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Mäntyneva, Päivi

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# Initial social-policy responses to the COVID-19 pandemic in the Global North – A scoping review

COVID-19 and  
social-policy  
responses

Päivi Mäntyneva and Eeva-Leena Ketonen

*University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland, and*

Heikki Hiilamo

*University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland and*

*Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare, Helsinki, Finland*

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this scoping review is to analyse comparative studies on social-policy measures implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic in Global North welfare states. The authors also consider the potential influence of the regimes on the responses.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The authors conducted a scoping review of six databases including peer-reviewed comparative studies. In an iterative process with exact inclusion criteria, the authors screened 699 titles/abstracts/articles and found 16 comparative research articles to be included in the review and analysis. The review summarises the main themes of the comparative articles and the articles' typical features.

**Findings** – The results show that social-policy measures were directed specifically at working-age people to minimise income loss and to save jobs. The pandemic also increased care-related responsibilities, necessitating the expansion of current policies and the implementation of new instruments. Despite the differences in responses between universalistic and residual welfare states, the influence of welfare regimes on COVID-19 social-policy measures remains unclear. The emergency responses in the different regimes varied widely in terms of coverage.

**Research limitations/implications** – The results of this review provide a basis on which to conduct future studies, identify new research topics and knowledge gaps and inspire new research questions and hypotheses. Given the accumulation of scientific knowledge in the area of social-policy measures, the need for systematic reviews will grow in the future.

**Originality/value** – The authors identified three main themes: changes in employment protection, changes in care-related income protection and the potential influence of welfare-state regimes on COVID-19-related measures.

**Keywords** Scoping review, Welfare states, Social policy, COVID-19, Comparative studies

**Paper type** Literature review

## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has been disrupting many aspects of life since the beginning of 2020. Social protection is no exception and has required the adaptation of rapid response throughout the world. The body of COVID-19-based comparative research is still in its infancy whilst the pandemic persists. Comparative welfare-state-related studies facilitate the enhancement of scientific understanding, given the inter-connectedness in this globalised world. The pandemic presents a triple challenge globally, with its effects on health, economies

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and social policy. The aim of this scoping review is to identify the nature of social-policy measures and to map current research evidence on how they responded during the early stages of the pandemic in Global North welfare states (e.g. [Munn \*et al.\*, 2018](#); [Petticrew and Rogers, 2006, p. 35](#)). Comparative studies on policy change and reforms have been examining the role of welfare-state regimes for many decades (e.g. [Esping-Andersen, 1990](#); [Hall, 1993](#); [Streeck and Thelen, 2005](#); [Korpi and Palme, 1998](#); [Sainsbury, 1999](#); [Ferrera, 2005](#); [Pierson, 2001](#); [Hemerijck, 2020](#)).

[Singh and Verma \(2022\)](#) recently conducted a systematic review within the social-science field, including an in-depth analysis aimed at enhancing understanding of the dominant themes within COVID-19 research in the early phase of the pandemic. Their study focused on five themes: the widespread impact of COVID-19 on public health, its influence on workplace functioning, global governance, research ethics and demography.

Our aim is to fulfil the need for comparative social-political reviews focussing on COVID-19-related social-policy measures. The comparative approach entails the covering of the same phenomena across at least two countries ([Wilensky, 1975](#)). We also considered the potential influence of welfare-state regimes on the various responses. These regimes have traditionally had strong explanatory power with regard to commonalities in policies, and this persists in present-day welfare states. There are already research articles covering social-policy measures from a broad, world-wide perspective (see [Cook and Ulriksen, 2021](#)), including the Global South (e.g. [Leisering, 2021](#); [Dorlach, 2022](#)). Thus, in our scoping review we intend to narrow the gap by focussing on measures in welfare states in the Global North.

Social-policy measures here refer to the steps taken in welfare states to mitigate and minimise social risks and socio-economic consequences related to COVID-19.

We describe the methodology of the review and the research process in the next section. After that we summarise the current state of comparative studies, then we map the evidence from comparative welfare-state studies thematically. The article ends with a discussion of the findings.

### **The methodological approach and the inclusion criteria**

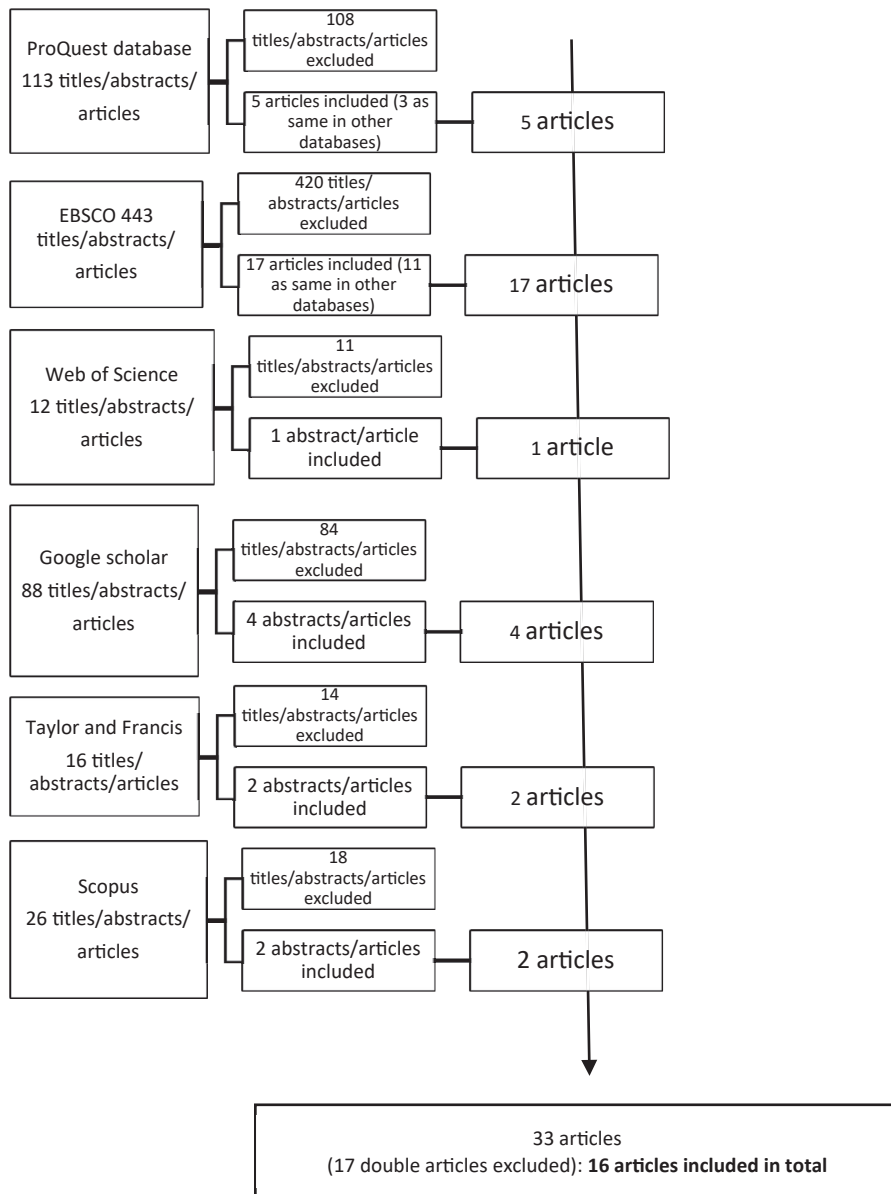
Many welfare states have planned and already implemented recovery measures, but given that the COVID-19 crisis has not disappeared, some still have social-policy measures in place and have even introduced new ones. Thus, the scoping review is appropriate as a methodological approach when the research topic is still relatively new, or the study context is changing as during the COVID-19 pandemic (see [Munn \*et al.\*, 2018](#); [Petticrew and Rogers, 2006, p. 35](#); [Hiilamo, 2021](#)). It is also appropriate for exploring new themes. Naturally, comparative and comprehensive systematic reviews are still rare in the COVID-19 context in the social sciences (e.g. [Singh and Verma, 2022](#)).

The methodological approach comprised the following iterative steps: first, identifying the purpose of the study; second, tentatively defining the types of publication to be included and third, conducting a comprehensive search of the research literature in social-science databases using selected keywords. We repeated this phase to ensure the selection of comparative welfare-state-related studies.

[Figure 1](#) illustrates the selection process. The search covered various core databases. The primary data sources for articles included ProQuest, Web of Science, Academic Search Complete EBSCO Databases and Google Scholar. In addition, we used Taylor & Francis Online for accessing articles as well as the Joanna Briggs Institute's and Cochrane databases to check the availability of systematic reviews.

At the outset, we used a variety of keywords to find relevant articles. The most frequently occurring subjects and search terms, including grammatical and morphological variants and combinations, were social policy\*, measures\*, responses\*, social security\*, social protection\*,

# COVID-19 and social-policy responses



**Figure 1.** Database article-search process

change\*, transformation\*, COVID-19, pandemic\*, crisis\*, comparative\* (study), welfare states\* and country\*. The most productive combination was social policy, COVID-19 and welfare states.

The focus of the search was broad initially, resulting in an enormous amount of material, but it narrowed after several retrievals when the eligibility criteria were implemented.

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The selection of the articles followed an exploratory but logical process comprising the following inclusion criteria:

- (1) The article was published between 1 January 2020 and 28 February 2022;
- (2) It represented the social-science field (databases);
- (3) It covered at least two welfare states in the Global North;
- (4) It covered governmental, macro-level studies, focussing on social-policy measures (social security, social assistance, social insurance and social protection, excluding services) related to the pandemic;
- (5) It was based on qualitative, mixed and quantitative methods;
- (6) It was published in English;
- (7) It was contextualised during the COVID-19 pandemic and
- (8) It was peer-reviewed.

Overall, we screened 698 titles/abstracts/articles, to which we added one cross-country comparative study on responses to COVID-19 (Casquilho-Martins and Belchior-Rocha, 2022). We excluded most of the articles because the focus was either on health policies and medication or on overall governmental responses such as imposing stringency measures or closure policies. We also excluded studies that emphasised policy style, leadership, governance capacity, impact and practices and that covered social services or public policy in general. Furthermore, we decided that comparative studies focused on preferences, perceptions, satisfaction, public opinion, trust in government and spending fell beyond the scope of study. The emphasis in this scoping review was not on the impacts or influence of different policy fields or on the well-being and vulnerabilities of certain groups during the pandemic.

Finally, we selected 16 research articles based on the criteria listed above. We used the scoping review as a descriptive method to synthesise the results from comparative studies on social-policy measures. First, we read all the articles. Second, we conducted pre-planned general appraisals and summarised the key aspects of the various research articles (see the following section). Having thus synthesised the research evidence, we categorised the preliminary findings into major themes of social-policy measures and examined the potential influence of welfare-state regimes in explaining the variety of measures and their coherence.

### **A general appraisal of the studies**

Table 1 presents the key characteristics of the selected comparative studies covering the Global North: the author(s), the publishing journal, keywords, the purpose and/or research questions and the major findings. We also included information on the countries on which the articles focussed, as well as on the methods and data.

Overall, the countries specifically represented in the studies were Germany (6 articles), Italy (5), the UK (4), the USA (3), Denmark (3), Sweden (2), Norway (2), the Netherlands (2), Spain (3), Portugal (3), France (2), Greece (2), Finland, Hungary, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, Canada and Belgium. In addition, Kempf and Dutta's (2021) world-wide review included some examples from high-income countries in Europe. Moreira and Hick (2021) surveyed social-policy responses in a sample of Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries. The research scope in Daly's (2022) study extends to 23 European countries. Only one of comparative studies focussed on Asian countries, namely Japan, Taiwan, South Korea and China (Soon *et al.*, 2021), the emphasis in most of them being on

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| Author, year, journal and keywords   | Study purposes/<br>research questions  | States in<br>comparison                           | Comparative method<br>and data/research<br>material   | Major findings  |
|--|--|---|---|---|
| 1. <a href="#">Aidukaite et al. (2021)</a><br>Social Policy and Administration<br><i>COVID-19, Hungary, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, crisis, social policy</i>                       | Documents and compares the social policies and utilises the path-dependency thesis to explain the policy responses   | Hungary, Lithuania, Poland and Slovakia           | Descriptive research. Analyses of Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) data, national statistical data sources, newspaper articles and national policy documents | Findings gave evidence of extensive protection for jobs and enterprises and great variation in solidarity policy responses to care for the most vulnerable. In addition, social policy responses depended on previous policy trajectories and the political situation in the countries.<br><a href="https://doi.org/10.1111/spol.12704">https://doi.org/10.1111/spol.12704</a>  |
| 2. <a href="#">Bariola and Collins (2021)</a><br>American Behavioural Scientist<br><i>work-family policy, pandemic relief, COVID-19, gender inequality, welfare states</i>           | Comparative examination to link the causes and consequences of gender and labour inequalities to various models of welfare state provisioning  | Denmark, Germany and the United States of America | Applies the conceptual framework of feminist welfare state theory and emphasises cultural infrastructures<br>Previous studies, statistics and OECD databases                              | Denmark acknowledged that parents' employment depends on childcare provisioning and acted accordingly. Germany's cultural legacy led to responses that strengthened the man breadwinner/woman caregiver family model. Responses in the U.S. caused negative consequences, especially women in the most vulnerable situations.<br><a href="https://doi.org/10.1177/00027642211003140">https://doi.org/10.1177/00027642211003140</a>                                    |
| 3. <a href="#">Béland et al. (2021a)</a><br>Social Policy and Administration<br><i>Canada, COVID-19, social policy, unemployment, United States, welfare state</i>                   | This comparative study investigates social policy responses to COVID-19 during the first five months   | Canada and the United States of America           | Compares the scale and speed of social policy responses from March to June 2020<br>Public and media documents as data sources   | Differences in the policy and institutional architectures of the US and Canada (both representing a liberal regime) was reflected in their social policy responses to the COVID-19 pandemic and led to a divergence between their responses. Canadian responses were more rapid and comprehensive than those in the US. There were some similarities in the responses as well.<br><a href="https://doi.org/10.1111/spol.12656">https://doi.org/10.1111/spol.12656</a> |
| 4. <a href="#">Cantillon et al. (2021)</a><br>Social Policy and Administration<br><i>Belgium, coronavirus, European Union, Germany, income transfers, Netherlands, public policy</i> | To explore social policy responses in relation to the pandemic, focussing on social security for employees and the self-employed. Discusses similarities and differences in the policy responses | Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands              | OECD Social Expenditure database, Eurostat and national labour force surveys  | Countries have focused on a variety of social security responses to the active age population<br>The extent to which countries used pre-existing schemes is related to the extent to which they have moved in the Anglo-Saxon direction. <a href="https://doi.org/10.1111/spol.12715">https://doi.org/10.1111/spol.12715</a>  |

(continued)

**Table 1.**  
Research articles  
and their main  
content ( $N = 16$ )

| Author, year, journal and keywords  | Study purposes/<br>research questions  | States in<br>comparison                                 | Comparative method<br>and data/research<br>material  | Major findings   |
|---|--|---|--|--|
| 5. Casquilho-Martins and Belchior-Rocha (2022)<br>Social and Economic Impacts COVID-19, crisis, European Union, Next Generation EU, pandemic social and economic impacts, Southern Europe | Analyses the impacts of the financial crises (incl. COVID-19) against objectives of the Europe 2020 Strategy in Southern Europe. Furthermore, study analyses COVID-19 responses through the Next Generation EU-program | Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain                       | Systematic analyses of measures and European recovery plans<br>Mixed methods with statistical data (e.g. Eurostat, International Labour Organisation) and documents analysis (European Commission, European Union)                                   | Southern European countries emphasised employment promotion and unemployment protection measures. Countries also prioritised the protection of the vulnerable and disadvantage groups. <a href="https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci11020036">https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci11020036</a>                               |
| 6. Cook and Grimshaw (2021)<br>European Societies COVID-19, social policy, employment, gender   | Comparative analysis of the gendered design, access, and impacts of COVID-19 employment and social and longer-term policies  | UK, Germany, Norway and Italy                           | A comparative analysis with gendered design<br>Previous research, statistics, surveys (Eurofound, European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC)<br>International Monetary Fund (IMF), International Labour Organization (ILO), and authors' formulations | Preliminary findings concerning the short-time work (STW) schemes exposed the gender-sensitive vulnerabilities to economic risks. <a href="https://doi.org/10.1080/14616696.2020.1822538">https://doi.org/10.1080/14616696.2020.1822538</a>  |
| 7. Daly (2022)<br>Frontiers of Sociology care, social policy, childcare, long-term care, European welfare states, European care systems   | The aim is to analyse priorities, relationships, and how countries in Europe responded to the care policies and assess whether there has been a change in approach   | 23 European countries                                   | The theoretical framework was further developed and discussed with empirical data (both developed in the authors' earlier studies)<br>World Bank COVID-data  | Responses varied both within and between countries. Dualisation of care for children and adults needs an integrative approach and systems. The idea of Universal Basic Services is one of the connected visions. <a href="https://doi.org/10.3389/fsoc.2021.808239">https://doi.org/10.3389/fsoc.2021.808239</a> |
| 8. Greer et al. (2021)<br>Global Public Health COVID-19, social policy, pandemic response, non-pharmaceutical interventions   | The study focuses on case studies and social policy responses  | Brazil, India, Germany and the United States of America | Comparison with conceptual framework. Focus on strengths and weaknesses of policies with qualitative case-studies<br>Previous studies, e.g. OECD Social Expenditure database (SOCX) 2020   | The study argues that social and public health policy are crucial to each other, and the success and failure of public health emergency response depend on its alignment with social policy. <a href="https://doi.org/10.1080/17441692.2021.1916831">https://doi.org/10.1080/17441692.2021.1916831</a>           |

Table 1.

(continued)

| Author, year, journal and keywords  | Study purposes/<br>research questions  | States in<br>comparison                      | Comparative method<br>and data/research<br>material   | Major findings   |
|---|--|--|---|--|
| 9. <a href="#">Greve et al. (2021)</a><br>Social Policy and Administration<br><i>equality, Keynesian demand<br/>management, Nordic welfare states,<br/>social and labour market policy,<br/>universality</i>                            | The aim is to study,<br>has the COVID-19<br>epidemic changed the<br>Nordic welfare states?<br>What instruments<br>have the Nordic<br>countries used or are<br>expected to use?                       | Finland,<br>Denmark,<br>Norway and<br>Sweden | Descriptive analysis<br>Official documents as<br>national sources<br>(primary data) and<br>comparative<br>quantitative<br>indicators (secondary<br>data)<br>Focus on early 2020<br>to October 2020  | Tentative conclusions<br>suggest that the focus of<br>the measures has been<br>more demand-side than<br>supply-side. Focus on<br>state intervention in<br>economies to ensure jobs<br>and a suitable living<br>standard for all citizens.<br>Welfare states have<br>increased social protection<br>coverage to include the<br>self-employed and small-<br>shop owners and<br>freelancers, influencing<br>better coverage in<br>forthcoming years.<br><a href="https://doi.org/10.1111/spol.12675">https://doi.org/10.1111/<br/>spol.12675</a>  |
| 10. <a href="#">Hick and Murphy (2021)</a><br>Social Policy and Administration<br><i>coronavirus, job retention, social<br/>protection and security, universal<br/>credit, wage subsidy, welfare politics</i>                           | Focus on social and<br>employment policies<br>to support family<br>incomes in response to<br>the coronavirus<br>pandemic   | Ireland and UK                               | Comparative<br>examination<br>Previous studies and<br>documents from<br>domestic and<br>international sources<br>March–October 2020   | In the early phase of the<br>pandemic, countries with<br>similarities were removing<br>waiting periods for sick<br>leave, increasing benefits<br>in the case of<br>unemployment, and<br>cancelling activation<br>requirements for job<br>seekers. One difference<br>between the countries was<br>Ireland's generosity in<br>social security<br>Responses relied on the<br>Tax Credit system and<br>continued pre-pandemic<br>policies in the UK. <a href="https://doi.org/10.1111/spol.12677">https://<br/>doi.org/10.1111/spol.<br/>12677</a> |
| 11. <a href="#">Kempf and Dutta (2021)</a><br>Sustainable Development<br><i>COVID-19 crisis, eco-social contract,<br/>integrated policies, socio-economic<br/>crises, transformative social policy,<br/>universal social protection</i> | The study examines<br>the different roles of<br>transformative social<br>policies (TSPs) in the<br>response to the<br>COVID-19 crisis  | Countries and<br>continents<br>word-wide     | This reflective study<br>refers to previous<br>studies and surveys<br>The study uses<br>statistics, COVID-<br>databases (ILO),<br>concepts as<br>analytical tool<br>defined by United<br>Nations Research<br>Institute for Social<br>Development<br>(UNRISD), and recent<br>surveys and case<br>studies | Social policy actions and<br>expansions have been a<br>priority of countries to<br>respond to the crisis<br>The crisis has compelled<br>the countries to<br>strengthen their social<br>policies: in less than a<br>year, the social protection<br>responses have increased<br>from only 50% to more<br>than 90% in 2020. <a href="https://doi.org/10.1002/sd.2197">https://<br/>doi.org/10.1002/sd.2197</a>  |
| 12. <a href="#">Moreira et al. (2021)</a><br>Social Policy and Administration<br><i>COVID-19, Greece, Italy, Portugal,<br/>social policy, Southern European<br/>welfare regimes, Spain</i>  | The aim is to describe<br>and discuss the<br>significance<br>(differences and<br>commonalities) of the<br>social policy (and<br>fiscal) measures<br>implemented in<br>Southern European<br>countries | Greece, Italy,<br>Portugal and<br>Spain      | The study focuses on<br>measures and<br>descriptive case<br>studies<br>Statistics and<br>databases (Eurostat,<br>IMF, OECD)<br>1.3. – 30.6.2020   | The economic impact of<br>the health crisis partly<br>reflects divergence<br>amongst the countries<br>studied, with Spain<br>experiencing the most<br>significant fall in both<br>GDP and employment<br>levels.<br><a href="https://doi.org/10.1111/spol.12681">https://doi.org/10.1111/<br/>spol.12681</a>  |

(continued)

Table 1.



| Author, year, journal and keywords   | Study purposes/<br>research questions  | States in<br>comparison   | Comparative method<br>and data/research<br>material  | Major findings  |
|--|--|---|--|---|
| 13. <a href="#">Moreira and Hick (2021)</a><br>Social Policy and Administration<br><i>COVID-19, financial crisis, Great<br/>Recession, health, housing, labour<br/>market, social policy, taxation</i> | Provides an overview<br>of the initial crisis<br>responses to the<br>coronavirus pandemic<br>and makes<br>comparisons to the<br>Great Recession  | Sample of<br>OECD countries   | Exploratory analysis<br>Based on earlier<br>studies and statistical<br>data (e.g. OECD,<br>IMF). The focus is on<br>the initial responses<br>to the crises between<br>March and June 2020  | Emphasis was more on<br>housing and deferrals<br>than tax relief compared<br>to the Great Recession.<br>The research also<br>identifies innovative and<br>incremental features in<br>social policies.<br><a href="https://doi.org/10.1111/spol.12679">https://doi.org/10.1111/<br/>spol.12679</a>   |
| 14. <a href="#">Pereirinha and<br/>Pereira (2021)</a><br>European Societies<br><i>COVID-19, insecurity, social<br/>protection, social resilience, welfare<br/>systems</i>                              | The study analyses<br>social resilience in the<br>selected EU countries<br>with different welfare<br>systems. It also<br>develops a theoretical<br>framework and an<br>index of social<br>resilience   | France,<br>Germany, Italy,<br>the Netherlands,<br>Portugal, Spain<br>and Sweden | Comparative desk-<br>study<br>Comparative<br>statistics and<br>databases<br>(Eurofound;<br>OxCGRT tracks,<br>COVID-19 data from<br>the European Centre<br>for Disease<br>Prevention and<br>Control, ECDC)<br>1.3.2020–10.10.2020 | Developed synthetic index<br>of resilience. Coping and<br>adapting in studied<br>welfare states resonates<br>with the different welfare<br>systems and preparation.<br><a href="https://doi.org/10.1177/14680181211012946">https://doi.org/10.1177/<br/>14680181211012946</a>   |
| 15. <a href="#">Seeman et al. (2021)</a><br>Global Social Policy <i>compensation,<br/>non-standard work, self-<br/>employment, social policy, solidarity,<br/>welfare states</i>                       | The aim is to examine,<br>how to systematise<br>crisis response into<br>welfare state<br>instruments, what are<br>the similarities and<br>differences in<br>responses related to<br>standard and non-<br>standard employees<br>and what were the key<br>differences in<br>responses between the<br>five welfare states | Denmark,<br>France,<br>Germany, Italy<br>and UK                                 | The study<br>concentrates on<br>measures between<br>March 2020 and<br>January 2021   | Crisis measures have<br>overwhelmingly been<br>temporary and left the<br>ordinary welfare state<br>structures unchanged.<br>When extraordinary<br>measures expire, the<br>difference between those<br>who are covered by<br>regular social protection<br>and those who are not will<br>once again become visible.<br><a href="https://doi.org/10.1177/14680181211019281">https://doi.org/10.1177/<br/>14680181211019281</a> |
| 16. <a href="#">Soon et al. (2021)</a><br>Social policy and Administration<br><i>coronavirus, East Asia, institutional<br/>resilience, social policy</i>   | The aim is to study<br>institutional resilience<br>and social policy<br>responses in East<br>Asia, emphasising<br>unemployment<br>protection and social<br>assistance  | China, Japan,<br>Korea and<br>Taiwan  | A systematic<br>comparison between<br>countries<br>Main measures in<br>year 2020 compiled<br>by authors  | Social policy responses to<br>the crisis have been<br>mainly expansive.<br>Researchers argue that<br>pandemics might be a<br>driving force in<br>developing universalistic<br>policies. <a href="https://doi.org/10.1111/spol.12713">https://doi.org/10.<br/>1111/spol.12713</a>  |

Table 1.

European countries. Even though all the studies purported to compare responses and policies, the study aims varied, as [Table 1](#) shows.

The studies focussed on issues such as social-policy responses and new agendas ([Aidukaite et al., 2021](#)), labour and gender inequalities ([Bariola and Collins, 2021](#)), social security for the self-employed ([Cantillon et al., 2021](#)), gendered viewpoints on social policies and employment ([Cook and Grimshaw, 2021](#)). Some of them covered the use of government instruments to mitigate unemployment as well as social and economic disadvantage ([Greve et al., 2021](#)), responses to care ([Daly, 2022](#)) and social and employment policies ([Hick and Murphy, 2021](#)). One article compared initial social-policy responses to what happened in the Great Recession ([Moreira and Hick, 2021](#)), another compared the content, scale and speed of the responses ([Béland et al., 2021a,b](#)), and another focused on transformative social policies ([Kempf and Dutta, 2021](#)). [Casquilho-Martins and Belchior-Rocha \(2022\)](#) examined the impacts

of combating socioeconomic effects and the European response to the COVID-19 pandemic crisis with country comparison. They also reflected to the former financial crisis 2008 and the aims of European 2002 Strategy in order to analyse the measures implemented in European plans through the “NextGenerationEU” programme.

An influence of the welfare regimes on social protection measures was discussed in over half of the studies (e.g. [Aidukaite et al., 2021](#); [Cantillon et al., 2021](#); [Greve et al., 2021](#); [Hick and Murphy, 2021](#); [Moreira and Hick, 2021](#); [Pereirinha and Pereira, 2021](#); [Cook and Grimshaw, 2021](#); [Daly, 2022](#)). The comparative perspective as a methodological structure relied almost exclusively on COVID-19 databases, statistics and previous studies, document analysis and a mixture of methods. For instance, the following databases and statistics were used: OECD data (e.g. the family database, the Better Life Index, Employment and unemployment statistics during COVID-19, social-expenditure database and national accounts), Eurofound, the International Labour Organisation (ILO), the Oxford COVID-19 government response tracker (OxCGRT tracks), the European Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (ECDC), the United Nations research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

Half of the articles used welfare-state regimes as a frame of reference within which to formulate an understanding of social-policy responses during the pandemic. All the comparative analyses were descriptive, based on COVID-19 databases, statistics and surveys and referring to previous studies. Some studies also proposed conceptual and theoretical frameworks. Social resilience ([Pereirinha and Pereira, 2021](#)), transformative politics ([Kempf and Dutta, 2021](#)) and integrative care policies involving both children and adults ([Daly, 2022](#)) are examples of conceptual advances in the comparative studies in question. Some articles lacked information on the study design, the methods and/or the analysis.

Half of the studies focussed strongly on the early phase of the pandemic in 2020 ([Aidukaite et al., 2021](#); [Cantillon et al., 2021](#); [Greve et al., 2021](#); [Hick and Murphy, 2021](#); [Moreira and Hick, 2021](#); [Pereirinha and Pereira, 2021](#); [Cook and Grimshaw, 2021](#); [Daly, 2022](#)). [Greer et al. \(2021\)](#) and [Seemann et al. \(2021\)](#) were amongst the few studies to discuss limitations.

### Key themes related to social-policy measures in reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic

Our results showed that the social-policy measures in the included studies focused mainly on the risk of unemployment or improving its coverage and responding to the increased care-related needs in families attributable to the pandemic. To some extent, nation-state social-policy measures were explained and interpreted within welfare-state regimes. However, the influence of the regimes on the responses was neglected and questioned in some studies.

#### *Employment-related measures*

[Kempf and Dutta \(2021\)](#) refer to the ability of countries to absorb, adapt and transform responses to the COVID-19 pandemic as social resilience. Additional social-policy measures are considered essential tools in buffering economic and social crises ([Kempf and Dutta, 2021](#)). In particular, all employment-related responses counteracted the economic impact of the pandemic, including wage-subsidy schemes to contain mass job losses, additional temporary benefits to compensate the self-employed and other non-standard workers for a loss of earnings, and the expansion of unemployment insurance ([Moreira et al., 2021](#)). Similarly, a study on crisis responses in Brazil, India, Germany and the United States of America emphasised the importance of social-policy measures in coping with a health crisis, including the introduction of emergency measures ([Greer et al., 2021](#)).

Comparing current pandemic responses to what happened during the Great Depression, [Moreira and Hick \(2021\)](#) investigated a large sample of OECD countries. They concluded that the

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current pandemic rather highlighted the need for unemployment benefits and wage-subsidy schemes. The need for instruments to support incomes in cases of job retention and to minimise job losses was also emphasised in a comparative study conducted in the UK and Ireland (Hick and Murphy, 2021). The findings also revealed that both countries removed deductible days for sickness allowance, increased the levels of social-security payments for those who had lost jobs and suspended activation requirements for job seekers. Ireland proposed a new Pandemic Unemployment Payment as part of the social security system (Hick and Murphy, 2021).

The social-policy measures prioritised so-called standard workers, albeit several measures also applied to a variety of other groups in the labour market (Seemann *et al.*, 2021). According to findings reported in the study on COVID-19 measures in East Asian welfare states, most pandemic-related changes were extensions of current policies (Soon *et al.*, 2021). The *Universal Emergency Relief Allowance* in South Korea is given as an example of the need to change unemployment policies, which triggered a heated discussion about universal employment security (Soon *et al.*, 2021). The pandemic aggravated societal problems such as social inequalities, unemployment and poverty (e.g. dualisation trends in the labour market and a lack of social security for workers in precarious employment in Japan and South Korea), which could accelerate change (Soon *et al.*, 2021).

Although employment-promotion measures were at the forefront of national social-policy responses to the pandemic – particularly in Europe – the crisis has also exposed the need for financial support to help workers in vulnerable situations in the labour market (Moreira *et al.*, 2021). The question of gaps in social protection amongst so-called non-standard workers was also raised (e.g. Cantillon *et al.*, 2021; Cook and Grimshaw, 2021; Seemann *et al.*, 2021). Given that pre-pandemic social provision did not cover all worker groups in all situations, a temporary expansion of social security was needed.

The Nordic countries eased access to unemployment benefits and social assistance without bringing about a notable change in benefit levels despite the changes in Norway guaranteeing 100-per-cent wage compensation and extending unemployment insurance (Greve *et al.*, 2021). One preliminary conclusion from the Nordic countries was that national responses expanded the coverage to include new segments of society and the self-employed (Greve *et al.*, 2021). A study comparing Eastern and Central European countries highlighted the significance of employment promotion and protection measures (Aidukaite *et al.*, 2021). All four countries, namely Lithuania, Slovakia, Poland and Hungary, focused their policies on employment and business protection: they provided allowances for employees and the self-employed, especially during the lockdowns, gave subsidies to employers, introduced flexible working conditions and postponed tax payments or even allowed exemptions (Aidukaite *et al.*, 2021).

Canada and the USA concentrated primarily on employment protection and unemployment prevention, as well as on housing (Béland *et al.*, 2021a). Responses were decided upon more quickly in Canada than in the United States, and the measures were more comprehensive. For example, Canada expanded unemployment compensation to cover contract, part-time and seasonal workers, who had been excluded from the employment security programme. The Emergency Response Benefit (CERB), which was introduced in March 2020, allowed for up to 16 weeks of taxable benefits to eligible workers who had lost their income because of the COVID-19 crisis. Income support of the unemployed became more generous in the United States, compensating for approximately 45% of lost earnings, on average (Bariola and Collins, 2021).

A comparative study conducted in Denmark, Germany and the United States reported various responses to the crisis. Freelancers and self-employed workers in Denmark were eligible for up to 75% of expected income lost during the lockdown. The expansion of *Kurzarbeit* in Germany, in turn, was crucial in saving jobs just as it was in previous economic recessions. Meanwhile, crisis responses in the United States included the expansion of

unemployment insurance, a paid leave programme and direct cash payments to households. As a consequence, part-time workers (including gig workers and the self-employed) became eligible for benefits during the pandemic. One study addressed the critical question of how these measures were implemented (Bariola and Collins, 2021).

The biggest impact on employment of responses to the COVID-19 crisis was on the self-employed, flexible workers and low-wage earners (Cantillon *et al.*, 2021). Nevertheless, there are major differences in how labour markets function in the Netherlands, Belgium and Germany: the part-time and temporary employment sector is larger in the Netherlands than in the other two countries (Cantillon *et al.*, 2021).

Cook and Grimshaw (2021) concentrated on short-term schemes and gendered policy responses, given that women are over-represented amongst low-wage workers across Europe. Levels of compensation varied greatly during the pandemic: 100% in Norway, 80% in Italy and the UK and just 60% in Germany (Cook and Grimshaw, 2021). The distinctive mechanism in job-retention schemes was the essential difference in the crisis responses (Seemann *et al.*, 2021). Women, particularly in frontier sectors in essential services, have experienced more stress during the pandemic because of longer working hours and a higher risk of COVID-19 infection (Daly, 2022). This could lead to growing inequalities in the labour market (Kempf and Dutta, 2021; Pereirinha and Pereira, 2021).

Casquilho-Martins and Belchior-Rocka (2022) point out that most unemployment measures in Southern Europe – namely Greece, Italy, Spain and Portugal – were directed at the private sector. Through the temporary exemption of social contributions, avoiding laying off workers as part of the stringency measures and avoiding infection, compensation was directed to the unemployed and extended to include situations that were not previously covered by the state (Casquilho-Martins and Belchior-Rocha, 2022).

### *Care-related income protection*

The second challenge arising from the pandemic was the need for care-related compensation and changes in social-security provision. Kempf and Dutta (2021) investigated employment and equality policies in some detail, and concluded that its care systems and policies significantly affected a country's ability to respond effectively to a crisis.

Previous research outlined what happened particularly in the early stages of the pandemic. Various countries in Europe scaled up their care policies in reaction to the closure of day-care (early education) centres and schools, as well as to the increasing need for people to combine care for family members and work duties (Seemann *et al.*, 2021). The socio-economic consequences of COVID-19 related for the most part to the introduction and/or strengthening of schemes to provide support to families with care responsibilities (Moreira *et al.*, 2021). However, childcare support was minor compared to the financial support related to employment, incomes and business (Cook and Grimshaw, 2021).

Daly (2022) points out that nine European countries introduced new COVID-19-specific paid parental leave: unpaid parental leave has been available in Spain for some time. Overall, 30% of OECD countries introduced child or family allowances as one way of compensating for income losses (Moreira and Hick, 2021). Italy, for example, increased the length of parental leave and doubled the value of day-care vouchers when parental leave was not feasible. South Korea, too, increased the budget for homecare allowances (Kempf and Dutta, 2021). Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia and Hungary took similar steps in family policy, granting paid sick leave to parents taking care of small children during the period when schools were closed or extending maternity and parental leave until the end of the emergency period (Aidukaite *et al.*, 2021). Amongst the Nordic countries, Finland, Norway and Sweden changed their family policies, granting temporary allowances (Greve *et al.*, 2021).

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In addition, the United States of America and Canada made federal-level changes in social assistance and family policies. The USA, which only had cash benefit programmes for low-income families in need before the COVID-19 pandemic, implemented the Cares Act that ensured the provision of direct income transfers directly to households (\$1,200 per adult and an extra \$500 per dependent child) that filed taxes in 2019. Canada, in turn, introduced one-off payments to elderly people on a low income (Béland *et al.*, 2021a). Childcare benefit was also extended (Béland *et al.*, 2021a).

Soon *et al.* (2021) point out in their study of East Asian welfare states that these countries also granted one-off payments: Japan made one-off payments to citizens, South Korea introduced e-money payments and vouchers and Taiwan responded with so-called triple-stimulus vouchers as significant social-assistance policies. Lithuania, in turn, responded in the most innovative and supportive way so as to enhance social solidarity; for example, all families with children received one-off lump-sum payments worth €120–€200 (depending on the number of children and the family income) (Aidukaite *et al.*, 2021).

One major problem that the COVID-19 pandemic brought to light is that equality-focussed systems to replace the full-time labour of women in the home have not developed (Daly, 2022). Hence, extended-term policies will widen or narrow gender inequalities (Cook and Grimshaw, 2021). It is suggested in another study (Hick and Murphy, 2021) that perhaps the most serious gap is in care provision, which has affected female workers in particular both in the United Kingdom and in Ireland: the authors further point out that state childcare deficits and a return to household means-testing may render women economically inactive.

#### *The potential influence of welfare-state regimes on pandemic responses*

Comparative studies on welfare states approach welfare arrangements and regimes in diverse ways. Our scoping review showed that welfare regimes were mentioned in over half the studies, in the purposes, being included in the research questions, as the hypothesis, as the theoretical starting-point, as justification for selecting the welfare state in question or as an analytical tool, as well as contributing to the conclusions and the discussion.

Table 2 gives a general overview of these studies and of the potential influence of welfare-state regimes on social-policy measures related to the COVID-19 pandemic, with comparative examples (Aidukaite *et al.*, 2021; Bariola and Collins, 2021; Béland *et al.*, 2021a,b; Greve *et al.*, 2021; Hick and Murphy, 2021; Pereirinha and Pereira, 2021; Soon *et al.*, 2021).

Our findings demonstrate that Nordic and Southern European countries share common characteristics and mostly or at least partly followed welfare and pre-pandemic policy paths (Greve *et al.*, 2021; Pereirinha and Pereira, 2021; Soon *et al.*, 2021; Casquilho-Martins and Belchior-Rocha, 2022). Universalist welfare systems seemed to be better prepared for the crisis than Bismarckian and Southern European countries in which preparedness affected the responses and the resilience (Pereirinha and Pereira, 2021). Southern European countries (Spain, Portugal and Italy) adopted more measures to prevent social hardship, including those designed to protect vulnerable and disadvantaged groups, than universalistic countries (Sweden) and the Netherlands (a country with mixed characteristics) (Pereirinha and Pereira, 2021; Casquilho-Martins and Belchior-Rocha, 2022). The findings reveal, for example, that measures focussed on employment protection and retention varied, and proved to be more intensive in Germany, France, Italy and Spain than in Sweden and the Netherlands (Pereirinha and Pereira, 2021; Casquilho-Martins and Belchior-Rocha, 2022). A tentative conclusion from the responses of the Nordic welfare states during the first wave of the pandemic was that the crisis measures reflected their key characteristics such that they continued in a path-dependent way, but they also introduced at least temporary extensions to avoid income losses (Greve *et al.*, 2021).

| Welfare state regimes and welfare states   | Regime related effects in the results  |
|--|--|
| Central and Eastern European countries (CEE) (hybrid welfare states with strong conservative Bismarckian elements): Lithuania, Slovakia, Hungary and Poland (Aidukaite <i>et al.</i> , 2021)<br>Liberal welfare state regime: the United States of America, social democratic regime state: Denmark, and corporatist regime state: Germany (Bariola and Collins, 2021) | Significant variation evidenced amongst CEE countries in responses during the first wave of the pandemic (Aidukaite <i>et al.</i> , 2021). The welfare regime does not have a clear effect on social policy measures<br>There was important cross-national variation in the design and implementation of pandemic relief. Such variation is consistent, to an extent, with the countries' respective welfare regimes (Bariola and Collins, 2021).<br>The welfare regime does not have a clear effect on social policy measures, but the official commitment and cultural legacy of the welfare regime affected the responses |
| Liberal regime states: Canada and the United States of America (Béland <i>et al.</i> , 2021a,b)  | Analysis reveals several fundamental sources of divergence between the US and Canadian social policy responses to the COVID-19 pandemic (Béland <i>et al.</i> , 2021a,b)<br>The welfare regime does not have a clear effect on social policy measures  |
| Welfare state regimes with Bismarckian roots: Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands (Cantillon <i>et al.</i> , 2021)  | Welfare state differentiation and dual transformation especially in recent decades impacted policy responses (Cantillon <i>et al.</i> , 2021)<br>The welfare regime does not have a clear effect on social policy measures   |
| Nordic welfare state regime: Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Finland (Greve <i>et al.</i> , 2021)  | The tentative conclusion was that the crisis has strengthened key characteristics of the Nordic welfare states by the state taking on a strong central role not only for the functioning of the market but also continuing in a path-dependent way with universal and relatively generous benefit. (Greve <i>et al.</i> , 2021).<br>The welfare regime seems to have some effect on social policy measures   |
| Liberal welfare state regime: The United Kingdom and Ireland (Hick and Murphy, 2021)   | Despite similarities in measures, the distinct policy legacies, political and institutional differences between the two countries mean critical differences in both the nature and the relative weight placed on these instruments (Hick and Murphy, 2021). The liberal welfare state regime has partly effect on measures   |
| Welfare state regimes: Bismarckian (France, Germany), universalist (Sweden), southern (Spain, Portugal) and mixed in character: Bismarckian/ universalist (Netherlands) and Bismarckian/ southern (Italy) (Pereirinha and Pereira, 2021)<br>East Asian welfare regime: Korea, Taiwan, China and Japan (Soon <i>et al.</i> , 2021)                                      | Differences in measures were evidenced between universalist (Sweden, the Netherlands, mixed character) and southern countries (Spain, Portugal and Italy) (Pereirinha and Pereira, 2021). Different welfare regimes have no clear effect on measures<br>Study identified striking similarities in institutional arrangements but also some variation in policy approaches (Soon <i>et al.</i> , 2021). Asian welfare state regime has some effect on measures  |
| Southern European welfare state regime: Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain (Casquilho-Martins and Belchior-Rocha, 2022)   | All countries applied measures to promote employment, protect unemployed, protect people in disadvantaged situations (Casquilho-Martins and Belchior-Rocha, 2022)<br>Welfare state regime has some effect on measures. Also open coordination and EU-level strategies have had effect on measures applied  |

**Table 2.**  
Welfare state regimes,  
welfare states and  
regime-related effects  
in the results

Differentiation was evident particularly between Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries and Anglo-Saxon welfare states, amongst which the regime type did not explain the changes in social policy (Aidukaite *et al.*, 2021; Hick and Murphy, 2021; Béland *et al.*, 2021a,b; Bariola and Collins, 2021). Research on social-policy measures in CEE countries revealed some variation in terms of care for the most vulnerable amongst the population (Aidukaite *et al.*, 2021). A comparative analysis of responses in Denmark, Germany and the United States of America based on cultural frameworks and state-market-family relations confirmed the differences in responses (Bariola and Collins, 2021). One conclusion was that Denmark and Germany had stronger safety nets to support families and workers than the United States of America. Cultural legacy and official commitment had a clearer effect on social-policy measures than the type of welfare-state regime.

The results from continental European countries (Cantillon *et al.*, 2021) also challenged the traditional division of welfare-state regimes and showed diversity in their grouping (see Table 2). Even though Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands share Bismarckian roots, they adopted features of Nordic and Anglo-Saxon models over time (Cantillon *et al.*, 2021, p. 328). These evolutionary paths had diverse effects on COVID-19-related social-policy measures: whereas the Netherlands turned to the “Bismarck cum Beveridge” model, Germany and Belgium expanded their social security in response to the so-called new social risks. The reduction in benefits for the long-term unemployed and the increasing number of self-employed workers contribute to the dualisation of the transformation. The social-protection systems for families in Belgium and Germany, including insurance-based parental leave, were strengthened through the use of pre-existing systems: Germany expanded unemployment assistance for the self-employed, and the Netherlands applied a new scheme. These measures, in turn, had positive effects in mitigating income loss and stabilising economies (Cantillon *et al.*, 2021, p. 328).

With regard to the liberal welfare regimes, namely the UK and Ireland, despite the similarities of the measures, the two countries adopted different approaches. The authors of the study argue that this may represent a new direction for distinct policy-reform pathways (Hick and Murphy, 2021). Differences were identified in the generosity of social-security provision, support for the unemployed and people in job-retention schemes, the relative reliance on retention and variation in terms of departing from existing policy agendas (Hick and Murphy, 2021).

## Discussion

This scoping review descriptively analysed 16 peer-reviewed comparative studies on welfare states. The results show that unemployment and care-related family duties in connection with COVID-19 were the major social risks on which welfare states focused during the pandemic. The main conclusion is that mainstream social-policy responses to the pandemic concentrated on people in the labour force and the working-age population.

First, social-policy measures related to employment and unemployment security in the countries under study. Preventive-employment-related measures to save jobs and work focused mainly on the private sector (e.g. Casquilho-Martins and Belchior-Rocka, 2022).

Second, the pandemic increased the need for carers because of day-care (early education centres) and school closures and the need to honour guarantees and COVID-19 infections, hence the need for changes to social policy and the development of new instruments. These questions emerged specifically in cases in which employees were not covered by any other employment-insurance or social-assistance schemes, such as those in precarious work and the self-employed (including freelancers, domestic workers and so-called “flexi-workers”). Changes in social support for parents, especially working mothers, were also needed. However, the cost of financial care-related support for families was minimal compared with support for employment, income and business (Cook and Grimshaw, 2021).

COVID-19-related social-policy measures and changes in pre-pandemic protection systems could be considered identifiers of gaps, non-functionalities and insufficiencies in current social protection. New tools were introduced to help people cope with and recover from the pandemic, in addition to scaling up benefits and expanding the coverage of measures. For example, direct income transfers were delivered to prevent income losses and avoid the rise in poverty in Canada, the United States of America, Lithuania, Japan and South Korea. Although most responses were temporary and urgent, the possibility that they could lead to reform and permanent change was recognised (e.g. [Greve et al., 2021](#); [Moreira and Hick, 2021](#); [Seemann et al., 2021](#)). Earlier configurations of the welfare system need to change to be transformative, and COVID-19 measures should be integrated and sustained to support long-term development policies ([Kempf and Dutta, 2021](#); [Pereirinha and Pereira, 2021](#)). The longer the pandemic and the related economic downturn go on, the more likely it is that the measures will last, and the likelihood of permanent change in welfare states increases. In this sense, the institutional environment and type of crisis might be different this time.

Third, our scoping review also produced evidence of influence on the part of welfare-state regimes on COVID-19-related social-policy measures. Although we identified differences between universalist and residual welfare states, the influence of traditional welfare regimes on COVID-19 social-policy measures was also questioned. Eastern and continental Europe showed most evidence of a welfare-regime developmental mix. This indicates a change from a more residual system towards universal coverage of social protection and, in general, the development of a welfare regime that is different from the one a particular country has traditionally espoused. In addition, the COVID-19 responses varied within liberal welfare regimes, whereas differences between Southern Europe and Northern countries were clearer. However, there is still lack of comparative studies that analyse the coherence in welfare-state regimes across countries.

In showcasing the various approaches to overcoming COVID-19 pressures on welfare states, our study facilitates the comparison and contrasting of strategies amongst students of policy as well as policymakers. The research also provided useful and comprehensive background information that could be of use in formulating a typology of COVID-19 strategies that mirrors or borrows from the literature on welfare regimes in its structure. Investigations focussing on various forms of response to crises could be combined with studies measuring the outcomes of measures in terms of gross domestic product (GDP), unemployment rates, poverty rates and inequality, for example, with a view to distinguishing desirable from undesirable policies. Our findings could serve as a basis on which to formulate hypotheses to be tested in future comparative studies of welfare states.

In addition to highlighting the significance of welfare-state regimes, lessons learnt from comparative studies served to explain and interpret commonalities in social-policy measures across countries in terms of social learning and policy diffusion. Ideas spread from one country to another, especially amongst the reference countries (e.g. [Kuhlmann et al., 2020](#)). Promoters of this policy diffusion and learning include governments, various international organisations and co-operatives (open coordination) and in Europe especially the European Union. Lessons learnt during the COVID-19 pandemic and from previous crises and responses as well (such as furlough systems, *Kurtzarbeit*) has helped to diffuse measures known as “crisis regime responses”, needs-based emergency help ([Moreira and Hick, 2021](#)) and déjà vu phenomena in the context of previous economic crises ([Soon et al., 2021](#)) as analysed in the reviewed studies. Beyond welfare-state regimes, social-policy measures could be formulated as parallel with COVID-19 responses representing diverse types of social protection in Europe (universal, means-tested, targeted; e.g. [Aidukaite et al., 2021](#); [Pereirinha and Pereira, 2021](#); [Greer et al., 2021](#)), as well as in East Asia ([Soon et al., 2021](#)). [Béland et al. \(2021b\)](#) refer to COVID-19 responses as a form of “Emergency Keynesianism”, referring to the aim of supporting rather than challenging institutions and the extensive use of deficit



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spending during the crisis. Open coordination on the EU level as well as purported active support for employment and the protection of people from poverty and social exclusion have also had an impact on the chosen priorities (Casquilho-Martins and Belchior-Rocha, 2022). The strong focus on family and employment policies in recent years might also reflect an emphasis on social investment (Hemerijck, 2017).

The reviewed studies applied various methods for comparing policy changes. Crucial questions that arose included whether short-term schemes and furlough systems saved jobs (Cook and Grimshaw, 2021) and the issue of gender equity in family-related policy responses (Daly, 2022).

Our study has some limitations. First, new peer-reviewed evidence and COVID-19-related comparative research continue to emerge. This review of research is based on data collected up until February 2022. We focused on typical social-science databases and broadening the scope of our search and research sources might have yielded new comparative articles to be included based on the inclusion criteria.

Second, our review was limited to the Global North, mainly European countries. A wider scope to include social-policy measures in the Global South (e.g. Latin America and Africa) would have facilitated the study of contingencies and differences in COVID-19 responses. Cook and Ulriksen's (2021) study on social-policy responses through a global lens highlighted vulnerabilities that have become glaring due to the pandemic, for example. Non-standard employees, migrant workers and the urban working poor are not covered under social protection, which is why the pandemic has brought job losses. Leisering's (2021) study on social-policy responses in the Global South has shown that the responses were aimed specifically to alleviate the most urgent needs. Moreover, meta-analyses of social-policy responses to COVID-19 in 36 countries in the Global South indicate that responses have been expansive but targeted (Dorlach, 2022). Social-policy instruments in developing economies emphasised cash transfers and food, whereas there was a broader array of responses in emerging economies (Dorlach, 2022). In sum, systematic and comprehensive reviews will be required in the future.

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#### Corresponding author

Päivi Mäntyneva can be contacted at: [paivi.mantyneva@helsinki.fi](mailto:paivi.mantyneva@helsinki.fi)