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Citation for published version:

Ibănescu, B-C, Cristea, M, Gheorghiu, A & Pascariu, GC 2023, 'The regional evolution of job insecurity during the first COVID-19 wave in relation to the pandemic intensity', *Letters in Spatial and Resource Sciences*, vol. 16, 13. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12076-023-00337-9>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1007/s12076-023-00337-9](https://doi.org/10.1007/s12076-023-00337-9)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Heriot-Watt Research Portal](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

Letters in Spatial and Resource Sciences

Publisher Rights Statement:

This is a post-peer-review, pre-copyedit version of an article published in Letters in Spatial and Resource Sciences. The final authenticated version is available online at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12076-023-00337-9>

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The regional evolution of job insecurity during the first COVID-19 wave in relation to the pandemic intensity

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Abstract

As the COVID-19 pandemic hit the European continent at the beginning of 2020, one of the most significant socio-economic effects that immediately become the central focus of media and governing bodies was the unemployment and the sudden transformations suffered by the job market. This effect created major concerns for citizens and governing structures, as the pandemic generated a new and unparalleled economic context, where the short and medium-term future of several sectors seemed unpredictable. The concern acted upon the job insecurity of individuals, a perceived threat to the continuity and stability of their employment.

Based on a self-reported survey covering the first pandemic wave, our study classifies the regions (NUTS2 level) from six EU countries according to their performance in terms of job insecurity, but also the shock intensity (death rates and case fatality ratio), and identifies the overall over and under performers. The results show that the regional evolution of the job insecurity could be linked to the pandemic evolution, especially in the stronger economies. However, the model does not follow a classic economic core-periphery pattern. The model is challenged especially by a stronger performance of several less performant regions from Italy, Romania, or France.

Keywords: job insecurity, COVID-19 pandemic, European Union, spatial model

JEL: R23, R58, D91, E71

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic led to a significant fall in economic growth worldwide. Faced with several waves of national lockdown and highly strict health measures, business changed their working models (Bailey et al. 2020; Lund et al. 2020). These changes often included employees being laid off or being sent into furlough for several months, being denied promotions or experiencing pay cuts (Basyouni and El Keshky 2021; Forbes and Krueger 2019; Nicola et al. 2020). With unemployment rates increasing, the levels of job insecurity among employees increased (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2020). Job

insecurity during large-scale disruptions (e.g., natural disasters, economic recessions, epidemics) has been associated with high levels of anxiety and depression (Jeanne et al. 2020; Margerison-Zilko et al. 2016; Mihashi et al. 2009; Stanisławski 2019). Similarly, job insecurity during the COVID-19 pandemic was linked to poor mental health among employees across the globe (Blanuša, Barzut, and Knežević 2021; Ganson et al. 2021; Obrenovic et al. 2021; San Too, Leach, and Butterworth 2021; Wilson et al. 2020).

Therefore, it is no surprise that during the past two decades, and especially after the crisis of 2008-2012, a constantly growing number of articles focused on job insecurity, trying to find the determinants, as well as emphasising the variations that the indicator tends to manifest during a shock. The variations were explained in a smaller or larger proportion through age (Yeves et al. 2019), gender (Menéndez-Espina et al. 2019), and level of education (Green 2009), the most common socio-demographical characteristics considered for complex analysis.

However, while socio-demographical determinants were thoroughly scrutinized by the scientific community during or following a socio-economic, geopolitical or pandemic shock, less effort was put in finding spatial implications of the job insecurity, despite numerous papers highlighting the importance of the regional economic situation (Amdaoud et al. 2020; Bourdin et al. 2021), especially in terms of job market evolution (Anderson and Pontusson 2007), the industrial contraction (Cooper and Antoniou 2013), or the overall resilience capacity of the governance systems (Harrison 2003), as job insecurity outmatches the job instability (Hassard and Morris 2018).

This study addresses this gap in the scientific literature by providing a longitudinal spatial interpretation and evolution of job insecurity during the first pandemic wave of COVID-19 in relation with the magnitude of the shock. The study is based on data gathered at personal level through one of the largest worldwide surveys applied during the pandemic (PsyCorona) correlated with data from regional and national institutions regarding the evolution of the case fatality ratio and death rates.

The paper is structured as follows: the following chapter is providing a thorough literature review on the topic of job insecurity and its connections with the socio-demographical and regional characteristics; the third chapter details the methodological approach, the sampling procedure, target population, and instrument validity; the fourth chapter presents the main results, while the last section offers an interpretation of the results, followed by several recommendations and the conclusions.

2. A literature review on job insecurity and its implications

Organisational psychologists defined job insecurity as a perceived helplessness to maintain continuity in a situation where individuals feel that their job might be threatened (Greenhalgh and Rosenblatt 1984). More specifically, individuals might experience a subjective fear of losing their job or specific features of their current job, e.g., promotions, remote working (Hellgren, Sverke, and Isaksson 1999). According to De Witte (1999), job insecurity is a *perceived subjective experience* meaning that two individuals being in the same situation (e.g., part-time contracts) are likely to experience different levels

or facets of job insecurity (van Vuuren 1999; Van Vuuren et al. 1991). Furthermore, job insecurity reflects an individual's fears or assumptions concerning a job-related future event (e.g., having their working hours or salary cut, being laid off) that has not happened yet and in many circumstances will never happen (Mohr 2000; Probst 2003). It is worth mentioning that not all job-related events lead to individuals experiencing job insecurity. Boswell and colleagues (2014) underlined that only events that involve the constituents of potential harm or loss will lead to job insecurity. While threats are considered as perceptual, job insecurity feeds on uncertainty (Probst 2003; Sverke and Hellgren 2002; Sverke, Hellgren, and Näswall 2002). Hence, job insecurity explains the complexity of individuals' perceptions and their responding relationship to elements of job loss in contradiction to the actual job or job loss elements (Greenhalgh and Rosenblatt 1984).

Job insecurity is defined as a stressful experience which is often associated with high levels of distress and negative feelings (Cheng and Chan 2008; Lim 1996). Given its potential to generate stress among those experiencing job insecurity, numerous studies evidenced its manifold negative consequences on mental, physical, and work-related wellbeing (Henseke 2018; Lee, Huang, and Ashford 2018; Llosa et al. 2018; Menéndez-Espina et al. 2019; De Witte, Pienaar, and De Cuyper 2016) such as depressive disorders (Blom et al. 2018; Kim et al. 2017), anxiety (Boya et al. 2008), heart diseases (Schnall, Dobson, and Landsbergis 2016), poor job attitudes, and decrease in performance, creativity, and adaptability (Niessen and Jimmieson 2016; Probst et al. 2007). Other studies showed that quantitative job insecurity is linked to low organizational commitment, and higher intentions to leave the organization (Shoss 2017) while qualitative job insecurity is associated to withdrawal attitudes and intentions (Hu and Zuo 2007).

Other studies looked at the link between job insecurity and sociodemographic characteristics such as age (Yeves et al. 2019), gender (Menéndez-Espina et al. 2019), and level of education (Green 2009). While some studies suggest that younger individuals experience higher levels of job insecurity (Keim et al. 2014; Roskies and Louis-Guerin 1990; Roskies, Louis-Guerin, and Fournier 1993) most studies report that older individuals are subjected to higher levels of job insecurity (Claes and Van De Ven 2008; Mohr 2000; Näswall and De Witte 2003). These findings are explained by the fact that older individuals perceive themselves as less employable than young one (Peeters, De Cuyper, and De Witte 2016; Rothwell and Arnold 2007; Wittekind, Raeder, and Grote 2010) and thus are more dependent on their current jobs (Cheng and Chan 2008).

Regarding gender, some studies suggested that women feel less insecure compared to men because it is easier for them to find jobs (Charles and James 2003), while other studies argue that women report lower levels of job insecurity because they work in more protective organizations (Coron and Schmidt 2021). Furthermore, gender moderates the relationship between job insecurity and its consequences. Previous studies reported that job insecurity had more negative consequences on women's attitudes towards work compared to men (Rosenblatt, Talmud, and Ruvio 1999) and on men's wellbeing

compared to women (De Witte 1999). More recent studies showed no significant gender differences when it comes to job insecurity (Rigotti, Mohr, and Isaksson 2015).

Regarding the level of education, previous studies underlined its role as a main predictor for job insecurity mainly because an individual's chances of employment and/or reemployment are strongly linked to their level of education (Postel-Vinay and Turon 2007). A recent study by Klug (2020) showed that individuals with vocational qualifications experienced higher levels of job insecurity compared to university graduates. These results are in line with other findings suggesting that higher levels of education reduce job insecurity (Muñoz de Bustillo and de Pedraza 2010).

Despite the personal nature of the job insecurity, it must be acknowledged that recent studies, mostly developed following the economic crisis or at the beginning of the pandemic, managed to identify several spatial patterns regarding the variations in job insecurity during a shock. For example, during the financial crisis of 2008-2012, the self-reported values of job insecurity were higher in the Southern and Eastern peripheral countries of the European Union (Sverke et al. 2010; Symeonaki, Parsanoglou, and Stamatopoulou 2019), a model which was later explained by the economic prowess of the central and Northern part of the continent, as well as the more pertinent social measures (De Cuyper et al. 2018; Håkansson and Bejakovic 2020; László et al. 2010; Shoss 2017). Nevertheless, the abovementioned papers did not take into consideration the magnitude of the crisis in each part of the continent, as well as the regional implications of the shock when measuring the self-reported job insecurity.

3. Methodological approach.

Our study is based on data collected through PsyCorona Study, an international psychological survey aimed at identifying the main potential psychological consequences of facing a pandemic situation and assessing key behaviours of citizens¹. The survey started in March 2020 and was the result of an international collaboration of over 100 researchers. Over 60.000 respondents answered the initial survey, available in 30 languages, during the first pandemic wave. After survey completion, the respondents could sign up to be contacted for follow-up surveys (psycorona.org). For the first two months, the surveys were sent weekly, then the frequency diminished to twice a week and then to once a month in order not to fatigue the respondents. Not all questions were sent out in each survey, as it was the case for job insecurity. For the current paper, we selected the waves where the measurement for job insecurity was available. The data collection processes were ensured in some countries by Qualtrics Panels.

The research was approved by the Ethics Committees of the University of Groningen (PSY-1920-S-0390) and New York University Abu Dhabi (HRPP-2020-42). In the current paper, we extracted only countries with representative samples (gender and age and for all waves) from the European Union

¹ <https://www.rug.nl/sustainable-society/research/previous-themes/psycorona/>

(Germany, Spain, France, Italy, the Netherlands, and Romania). The original questionnaire was created in English and translated for each country taking part in the survey in official language by the team of researchers.

The job insecurity was assessed on the Vander Elst scale (Vander Elst, De Witte, and De Cuyper 2014) and the respondents were asked to indicate the degree of self-perceived risk of losing their job (“Chances are, I will soon lose my job”) with a value varying from -2 “Strongly disagree” (very low job insecurity) to 2 “Strongly agree” (very high job insecurity).

In order to correlate the job insecurity with the intensity of the shock during the first pandemic wave, we used data regarding the case fatality ratio and death rates at regional level from the ESPON Report “Geography of COVID-19: Territorial impacts of COVID-19 and policy answers in European regions and cities”². The ESPON report served as base for the delimitation of the period marking the first pandemic wave: from the end of February/beginning of March 2020 until mid-June 2020.

4. Results

The first element to take into consideration is the overall national evolution of the self-reported job insecurity during the first pandemic wave. The initial national values at the start of the survey (mid-March) varied from -.920 in Germany (lowest average of job insecurity from the sample) to -.488 in Italy (highest average). However, as the pandemic extended, the overall self-reported values constantly decreased, a sign of the adaptation of the citizens to the new context. At the end of the first pandemic wave, the job insecurity across the countries selected for our study showed an overall improvement, with values varying from -1.451 in Germany to -.717 in Romania (Table 1).

Table 1 National evolution of job insecurity during the first pandemic wave (values closer to 0 denote higher job insecurity values)

Date	DEU	ESP	FRA	ITA	NLD	ROU
19 March	-.920	-.543	-.844	-.488	-.872	-.493
11 April	-1.121	-.643	-1.109	-.614	-1.200	-.628
18 April	-1.248	-.630	-1.080	-.639	-1.146	-.733
25 April	-1.360	-.594	-1.038	-.803	-1.199	-.714
03 May	-1.242	-.635	-1.068	-.818	-1.128	-.588
30 May	-1.418	-.684	-1.187	-.889	-1.161	-.677
13 June	-1.451	-.804	-1.219	-.857	-1.225	-.717
Overall evolution	-.532	-.261	-.375	-.369	-.353	-.224

However, the overall national values of job insecurity do not reflect the more detailed territorial impact. For this kind of picture, we need to advance to a more granular level, therefore, based on the regional location provided by the respondents (NUTS2 administrative units, except for Germany, where the location was provided at NUTS1 level) we managed to identify the overperforming and

² <https://www.espon.eu/covid-19>

underperforming regions in terms of job insecurity. Since the evolution was strongly dependent on the national context, the classification of over or under performing was made by reporting the regional score to the national average. Moreover, using the same methodological approach, we identified the over and underperforming regions regarding the shock intensity (case fatality ratio and death rates) and correlated the results by creating four classes of regions.

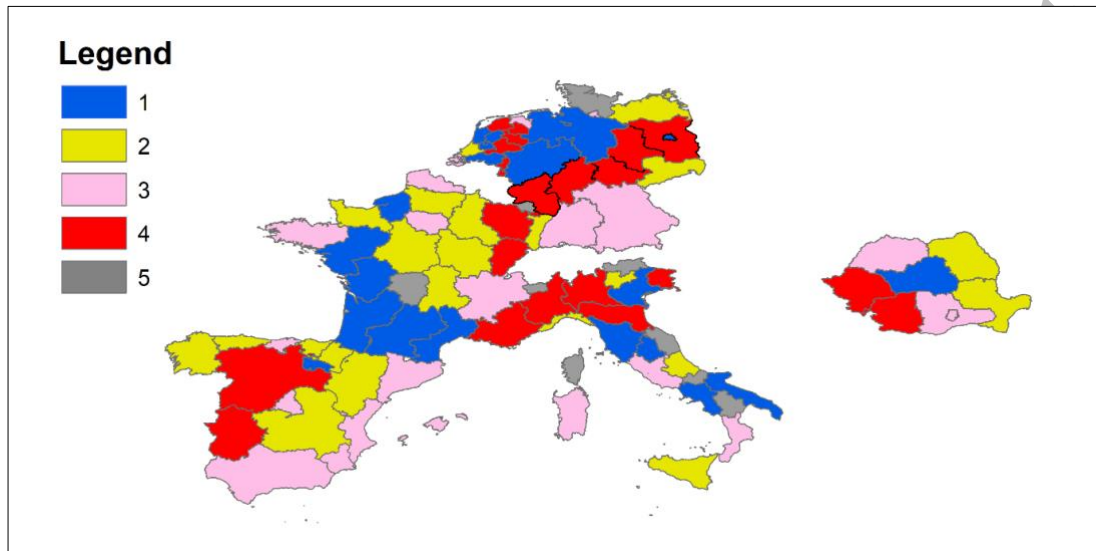


Figure 1 – The regional repartition in classes according to the evolution of job insecurity and the case fatality ratio³ during the first pandemic wave
 (1 – overperformers in both job insecurity and case fatality ratio; 2 – overperformers in terms of job insecurity, underperformers in terms of case fatality ratio; 3 – underperformers in terms of job insecurity, overperformers in terms of case fatality ratio; 4 – underperformers in both job insecurity and case fatality ratio; 5 – insufficient data)

The resulting maps (Figure 1 and Figure 2) show two different types of region. On one hand, the overall overperformers (Class 1) and the overall underperformers (Class 4), where the evolution of job insecurity can be connected with the evolution of the intensity of the shock: these regions tend to cover the majority of France, the Netherlands, and Italy. On the other hand, the regions where the evolution of job insecurity was not connected with the intensity of the shock (Class 2 and Class 3): these regions, mostly from Spain and Romania managed to perform either in job insecurity, either in shock intensity, but not in both.

³ Case fatality ratio (CFR) or more precisely case-fatality risk (CFR) is the percentage (%) of persons diagnosed with a disease (COVID-19 in this case) and who die from it. CFRs are usually used to assess diseases with discrete and limited time courses. Source: *ESPON Report, Geography of COVID-19*

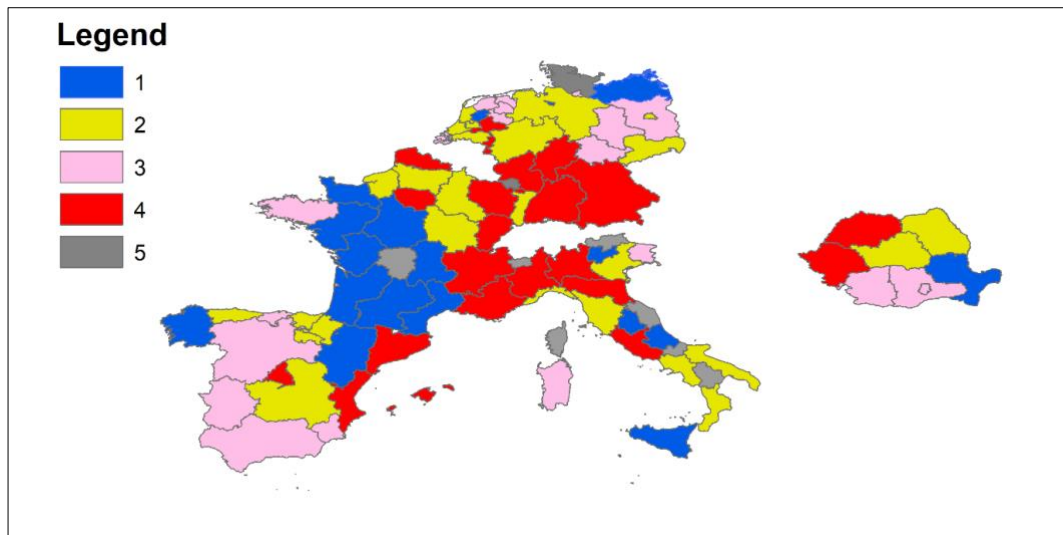


Figure 2 – The regional repartition in classes according to the evolution of job insecurity and death rates⁴ during the first pandemic wave

(1 – overperformers in both job insecurity and death rates; 2 – overperformers in terms of job insecurity, underperformers in terms of death rates; 3 – underperformers in terms of job insecurity, overperformers in terms of death rates; 4 – underperformers in both job insecurity and death rates; 5 – insufficient data)

Interesting overlapping between the two maps indicate that regions from North of Italy, West of France, West of Romania showed similar classes when the job insecurity was put in relation with both case fatality ratio and death rates. On the other hand, for the most part of Germany, Spain, or South of Romania, the regions overperformed or underperformed differently according to each indicator of shock intensity. This could be due to difference in population structure, health infrastructure performance, health systems and particular answers of regional and local actors to the pandemic.

1. Discussions and Conclusions

Our results are similar to findings from literature that signalled the existence of a certain North-South gradient in terms of job insecurity (De Cuyper et al. 2018; Näswall and De Witte 2003; Shoss 2017; Sverke et al. 2010; Symeonaki, Parsanoglou, and Stamatopoulou 2019), as the southern regions of Spain, France, or Italy tend to underperform in terms of job insecurity, even when they overperform in terms of case fatality ratio. However, the most surprising result was that in the most developed economies the evolution of the job insecurity during the first pandemic wave followed the evolution of the intensity of the shock, either in terms of case fatality ratio, either in terms of death rates. The behaviour, prevalent in France, Germany, and the Netherlands is more visible when the job insecurity is correlated with case fatality ratio, and less visible when correlated with death rates. This may be due to the fact that case fatality ratio represents a more precise indicator of the shock's impact, giving that its value is taking into consideration the number of persons diagnosticated with COVID-19. Therefore,

⁴ Death rate represents the COVID-19 death rates per 10,000 inhabitants. Source: *ESPON Report, Geography of COVID-19*

from an individual (and even statistical) perspective, this indicator manages to better display the “gravity” of the situation.

Another finding which deserves attention is the overperforming behaviour in terms of job insecurity of less economic performant regions from Italy (south), Romania (centre and north-east), or France (central part). This challenges the classic stereotype in terms of core-periphery relation existent in literature.

Giving that job insecurity tends to react to shock intensity, governing bodies need to pay attention to the future evolution of job insecurity and its social effects. And while the pandemic effects are less visible than during the first semester of 2020, the new geopolitical and economic challenges foreseen for the beginning of 2023 have a tremendous effect on the self-perceived job insecurity of individuals (Rydzik and Bal, 2023). Amid uncertainty, many millions of Europeans will worry about job loss or job quality decline. And while job insecurity may reduce one’s life satisfaction, ground based policy interventions can make a difference (Carr and Chung 2014; László et al. 2010). Therefore, instead of waiting for the triggering of a new shock that could generate a huge spike in job insecurity, the development of an EU-wide support mechanism can provide short and medium term social benefits. Further data collection on health systems and health infrastructure at regional level is required in order to better understand how the relation between job insecurity and shock intensity acts for sub-national structures.

Acknowledgements

This research has been conducted with the support of the Erasmus+ programme of the European Union, within the Project no. 621262-EPP-1-2020-1-RO-EPPJMO-MODULE ‘Jean Monnet Module on EU Interdisciplinary Studies: Widening Knowledge for a more Resilient Union (EURES)’, co-financed by European Commission in the framework of Jean Monnet Action and the ESPON TERRCOV Project (Geography of COVID-19 Territorial impacts of COVID-19 and policy answers in European regions and cities).

The European Commission support for the production of this publication does not constitute an endorsement of the contents which reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

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