

Zagel, Hannah; Struffolino, Emanuela

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ARTICLE

Crisis-proof households? How social policy responses to the COVID-19 pandemic imagined work and care in Germany

Hannah Zagel¹  and Emanuela Struffolino² 

¹Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung gGmbH, Berlin, Germany and ²Department of Social and Political Sciences, University of Milan, Milano, Italy

Corresponding author: Hannah Zagel; Email: hannah.zagel@wzb.eu

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Abstract

Social policies convey normative assumptions about how households should make ends meet and organise care, but how do these ideals withstand crises such as the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic? Previous research shows continuity of welfare state models in the crisis, but mostly looked at single policy fields and produced mixed findings regarding the role of pre-crisis reform trajectories. This paper contributes a detailed analysis of assumptions about the ‘standard productive household’ in terms of three dimensions: labour market participation, coverage of economic needs and coverage of care needs. Drawing on original policy documents enacted in 2020 in Germany – which had dismantled many of its institutional strongholds for the male-breadwinner model before the crisis – we provide two novel insights. First, social policy responses to the pandemic were relatively coherent regarding assumptions about labour market participation, but expectations towards households’ abilities to make ends meet and parents’ care involvement were less coherent. In addition to relaxing conditions on stable employment and income, policy responses normalised patchwork incomes and relied on parents to compress paid and unpaid work. Second, we propose that crises may slow down reform processes that are already underway by reverting to ideas that were dominant in the past.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic; social policy responses; ideal-type household; Germany

Introduction

The economic consequences of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic sparked strong social policy reactions in countries across the world. These reactions appear to have been mostly in line with general approaches to providing welfare (Börner and Seeleib-Kaiser, 2023), but the normative expectations about welfare production that were inscribed in social policies during the crisis have received less attention. How were households assumed to make ends meet? Who was held responsible for economic maintenance and unpaid care? And what were

the images of productive and reproductive citizens inscribed in policy responses? These are important questions because policies contribute to ideas of what is possible and what is 'normal'; they constitute categories of people of whom specific behaviours are expected, such as different types of workers or parents (Bacchi, 2017). Illuminating the categories of people and expectations inscribed in crisis policies is crucial to addressing and potentially reconsidering such categories in the future.

The COVID-19 pandemic affected all life domains. It created stress for the welfare state – initially to its healthcare systems but then also more broadly – and shifted the logics of social protection to crisis mode (Börner and Seeleib-Kaiser, 2023). Government containment measures restricted social life and work, with direct consequences for people whose jobs could not be shifted to telework (because they entailed contact with costumers) or whose jobs stopped because customer traffic was constrained. In contrast, some occupations were deemed 'essential' because they were required to keep infrastructures running, with little regard for risks of infection. Meanwhile, due to the closure of schools and childcare facilities, many working parents either combined telework and childcare or left their jobs, permanently or temporarily. Governments attuned their social policy measures to buffer social and economic effects for households and ultimately prevent a major recession.

In this study, we look at Germany as an exemplary case. In Germany, the dismantling of the institutionalised male-breadwinner model has long been proclaimed (Mätzke and Ostner, 2010), but crisis response policies were publicly criticised for insufficiently countering the re-traditionalisation of gender roles invoked by the crisis.¹ Understanding the normative frame underpinning crisis policies in relation to pre-crisis institutional reform trajectories can inform theorising about the persistence of ideas in welfare state models.

We make two main contributions to the literature on social policy responses to crises. First, we consider social policy responses as packages rather than single policy fields. Comparative research has shown that overall, structural responses to the COVID pandemic were consistent with the welfare state model in social security (Béland et al., 2023; Seemann et al., 2021) and in care-related policies (Daly and Ryu, 2023; Dobrotić and Blum, 2023). In our study, we consider these policies jointly, enabling a comprehensive analysis of assumptions of how individuals and households were supposed to deal with material and care needs. Analysing a set of policies helps in understanding their joint contribution to normalise a particular form of household production. Second, our study builds towards a refining of expectations regarding the relationships between crisis responses, prior reform trajectories and gendered ideas about work and care. While some studies have suggested that social policy responses to crises are aligned with the progression of institutional reform trajectories (Cantillon et al., 2021), others point to the reliance on 'old' ideas in moments of emergency (Eggers et al., 2023). We use the historical instance of Germany's social policy response package to the COVID-19 pandemic to take a more in-depth look at these links, and generate a hypothesis regarding the stickiness of norms in institutional reform trajectories.

From the 1990s up to the moment the pandemic hit Europe, welfare states (including in Germany) had increasingly tended to address citizens in their own

right, and less as members of family-household units with mutual obligations, as they had previously (Ostner, 2004). In the 2010–2020s, support for the ‘adult-worker model’ was arguably provided regardless of gender or parental status, contributing to what has been considered ‘formal’ gender equality (Chanfreau, 2022). In this model, social policies normalise the ideal of full-time employed workers, whose social protection is conditional on their labour market participation. The pandemic radically changed the conditions under which the adult worker model had found support. The possibility of practicing and maintaining full-time employment became much more selective (Brugiavini et al., 2021); this was among the key drivers of social policy responses. However, policymakers always opt for specific normative frames among a range of alternatives, and their choices in crises can reveal underpinning ideas about gender and work (Daly, 2021; Eggers et al., 2023).

In this paper, we look at policies in the initial phase of the COVID-19 pandemic between March and December 2020 in Germany. This was when crisis politics played out clearest, while later policies were often amendments to initial policies (Daly, 2022). Drawing on original policy documents and government reports, we consider policies that directly intervened in people’s household maintenance in terms of paid and unpaid work: short-time work schemes, social security transfers, parental leave rights and payments, family allowances and school services. We compare these crisis policies against assumptions about ‘productive households’ inscribed in pre-crisis policies, also considering what alternative responses there might have been. The analysis gives a nuanced picture of a social policy response package, leading us to hypothesise regarding policymakers’ reluctance to pursue gender-equality-oriented crisis policies – which future research should investigate.

Social policy in the pandemic

In the COVID-19 pandemic, the conditions under which productive households operated changed dramatically for most people. Governments issued containment measures restricting social life and work in the labour market. This had immediate consequences for employees in businesses that rely on customer contact; these jobs could not be shifted to telework, and many businesses had to close (at least temporarily). In this context, some of the main logics of employment-centred welfare states, such as the principle of activation, were no longer viable. The health crisis and its containment measures meant that, to keep infrastructures running, some occupations were deemed ‘essential’. Employees in these occupations, such as healthcare, public transport and electricity, were expected to keep working; these jobs were relatively secure. The possibility of practicing and maintaining full-time employment and a stable income during this period of the pandemic became much more selective than before (Brugiavini et al., 2021).

At the same time, containment measures affected the way households relied on family relationships for resources and support (Daly and Ryu, 2023). Closures of schools and childcare facilities meant that, in households with children, adults’ care responsibilities intensified, and children were largely reliant on the resources of their families (ibid.). Employed parents who did not qualify for the emergency childcare

measures reserved for ‘essential workers’ either shifted to telework to care for dependent children at home when possible, or were forced to take leave or quit their jobs (Eggers et al., 2023). This environment radically changed the context of household production, altering the playing field for the welfare state.

Welfare state logics of social protection shifted to a crisis mode, and emergency measures addressing acute needs were overwhelmingly temporary in nature. Social policy responses aimed to buffer social and economic effects for households, not least to prevent a major recession (Börner and Seeleib-Kaiser, 2023). Governments’ interventions were extensive, and included the expansion of programmes that were already in place as well as the instalment of new measures. In Europe, about 40 per cent of all policy responses were amendments to existing policies, while the remainder were new measures (Weber et al., 2020). Over 30 per cent of policy responses across European countries in 2020 focused on keeping businesses afloat; income protection measures (19 per cent) and employment protection measures (13 per cent) were the other main domains (ibid.).

There were notable differences in crisis responses across countries, which comparative research has attempted to explain. A number of studies have shown that country-specific social policy responses to the pandemic mostly reflected existing policy legacies (Béland et al., 2021; Béland et al., 2023; Eggers et al., 2023). The setup of targeted and universal benefits was maintained in welfare states’ crisis responses, and there was stability in the instruments used, such as regarding wage subsidies versus temporary unemployment benefits. Comparative research has also suggested, however, that the links between welfare state systems and policy responses to crises are not deterministic. Cantillon et al. (2021) examined social security measures and showed that, among Bismarckian welfare states, the nature of the policy response varied depending on the country’s progress in dualism in social protection when the pandemic hit. Eggers et al. (2023) examined childcare policies and found that, where the institutional structures would have allowed for a focus on either family care or extrafamilial care, cultural ideas shaped welfare states’ crisis response pathways. Research shows that crisis responses were underpinned by gendered ideas of who would take on the emerging care responsibilities (Daly 2021) and who would be expected to do the breadwinning.

Our study country, Germany, is a good case to examine such normative expectations. The institutional reform trajectory from the male-breadwinner towards a Sweden-type adult-worker model had been going on for over a decade when the crisis hit. However, previous studies have provided mixed evidence for what the main normative frame in the crisis was. Evaluating differences in policy responses between countries, Bariola and Collins (2021) point to longer school closures in Germany compared with other countries to conclude that the male-breadwinner legacy must still have had a strong influence in the crisis. Eggers et al. (2023) make a similar argument based on analyses of childcare-related policies in the crisis. Looking at short-time work schemes during the beginning of the pandemic, Cook and Grimshaw (2021) show that, in Germany, the scheme disregarded the different positions of men and women in the labour market by paying the same replacement rate for all workers and excluding *mini-jobs*. By contrast, the scheme was considered sensitive to women’s employment patterns in

that it allowed for a reduction in work hours and provided more generous short-time work benefits for households with children (Cook and Grimshaw 2020).

In summary, the literature provides fragmented evidence regarding our research question on who is held responsible for the economic maintenance and unpaid care in crisis-facing households. To examine the expectations towards productive households in the crisis, we have to consider a more comprehensive policy package. Digging deeper into the case of Germany will also grant insights into the resilience of a pre-crisis reform trajectory that had been described as ‘substantive institutional change’ (Palier, 2010) in times of crisis.

Conceptual framework

How social policies constitute productive households

This paper builds on the assumption that policies contribute to shaping ideas of what is considered ‘normal’, and this extends to situations of emergency. Policies convey assumptions and prescriptions about individual behaviours beyond setting (economic) incentives, and in addition to their material consequences. More broadly, policies transport context-specific perceptions of need and formalise ideas about work and care (Daly 2022). This view is widely shared in the social policy literature (e.g. van Oorschot et al., 2008), and is in line with a sociological neo-institutionalist understanding of policies to operate both on a regulative as well as a cultural-cognitive dimension that provides frames of meaning for behaviour (Hall and Taylor, 1996). The links between policies and normative ideas are complex; in this paper we focus on the perspective that policies institutionalise ideas of how households should arrange their maintenance.

Concepts such as the ‘male-breadwinner model’ (Lewis, 1992) and the ‘adult-worker model’ (Lewis, 2001) describe how states structure household production. The male-breadwinner model implies welfare states’ support for a gendered division of paid and unpaid labour, with women assumed to do most of the care and domestic work. By contrast, the adult-worker (also ‘dual-earner’) model implies that both women and men are assumed to be active in the labour market, although it is conceptually unclear how the load of unpaid work is redistributed between women and men (Daly 2011). Our study country, Germany, has been described as a typical case of a male-breadwinner model that has gradually adapted towards a dual-worker model since the late 1990s (Mätzke and Ostner, 2010). The breadwinner concepts are mostly used to describe the regulative dimension of the institutional setting (Pfau-Effinger, 1998) and how social policies structure material conditions. Although the breadwinner concepts also assume that policies have an ideological foundation, this remains more implicit (Daly, 2011).

We build on the approach introduced by Bacchi (2017) and applied by Chanfreau (2022) in this journal to consider how policies themselves, rather than their material consequences, constitute their subjects. Rooted in a Foucauldian conception of policy as discourse, Bacchi’s approach views policy output as knowledge, and therefore as markers of what is accepted as truth. By defining claimant groups, eligibility criteria and thresholds, policies create categories of people, setting the boundaries of what is possible to say and to be. Bacchi (2017)

suggests that, besides their effect *on* people and *on* people's lives, policies ought to be understood as contributing to who people *are*. Bacchi's focus is on policies as 'gendering practices': how policies encourage gendered behaviour in paid and unpaid work. We consider this gendering too, but looking at the case of social policy responses to the pandemic, we investigate assumptions on the nature of households' economic maintenance and unpaid care in a more general way.

We assume that social policies, including those introduced as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic, constitute what is a 'standard productive household'. This is defined as the arrangement of household members' labour market participation, coverage of economic needs and care involvement. We consider the standard productive household to be constituted by assumptions inscribed in social policies about who is employed, on what terms they are employed, on what level of income they will be able to maintain their household and how care responsibilities will be fulfilled. For example, by restricting eligibility to short-time work to permanently employed workers, the policy defines such work contracts as the norm; thresholds for income replacement payments reflect assumptions about capacities for economic maintenance, and temporal limits to paid care leave normalise what is accepted in terms of labour market breaks. Considering that even formally gender-neutral policies can maintain existing inequalities, it is also important to pay attention to what policies do not say (Chanfreau, 2022). For example, providing protection to specific categories of workers employed in typically male-dominated labour market segments or assigning 'gender neutral' parental leave rights to 'parents' in a context where paid and unpaid work are shared unequally among mothers and fathers likely perpetuates inequalities.

The 'standard productive household' frame

To analyse how social-policy responses to the pandemic constituted the productive household in the crisis, we first set out what was the normative frame of the 'standard productive household' before the crisis as an analytical grid to compare policy output during the crisis. As defined above, the normative frame refers to assumptions on three dimensions: (a) labour market participation, (b) the ability to cope with household's economic needs and (c) the ability to fulfil care responsibilities. Table 1 defines assumptions inscribed in social policy (in Germany before the pandemic) on the three dimensions. Within this normative frame, the state expects adults of working age to participate in the labour market and hold a position that guarantees not just stable dependent employment on a permanent contract but also employment with an employer that is able to counterbalance negative economic cycles (e.g. start-ups in the short run, see Gries and Naudé, 2021). In the case of unemployment, the normative frame implies that adult household members will not become permanently inactive; they will return to the labour market within a limited period of time.

Having labour market participation as the primary source for covering households' economic needs builds on several assumptions that are important for our later focus on crises. First, part of the labour market income should be saved to cope with possible future income losses. Second, in the case of unemployment, workers should actively seek to re-enter employment as soon as possible (within

Table 1. Normative frame of ‘standard productive households’ in Germany before the pandemic

Dimension	Assumptions about ‘standard productive households’
(a) Participating in the labour market	Adults in working age ideally: (i) hold a permanent contract, (ii) work in a sector/company that is able to distribute economic risks across economic cycles and (iii) do not leave the labour market without looking for a job.
(b) Ability to cope with household’s economic needs	Workers are able to cope with temporary income losses thanks to previous savings.
	If workers experience periods of unemployment, they will actively seek work and return to the labour market within a year to maintain their income levels.
	Workers in longer periods of unemployment are required to actively seek to return to employment to secure sufficient income levels.
	Coping with income loss is more challenging for low-income households, which are likely to host low-wage workers – especially if there are dependent children in the household.
	Nonstandard employment may be used to bridge difficult periods for a limited time.
	Pensioners can top up their income with a restricted amount per year.
	In general, children are a cost factor in the household for which the state partially compensates with, e.g., child benefits.
(c) Ability to manage childcare	Working parents often temporarily leave their dependent permanent employment to care for their children; for longer periods off work they are supposed to be able to cover their income loss or foregone earnings.
	Working parents supervise their young children outside of school times and childcare hours.

twelve months) with a salary that secures an adequate income level for their household. Third, marginal employment is not considered a long-term solution to unemployment or temporary income losses, so contracts such as so-called mini-jobs² are limited to a short period of time during the year; the expectation is that adult members of the 'standard productive household' will find more stable and better-paid employment. Fourth, pensioners in under-resourced households can top up their low pension with (marginal) employment. Finally, the state partially compensates for the costs of children with direct transfers and services.

For households with children, the 'standard productive household' frame expects adults to manage childcare responsibilities next to their labour market participation. On the one hand, after the birth of a child, parents are expected to interrupt their employment to care for their child for a limited period of time, and if they decide to prolong their time out of work, be able to cover the (potential) income loss themselves. On the other hand, parents are expected to supervise their young children out of school hours and beyond the time covered by formal out-of-school care. These policies account for gender inequalities in employment and care to a limited degree in reserving two extra months of leave to the second parent taking leave (usually the father). Blanket measures for family care without explicit targeting of mothers/fathers tend to assume a traditional gender division of labour (Daly 2022), and so the weakened male-breadwinner model was effectively a one-and-a-half-breadwinner model.

Using this classification as an analytical grid, we organised the data collected for this research (see next section) to identify: (1) the 'pre-crisis frame' (which categories did the German welfare state define as worthy of protection along these dimensions before the onset of the pandemic?) (2) the 'crisis frame' (how did the German welfare state change or extend the categories of the pre-crisis frame in the pandemic?). This comparative approach allowed us to tease out the main focus of crisis policies, their 'gendering' practices and how consistent the assumptions underlying the policy package were. To make the normative frame followed in the crisis more tangible, we also considered what alternative responses could have been made in each dimension of the crisis frame (following the approach of Daly, 2022).

Analytical design

Case description

In the 2000–2010s, Germany's welfare state underwent changes commonly evaluated as a departure from the conservative welfare state model (Fleckenstein, 2008) and a trend towards individualisation of social provision (Ostner, 2004). The previously strong orientation towards status preservation through social-insurance-based entitlements and a male-breadwinner model was weakened in several respects in the early 2000s. In the domain of minimum income and unemployment policy, the 'Hartz IV reforms' installed a strong work-first agenda. They were aimed at reducing unemployment by increasing working-hour flexibility, job matching and work incentives. The integration of long-term unemployment benefits (*Arbeitslosenhilfe*) and social assistance (*Sozialhilfe*) schemes strengthened workers' individual responsibility by increasing the conditionality of social assistance benefits

and introducing sanctions, framed as incentives for labour market participation in the name of an 'activation' strategy (Eichhorst et al., 2010). Social assistance (*Sozialhilfe*), which had been a central measure in the old model, was now restricted to a smaller group of people who were temporarily unable to work. The reforms can be seen as having normalised the assumption that all working-age individuals are generally employed in standard employment, potentially topping up income with marginal employment.

Post-reform unemployment insurance (*Arbeitslosengeld I*) in Germany offered benefits that were individualised, often income-related and not means tested, with the exception of basic income support (*Grundsicherung für Arbeitssuchende/Arbeitslosengeld II*). Another aspect of these reforms which pointed in a different direction was that they tied eligibility for basic income support to total household income in the so-called *Bedarfgemeinschaft* (household/community of dependence), rather than to individual income. Some critics have argued that this reinstalled institutional support for male-breadwinner arrangements because it deprived unemployed women of their individual right to benefits, increasing their dependency on a breadwinner (Betzelt, 2007). Overall, labour market policy seems to have fostered men and women's labour market participation, but also maintain a tendency to tolerate gendered income gaps.

Family policy was another domain where the German welfare state had increasingly moved away from the male-breadwinner model in the decades before the pandemic. In the 1990s, family policy in Germany was still primarily designed to compensate for the costs of children through financial transfers to families (Leitner et al., 2008). By the early 2000s, a new paradigm of 'sustainable family policy' (BMFSFJ, 2006) was introduced. Comparatively high direct transfer payments to families were maintained, but these were complemented with a reform of the parental leave policy (from 2007) and a commitment to expanding childcare provision, with a guarantee of childcare places for every child (2008 and 2013). By supporting mothers' employment, these reforms clearly weakened the idea that there was only one (male) adult earner in the household (Fleckenstein et al., 2011; Mätzke and Ostner, 2010). Providing high family transfers at the same time meant that individualisation was more 'optional' (Saraceno and Keck, 2010), maintaining some of the familialist orientation of German family policy despite the strong paradigm shift. Although the new policies were formally 'gender neutral', critics have highlighted the weak incentives to balance gendered paid and unpaid work, for example, by promoting the care involvement of fathers and shared parenthood (Auth and Martinek, 2017; Daly, 2011).

COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns in Germany in 2020

The observational window for this study is 2020, with a focal time period of spring 2020. The severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) virus reached Germany on 27 January 2020. After it had spread quickly in other European countries, the German government installed a series of containment measures similar to many countries at the time. Although extensive, containment measures in Germany were not particularly fast or far-reaching compared with other countries with previous experiences of pandemics (Capano et al., 2020). The measures

included isolation of infected individuals (February 2020), the closure of national borders and the requirement to wear face masks in shops and public transport (April 2020). From March 2020, further measures for social distancing included the closure of non-essential business; about 10 percent of employees in Germany had to stay at home with immediate effect. Decisions by federal states over which sectors to close varied. However, in every federal state, closed sectors were characterised by an overrepresentation of female employees (Gädecke et al., 2021; Zagel et al., 2021). The lockdown of these sectors had different direct implications for individuals and households depending on the occupations' teleworkability. In Germany, the share of people mainly working from home increased from about 4 per cent before the pandemic to approximately 20 per cent during the first wave of the pandemic (Kohlrausch and Zucco, (2020). Holding a teleworkable job preserved workers (and their households) from economic risks due to the lockdown (Fasang et al., 2023), but likely increased the probability of experiencing difficulties in managing care work for workers with children and dependent adults.

In May 2020, after seven weeks of lockdown, the government eased some of the measures. The first businesses to reopen were hairdressers, albeit under strict hygiene regulations; restaurants followed a week later on 11 May 2020. Similarly to most European countries, Germany adopted a 'public-health approach' in the first wave of the pandemic (Dobrotić and Blum, 2023) and implemented a nation-wide lockdown of schools and childcare centres with emergency care for essential workers in both early childhood education and care (ECEC) and lower grades of primary schools. School closures (or in some areas, limited operation of schools) were in place from 16 March to 4 May 2020 (Dobrotić and Blum, 2023; Grewenig et al., 2021). Schools opened for all students only after the summer break (August/September 2020). Travel warnings for European countries were lifted in June 2020, and leisure activities in groups were allowed again.

A summer of fewer restrictions was followed by a rise in the number of infections (the 'second wave'). The government implemented a new, less severe lockdown in November 2020, which was further tightened in December. Restaurants closed again, and the number of people allowed to gather indoors was restricted to the members of two separate households. Leisure, sport and cultural activities were again restricted. Schools and childcare centres remained open in principle, though many schools were effectively closed through much of November, and all facilities were officially closed again from 16 December 2020 to 22 February 2021 (Dobrotić and Blum, 2023; Grewenig et al., 2021). These restrictions for childcare services and schools were introduced as part of a new cycle of lockdown measures activated in December. People were asked to stay at home as much as possible, and only businesses for everyday needs operated. This lockdown lasted until March 2021, after being prolonged twice in January and February. With the start of the vaccination campaign on 27 December 2020, Germany entered a phase of new dynamics in lockdown politics.

Data

Different collections of COVID-pandemic-related policy data have become available in recent years. We began to track the evolution of these important

initiatives in September 2020 in the framework of the research project ‘Household structures and economic risks during the COVID-19 pandemic in East and West Germany: Compensation or accumulation? (KOMPAKK)’ at Humboldt University of Berlin. The Eurofound PolicyWatch (2023) represented the first systematic summary of policies in different domains (e.g., employment protection and retention, protection of workers, income protection, short-time work and measures to prevent social hardship). Among all the new measures and changes in existing policies in each domain, we selected those relevant to our three conceptual dimensions of the normative frame of the ‘standard productive household’.

These new measures and policy changes concern the following domains: short-time work (*Kurzarbeit*), social security benefits, parental leave, transfers to households with children, school services and job contract regulations. For each domain, we identified the specific measures and changes in existing policies that reflect either a confirmation of or a challenge to the standard productive household frame identified in Table 1. The detailed features of each measure are reported in Table A1 in the Appendix. For each selected measure/policy we retrieved the original official legislative document and reported it in Table A2 in the Appendix. Finally, we systematically cross-checked information collected via Eurofound (2023) by consulting all data sources included in the Oxford Supertracker – the Global Directory for COVID Policy Trackers and Surveys (Daly et al., 2020), which includes information for Germany on our domains of interest. These sources are included in Table A3 in the Appendix. The sole reliance on data from policy documents is a limitation of our study; this could be addressed in future research by complementing the analysis with expert interviews on policy decisions.

Analysis

In this section, we systematically compare crisis response policies to pre-pandemic assumptions towards the ‘standard productive household’ along the three dimensions presented above. A summary of these results can be found in Table S1.

Labour market participation

In March–December 2020, several COVID-19-related policies challenged the pre-pandemic normative frame of the standard productive household, which assumed that workers have to be permanently employed. First, in the crisis, the types of workers recognised as deserving support went well beyond dependent employees. The target population for short-time work was extended to temporary and agency workers, and eligibility to the key social security benefits was extended to the self-employed and freelancers (basic income support *Arbeitslosengeld II*, SGB II; unemployment benefit *Arbeitslosengeld I*, SGB III; and paid sick leave). Second, the assumption that workers are employed in companies that are able to distribute the economic risk irrespective of the state’s support was relaxed in the crisis by easing companies’ access to short-time work (10 per cent of a company’s workforce affected instead of 30 per cent). Third, the assumption of unemployment as a short period characterised by active job search (*Arbeitslosengeld II*, SGB II) was also relaxed, though rather tentatively; the obligation to actively search for employment

was lifted, but the expectation that people were seeking re-employment was kept, and the assumption that workers return to employment within 12 months was prolonged to 15 months. An alternative approach to social security measures would have kept the focus on dependent employees and employed a more restrictive definition of short-time work eligibility, thereby keeping the dualised recognition of need. An alternative approach to job-seeking requirements breaking more with dual labour market segmentation would have been to entirely drop requirements and allow more generous time periods.

COVID-response policies can be considered ‘gendering’ (Bacchi, 2017) in that they convey the idea of women as a secondary earner at most, primarily mitigating men’s labour market risks. This is reflected in the exclusion of mini-jobs (a sector in which women are overrepresented) from the social protection measures (Pfahl et al., 2023a). Marginal employment is concentrated in sectors that were shut-down in the pandemic, with no option to access unemployment benefits (Zagel et al., 2021). The more generous provision for the solo self-employed also primarily benefited men, since women are underrepresented in this type of work (Pfahl et al., 2023b). An alternative response would have been to include mini-jobs in social protection or even to provide a tailored scheme to shield already vulnerable mini-job workers from economic losses.

Ability to cope with household’s economic needs

On this dimension, we find the most detailed assumptions about the ‘standard productive household’ in policies. Crucially, the principle of activation, which was central to the pre-crisis normative frame, was aimed at the economic independence of households from welfare provisions.

In the event of temporary income loss pre-crisis, workers were assumed to be able to maintain their household on 60 per cent of their previous income (short-time work policy). In the crisis, the policy assumed that workers would be unable to maintain their household on 60 per cent of their income for longer than four months, increasing the generosity of the benefit after the fourth month and then again after the seventh month (see Table S1 in the Supplementary materials). Crisis policy also allowed additional earnings along with short-time work, implying that workers might need and be able to attain additional income in longer periods of short-time work. An alternative response would have provided a level of compensation that would have made the need for additional earnings unnecessary, especially for low-income households.

The pre-pandemic normative frame also assumed households would cope with sudden temporary income loss according to the means test regime of the basic income support scheme. Several crisis regulations nuanced this assumption. Access to basic income support (*Arbeitslosengeld II*, SGB II) was relieved of an immediate means test and wealth assessment. The assumption was that even households with wealth assets would be unable to cope with the economic conditions of the crisis. The same exceptions with regards to wealth assessment and means test were introduced for accessing social assistance benefits (*Sozialhilfe*, SGB XII). This measure was also extended to solo self-employed for six months, under the assumption that they should not be forced to mobilise their assets for subsistence

during the crisis. Furthermore, in the crisis frame, both the social assistance benefits and basic income support were balanced with respect to actual expenditures for shelter and heating.

Compared with the pre-crisis frame, the crisis frame implied that households would be unable to cover expenditure for basic needs on their own. One measure covering for income loss during the pandemic directed at parents was the continuation of wage payments for parents who had to take unpaid parental leave due to school closures (*Lohnfortzahlung für Eltern*). This policy reflected the assumption that households with children would be unable to cover for childcare-related sudden income loss in the crisis while also assuming care was being done by families. Alternative approaches more in line with the adult-worker model would not have provided this compensation, instead putting more focus on infrastructural support and care services.

Crisis response policies included other types of transfers to families, but they reflect different assumptions of the 'standard productive household' with respect to its ability to cover economic needs. Before the crisis, children were already considered a cost factor in the productive household for which the state partially compensates. As the cost of children on households weighs heavier during a crisis, response policy remitted a child bonus (*Kinderbonus*) of 300 Euros per child to families with no means test. The pre-crisis assumption that households with children on low incomes in the past six months would find it difficult to maintain their standard of living was expanded in the crisis with a broader definition of low-income household; the opportunity to access the emergency child supplement (*Notfall Kinderzuschlag*) was granted to households that had been on low income in the past month.

The pre-pandemic normative frame assumed that taking parental leave was generally linked with stable employment and income (the basic amount paid to parents without previous income was only 300 Euros per month). Crisis response policies lifted this assumption in that parents were expected to experience employment interruptions or income loss due to the crisis; the generosity of parental leave allowance (*Elterngeld*) was modified so that it would not be affected by other COVID-related income compensations. Alternative response policies to this and the measures discussed in the previous paragraph – which would have diverted more from the adult-worker frame – would have included more generous regular (e.g. monthly) flat-rate cash transfers to families.

Finally, assumptions about productive households in two work-contract regulations regarding marginal workers in mini-jobs and pensioners were affected in the crisis responses. By definition, mini-jobs were insufficient as the only source of income in the pre-crisis scenario, as their maximum length is limited to three months per year. This reflects the assumption that marginal employment will be used to top up households' low incomes. In the crisis response, the maximum length was extended by two months, recognising the possibility that marginal employment may be the only income source for some in the crisis. For pensioners, the pre-crisis frame assumed they were generally able to make ends meet with the pension income, allowing to top it up by a maximum of 6,300 Euros per year. In the crisis response, the allowance was increased sevenfold, implying that pensioners would be unlikely to be able to maintain their households only with their pension income in

the crisis. Alternative responses would have provided cash transfers so that people working in mini-jobs and pensioners would not have to work multiple jobs.

With respect to how crisis response policies were ‘gendering’ on the income dimension, the considerations concerning the overrepresentation of women in marginal employment apply as well. The assumption was that women’s share of income was secondary, primarily protecting the household’s main (‘male’) income. Policies that secured transfers to families conveyed two main assumptions: that households with children carry additional costs in the crisis, and that parents experience income losses due to school closures. Since job loss and income loss were not expected to be uneven for men and women, these policies were not particularly gendering.

Ability to fulfil care responsibilities

This dimension mainly concerns changes to paid parental leave policies in the pandemic. Pre-crisis paid parental leave (*Elterngeld*) conveyed the assumption that, within ‘standard productive households’, working parents will usually leave their dependent permanent employment for no more than twelve months to care for young children (fourteen for two parents and single parents), and they will be able to cover their income loss for any additional leave (*Elternzeit*). In the crisis, regulations allowed for the postponement of paid parental leave without losses, reflecting the assumption that working parents may not be able to take their leave as planned. The partnership bonus, which incentivises parents’ part-time employment during pre-crisis parental leave periods (*ElterngeldPlus*), was also defined as not affected by any changes in work hours (effectively more or less than planned) due to the pandemic. Again, the assumption was that parental leave arrangements were less projectable in the crisis. Alternative responses more attuned to the pre-crisis adult-worker reform trajectory would have granted paid leave targeted at mothers and fathers, respectively, rather than providing blanket measures.

Another pre-crisis policy regarding the ability to fulfil care responsibilities stipulated that working parents be away from their permanent job to care for their sick children only for a limited number of days per year (one child: 30 days, or 60 days for single parents; more than one child in the household: not more than 65 days per parent, or 130 for single parents; *Kinderkrankengeld*). During the pandemic, child sick leave was extended with respect to the number of paid days covered (forty days per year, or eighty days for single parents). The assumption was that the crisis would increase the need for parents to be with their children, partly due to quarantine regulations. Since sick leave days were tied to parents and not to children, the incentive was for parents to share the care leave rather than one parent (mothers) to cover it all.

Finally, school regulations reflected changed assumptions about the ‘standard productive household’ with children. Pre-crisis, school-aged children of working parents were supervised during school hours, and parents were expected to be able to supervise their children in the afternoons. During the confinement phase, only children of parents working in essential occupations could access schools in school hours. All other working parents with school-aged children were expected to be able

to supervise their children throughout the day. Alternative responses more in line with the adult-worker frame would have left schools and childcare facilities open (for all working parents).

Conclusions

Welfare state responses to the COVID-19 pandemic were strong across Europe, with the aim of mitigating negative economic consequences for businesses and households. The types of response policies varied. Although a majority focused on protecting employment and cushioning the loss of income, countries differed in emphasising particular policies. Previous studies have shown that social policy responses to the pandemic were mostly in line with countries' respective welfare state models (Béland et al., 2023). However, two factors have been considered in less depth. First, by focusing on single fields of social policy, comparative studies have provided limited insights into the range of instruments that jointly addressed households in the pandemic. Second, countries' progression of pre-pandemic reform trajectories for policy responses to the crisis have been primarily considered in relation to labour market dualism, while the strong institutional changes to the support of a gendered division of household labour have been largely omitted. In this paper, we addressed both issues by employing a within-case analysis of the normative frame underpinning social policy responses to the pandemic in Germany.

We contribute to the literature on normative assumptions conveyed by social policies about how households should make ends meet and organise care (what we defined as the 'standard productive household') and analyse the normative frame underpinning crisis policies in relation to pre-crisis institutional reform trajectories. Our study builds on earlier work showing that welfare state support of the 'male-breadwinner model' has declined, as well as on recent theorising of policies as 'gendering practices' (Bacchi, 2017). We look at Germany as a case where the pre-crisis welfare state reform trajectory departed from upholding a strongly gendered model of work and care, though crisis responses were publicly criticised for failing to prevent re-traditionalisation (endnote i). In contrast to previous research that compared countries in single policy fields, our case-study approach allows for a more in-depth consideration of policy packages and how they jointly shaped assumptions of productive households.

To analyse the normative frame of crisis policies, we compared crisis responses to pre-crisis social policy in Germany focusing on three dimensions: labour market participation, income maintenance and care. Our focus was on normative frames of initial crisis responses, so our data covered the early phase of the pandemic, March–December 2020; this means that we do not account for possible stability of the measures over time or beyond the crisis. In line with previous literature, we show how the overwhelmingly temporary measures were attuned to the severe crisis, but kept with many of the previously held social protection logics (Béland et al., 2023). Intuitively, assumptions about active labour market participation were consistently relaxed, and access to state contributions to household incomes was extended. Social policies reflected a recognition that the crisis substantively altered the conditions for stable employment and for workers to maintain their income levels. The increased

generosity in duration and levels of benefits illustrate this point. However, especially low-income households were assumed to rely on patchwork incomes, including marginal employment. Social policies also factored in that, owing to containment measures, households were more central as the *site* of production, for example, in granting low-income households support with their actual expenses for heating and housing.

As before, assumptions about the care arrangements of ‘standard productive households’ in response policies were strongly tied to parents’ employment status – with the exception of the child bonus. The tendency was to allow some more flexibility for the length and sequencing of care interruptions (e.g., *Lohnfortzahlung, Elterngeld*), but with a clear emphasis on care being done at home. Care-related policies seemed oriented towards reducing the potential negative future effects of more discontinuous employment careers, rather than towards immediate relief in a situation where parents and children were tied to the household. School closures, which went beyond social policy responses, strongly conditioned the (im)possibilities for parents of prioritising employment and market income, leading to a compressed arrangement of paid and unpaid work in these households. Looking across the three dimensions, gendering was particularly noticeable where categories of workers and parents were defined.

Our findings can inform thinking about the role of crisis in welfare state reform trajectories. The analysis of the German case supports the hypothesis that welfare states do not use crises to push forward on pre-crisis reform trajectories. Rather, we found indications for crisis responses to support a model that was believed to belong to the past. Policymakers in Germany missed the opportunity to use the crisis to implement the normative frame of the adult-worker model that they had been pursuing in several reforms throughout the 2000s–2010s. Despite the rare occasion created by the lockdown measures of harmonising many of the conditions under which men and women work in segmented labour markets (by tying them to the home), policymakers introduced blanket measures of parental leave and transfers to families rather than addressing gendered care practices. These care-related measures were flanked by social security policies that constituted women as secondary earners. Adding to evidence showing that crises rarely unleash a potential for institutional change, we suggest that crises may instead contribute to slowing down reform processes already under way.

Supplementary material. To view supplementary material for this article, please visit <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047279424000278>.

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Competing interests. The authors declare none.

Note

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Appendix

Table A1: Detailed policy measures implemented in response to the Covid-19 Pandemic

Policy	Change under Covid-19	Source
Short-time work		
Target population (workers)	Extended to temporary and agency workers included	A/B
Target population (companies)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * 10% of company's workforce negatively affected by economic shock * all remaining hours on workers' working-time accounts have to be depleted 	A/B
Duration of the allowance	The maximum duration of the allowance extended from 12 to 24 months for businesses that applied for it prior to 31 December 2020.	C
Generosity of the allowance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Until 4 months of short-time work <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (o) 60% of net income for all hours not worked (o) 67% of net income for all hours not worked if having children * After 4 months of short-time work <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (o) 70% of net income for all hours not worked (o) 77% of net income for all hours not worked if having children * After 7 months of short-time work <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (o) 80% of net income for all hours not worked (o) 87% of net income for all hours not worked if having children 	A/B/D
Possibility to accumulate additional earnings next to short-time work	Granted	A/B
Social security benefits		
Basic income support (<i>Arbeitslosengeld II-ALGII</i> , SGB II)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Inclusion of solo self-employed workers * Temporary suspension of wealth consideration * Temporary recognition of actual expenditures for shelter and heating * Provisional approval and later means-testing of basic income support application 	A/B

(Continued)

Table A1: (Continued)

Policy	Change under Covid-19	Source
Social assistance benefit (<i>Sozialhilfe</i> , SGB XII)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Inclusion of solo self-employed workers * Temporary suspension of wealth consideration * Temporary recognition of actual expenditures for shelter and heating * Provisional approval and later means-testing of basic income support application 	A/B
Duration of unemployment benefit (<i>Arbeitslosengeld I</i> -ALGI, SGB III)	Extension of 3 months for unemployed individuals whose claim to ALG I expires between 01.05 - 31.12 of the standard 12 months	A
Target population for unemployment benefit (<i>Arbeitslosengeld I</i> -ALGI, SGB III)	Self-employed persons and freelancers: compensation for loss of earnings based on profits established in the tax declaration of the previous calendar year	A
Obligation to job search/activation principles	Eased for contribution-based unemployment insurance benefits and the tax-based basic income support	A
Target population for paid sick leave	Extended to self-employed in quarantine and employees who are infected and in isolation or caring for a sick family member	A/B
Parental leave		
Access to paid parental leave (<i>Elterngeld</i>)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Number of hours worked is irrelevant * COVID-related income compensations do not affect amount of parental allowances * Parents who cannot stay at home during COVID can postpone their parental allowance months until the child's 14th month 	E
Access to extra months of paid parental leave (<i>ElterngeldPlus</i>)	Working parents are entitled to extra months of paid parental leave even if the agreed parallel part-time (max. 32 hours/week) arrangement is altered	E
Paid family leave (<i>Kinderkrankengeld</i>)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * The regular entitlement to child sickness benefit increases from 10 to 15 working days per child (from 20 to 30 for single parents) for parents with children at home due to school or childcare closures * For more than 1 child under the age of twelve, the total entitlement increases from 25 to 35 working days in 2020, and for single-parent from 50 to 70 working days 	F
Transfers to families		
Compensation of income losses (<i>Lohnfortzahlung für Eltern</i>) for parents affected by lockdown of schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * 67% of net income up to max. 2,016 Euros for all hours doing childcare for 10 weeks per parent * 67% of net income for all hours doing childcare for 20 weeks for single parent 	A/B

(Continued)

Table A1: (Continued)

Policy	Change under Covid-19	Source
Access to emergency child supplement (<i>Notfal Kinderzuschlag</i>)	Eases: assessment on the basis of parental income over the last 1 month (instead of 6), 300 Euros per child (600 for single parents)	A/B
Child bonus (<i>Kinderbonus</i>)	300 Euros	G
School services		
Access to schools and childcare services	During lockdowns, (some) schools and childcare facilities remained open for children of parents working in essential occupations	H
Job contract regulations		
Duration of contract for marginally employed workers (mini-jobs)	Extended to 5 months/115 work days of marginal employment (instead of 3 months/70 days of contract for mini-jobs)	A
Allowed wages from employment for pensioners	Additional earning of 44,590 Euros allowed (instead of 6,300 Euros)	A

Notes: full references of the original policy documents – the sources (last column) – are reported in Table A2

Table A2: Original policy documents

ID source	Reference
A	Gesetz für den erleichterten Zugang zu sozialer Sicherung und zum Einsatz und zur Absicherung sozialer Dienstleister aufgrund des Coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 (Sozialschutz-Paket). Bundesgesetzblatt Jahrgang 2020 Teil I Nr. 14
B	Gesetz zu sozialen Maßnahmen zur Bekämpfung der Corona-Pandemie (Sozialschutz-Paket II) G. v. 20.05.2020 BGBl. I S. 1055 (Nr. 24)
C	Entwurf eines Gesetzes zur Beschäftigungssicherung infolge der COVID-19-Pandemie (Beschäftigungssicherungsgesetz – BeschSiG), Drucksache 19/23480
D	Bundesgesetzblatt Jahrgang Teil I 2020 Ausgegeben zu Bonn am 14. März 2020 Nr. 12, Gesetz zur befristeten krisenbedingten Verbesserung der Regelungen für das Kurzarbeitergeld
E	Bundesgesetzblatt Jahrgang 2020 Teil I Nr. 24, ausgegeben zu Bonn am 28. Mai 2020, Gesetz für Maßnahme im Elterngeld aus Anlass der Covid-19-Pandemie
F	Absatz 2a in den Paragraphen 45 des SGB V “§ 45 Krankengeld bei Erkrankung des Kindes”
G	Bundesgesetzblatt Jahrgang 2020 Teil I Nr. 31, ausgegeben zu Bonn am 30. Juni 2020, Zweites Gesetz zur Umsetzung steuerlicher Hilfsmaßnahmen zur Bewältigung der Corona-Krise (Zweites Corona-Steuerhilfegesetz
H	Each federal state in Germany promulgated a separate law indicating different timing and length of school closures (because education is a federal matter), and a state-specific list of essential occupations. For the few differences in the definition of essential occupations across federal states, see: Gädecke M., Struffolino E., Zagel H., Fasang A.F. (2021), KOMPAKK - Essential occupations in Germany during the COVID-19 pandemic. Version 1.0.0. SowiDataNet datorium. Dataset - https://doi.org/10.7802/2283 . For the timing and the duration of school closure across federal states see https://en.unesco.org/file/unesco-data-school-closures-february-2020-june-2022csv-zip

Table A3: Material for cross-checking policy documents

Data Source	Reference
COVID Analysis and Mapping of Policies (AMP) - Enabling and Relief Measures	AMP. 2022a. "COVID Analysis and Mapping of Policies (AMP) - Enabling and Relief Measures."
COVID Analysis and Mapping of Policies (AMP) - Social Distancing	2022b. "COVID Analysis and Mapping of Policies (AMP) - Social Distancing."
Oxford Supertracker - The Global Directory for COVID Policy Trackers and Surveys	Daly, Mary, B. Ebbinghaus, L. Lehner, M. Naczyk, and T. Vlandas. 2020. "Oxford Supertracker: The Global Directory for COVID Policy Trackers and Surveys." Department of Social Policy and Intervention. https://supertracker.spi.ox.ac.uk/ .
IZA COVID-19 Crisis Response Monitoring – Germany	Eichhorst, Werner, and Ulf Rinne. 2020. "IZA COVID-19 Crisis Response Monitoring - Germany."
Job Retention Schemes during the COVID-19 Lockdown and Beyond	OECD. 2020a. "Job Retention Schemes during the COVID-19 Lockdown and Beyond."
Paid Sick Leave to Protect Income, Health and Jobs through the COVID-19 Crisis	2020b. "Paid Sick Leave to Protect Income, Health and Jobs through the COVID-19 Crisis."
Green Recovery Database	2022. "Green Recovery Database." OECD. https://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/en/themes/green-recovery#Green-recovery-database%20database .

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