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WORKING PAPERS

03/2024

PARTNERSHIP DISSOLUTION IN AUSTRIA DURING MULTIPLE CRISES, 2018-2023

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MARIA WINKLER-DWORAK

ABSTRACT

At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, divorce rates across European countries significantly declined and remained low through 2023. This sustained low level is notable, especially given the potential for a rebound in postponed divorces. This study examines partnership dissolution in Austria from 2018 to 2023, covering the pandemic and a subsequent period of high inflation. It specifically investigates the role of socioeconomic and family characteristics. The analysis draws on 24 quarterly waves from the Austrian Labour Force Surveys, focusing on cohabiting and married couples aged 20 to 54 ($n=32,913$ couples). Households participated in five consecutive quarters. Changes in partnership status across waves were analysed using random effects logistic panel regression models. The dissolution of partnerships sharply declined during the pandemic (2020-22) and remained at a lower level throughout the period of high inflation (2022-23). The risk of separation decreased most significantly in two groups: couples without children (compared to those with children, especially two or more) and couples with low to medium education levels. We interpret the less pronounced decline in dissolution risk among parents as an indication of greater strain, particularly due to work-family conflicts. Additionally, the reduced rate of union dissolutions among low- and medium-educated couples likely reflects financial challenges in setting up a second household, exacerbated by inflation and rising living costs. The economic barriers to partnership dissolution may be considered a social problem.

KEYWORDS

Separation, union dissolution, divorce, COVID-19, pandemic, inflation, Austria

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1 INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the term “multiple global crises” has been used to describe the emergence of several significant challenges since the COVID-19 pandemic began in March 2020. These include high inflation, wars and conflicts (such as those in Ukraine and Israel), and increased awareness of advancing climate change. These crises impact many aspects of people’s lives and contribute to heightened perceived uncertainty about the future. This study examines partnership dissolution in Austria from 2018 to 2023, covering the pandemic period (2020-22) and the overlapping period of high inflation (beginning in 2022).

Divorce rates across European countries significantly declined at the start of the pandemic and have remained low since then (cross-national data on union dissolutions are not available): between 2009 and 2019, the crude divorce rate was stable at 1.8-1.9 in the EU-27, while it dropped to 1.6 in 2020 (Eurostat, 2024). It fell in 23 out of 27 EU countries between 2019 and 2020 (the exceptions were Denmark, Finland, the Netherlands and Sweden). In most countries, the crude divorce rate recovered slightly in 2021 (EU-27: 1.7) but fell again in 2022 (1.6). This most recent drop is particularly remarkable: while it could have been assumed that the divorce rate would increase due to couples who had postponed divorce in previous years, the opposite was the case. This unexpected pattern warrants further exploration. We use Austria as a case study. In this country, the total divorce rate stagnated between 2010 and 2019 at 41 to 43%, fell to 37% in 2020 and has not recovered since (2021: 36%; 2022: 35%; 2023: 36%) (Statistics Austria, 2024c). Going beyond divorces, we investigate partnership dissolutions, which are more comprehensive.

During the pandemic, the lockdown measures taken to stop the spread of the coronavirus had a drastic impact on all areas of life, including social relationships, employment and (mental) health. They also affected one of the closest and most important relationships: the one with the partner. Previous research has shown both positive and negative changes in partnership quality during the pandemic (e.g. Luetke et al., 2020; Schmid et al., 2021). Couples who experienced stressors such as heightened work-family conflict or economic uncertainty were especially prone to report lower levels of satisfaction with their partnership (Bellani and Vignoli, 2022; Fleming and Franzese, 2021). Conversely, couples without such stressors may have even spent more time with their partner or slowing down everyday life as gratifying (Lebow, 2020). Moreover, partnerships are, especially in challenging times such as during the pandemic, an important source of support. Lebow aptly summarized the effect of the pandemic on partnerships: “The intense environment that has emerged the wake of COVID-19 leads many to greater intimacy, egalitarianism, and connection [...], but for those close to the fault line, acrimony and distance readily increases. In this intense confined environment, thoughts about the advantages of separating and divorcing are for many are [sic] intensified” (Lebow, 2020: 968). If partnership quality deteriorated, however, practical limitations constrained separation and divorce, as reflected in the sharply declining divorce rates in 2020. In particular, during the lockdown phases, there were restrictions to find new housing and moving, and courts were temporarily closed. Additionally, economic uncertainty was high due to rising unemployment and the prevalence of short-term employment. As life returned to normal, a recuperation of postponed divorces could have been expected. However, rising inflation at the beginning of 2022 in Europe created new financial challenges for establishing a separate household after dissolution. The rise in inflation led to significantly higher living costs, particularly in rents, mortgages, and energy (Baumgartner, 2024). However, this was not accompanied by a surge in unemployment. Research on the impact of inflation is scarce.

We study partnership dissolution in Austria from the prepandemic period (2018-19) onwards. On the basis of divorce trends, we expect that partnership dissolution declined strongly in 2020 and has remained at a moderate level since then. We aim to explain this trend by examining the role of socioeconomic status and family characteristics, recognizing that partnerships encounter various challenges, including financial strain and work-family conflicts. Our study is based on high-quality data from the Austrian Labour Force Surveys (LFS). The LFS is a compulsory panel survey in which all household members are interviewed for five successive quarters. We include 24 quarterly waves over the period of 2018-2023 and study changes in partnership status between them using random effects logistic panel regression models. Sample sizes are large, thus allowing us to analyse the rather rare (at least within a short time frame) behavior of partnership dissolution. The focus is on couples in

the age range of 20 to 54, where some stressors, especially work–family conflict, are most prevalent. We address the following research questions: (1) How did couples' separation risks change during the period 2020-23 compared with the prepandemic years (2018-19)? (2) How was the risk of partnership dissolution associated with potential stressors related to socioeconomic status and family characteristics?

In this paper, we begin by reviewing previous research on partnerships during crises, highlighting stressors and evidence on partnership quality during the pandemic, including insights specific to Austria. We then present our data and methods. The empirical section reveals our findings on trends in partnership dissolution and their correlates. Finally, the conclusion summarizes and discusses the key results.


2 PAST RESEARCH: PARTNERSHIP DISSOLUTION DURING CRISES

2.1 STRESSORS

Research generally indicates that adverse economic conditions moderately reduce the divorce rate (Cherlin et al., 2013; Hellerstein and Morrill, 2011), although the evidence is mixed (e.g. González-Val and Marcén, 2018). Two potentially offsetting mechanisms are at play: first, economic hardship during recessions increases marital conflict; second, financial constraints make it difficult for couples to establish separate households (Cohen, 2014). The COVID-19 pandemic has been a health, social and economic crisis. Owing to (lockdown) measures, life became much more strongly concentrated within households. There were restrictions as to the reasons for which people could leave the house. Contact limitations with other households were in place, as were distancing rules in the public sphere. Working places were often relocated home, and there was an increase in short-time employment and unemployment. Children also stayed at home due to school and kindergarten closures. Overall, people's daily radius was significantly diminished, and families were more isolated. Like the rest of Europe, Austria has implemented a range of policies to combat the coronavirus. During the first lockdown in spring 2020 and then in winter 2020/21, Austria enforced stringent measures (see Figure A1). While Austria experienced relatively low COVID-19 mortality in spring 2020, the country was significantly harder hit by the second wave in October/November 2020 and the subsequent wave in November/December 2021.

Against the background of the pandemic, three important stressors with impacts on couples' relationships have been identified: financial, work-family conflict and health concerns (Pietromonaco and Overall, 2021). The rise in both unemployment and short-time employment led to declines in earnings, placing financial strain on families and increasing the potential for partnership conflicts. In Austria, the unemployment rate rose only moderately, partly due to the strong promotion of short-time employment. By the end of April 2020 (the first lockdown), the share of short-term employees had spiked at 30% of employees (AMS, 2020). Workers in short-term employment received 80% to 90% of their previous income, which provided higher replacement rates than unemployment benefits did (OECD, 2020a, Figure 4). Given the significant uncertainty and unpredictability of the pandemic's progression, even individuals not directly affected by unemployment or short-term employment likely experienced employment insecurity. The increased financial strain affected social groups differently. In Austria, single-parent families, large families (with three children) and those with low education levels reported particularly great difficulties in managing on household income (Steiber et al., 2022). Couples without children in the household and with highly educated partners were the least affected. Consequently, the effects of the pandemic on partnership dissolution varied: As the economic situation worsened, it may have been particularly difficult to establish a second household for couples with a lower socioeconomic status. This is in line with Austria's divorce statistics, which show that divorces fell most strongly among low- and medium-educated individuals, whereas their highly educated peers were not affected (see Table A1). Generally, there is a well-documented negative education gradient in divorce (Matysiak et al., 2014), also in Austria (Frimmel et al., 2012), which is partly due to the greater (economic) life strains of low-educated couples (Hogendoorn et al., 2021; Lester, 1996).

The rise in work-family conflict was another stressor for partnerships. It especially concerned families with minor children, as they faced a strongly elevated level of childcare (and housework) due to kindergarten and school closures (Pietromonaco and Overall, 2021). Childcare and support with distance learning had to be provided almost entirely by parents since external caregivers such as grandparents were generally not available due to contact restrictions. Couples faced the challenge of renegotiating and redistributing childcare and household responsibilities, which could lead to potential conflicts. Generally, when the distribution is deemed unfair, conflicts are more probable with negative consequences for partnership satisfaction



(e.g. Bodi et al., 2010; Ruppanner et al., 2018). The total workload (paid and unpaid work) was highest in Austria during the first lockdown and was most extensive for mothers with young children (Berghammer, 2022). Parents who worked from home faced additional difficulties in combining their employment with the children being present, possibly even in the same room (Derndorfer et al., 2021). In Austria, 38% of employees worked predominantly from home in April 2020 (Jauneau and Vidalenc, 2020), particularly those with a higher socioeconomic status (OECD, 2020b, Figure 1.12.). Since the part-time rate is very high among mothers in Austria—approximately three quarters of employed women with children below age 15 work part-time (Statistics Austria, 2024d)—families might have been better able to combine work and family than families in countries with higher women’s work intensity (Berghammer and Riederer, 2024; Yerkes et al., 2022). In general, couples with children divorce and separate less than their childless counterparts do (e.g. Hart et al., 2017; Manning, 2004). Owing to greater work–family conflict among couples with children during the pandemic, we assume convergence in separation risk. This corresponds to Austrian divorce statistics, which reveal that the drop in divorces was largest among couples without children, followed by couples with one child; the risk was most stable among couples with two or more children (see Table A1).

Health-related concerns were further stressors (Reizer et al., 2020). Especially at the beginning of the pandemic, very little was known about how infectious and dangerous the virus was and how effective various measures were. In this situation, people’s assessments of risk and risk mitigation strategies differed as did their views on science (Goldberg et al., 2021). These discrepancies potentially led to conflicts in partnerships, affecting perceived partnership satisfaction.

2.2 PARTNERSHIP QUALITY DURING THE PANDEMIC

To date, there is scant evidence on the effects of the pandemic on partnership dissolution and divorce. Studies generally document a decline in the divorce rate (Eurostat, 2024; Fallesen, 2021; Ghaznavi et al., 2022; Manning and Payne, 2021; Westrick-Payne et al., 2022). In France, higher levels of employment uncertainty during the pandemic were related to couple instability (Barbuscia et al., 2023).

Owing to the lack of studies on divorce and separation, we review evidence on partnership quality. Partnership satisfaction and dissolution are linked (Pietromonaco and Overall, 2021), but a decrease in satisfaction does not necessarily and immediately result in the dissolution of a partnership. Partnership dissolution and divorce are, generally speaking, complex, lengthy and comprehensive processes (Coleman et al., 2006; Kurdek, 2002; Vangelisti, 2006). Partnership dissatisfaction may result less in separation if the decrease in partnership satisfaction is attributed to external circumstances (such as the pandemic) and is expected to be short-term (Neff et al., 2021).

Empirical studies on the consequences of the pandemic for partnership quality have documented positive as well as negative effects. For Austria, only descriptive findings exist showing an increase in partnership quality in April 2020 since the beginning of the pandemic among 17% of couples, whereas 8% described a decrease. The decline in partnership satisfaction was linked to a decrease in income (Berghammer and Beham-Rabanser, 2020). Similarly, the results from other countries report an increase in partnership satisfaction for some couples and a decrease in satisfaction and an increase in conflict for others (Bellani and Vignoli, 2022; Luetke et al., 2020; Perelli-Harris et al., 2023; Schmid et al., 2021). There is also evidence that a decrease in partnership quality was related to adverse circumstances, e.g., more difficulties organizing work from home (Bellani and Vignoli, 2022; Kreidl and Hubatková, 2023), monetary stress and parenthood (Fleming and Franzese, 2021) or experiencing the division of childcare as unfair (Waddell et al., 2021). Research during the pandemic also documented an increase in domestic violence (Anderberg et al., 2021; Arenas et al., 2015; Hsu and Henke, 2021).

Against the background of prior research, we propose the following hypotheses. On the basis of divorce trends, we expect a decrease in partnership dissolutions in 2020–21 and stagnation thereafter (H1). We hypothesize that, owing to increased work–family strains, the dissolution risk of couples with minor children during the pandemic declined less than that of their peers

without minors in the household (H2). We expect that the dissolution risk of couples with a lower socioeconomic status (lower education) and higher economic uncertainty (unemployment) declined more during the pandemic and the subsequent period of inflation than did their peers in a more stable economic situation (H3).

3 DATA AND METHODS

3.1 DATA

The analyses are based on the Austrian Labour Force Surveys (LFS) for the period of 2018-2023. The LFSs are representative, quarterly household surveys that contain detailed information on structural variables such as family and household composition and the employment and education of household members. The characteristics of the LFSs are their large sample sizes, high response rates and panel structure. Each quarterly wave includes approximately 20,550 households in Austria. Such high case numbers are necessary when studying partnership dissolution within a short time interval. Participation is compulsory, with response rates as high as approximately 95% and very low attrition rates (on average, 3.25% between quarterly waves; see Table A2). The LFS follows a rotating sample design in which households participate for five consecutive quarters. Our analytical sample includes heterosexual couples who live together. We restricted the age range to 20 and 54 years, as our focus was on young and middle adulthood—a group that was most affected by employment changes and school closures—and thus excluded parents in the empty-nest phase and the old-age population. The sample size was 30,646 couples.

To identify partnership dissolution, we compared the household composition across each pair of consecutive waves to examine whether couples had separated by the time of the next quarter (that is, the change in household type from “couple” to “single-person” or “single-parent”). Altogether, we included 23 transitions (between 24 waves). Households participating in five consecutive waves are therefore included four times in our sample (i.e., transition from wave 1 to wave 2).

Although the LFS has many advantages for studying partnership transitions, as outlined above, it has several limitations. First, detailed information on partnerships is lacking, including precise separation dates within a three-month interval, as well as measures such as partnership duration or subjective partnership quality. Second, if a household dissolves shortly after a separation but before the next interview round, it might be recorded as attrition, although this scenario seems less probable within a three-month timeframe.

3.2 METHODS

Descriptive analyses show the proportion of couples who separated between two consecutive waves. In the multivariate part, random effects logistic panel regression models were estimated with separation (1=yes; 0=no) as the dependent variable. We subsequently used stepwise models including the following variables: year/period (Model 1), quarter (Model 2), children in the household (Model 3), education (Model 4), employment (Model 5) and control variables (Model 6). In Model 7, we added the stringency index and the consumer price index as macrolevel variables and, in Model 8, excluded year and quarter. To assess changes over the observation period, we estimated interactions (extending Model 6) between year and the following variables: children below age 18 in the household, education employment, and marital status. Separate models are provided for couples with children younger than 18 (“minors”) in the household. In these models, we further included the number of children and the age of the youngest child and estimated an interaction (extending Model 8) between year and number of children. Household weights were applied. The results are displayed as average marginal effects (AMEs), representing the average effect of a variable on the probability of separation. Positive coefficients indicate that a group separated more often and negative coefficients indicate that a group separated less often than the reference group did. AMEs allow comparisons of effect sizes between different models (Best and Wolf, 2012).

The variables are defined as follows (see Table A3 for distributions): children below age 18 in the household (yes; no); children aged 18+ in the household (yes; no); education (highest educational level within the couple: primary and lower secondary education – ISCED 1-2; upper secondary and postsecondary education – ISCED 3-5; tertiary education – ISCED 6-8); and employment (employment was based on usual weekly working hours, part-time was defined as 1 to 29 hours per week; both full-time; he full-time/she part-time; at least one unemployed; other). We included the following control variables: marital status (married; cohabiting); mean age of the couple (measured in years); country of birth (both in Austria; one partner born abroad; both born abroad); and population density (low; medium; high). In the models for couples with children younger than 18 years, we further included the number of children younger than 18 years in the household (1; 2; 3+) and the age of the youngest child in the household (0-5; 6-17). The stringency index (see Figure A1) measures the stringency of COVID-19 policies (Hale et al., 2021). It combines nine components: closings of schools, closes of workplaces, cancelling public events, limits on gatherings, closing of public transport, stay at home requirements, restrictions on internal movement, international travel controls and public information campaigns. Each component is normalized to range from 0 to 100, and the index is computed as a simple average of the nine components; higher values indicate more severe policies. We further include the consumer price index to measure the change in consumer prices in goods and services (see Figure A2).

4 RESULTS

In the period of 2018-2023, approximately 1.1% of Austrian couples aged 20 to 54 years separated within three months (see Figure A3). As expected by divorce trends, the separation rate declined in 2020 and remained low in the following years, with some increase in 2023. Throughout all the years studied, separations were more frequent among couples without children under 18 in the household than among those with children. The primary trend observed is the convergence in separation risk between couples with and without minors in the household: couples without children experienced a much sharper decline in separation risk than their counterparts with children did.

Multivariate models confirmed a decline in separations during and after the pandemic in Austria, in line with Hypothesis 1 (see Table 1). As indicated by the descriptive results, the decline in separations was more pronounced among couples without minors in the household, as expected by Hypothesis 2 (see Figure 1a). While in 2018/19, the separation risk was significantly greater among couples without minors in the household, there were no significant differences in the following period because of the convergence of couples without minors to a lower level.

There is a clear education gradient in dissolution risk, with low-educated individuals showing the highest and medium-educated individuals and highly educated individuals showing the lowest risk (Table 1). The interaction effect for period with education reveals that the separation risk declined most for low- and medium-educated individuals (in 2020) and, in 2022, with the beginning of high inflation, decreased further among the low-educated individuals (Figure 1b). While separation risks slightly increased in 2023 when inflation slowed down, they are still lower than before the pandemic. This stronger decline for the lower-educated individuals is in line with Hypothesis 3, but the results are not significant (probably also due to low case numbers for the low educated).

The results for couples' employment show a significantly lower dissolution risk for the "he full-time, she part-time" model than for the "both full-time" model. Couples in which at least one partner is unemployed have the highest dissolution risk. As Figure 1c shows, their dissolution risk is highest throughout the period but declines in 2021 and, similar to the low-educated pattern, in 2022, with some indication of a rebound in 2023. However, the effects are not significant. The findings for married versus cohabiting couples reveal that the dissolution risk was more volatile among cohabiting couples and that the drop was much steeper in the first phase of the pandemic (Figure 1d). Differences are significant over the whole observation period. We further estimated separate models for couples with minors in which we, in addition, included the number of children and the age of the youngest child (see Table A3). The separation risk is lower for two or more children, 18+ children and children aged 0-5. Interacting the number of children (one versus two or more) with period shows significant differences in 2018/19, which has disappeared since 2020 (Figure 1e).

Finally, the results for the control variables may be summarized as follows (Table 1). The dissolution risk is greater for couples who are unmarried, younger, with one partner born abroad and in regions with high population density. In the models with macrolevel variables, we also find significantly negative effects of the stringency index and the consumer price index. More severe COVID-19 measures and higher consumer prices were associated with a lower dissolution risk (Model 8, not controlling for year).

TABLE 1: CORRELATES OF PARTNERSHIP DISSOLUTION AMONG COUPLES AGED 20-54 YEARS (AVERAGE MARGINAL EFFECTS)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Period (ref = 2018/Q1-2020/Q1)								
2020/Q1-2021/Q1	-0.00216 (0.00132)	-0.00215 (0.00132)	-0.00225+ (0.00130)	-0.00228+ (0.00129)	-0.00244+ (0.00125)	-0.00271* (0.00124)	-0.00324 (0.00310)	
2021/Q1-2022/Q1	-0.00456*** (0.00128)	-0.00457*** (0.00128)	-0.00466*** (0.00126)	-0.00465*** (0.00126)	-0.00473*** (0.00121)	-0.00512*** (0.00119)	-0.00485 (0.00407)	
2022/Q1-2023/Q1	-0.00308* (0.00135)	-0.00307* (0.00135)	-0.00322* (0.00131)	-0.00322* (0.00131)	-0.00310* (0.00128)	-0.00359** (0.00125)	0.000482 (0.00724)	
2023/Q1-2023/Q4	-0.00192 (0.00154)	-0.00192 (0.00157)	-0.00204 (0.00154)	-0.00201 (0.00154)	-0.00206 (0.00149)	-0.00240 (0.00147)	0.00903 (0.0144)	
Quarter (ref = Q1)								
Q2		0.00112 (0.00115)	0.00107 (0.00114)	0.00108 (0.00114)	0.00112 (0.00112)	0.00102 (0.00111)	0.00134 (0.00121)	
Q3		0.00104 (0.00116)	0.000952 (0.00115)	0.000936 (0.00115)	0.00102 (0.00113)	0.000979 (0.00112)	0.00190 (0.00136)	
Q4		0.000671 (0.00122)	0.000537 (0.00120)	0.000531 (0.00120)	0.000556 (0.00118)	0.000595 (0.00118)	0.00179 (0.00181)	
Children below age 18 in household (ref = no)			-0.0113*** (0.00120)	-0.0115*** (0.00120)	-0.00992*** (0.00119)	-0.00394*** (0.00113)	-0.00394*** (0.00113)	-0.00394*** (0.00112)
Children age 18+ in household (ref = no)			-0.00861*** (0.000936)	-0.00884*** (0.000948)	-0.00821*** (0.000939)	-0.00306* (0.00139)	-0.00305* (0.00139)	-0.00304* (0.00139)
Education (ref = ISCED 3-5)								
ISCED 1-2				0.00971** (0.00332)	0.00658* (0.00289)	0.00656* (0.00296)	0.00656* (0.00296)	0.00658* (0.00296)
ISCED 6-8				0.000355 (0.000989)	0.000263 (0.000960)	-0.00121 (0.000978)	-0.00122 (0.000978)	-0.00121 (0.000974)
Employment (ref = both full-time)								
He full-time, she part-time					-0.00414*** (0.000999)	-0.00342** (0.00105)	-0.00343** (0.00105)	-0.00342** (0.00104)
At least one unemployed					0.00886*** (0.00261)	0.00583* (0.00230)	0.00577* (0.00230)	0.00575* (0.00229)
Other					0.000987 (0.00120)	-0.000418 (0.00115)	-0.000431 (0.00115)	-0.000429 (0.00114)
Marital status (ref = married)								

Unmarried cohabitation						0.0132*** (0.00137)	0.0132*** (0.00137)	0.0132*** (0.00136)
Mean age of couple						-0.000291*** (0.0000695)	-0.000291*** (0.0000696)	-0.000290*** (0.0000693)
Country of birth (ref = both in Austria)								
One partner born abroad						0.00392** (0.00138)	0.00393** (0.00139)	0.00389** (0.00138)
Both born abroad						0.00184 (0.00125)	0.00186 (0.00126)	0.00184 (0.00125)
Population density (ref= Medium)								
High						0.00354** (0.00120)	0.00353** (0.00120)	0.00352** (0.00119)
Low						-0.00110 (0.000938)	-0.00110 (0.000938)	-0.00110 (0.000934)
Stringency index							0.0000366 (0.0000479)	-0.0000504** (0.0000160)
Consumer price index							-0.000361 (0.000377)	-0.0000959+ (0.0000518)
var(u1)	3.055*** (0.824)	3.109*** (0.834)	2.555** (0.816)	2.506** (0.805)	1.912* (0.858)	1.493* (0.684)	1.502* (0.691)	1.435* (0.680)
N	98,259	98,259	98,259	98,259	98,259	98,259	98,259	98,259
N_g	30,646	30,646	30,646	30,646	30,646	30,646	30,646	30,646
ll	-1,236,290.2	-1,236,123.2	-1,210,335.4	-1,208,244.5	-1,201,590.8	-1,166,215.5	-1,165,870.9	-1,167,193.2
df_m	4	7	9	11	14	21	23	16
AIC	2,472,592.5	2,472,264.5	2,420,692.7	2,416,515.1	2,403,213.7	2,332,477.0	2,331,791.9	2,334,422.4
BIC	2,472,649.5	2,472,349.9	2,420,797.2	2,416,638.5	2,403,365.6	2,332,695.4	2,332,029.2	2,334,593.3

Notes:

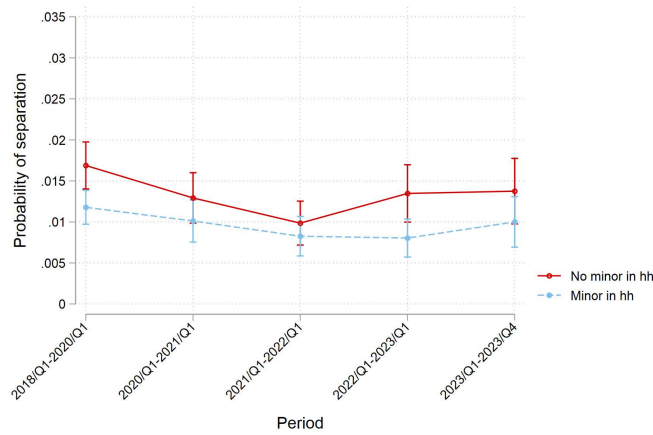
Standard errors in parentheses. Significance levels: + p < 0.10, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Source:

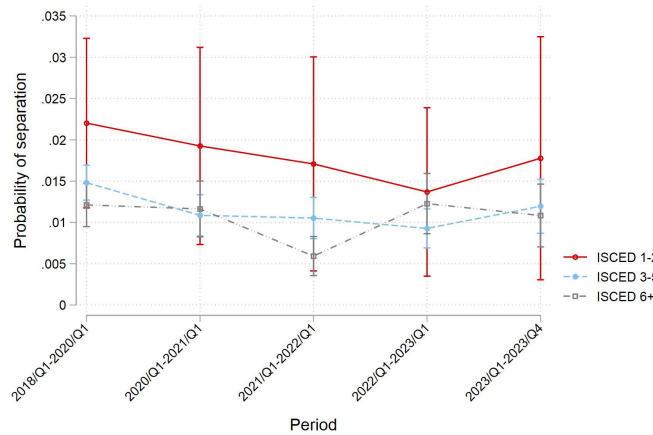
LFS 2018-2023; weighted data

FIGURE 1: TIME TRENDS OF CORRELATES OF PARTNERSHIP DISSOLUTION AMONG COUPLES AGED 20-54 YEARS (PREDICTIVE MARGINS; 95% CONFIDENCE INTERVALS)

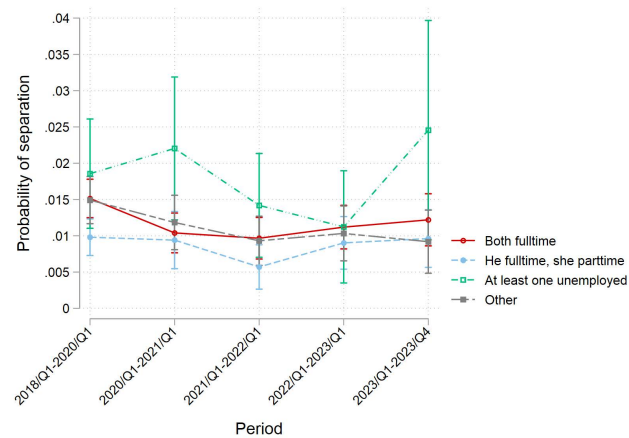
(A) HOUSEHOLDS WITH CHILDREN UNDER AGE 18



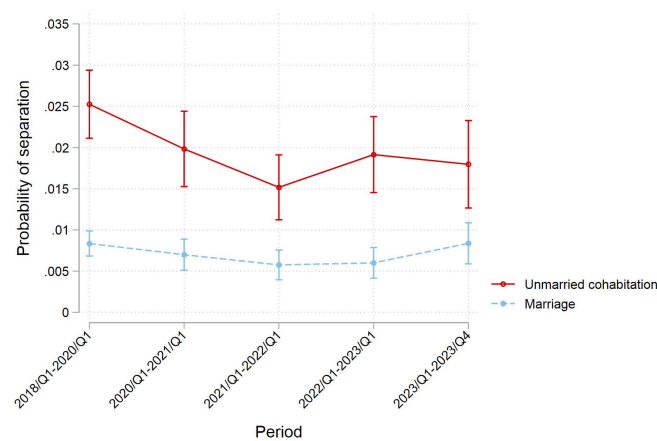
(B) EDUCATION



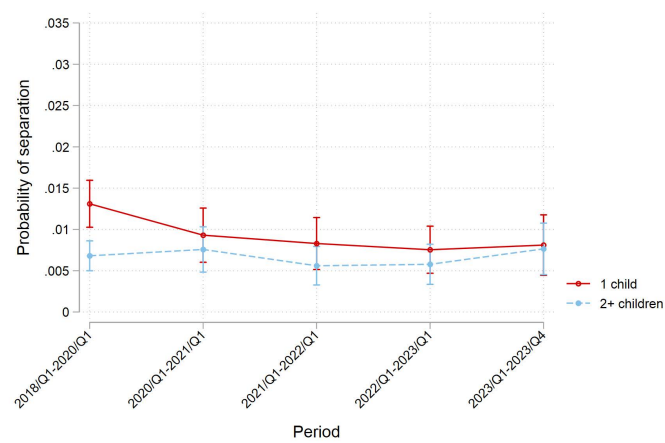
(C) EMPLOYMENT



(D) MARITAL STATUS



(E) NUMBER OF CHILDREN (MODEL FOR COUPLES WITH MINOR CHILDREN)



Source:
LFS 2018-2023; weighted data

5 CONCLUSIONS

This study explored trends in partnership dissolution in Austria from 2018 to 2023 and found that dissolution risks decreased during the pandemic and remained at a lower level since then (as reflected in the divorce rate). This decrease indicates that couples were hesitant to split during uncertain circumstances and that financial constraints made it difficult to establish separate households (Cohen, 2014). Practical barriers and difficulties in finding housing during lockdowns may have also contributed to this trend. Couples split less despite the increased strains and conflicts that many families have experienced since the onset of the pandemic (e.g., Luetke et al., 2020; OECD, 2021; Schmid et al., 2021).

This study's main contribution is to elucidate the Austrian trend in partnership dissolution: it proposes that both higher work–family conflict and lower affordability are pivotal. First, since 2020, there has been a noticeable convergence in dissolution risk between couples with and without children in the household, with the risk decreasing most significantly among couples without children, starting from a higher initial level. This suggests that during the pandemic, couples without children likely spent more time together, were able to focus more on their relationships, often experienced increased closeness with their partners and developed stronger connections (Lebow, 2020; Settersten et al., 2020). In contrast, couples with children experienced much greater work–family conflict during the pandemic, primarily due to increased childcare and housework demands stemming from kindergarten and school closures during lockdowns (e.g., Derndorfer et al., 2021; Pietromonaco and Overall, 2021). This increased strain appears to be mirrored in dissolution patterns, as the risk of separation among couples with children (especially two or more) decreased to a lesser extent.

Second, we offer indicative evidence of a decline in dissolution risk among couples with lower and medium levels of education, moving closer to that of their highly educated counterparts. While these findings are not statistically significant, the divorce statistics also support the trend of a stable divorce rate among highly educated couples in 2020 and 2021 (see Table A1). In 2022, we observed a notable decline among the lower educated, suggesting an impact of high inflation. A similar trend is noticeable among couples where at least one person was unemployed: initially facing a higher dissolution risk, this risk converged by 2021–22. This pattern suggests that couples with lower socioeconomic status experienced heightened economic uncertainty (Steiber et al., 2022) or could not afford to establish separate households after separation. The economic barriers hindering partnership dissolution, especially among couples in weaker socioeconomic positions, may be considered a social problem. This means that couples in advanced stages of the dissolution process (Vangelisti, 2006) could not move away in a potentially very stressful situation. This combination may have aggravated existing conflicts and potentially contribute to instances of domestic violence within some families (Schneider et al., 2016).

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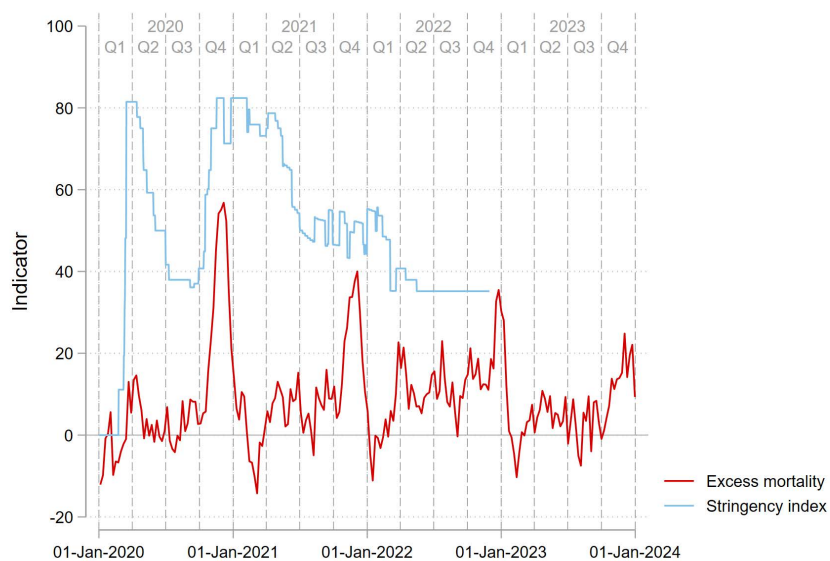
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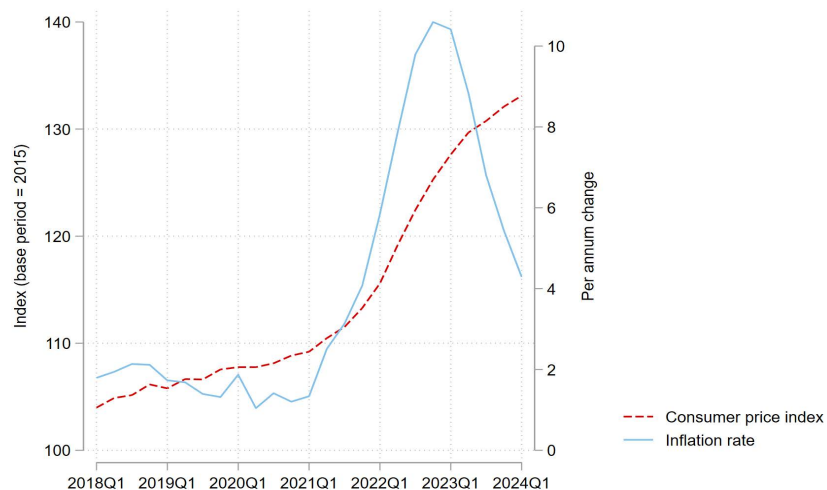
APPENDIX

FIGURE A1: EXCESS MORTALITY AND STRINGENCY INDEX IN AUSTRIA, 2020-2023



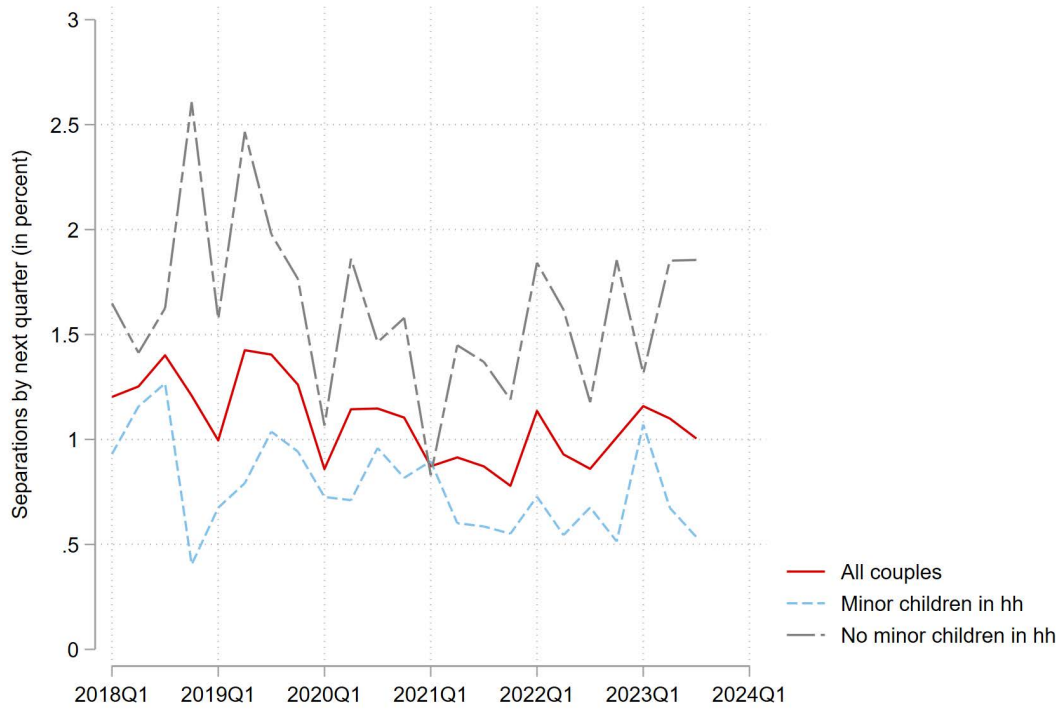
Source:
Hale et al. (2021)

FIGURE A2: CONSUMER PRICE INDEX AND INFLATION RATE (QUARTERLY) IN AUSTRIA, 2018-2024



Source:
OECD Data Explorer (2024)

FIGURE A3: SEPARATION BETWEEN WAVES, COUPLES AGED 20-54 YEARS, IN PERCENT



Source:
LFS 2018-2023; weighted data

TABLE A1: DIVORCES BY EDUCATION AND NUMBER OF CHILDREN, IN PERCENT RELATIVE TO 2018/19 (=100%)

	2018/19	2020	2021	2022	2023
Education					
Low	100	84	92	88	-
Medium	100	91	86	85	-
High	100	99	101	93	-
Number of children in household					
0	100	88	85	84	86
1	100	94	89	85	88
2+	100	93	93	88	96

Note:

Definition of education: Low education (Compulsory School), medium education (Apprenticeship Certificate, Vocational Middle School, General Secondary School, Vocational Secondary School), high education (College, Academy, University)

Source:

Statistics Austria (2024a; 2024b)

TABLE A2: ATTRITION BETWEEN WAVES, COUPLES AGED 20-54 YEARS, IN PERCENT

2018/Q1->2018/Q2	4.75
2018/Q2->2018/Q3	3.98
2018/Q3->2018/Q4	4.19
2018/Q4->2019/Q1	3.59
2019/Q1->2019/Q2	2.69
2019/Q2->2019/Q3	4.38
2019/Q3->2019/Q4	3.57
2019/Q4->2020/Q1	3.46
2020/Q1->2020/Q2	2.36
2020/Q2->2020/Q3	2.96
2020/Q3->2020/Q4	3.14
2020/Q4->2021/Q1	4.42
2021/Q1->2021/Q2	3.66
2021/Q2->2021/Q3	2.68
2021/Q3->2021/Q4	2.73
2021/Q4->2022/Q1	2.76
2022/Q1->2022/Q2	3.30
2022/Q2->2022/Q3	3.24
2022/Q3->2022/Q4	2.27
2022/Q4->2023/Q1	2.70
2023/Q1->2023/Q2	3.00
2023/Q2->2023/Q3	2.76
2023/Q3->2023/Q4	2.24

Source:

LFS 2018-2023; weighted data

TABLE A3: FREQUENCY DISTRIBUTION, COUPLES AGED 20-54 YEARS, IN PERCENT

Children below age 18 in household	
No	37
Yes	63
Children age 18+ in household	
No	82
Yes	18
Number of children below age 18 in household	
0	37
1	27
2	26
3+	10
Age of youngest child in household	
Childless	27
0-5	31
6-17	32
18+	10
Education	
ISCED 1-2	5
ISCED 3-5	64
ISCED 6-8	31
Employment	
Both full-time	40
He full-time, she part-time	29
At least one unemployed	6
Other	25
Marital status	
Married	71
Unmarried cohabitation	29
Mean age of couple	
Age (in years)	39.6
Country of birth	
Both in Austria	62
One partner born abroad	14
Both born abroad	24
Population density	
High	30
Medium	32
Low	38

Source:
LFS 2018-2023; unweighted data

TABLE A3: CORRELATES OF PARTNERSHIP DISSOLUTION AMONG COUPLES AGED 20-54 YEARS WITH CHILDREN YOUNGER THAN 18 YEARS (AVERAGE MARGINAL EFFECTS)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)
Period (ref = 2018/Q1-2020/Q1)										
2020/Q1-2021/Q1	-0.00107 (0.00140)	-0.00108 (0.00140)	-0.00108 (0.00139)	-0.00117 (0.00138)	-0.00117 (0.00139)	-0.00115 (0.00137)	-0.00126 (0.00135)	-0.00136 (0.00132)	-0.00185 (0.00295)	
2021/Q1-2022/Q1	-0.00266+ (0.00139)	-0.00266+ (0.00139)	-0.00265+ (0.00136)	-0.00273* (0.00136)	-0.00273* (0.00136)	-0.00263+ (0.00136)	-0.00273* (0.00133)	-0.00288* (0.00129)	-0.00260 (0.00395)	
2022/Q1-2023/Q1	-0.00316* (0.00132)	-0.00318* (0.00132)	-0.00310* (0.00130)	-0.00313* (0.00130)	-0.00313* (0.00130)	-0.00306* (0.00129)	-0.00302* (0.00128)	-0.00313* (0.00124)	0.00143 (0.00744)	
2023/Q1-2023/Q4	-0.00146 (0.00156)	-0.00190 (0.00154)	-0.00180 (0.00153)	-0.00186 (0.00153)	-0.00185 (0.00153)	-0.00169 (0.00153)	-0.00171 (0.00152)	-0.00183 (0.00148)	0.0136 (0.0201)	
Quarter (ref = Q1)										
Q2		-0.000871 (0.00123)	-0.000853 (0.00122)	-0.000856 (0.00122)	-0.000857 (0.00122)	-0.000867 (0.00122)	-0.000825 (0.00121)	-0.000844 (0.00119)	-0.000406 (0.00131)	
Q3		0.000198 (0.00128)	0.000236 (0.00127)	0.000220 (0.00127)	0.000218 (0.00127)	0.000215 (0.00126)	0.000251 (0.00125)	0.000233 (0.00124)	0.00135 (0.00148)	
Q4		-0.00192 (0.00124)	-0.00189 (0.00123)	-0.00192 (0.00123)	-0.00192 (0.00123)	-0.00191 (0.00122)	-0.00187 (0.00121)	-0.00183 (0.00120)	-0.000535 (0.00174)	
Number of children below age 18 in household (ref = 1 child)										
2 children			-0.00528*** (0.00106)	-0.00595*** (0.00108)	-0.00597*** (0.00109)	-0.00612*** (0.00110)	-0.00572*** (0.00107)	-0.00339*** (0.000959)	-0.00341*** (0.000960)	-0.00339*** (0.000963)
3+ children			-0.00505*** (0.00137)	-0.00563*** (0.00139)	-0.00560*** (0.00140)	-0.00631*** (0.00137)	-0.00616*** (0.00133)	-0.00290* (0.00143)	-0.00290* (0.00143)	-0.00289* (0.00143)
Children age 18+ in household (ref = no)				-0.00492*** (0.00105)	-0.00505*** (0.00109)	-0.00545*** (0.00107)	-0.00542*** (0.00104)	-0.00383** (0.00124)	-0.00382** (0.00124)	-0.00384** (0.00125)
Age of youngest child (ref = 0-5 years)										
6-17 years					0.000423 (0.000993)	0.000258 (0.000995)	0.000524 (0.00106)	0.00314* (0.00132)	0.00314* (0.00132)	0.00316* (0.00133)

Education (ref = ISCED 3-5)										
ISCED 1-2						0.00966** (0.00361)	0.00756* (0.00323)	0.00581* (0.00291)	0.00581* (0.00291)	0.00583* (0.00293)
ISCED 6-8						-0.000816 (0.00100)	-0.000906 (0.000991)	-0.000544 (0.00103)	-0.000548 (0.00103)	-0.000536 (0.00103)
Employment (ref = both full-time)										
He full-time, she part-time							-0.00285** (0.00110)	-0.00243* (0.00111)	-0.00242* (0.00111)	-0.00244* (0.00111)
At least one unemployed							0.00317 (0.00260)	0.00148 (0.00227)	0.00144 (0.00226)	0.00151 (0.00228)
Other							0.000430 (0.00139)	-0.000349 (0.00134)	-0.000371 (0.00117)	-0.000358 (0.00134)
Marital status (ref = married)										
Unmarried cohabitation								0.0110*** (0.00164)	0.0111*** (0.00165)	0.0111*** (0.00165)
Mean age of couple								-0.000214* (0.0000987)	-0.000214* (0.0000989)	-0.000214* (0.0000993)
Country of birth (ref= both in Austria)										
One partner born abroad								0.00125 (0.00139)	0.00128 (0.00140)	0.00125 (0.00139)
Both born abroad								0.00127 (0.00127)	0.00129 (0.00127)	0.00125 (0.00127)
Population density (ref = Medium)										
High								0.00207 (0.00130)	0.00208 (0.00130)	0.00209 (0.00131)
Low								-0.00144 (0.000963)	-0.00144 (0.000963)	-0.00143 (0.000965)
Stringency index									0.0000383 (0.0000500)	-0.0000294+ (0.0000170)
Consumer price index									-0.000414 (0.000386)	-0.0000972+ (0.0000547)
var(u1)	3.254** (1.054)	3.141** (1.042)	2.785** (1.018)	2.785** (1.018)	2.700* (1.018)	2.559* (1.018)	2.263* (1.018)	1.476 (1.015)	1.512 (1.049)	1.524 (1.031)

N	62,666	62,666	62,666	62,666	62,666	62,666	62,666	62,666	62,666	62,666
N_g	19,536	19,536	19,536	19,536	19,536	19,536	19,536	19,536	19,536	19,536
ll	-586,761.5	-586,285.3	-582,077.7	-579,638.7	-579,612.3	-577,407.7	-575,325.2	-561,337.9	-561,337.9	-561,337.9
df_m	4	7	9	10	11	13	16	23	25	18
AIC	1,173,534.9	1,172,588.6	1,164,177.4	1,159,301.4	1,159,250.7	1,1548,45.4	1,150,686.4	1,122,725.9	1,121,980.4	1,124,070.3
BIC	1,173,589.2	1,172,670.0	1,164,276.9	1,159,410.0	1,159,368.2	1,154,981.1	1,150,849.2	1,122,952.0	1,122,224.6	1,124,251.3

Notes:

Standard errors in parentheses. Significance levels: * $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Source:

LFS 2018-2023; weighted data



Wittgenstein Centre

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