



Wittgenstein Centre

FOR DEMOGRAPHY AND
GLOBAL HUMAN CAPITAL



universität
wien

Is the COVID-19 pandemic a driver of relationship dissolution? A comparative study of Austria and France



Isabella Buber-Ennser, Caroline Berghammer, Maria Winkler-Dworak

December 14, 2021; Pandemic Babies Conference

Vienna Institute of Demography (VID)

COVID-19

- Lockdown measures during the pandemic had impact on all areas of life – including relationship to the partner
- Life became more concentrated within households
- Different perceptions (Lebow 2020)
 - Additional time with partner/children; slowing down of life
 - Trapped at home
 - Stressors: employment-related, work-family conflict, health concerns (Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021)

Stressors

- Employment
 - Unemployment, short-time work, decline in earnings
 - Potential for partnership conflicts (Berghammer & Beham-Rabanser 2020)
- Work-family
 - Elevated level of childcare
 - Work from home (Derndorfer et al. 2021)
- Health-related concerns
 - Different assessment of risk and risk mitigation strategies (Reizer et al. 2020)

Recent studies on partnership

In challenging times, like pandemic, partner an important support (Pieh et al. 2021)


Positive and negative effects of COVID-pandemic on partnership quality

- DE: 20% better, 40% worse (Schmid et al. 2021)
- IT, FR, ES: 12% worsening of relationship (N.N. 2021)
- AT: 17% increase, 8% decrease in p. quality (Berghammer & Beham-Rabanser 2020);
23% more conflicts with partner (Berghammer 2021)
- US: 34% conflicts due to the pandemic (Luetke et al. 2021)

Recent studies on partnership

- Short-term work – home office – no COVID-related employment change: Similar decline partnership satisfaction
(Schmid et al. 2021)
- Decrease in income linked to decline in partnership satisfaction (Berghammer & Beham-Rabanser 2020; Fleming & Franzese 2021)
- Unfair division of childcare – conflicts (Goldberg et al 2020; Waddell et al. 2021)

The process of separating

- Partnership satisfaction and separation are linked (Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021)
- Decrease in satisfaction  separation
- Partnership dissolution and divorce are comprehensive processes
- Starts long before the actual event

- Scant evidence on effect of pandemic on partnership dissolution/divorce
- DK, US: Low numbers of separation filings (Fallesen, 2021; Manning & Payne, 2021)
may be due to practical barriers
- Google trend searches on break up/divorce during pandemic: first decline then former level (Berger et al. 2021)

Research questions

- Increase or decrease in separations since onset of the pandemic?



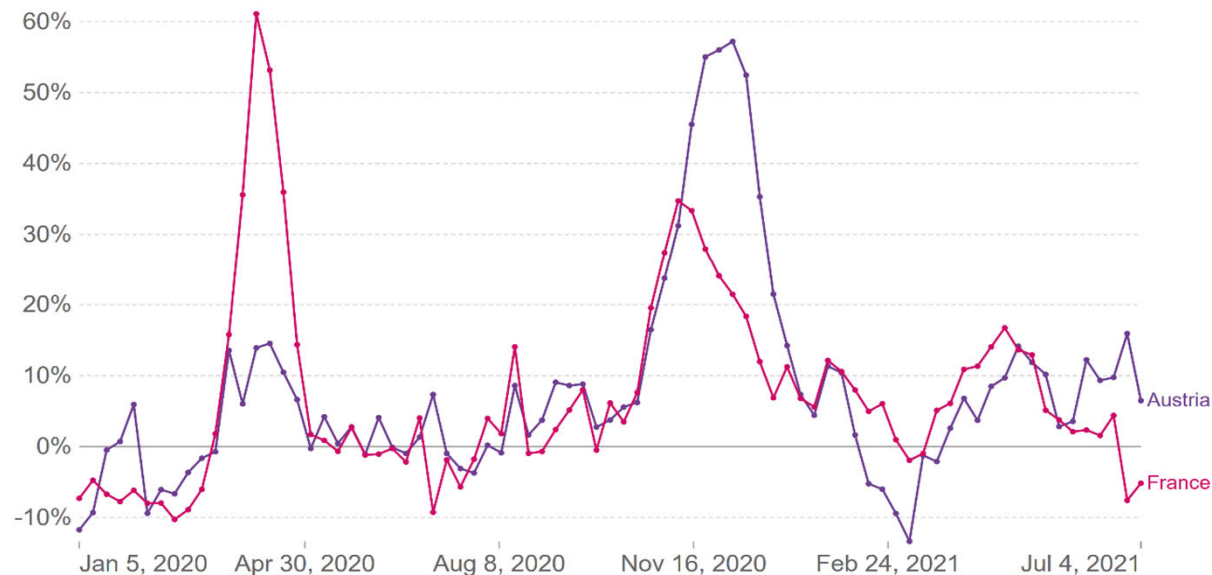
- Do couples separating in 2020/21 differ from those separating in 2018/2019?

Country contexts: Austria and France

Excess mortality: Deaths from all causes compared to projection based on previous years



The percentage difference between the reported number of weekly or monthly deaths in 2020–2021 and the projected number of deaths for the same period based on previous years. The reported number might not count all deaths that occurred due to incomplete coverage and delays in reporting.



Source: Human Mortality Database (2021), World Mortality Dataset (2021)

OurWorldInData.org/coronavirus • CC BY

Note: Comparisons across countries are affected by differences in the completeness of death reporting. Details can be found at our Excess Mortality page.

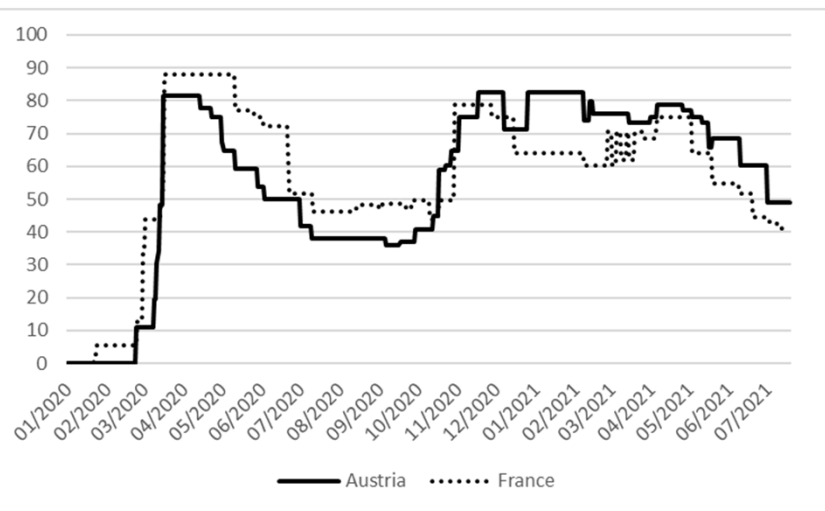
COVID-19-related mortality

Spring 2020: France among the countries in EU with highest mortality

Second wave more severe in Austria

Country contexts: Austria and France

Policies to combat the virus:
Stringency index



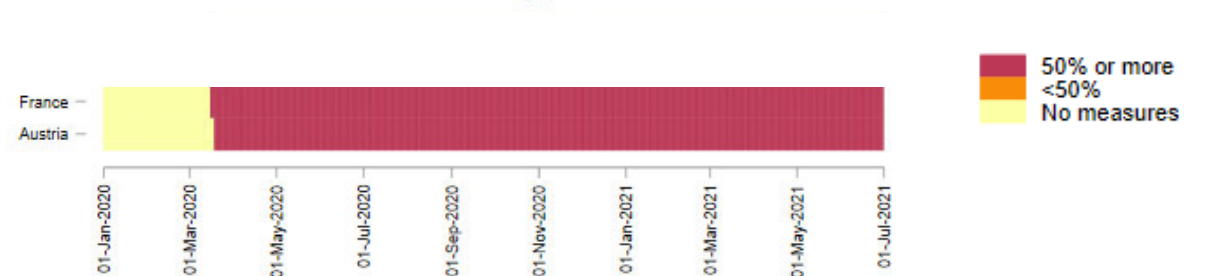
School closures



Workplace closures



Income support



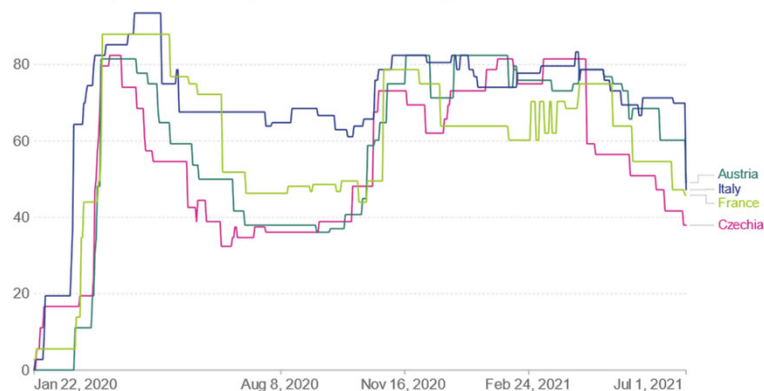
Notes: Income replacement has only three levels (No measures, less than 50%, or 50% or more).
Source: <https://ourworldindata.org/coronavirus>

Country contexts: AT, FR, CZ & IT

Policies to combat the virus: Stringency index

COVID-19 Stringency Index

The stringency index is a composite measure based on nine response indicators including school closures, workplace closures, and travel bans, rescaled to a value from 0 to 100 (100 = strictest). If policies vary at the subnational level, the index shows the response level of the strictest subregion.



Source: Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker, Blavatnik School of Government, University of Oxford – Last updated 12 December 2021, 19:50 (London time)
OurWorldInData.org/coronavirus- CC BY

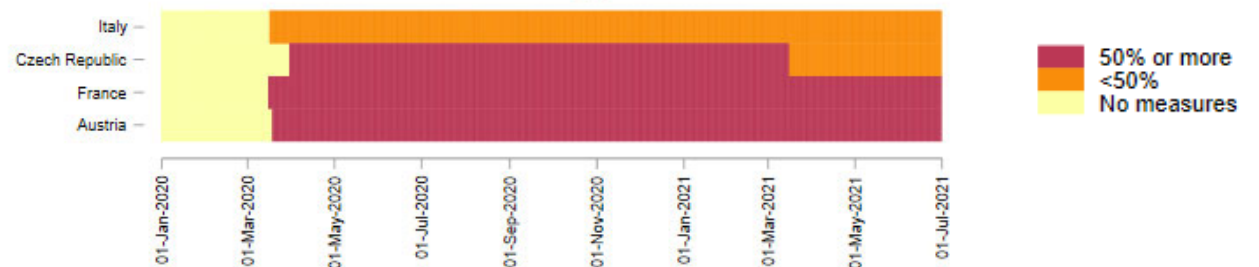
School closures



Workplace closures



Income support



Notes: Income replacement has only three levels (No measures, less than 50%, or 50% or more).
Source: <https://ourworldindata.org/coronavirus>

Data

Labour Force Survey (LFS) 2018/Q1 – 2021/Q2

Households participate in 5 (AT) or 6 (FR) consecutive quarters



Large samples: 55,369 units in AT 103,096 in FR

Plan: Further include Italy and Czechia

Focus: cohabiting heterosex. couples, both aged 20-54 years

„Separation“: living together in wave n and not living together in wave n+1 (i.e. three months later).

Analyses

- Pooled sample – Increase or decrease in separations in 2020?
- Separate analyses for 2018, 2019, 2020: Do couples separating differ?
 - Couples without children below age 18 living in the hh 
 - Couples with children below age 18 living in the hh 
- Logistic regressions for the risk of separating
- Average marginal effects (AME), adjusted for clusters
- Main explanatory variable: period
 - 2018
 - 2019
 - 2020/Q1-2020/Q3
 - 2020/Q3-2021/Q2 (Austria only)

Multivariate Analyses

- Existence and number of children below age 18 in hh
- Age of youngest minor in hh
- Employment of couple (full-time, part-time, not employed)
- Marital status
- Age, adult children in hh, education

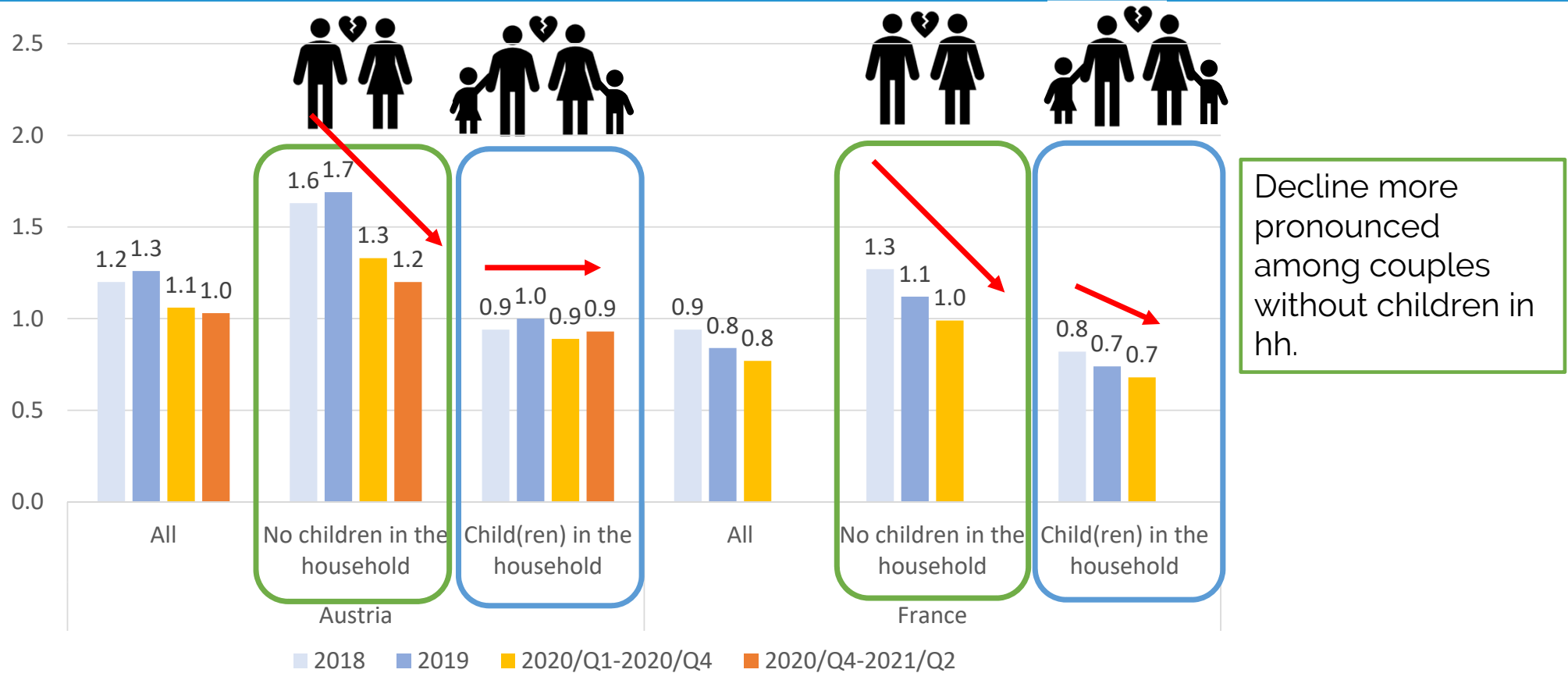
Austria:

- Short-time work due to the pandemic
- HomeOffice
- Housing (overcrowded housing)

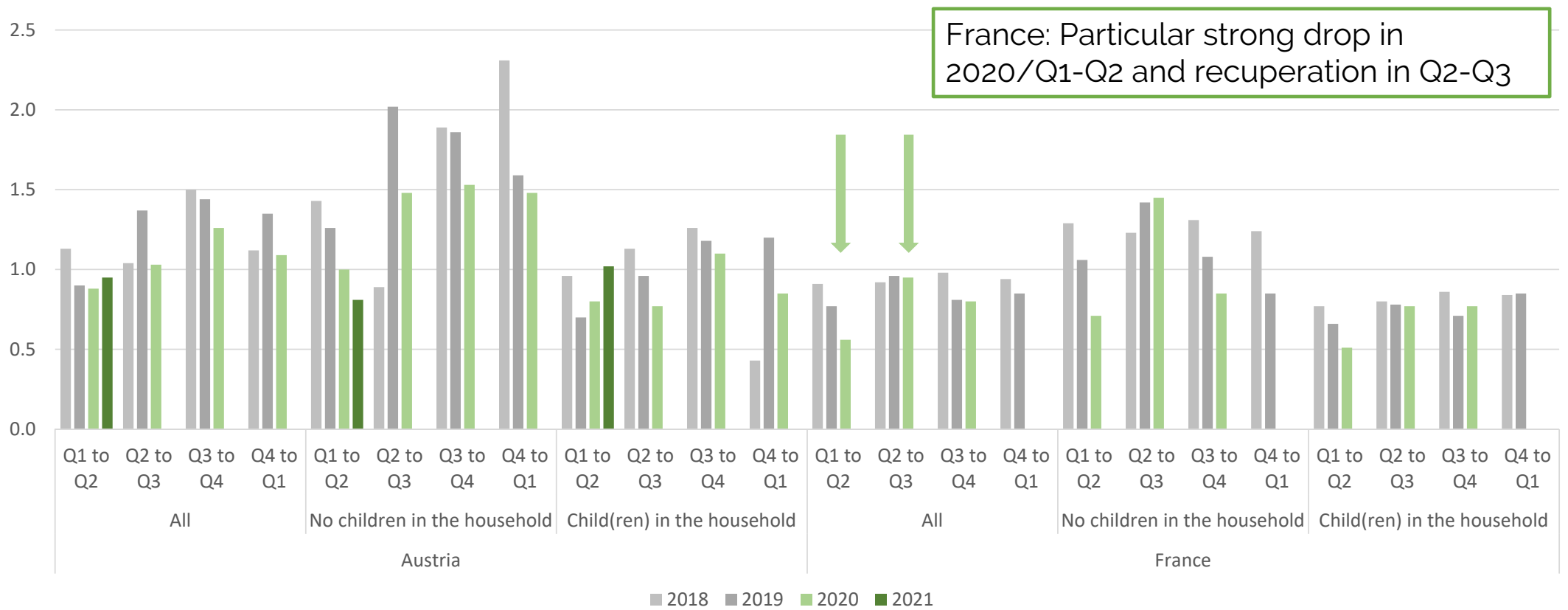


Descriptive results

Separations – descriptive results

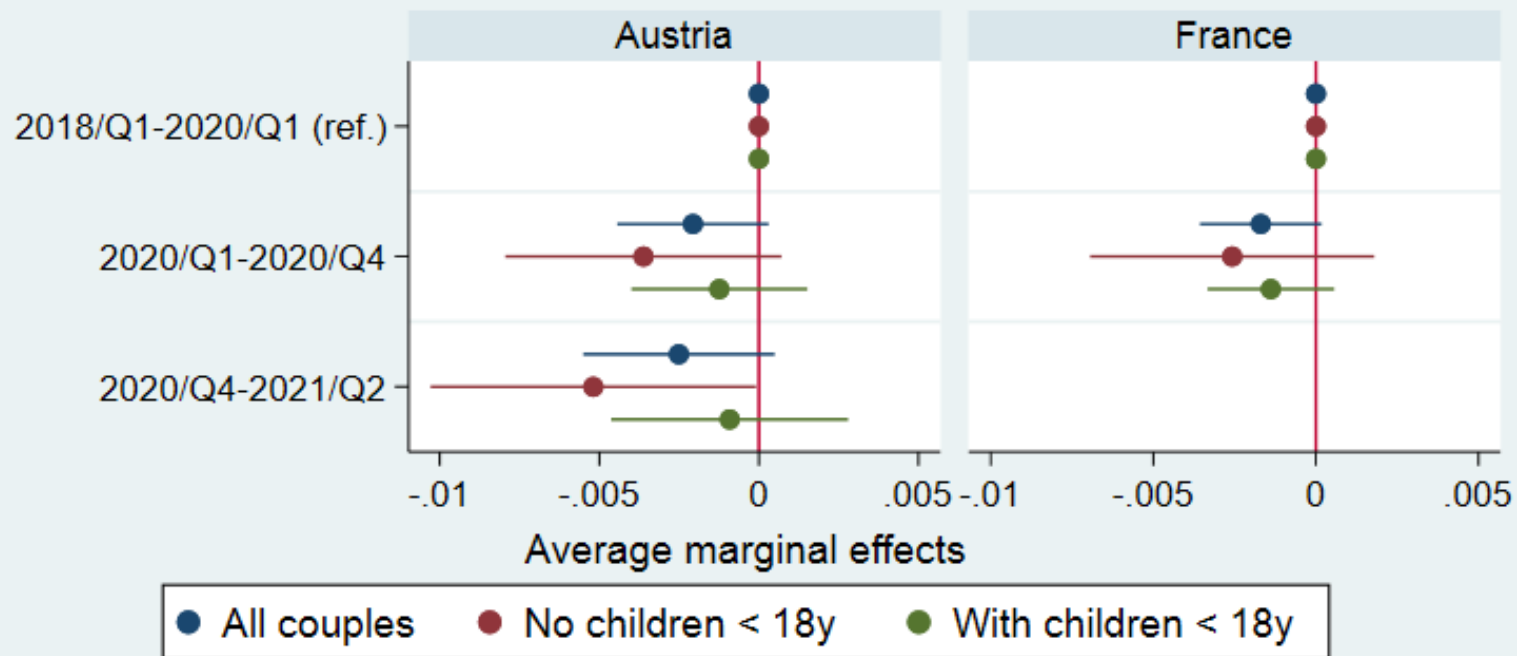


Separations, quarterly



Multivariate results

Separations 2020/21 versus 2018-2019

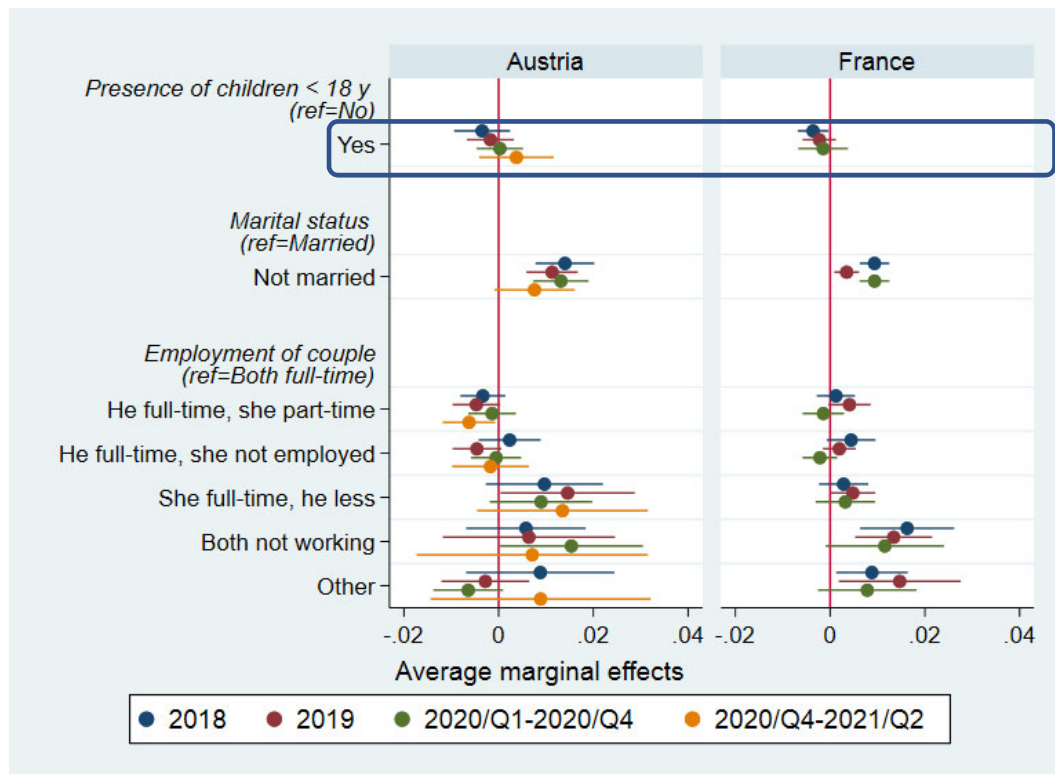


In both countries fewer separations in 2020 than in 2018-2019.

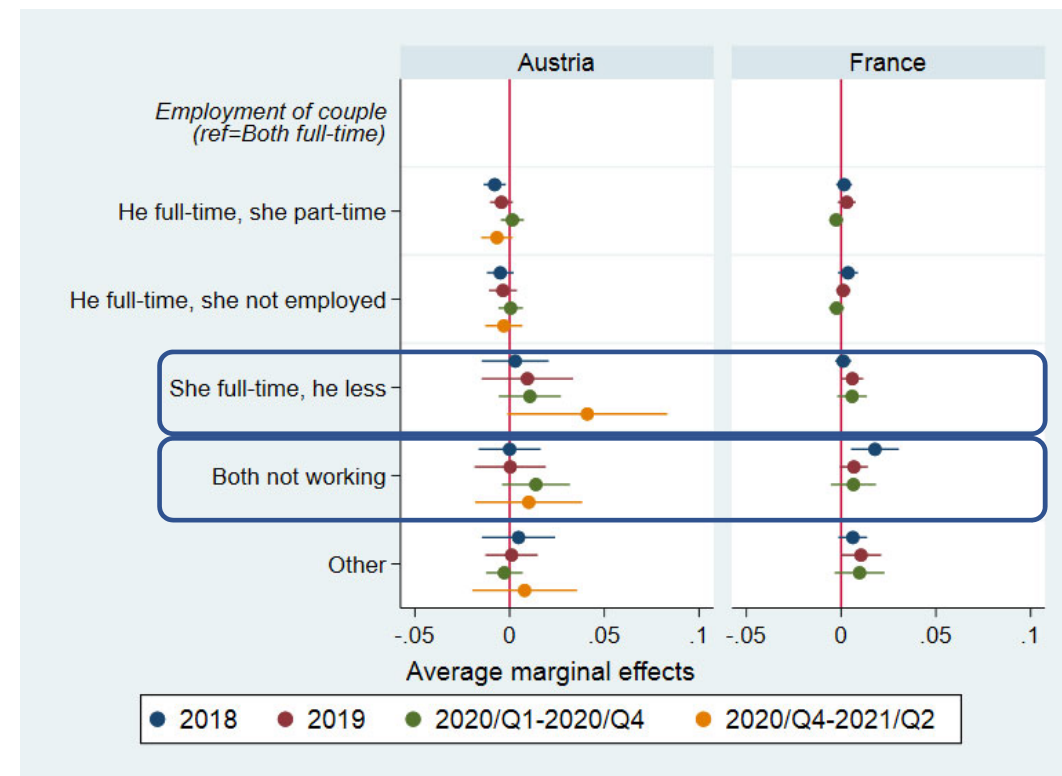
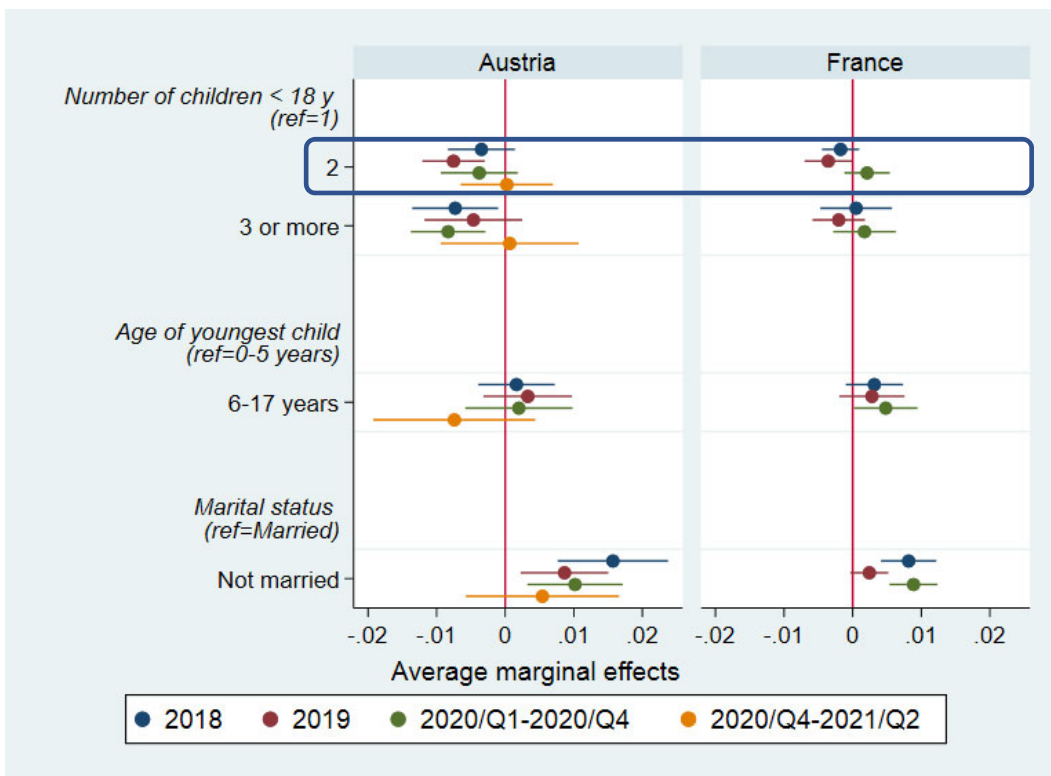
Effect stronger among couples without children < 18y in hh.

Effect strongest among couples without any children in the household.

Separations 2018-2021 all couples



Separations 2018-2021 couples with minors in hh



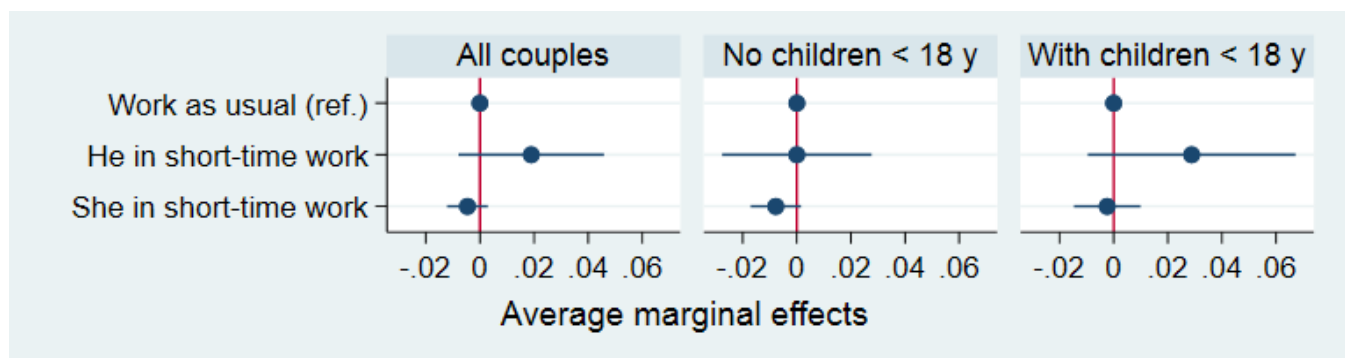
„Shielding“ effect of having two children against partnership dissolution disappeared in 2020/21.

Economic precariousness related to separations.



Short-time work in 2020

„Not working or working short-time in the reference week due to the pandemic“



Dissolution risk is higher (among couples with children) when the man did not work or was in short-time work due to the pandemic.



Home Office in 2020

„Work from home in reference week? If yes: Due to the pandemic?“

	All couples	Couples with children below age 10 in hh
Both not working from home (ref.)		
He working from home due to pandemic	-0.0032	-0.0087
She working from home due to pandemic	0.0037	0.0102*
Both working from home due to pandemic	-0.0038	-0.0076
He working from home	-0.0054	-0.0109
She working from home	0.0030	0.0036
Both working from home	0.0018	-0.0061
R ²	0.0558	0.0952
N	16,298	7,404

Controlled for employment, age, education, housing, age of youngest minor, existence of adult children in hh

Conclusions



- Decrease in dissolution risk, unexpected in view of increased strains and conflicts many families experienced since onset of pandemic.
- Practical barriers of searching for housing and moving during lockdowns.
- In France, with high mortality rates and strict measures, we observe a particular strong drop in dissolution risk from 1st to 2nd quarter 202 and recuperation in following quarter.
- Decline in dissolution risk largely driven by couples without children in hh.
- „Shielding“ effect of two children vanished during the pandemic.
- Economic precariousness related to higher dissolution risk.
- Process leading to separation is complex, starting long before the actual event.
- With pandemic ongoing, it remains to be seen how dissolution risk will develop.



Wittgenstein Centre

FOR DEMOGRAPHY AND
GLOBAL HUMAN CAPITAL



universität
wien

Thank you for your interest



Contact: isabella.buber@oeaw.ac.at

Caroline Berghammer's contribution was funded by the Austrian Science Fund FWF (P 34362).