Research explores human migration changes during the COVID-19 pandemic

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The choice of where to live is a major economic and social decision and includes factors such as labor markets, schools, housing costs and access to amenities. In 2020, new research shows, a new factor made a

prominent appearance: the COVID-19 pandemic. But the way it showed up might not be what you'd expect.

The researchers, Peter Haslag from Vanderbilt University and Daniel Weagley from Georgia Institute of Technology, examined four years of proprietary move-level data on more than 300,000 inter-state moves within the United States to determine how and why the nature of relocation decisions have changed since the onset of the pandemic.

The researchers found that a significant percentage of respondents were moving from larger cities to smaller cities with lower costs of living and less stringent COVID regulations. The researchers also found correlation between household income and reason for migration during the pandemic. "We found higher-income households are moving much less for changes necessitated from work (such as job loss or taking a new job) and much more for non-work-related reasons," the researchers said. In contrast, lower income households typically moved for job-related reasons at a similar rate to pre-pandemic levels and were less likely to move for reasons such as retirement, health or lifestyle.

Why it matters

The research provides insight into the impetus for inter-state moves and the ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic impacted migration decision making. The patterns can be used by public health experts and policymakers to predict the impact of future health or environmental crises on migration decisions.

"What stood out to me was how little the infection rate in a city impacted the decision to move to or from there," said Haslag, assistant professor of finance at Owen Graduate School of Management. "We found that it was other COVID-related factors, including regulations and the ability to work remotely, that had a greater impact on migration

decisions."

This shift in inter-state migration will have major implications for population-dependent issues such as city structures, tax bases, political biases and real estate markets. "By analyzing movement patterns during the pandemic, we can better understand the reasons that people of different income brackets move and make stronger predictions about the futures of identified cities and states," Haslag said.

What's next

Haslag and Weagley are particularly interested in examining the long-term impact of remote work on the labor market. "The fact that we are seeing such a large reaction across states indicates that people are buying into the notion that remote work is here to stay," Haslag said.

Moreover, they plan to study the impact of high income earners leaving cities with high taxes and regulations, such as New York and San Francisco, and moving to cities with less taxation and regulation, such as Austin, Texas, and Nashville, Tennessee. "We expect that areas with high tax rates will suffer, at least in the short term," said Haslag, though he believes that the increase in housing prices in cities with lower taxes will ultimately create an equilibrium effect.

The research, "From L.A. to Boise: How Migration Has Changed During the COVID-19 Pandemic" was published in *SSRN Electronic Journal*.

More information: Peter H. Haslag et al. From L.A. to Boise: How Migration Has Changed During the COVID-19 Pandemic, *SSRN Electronic Journal* (2021). DOI: 10.2139/ssrn.3808326

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