

New research shows how COVID-19 altered Americans' intentions to move

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Divorce. Changing jobs. Natural disasters. A change in financial resources. Going away to college. Wanting to be nearer to family members.

Those are just a handful of traditional reasons Americans choose to pack up and move.

One non-traditional reason for moving was the COVID-19 [pandemic](#), which had a significant impact on every aspect of Americans' lives starting in March 2020. With this fact in mind, Xialu Liu, professor of management information systems (MIS) at the Fowler College of Business at San Diego State University and Lei Lei, professor of sociology at Rutgers University, analyzed data gathered from Google Trends to assess how the pandemic may have altered Americans' decisions to change residences.

Thoughts of escaping pandemic lockdowns were high

To measure the intentions of those people considering a move, the researchers accessed Google Trends to identify [internet searches](#) using keywords or phrases associated with changes in residence (such as "real estate agent," "house for rent" or "moving company") or a temporary relocation (such as a trip to Florida or Hawaii) between January 2011 to February 2021.

They noted that Americans' thoughts about temporarily relocating surged during the early months of the pandemic lockdown in March through April of 2020. But while the number of Americans thinking about a

short-term move may have spiked over 40%, the number of people seeking real estate purchases and housing rentals dropped 20-30% during the same period.

Eventually, the panic died down

"The lack of knowledge, feelings of uncertainty and fear of the disease may have caused some level of widespread panic, prompting those in high-density areas to escape what they perceived as increased exposure to COVID and societal restrictions," said Liu. "But these feelings soon subsided as [lockdowns](#) and stay-at-home orders were implemented in most states. Additionally, the risk of infection inhibited the home search process in the early months of the pandemic, causing real estate sales and rentals to decline during that same period."

While the frequency of temporary relocations searches had declined by 30-50% at the end of April 2020, it was the exact opposite for those seeking more permanent housing solutions. Starting in June 2020, people seeking both real estate purchases and rentals, saw their numbers increase substantially (22-24%) and remain high until the research concluded in February 2021. The only exception was individuals using the search term "apartments for rent" which returned to pre-pandemic levels, while searches for house rentals increased by 15.65%.

Temporary escape gave way to thoughts of permanent relocation

"In June 2020, the Google Trends data indicated that as Americans became more knowledgeable about the disease—and as businesses and amenities began to adjust and open up again—there was an initial marked increase in searches for housing purchases and rentals," said Liu. "With the pandemic responses varying in different areas in the country,

many people relocated to areas that fit their lifestyles. For example, some people moved to avoid strict lockdowns, while others may have moved to be nearer to necessary medical care."

The researchers also noted that educational requirements and working conditions also may have driven Americans to consider a permanent relocation as well. "With many people working and learning from home, the constraints binding them to a physical office or school were removed," said Liu. "This allowed them to consider a broader array of locations and housing options that met their evolving needs."

Family ties ran deep

The only search that never fluctuated after the start of the pandemic was the increase (around 50%) of individuals looking to move in with their parents or other family, which showed no significant change between March 2020 and February 2021. The researchers noted that this might have been a result of college students moving home or adult children searching for ways to remove their parents from retirement facilities.

As their research wrapped up, the two professors concluded while only "move in with family" searches remained consistently higher since March 2020, the fluctuations in the searches for temporary or permanent relocations offers a glimpse into U.S. residents' thought processes as their housing needs and the regulations surrounding COVID-19 protocols evolved.

Maybe... or maybe not

Lastly, they also concluded that while Google Trends indicated an intention to relocate, not everyone seeking to move followed through.

"Housing inventory, price, employment factors and other issues factor into relocations intentions vs. an actual move," said Liu. "Theoretically, scholars view residential mobility as a multi-stage process, though the actual process could be nonlinear and much messier. In other words, desires or intentions to relocate may—or may not—eventually result in actually moving."

The study is published in *Population, Space and Place*.

More information: Lei Lei et al, The COVID-19 pandemic and residential mobility intentions in the United States: Evidence from Google Trends data, *Population, Space and Place* (2022). [DOI: 10.1002/psp.2581](https://doi.org/10.1002/psp.2581)

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