5.005 (3.552)	2.459 (8.017)
Scaled Imbalance	0.317	0.193
Num. leads	41	19
Num. lags	10	32

<sup>185</sup> Finally, another concern in terms of comparison of the effects between high-

and lower-income municipalities is the timing of the lock-downs. If lower-income areas were systematically treated later in the pandemic, it could be the case that the timing factor is confounding my results. To avoid this potential issue, I only compare high- and lower-income municipalities that were treated roughly at the same time, using the same set of high-income areas, but only Santiago and Independencia as lower-income municipalities. Conclusions remain unchanged, as overall effects of lock-down measures were not effective in Santiago or Independencia, lower-income area that were subject to quarantine at the same time that high-income municipalities (Figure 5).

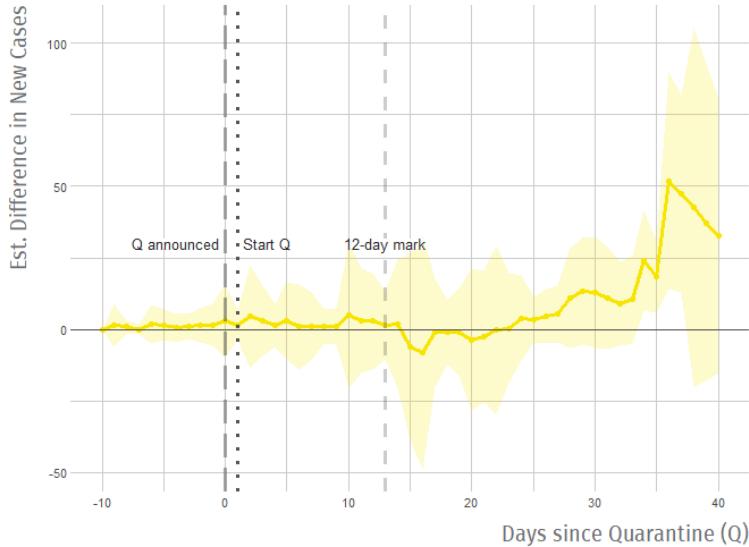


Figure 5: Estimated difference in number of new cases pre- and post-quarantine for early-entrance, lower-income municipalities using Augmented Synthetic Control Method

#### <sup>195</sup> 4. Mediating Factors for Differential Effects

In this section, I study two different, but potentially complementary, hypotheses that could explain the heterogeneity in the effect of lock-downs on

the number of new infections. The first one relates to the differential ability of households to stay at home during a lock-down, and the second one to the availability and timing of testing in different municipalities.

#### *4.1. Mobility during Lock-Downs*

Mobility has been highly reduced during the pandemic, both because of particular changes in behavior, but most importantly due to government policies aimed at avoiding contagion. Figure 6 shows data from Google Mobility Reports for the Metropolitan Region, which compares number of visitors to transit stations over time between mid-February and early May to a baseline prior to the pandemic.<sup>6</sup> I focus on transit data, as it is a measure that most likely approximates mobility to and from work during labor days. As Figure 6 shows, the biggest drop in mobility was given by closure of schools, with a 56% decrease. After that, there are no clear changes in mobility rates considering the active quarantines in Santiago. Excluding the day right before and after quarantines, there is no distinctive change in mobility for labor days when only the first wave of lock-downs was in place (i.e. high-income municipalities plus Santiago and Independencia), and when the second one started during that same period (i.e. half of the municipality of Puente Alto).

Given that quarantines were targeted to specific areas in the Metropolitan Region and were not widespread, it is possible that the aggregated mobility map is hiding movement reductions for those areas. To test potential differences, I use data from the Mobility Index Report created by the Data Science Institute from UDD and Telefonica (Universidad del Desarrollo, 2020) to analyze changes in mobility before and after quarantine, using the same Augmented Synthetic Control Method described in the previous section. The mobility index presented here measures the number of trips for a given individual, approximating his or her location using cellphone tower connections. A trip is then considered the movement from one tower to a different one, and the mobility index normalizes

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<sup>6</sup>Baseline consists of the period between January 3rd, 2020 and February 6th, 2020.

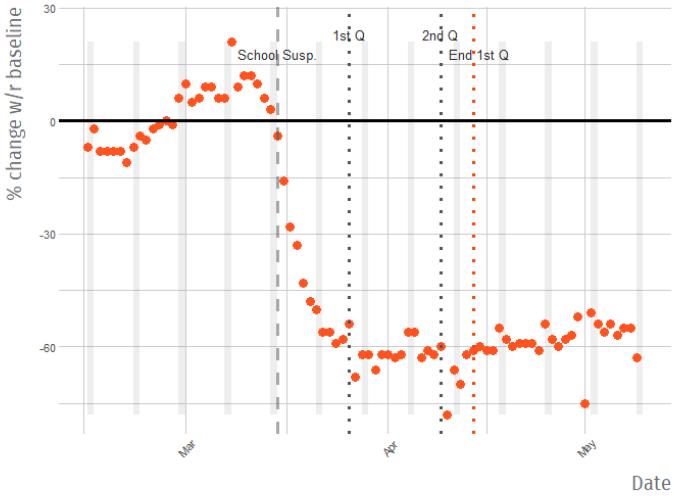


Figure 6: Percent change in transit station mobility measure with respect to baseline for the Metropolitan Region (Google, 2020), with weekends highlighted in shaded regions.

the number of trips by the population of each municipality, to make numbers comparable. Given the date range of the data, between end of February and April 12th, I focus only on those municipalities in the Metropolitan Region that were subjected to quarantines during the first wave.<sup>7</sup>

230      Figure 7 shows the results in terms of differences in the mobility index for lower- and higher-income municipalities that were subjected to lock-downs compared to their synthetic control. There is an important drop in mobility after the closure of schools on March 15th for higher-income municipalities, and that decrease in mobility is exacerbated due to quarantine measures. For lower-income municipalities, on the other hand, schools closures did not differentially affect their mobility compared to their synthetic comparison, but it did reduce trips 235 during the first week of the quarantine. The effect decreases substantially with

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<sup>7</sup>High-income municipalities are the same ones as considered before, but for the lower-income municipalities I do not consider Puente Alto for this analysis.

time, though, dissipating almost completely by day 9.



Figure 7: Difference in Mobility Index using ASCM for municipalities subjected to lock-downs by income level

Figure 7 clearly shows that income is an important mediating factor in mobility. It is not possible to recreate a synthetic control with a good pre-intervention fit for higher-income municipalities, because most of these areas entered quarantine at the same time, and in this case, income plays a key role in how people move. High-income municipalities appear to be more sensitive to overall policy measures, and reduced their overall mobility patterns even earlier than expected. Some of these differences could be due to higher ability for smoothing consumption (e.g. savings) or work-from-home opportunities that lower-income households do not have available, but more data would be required to study these hypotheses.

#### 4.2. Testing Availability

One important factor that highly influences the containment of COVID-19 spread is testing and tracing policies. By properly identifying vectors that

carry the disease, it makes it easier to isolate and mitigate contagion. However, testing is not equally available to all. During the first month of the pandemic in Chile, private and public hospitals had different protocols for testing potential cases of COVID-19: While private centers quickly adopted more flexible rules for testing, the public sector lagged behind, making it more difficult for patients to get tested<sup>8</sup>.

Publicly available testing data supports these differences in testing availability. By analyzing the correlation between private center testing and estimated positivity rate using publicly available data (Ministerio de Salud de Chile, 2020),<sup>9</sup> I find a significant negative correlation of -0.61 for the month of April.<sup>10</sup> This means that when private centers increased their share of testing, number of new cases over total testing dropped (Figure 8), while the opposite was true for public-center testing, providing additional evidence that it was more likely for patients to get tested “just in case” in private hospitals than in public ones. The difference between private and public center availability becomes particularly relevant when we consider that in high-income municipalities that had lock-down policies only 32% of residents were subscribed to the public health care system in 2017, while that number was 78% for lower-income areas that had quarantines before May 5th (Observatorio Social, 2017).

In addition to the availability of testing for different groups, proper timing plays a key factor. Even though there is no official data related to the timing from testing to result confirmation, some reports show that test results could take between two to five days, depending on the lab (La Tercera, 2020). If we add these differences to the timing it takes for patients to actually get tested, the

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<sup>8</sup>The need for a physicians’ referral, as well as the cost of the test are some of the barriers that differentially affected lower and higher income populations.

<sup>9</sup>Estimated positivity rate refers to the number of new daily cases over the number of informed tests for that day.

<sup>10</sup>Testing data is available continuously for type of testing center since 3/31/2020, and I use this data until 04/28/2020, given that the testing strategy changed to broader testing after that date.

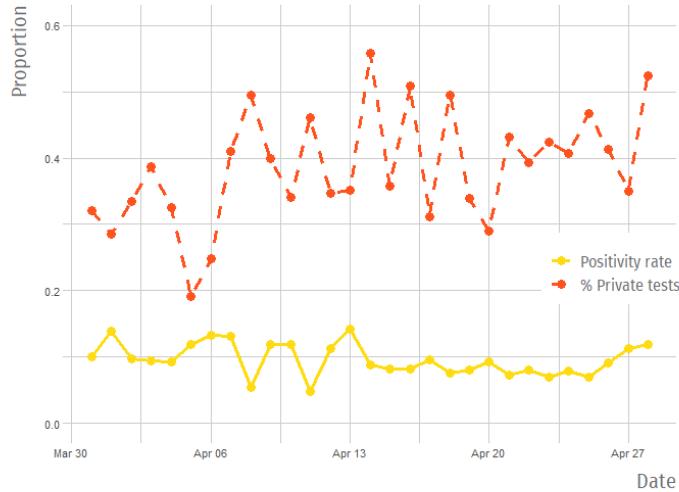


Figure 8: Estimated positivity rate and proportion of private testing by date

period between getting infected and having a confirmed diagnosis could likely be over a week.

Using publicly available data provided by the Ministry of Health (Departamento de Epidemiología, 2020), I combine different reports that gather the week of first symptoms by municipality over time. With this data, I estimate the difference in new cases between reports, and the difference in number of patients that reported initial symptoms each week. Using the fact that reports are made available every two to four days, I estimate the maximum days between first symptoms and diagnosis for these new cases, and calculate the estimated proportion for days between first symptoms and confirmation, shown in Figure 9.

As it can be seen in Figure 9, for both high and lower-income municipalities, there is a lag of at least three days between showing first symptoms and getting a confirmed diagnosis. However, differences become significant after the 4-day mark: While nearly a quarter of new cases in high income municipalities have a confirmed diagnosis by day 5, only 15% of newly infected cases in lower-income

municipalities have a confirmed test by that date. These differences remain fairly stable 7 days since first symptoms, and shed light on the fact that lower-income areas that experienced quarantine have almost consistently less timely diagnosis. One caveat of the data provided by the Ministry of Health is that is subject to changes between reports that could be due to reasons other than new cases (e.g. further investigation about initial symptoms); however, if we assume this measurement error is haphazard and not systematically correlated with municipality's income, the difference between both curves is still informative.

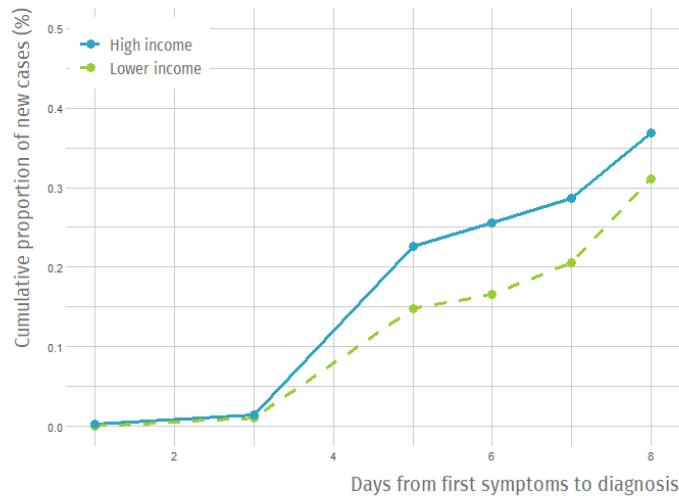


Figure 9: Cumulative proportion of new cases between reports by days since first symptoms to confirmed diagnosis, for high and lower income municipalities that were in quarantine in the Metropolitan Region.

300 **5. Discussion**

The effectiveness of mitigation measures play a paramount role in contagion containment during a pandemic. For the same reason, understanding how interventions work for different populations is key to design and implement policies that will actually help reduce the spread of COVID-19.

<sup>305</sup> In this paper I show evidence that small-area lock-down measures had a differential effect for high and lower-income populations. While quarantines proved effective in reducing new daily cases in more affluent areas, they did not have a significant effect on lower-income municipalities. Timely testing and difference in opportunity costs for staying at home might have played a role in explaining part of this difference.

<sup>310</sup> Given the speed with which governments need to act during a pandemic, more, better, and timely data is needed to assess some of this policies when they are implemented, and provide swift feedback that could help improve or complement current interventions.

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## Appendix

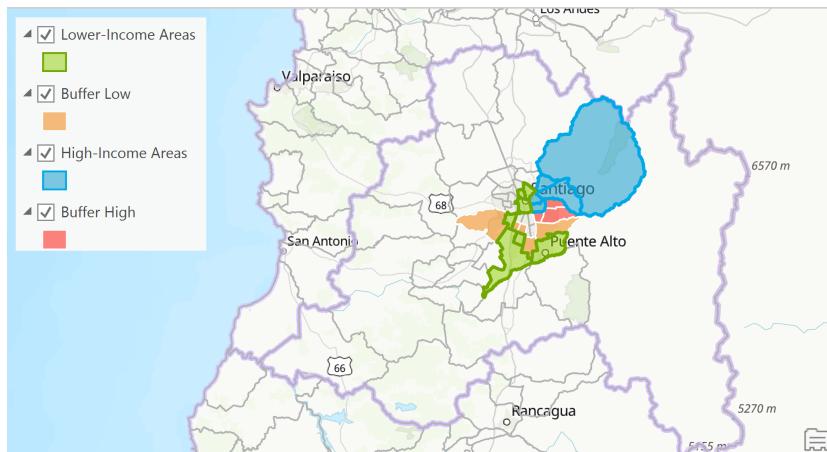


Figure 10: Map for high and lower-income municipalities that had lock-downs before May 5th, including buffer zones used for robustness test.

Table 4: Quarantines in Chile from early March to May 5th

Note: High income municipalities in blue and low income municipalities in green

Note: Ingraham municipalities in blue; and lower-income municipalities in red.