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The long-term effects of childhood residential mobility on social capital

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When a child moves home multiple times, the consequences for the adult they will later become can be substantial. This study investigates how frequent relocations during childhood influence the development of social capital in adulthood. Using a combination of retrospective and longitudinal data from a nationally representative sample of the Swiss population ($N = 4{,}451$), we examine how identity formation and the sense of agency jointly shape individuals' ability to sustain supportive networks over time. Results from structural equation modelling show that individuals who experienced frequent moves in childhood tend to identify less with the city, region, and country in which they live; yet this appears to have no direct consequences for their social capital. In contrast, they report a stronger sense of personal agency—defined as feeling more confident in addressing problems and making decisions—which, in turn, enhances their ability to maintain supportive networks. Overall, the findings highlight that residential mobility in childhood is a complex phenomenon that reshapes how individuals relate to the communities they belong to, to themselves, and to others across the life course.

Introduction

Scholars agree that although residential moves 'may be driven by positive (e.g., birth of a child or a job promotion) or negative (e.g., divorce or substantial loss in income) forces, they nonetheless bring transitions and adjustments' (Coley and Kull, 2016: pp. 1,206). During childhood, a key stage for physical and cognitive development, these adaptations aim to cope with the many challenges of residential moves and are the result of both structural factors and individual strategies of integration. These processes are even more necessary in cases where individuals experience frequent and repeated relocations from the early stages of their life courses (DeCandia, Volk and Unick, 2022). The impact of residential mobility at such a young age can be profound and operate at multiple levels in the long run. Among the research angles on these coping strategies and processes, scholars have discussed the impact that changes of residence during childhood have on the creation and maintenance of social relations. It has been shown that geographical mobility can be disruptive to social networks, especially in the short term, by temporarily reducing the number of network members (Bidart and Lavenu, 2005) or leading to their restructuring (Offer and Schneider, 2007; Nisic and Petermann, 2013). While family contacts are usually the most resilient in withstanding the turbulence of a residential move, people might lose sight of weaker connections, such as acquaintances or friends who gradually become less important (Antonucci *et al.*, 2010). These changes affect the ability of individuals to access and mobilize a range of social resources provided by personal contacts. That is, all those forms of instrumental and emotional support that compose an individual's social capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Lin, 2001).

However, too often, a short-term look at the detrimental effect of changes in residence has been adopted. Little attention has been given to the idea that networks are by nature dynamic structures, with an extraordinary potential for renewal (Vacchiano *et al.*, 2024). Although it is certainly true that, after a change of

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residence, we lose sight of some of our contacts, if we look at the effect of changing residence from an early age, we must study what these processes mean in the long run (Vidal, 2023-2027). The literature suggests that it is precisely within the adaptation processes triggered by residential changes that we can find mechanisms shedding light on their long-term effects on social capital (Oishi, 2010). Children who move repeatedly must learn to navigate new social environments, build new friendships, adapt to unfamiliar cultural and institutional norms, and negotiate their identity in response to shifting relational contexts. Over the life course, these experiences may strengthen social skills that facilitate the creation and maintenance of relationships in adulthood (Mann, 1972; Oishi, Lun and Sherman, 2007).

To investigate these mechanisms, we implemented a longitudinal mediation model using data from a nationally representative sample of 4,451 individuals drawn from the Swiss Household Panel (SHP). Our model analyses two parallel pathways through which childhood residential mobility relates to the development of social capital in later life. On the one hand, we tested how frequently moving is associated with individuals' identification with collective entities—the city, canton, and country in which they live. On the other hand, we analysed how frequent moves relate to individual agency, that is, the perception of being capable of tackling problems and making decisions. By linking childhood residential mobility to identity formation and agency in adulthood, we examined the direct and indirect impacts of both mechanisms on social capital later in life. Few studies have integrated processes related to residential mobility, identity, agency, and social capital within a single longitudinal framework (Settersten, 2009). This study was designed to address this gap.

Short-term and long-term effects of childhood mobility on social capital

Social capital is conceived as 'the extent of the diversity of resources embedded in one's social network' (Lin, 2001: p. 3). According to social capital theory, individuals potentially gain access to both instrumental and emotional resources through their social ties (Bourdieu, 1986). This means that social capital comprises a structural component, which reflects the characteristics and the number of people that compose a network of relations, and an agentic component, referring to the capacity to mobilize these resources when needed. Residential relocations have been shown to challenge both components of an individual's social capital (Bidart and Lavenu, 2005; Lubbers *et al.*, 2010).

Against this backdrop, one of the most immediate consequences of residential mobility is the loss of local contacts, such as neighbours, friends, classmates, teachers, and community members in the area where the child lives. When children relocate, they leave behind the physical environments and social settings where daily interactions foster these relationships, and disruptions tend to increase with each move (Jelleyman and Spencer, 2008). However, networks possess an intrinsic capacity for renewal, as they are inherently dynamic (Nisic and Petermann, 2013; Volker, 2020; Settersten, Hollstein and McElvaine 2024). These initial losses, therefore, often trigger turnover processes that unfold over time. This means that the lost contacts are gradually replaced by new ones as children adapt to their new environments (Offer, Fischer and Lee 2026). These renewal processes result from multiple factors, but in the context of residential mobility, research has consistently highlighted the importance of understanding the reasons for moving and the family's socioeconomic resources (Pettit and McLanahan, 2003). Both shape the resources available to the child, the meaning they attribute to the mobility experience, and their social and cognitive responses to relocation. Moves prompted by parental job promotions or upward social mobility tend to be less disruptive than those caused by divorce, financial hardship, or eviction (Adam and Chase-Lansdale, 2002).

Another key driver of these dynamic relational processes is related to identity formation. Early ages are crucial to an individual's identity formation, and experiencing one or more residential moves at this stage can drive significant cognitive, emotional, and behavioural redefinitions. Seminal works in developmental psychology (Erikson, 1950; Allison, 1993; Harris and Orth, 2020; Crocetti *et al.*, 2023) reveal that children go through an initial stage of identity confusion and exploration of different options to a subsequent phase of identity synthesis or achievement. Children who arrive at a new place have fewer social ties than incumbent residents who have lived in that community for an extended period. They are more likely to interact with people who know nothing about their social background. Because of that, social status or any other group affiliation is no longer an effective tool for mutual recognition. They must seek alternative approaches to making new friends by mobilizing personal skills and abilities. This could explain why, for instance, people who moved more frequently while growing up tend to have an image of themselves strongly skewed towards personal traits to the detriment of collective identity and sense of belonging (Oishi, Lun and Sherman, 2007; Easthope, 2009).

Along these lines, research suggests that childhood mobility encourages the development of adaptive coping strategies that may enhance a person's sense of agency. Agency, understood as the capacity to navigate one's environment intentionally, make independent decisions

and tackle problems (Hitlin and Elder, 2006, 2007), is shaped not only by structural factors but also by biographical experiences. Childhood residential mobility thus represents a particularly meaningful life event, as it inherently exposes children to novelty, discontinuity, and the need to adapt. Depending on how these changes are interpreted and managed, mobility can either hinder or stimulate the emergence of agency. Arguably, children who move frequently may develop a stronger sense of agency if these experiences teach them how to adapt, assert themselves in new environments, and make autonomous decisions (Werkman *et al.*, 1981). By extension, it has been hypothesized that individuals who experienced mobility as children may feel more confident in building social ties in new contexts and actively pursuing supportive networks when needed (Nisic and Petermann, 2013; Oishi and Tsang, 2022).

Conceptual model

To dig into the consequences of childhood residential mobility for social capital in adulthood, we propose here a longitudinal outlook about the two mechanisms graphically represented in Figure 1 related to identity formation and sense of agency among a sample of Swiss residents. Current knowledge on how these mechanisms would act is ambiguous, but it suggests that childhood mobility triggers a profound process of identity restructuring.

The first mechanism is derived from earlier research reported above, pointing to the shift from collective to personal attributes in identity construction after repeated residential episodes. We conceptualize collective identity as the emotional attachment to territorial entities, such as the municipality, canton, linguistic region, or nation, which provide symbolic continuity across life stages (Proshansky, Fabian and Kaminoff, 1983; Lewicka, 2011). Collective identity represents the part of one's identity grounded in shared membership and common values. Developmentally, this form of identification emerges during late childhood and adolescence, when individuals begin to internalize social roles and locate themselves within broader collectives (Erikson, 1950; Crocetti *et al.*, 2023). Stable environments typically facilitate this process by providing predictable social feedback and reinforcing a sense of belonging. In contrast, repeated residential moves may fragment these contexts of socialization and weaken the sense of continuity needed to build and sustain collective forms of identification (Oishi, 2010). Each move demands the renegotiation of social boundaries and the reconstruction of place-based attachments, often before previous ones have solidified.

Over time, this renegotiation can foster an individualized or situational self-concept that prioritizes adaptability and personal competence over collective belonging (Easthope, 2009), thereby opening the way to the second mechanism integrated into our model. This second mechanism centres on the development of a sense of agency, defined as the perception of oneself as an agent capable of influencing life outcomes (Hitlin and Elder, 2006). Agency represents an individual's capacity to act intentionally within structural

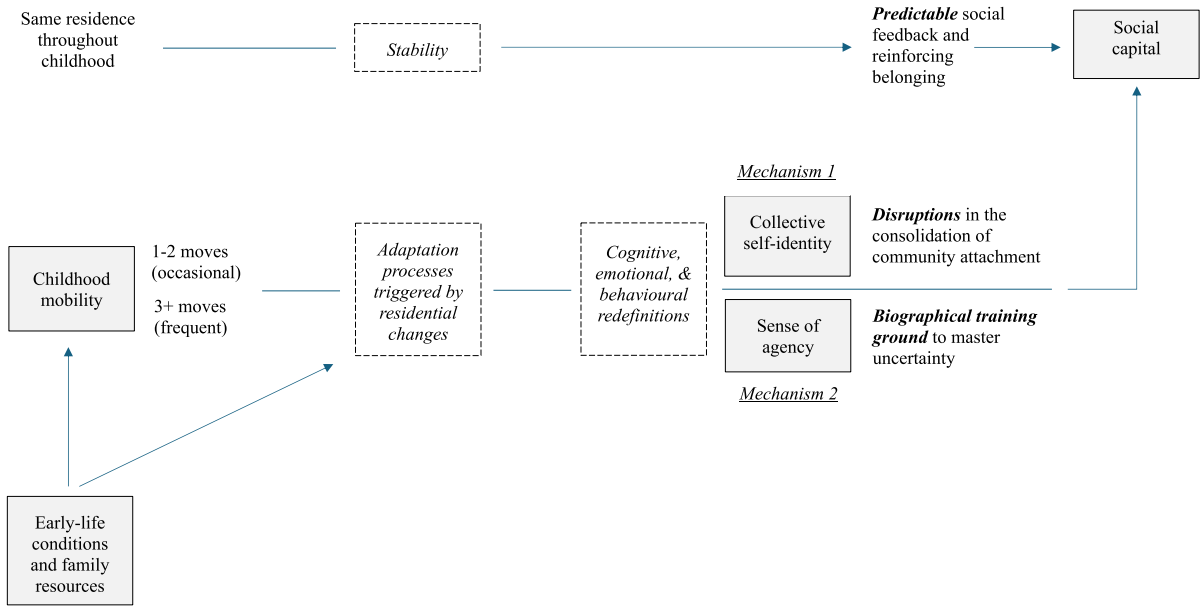

Figure 1. Conceptual model

constraints (Elder, 1994). It is not an innate trait but a learnt orientation, shaped through repeated interactions with changing environments and through experiences that either affirm or undermine one's ability to exert control. Childhood residential mobility constitutes a particularly formative context for this process. Developmental theories suggest that successful adaptation to such transitions fosters mastery experiences, a central component of agency formation (Bandura, 2001). Children who repeatedly face and overcome mobility challenges may internalize a sense of resilience and self-efficacy, perceiving themselves as capable of handling future disruptions (Masten, 2014).

Following these two parallel pathways through the right-end side of the conceptual model, repeated residential mobility in childhood is assumed to indirectly rebound on social capital in adulthood, particularly testing this hypothesis on indicators related to the friendship network and the perceived levels of social support, as detailed in the methodological section. On one hand, the implications of collective identity for social capital are both symbolic and structural. A strong sense of belonging to one's locality or nation tends to foster trust, reciprocity, and civic participation (Putnam, 2000). People who identify with their communities are more likely to engage in supportive exchanges, maintain friendships, and mobilize social resources within those networks. Conversely, when collective identification is weak, relational commitments may become more fluid, reducing opportunities to keep stable, supportive ties. In our model, collective identity thus reflects the relational mechanism through which early residential instability can impact adult social capital. On the other hand, the link between agency and social capital follows from the adaptive dynamic through which children face and overcome the challenges of mobility. Individuals with higher perceived control are more likely to actively maintain and mobilize social ties, to seek support when needed, and to invest effort in sustaining networks (Lin, 2001). Agency thus facilitates the agentic dimension of social capital: the capacity to transform relational resources into tangible support. In our conceptual model, the sense of agency captures this proactive orientation towards the social environment, representing the individual-level mechanism through which early mobility experiences shape long-term social connectedness. Together, these two mechanisms form a dual pathway: while collective identity reflects the relational anchoring of the self in social groups, agency represents the individual's ability to navigate those groups and sustain connections across changing contexts.

The proposed model also acknowledges that social capital outcomes are contingent on supportive family environments and the meaning attributed to mobility (Coley and Kull, 2016). Mobility can operate as both a developmental risk and an opportunity for agency-building, depending on the social conditions under which it occurs. Children from working-class families and those whose parents have lower educational attainment tend to have fewer financial, social, and cultural resources to help them cope with the disruptions caused by residential moves (Bernardi, 2014; Tønnessen, Telle and Syse, 2016). In these cases, mobility may amplify early disadvantages, reinforcing inequalities in psychosocial outcomes such as agency, symbolic identification with collective identities, and social capital.

Data and methods

Data source and analytical sample

Data are drawn from the SHP, a large-scale annual survey conducted by the Swiss Centre of Expertise in the Social Sciences. After its first edition in 1999, three refreshment samples were added, respectively, in 2004 (SHP_II), 2013 (SHP_III), and 2020 (SHP_IV). This study focuses on the SHP_III sample for which retrospective residential trajectories of 6,090 individuals aged 16+ are available. Respondents were asked to complete a life calendar to provide information about the occurrence and duration of any residential event since birth, including moves within foreign countries before their arrival (or return) to Switzerland. As for internal mobility in Switzerland, the retrospective survey allows for the geolocation of residential settings at the canton level, meaning that any move within or across the 26 cantons is tracked. The life calendar includes other domains, such as living arrangements or family events, which we used to extract early-life confounders, as detailed below.

We used the personal ID (*idpers*), which always refers to the same individual throughout the panel, to combine information from the life calendar with the individual files in subsequent waves 16, 17, and 18 (data collections in 2014, 2015, and 2016, respectively). The selection of these waves responds to a criterion informed by the structure of the panel study. The SHP survey includes a *core* group of questions asked each wave and a *rotating core* asked every three years. Questions about social relationships are part of the rotating core respondents sampled for the SHP_III answered for the first time in 2016. In contrast, the 2014 and 2015 editions include *ad hoc* modules on non-cognitive skills and identity formation that were used to compute our measures of sense of agency and collective self-identity. We handled missing data in exogenous variables using full information maximum likelihood (FIML), which left us with an analytical sample of 4,451 respondents. We applied longitudinal sampling weight adjustments to restore representativeness.

Model specification

Our baseline parallel mediation model includes 11 variables. The exposure variables focus exclusively on childhood characteristics. This is an analytical choice grounded on the assumption that adult conditions are not strictly exogenous controls but reflect the developmental consequences of early-life experiences. In a similar sense as expressed by Elwert and Winship (2014), including such conditions as confounders would expose the analysis to the risk of over-control bias, masking the long-term effects of childhood mobility that this study seeks to uncover. Adulthood conditions (e.g., mobility after age 16) are included as a competing explanation in a follow-up adjustment model. In follow-up sensitivity checks, detailed in the following section, we also estimated conditional effects, depending on the geography of moves and the social characteristics of the mover's family. Table 1 describes the variables involved in empirical testing.

Residential mobility from birth to 16 years old is our exposure variable. We defined two dummy variables to isolate respondents who moved occasionally during childhood (once or twice) from recurrent movers (thrice or more), being zero moves until age 16 the reference category.

At the opposite end of the path model, social capital is measured, on the one hand, through indicators linked to its structural characteristics, such as the number of people belonging to the networks of relationships. The 'friendship network' refers to the respondent's availability of social resources (from none to 5+ close friends) combined with the frequency of contact with these friends (on a scale from *never* to *weekly*). The final score is a normalized sum of these two ordinal variables. On the other hand, we extracted indicators linked to the effective capacity to mobilize the resources integrated in these networks, such as social support. 'Social support' is measured by focusing on the emotional *understanding* and *concrete help* that the respondent envisages from close friends in case of need. A mean social support score was calculated on a 10-point scale ranging from *not at all* to *a great deal*.

Table 1. Descriptive data

	Definition	N	Descriptives
Variables used in the baseline model			
Childhood mobility, ref.= residential stability	Zero moves from birth to age 16	2,700	60.7 per cent
Childhood mobility, occasional movers	1–2 moves from birth to age 16	1,409	31.6 per cent
Childhood mobility, frequent movers	3+ moves from birth to age 16	339	7.6 per cent
Collective self-identity	Sense of belonging to the municipality, the canton, the linguistic region, or Switzerland [0 = not important at all; 10 = very important belonging to]	4,414	$\bar{x} = 6.9$
Sense of agency	4-item index combining self-perceived mastering of unpredictability, the influence on life events, the ability to solve problems, and the capacity to choose between two possibilities [0 = low; 10 = high]	3,529	$\bar{x} = 6.3$
Friendship network	Combined score of number of friends and frequency of contact [0 = poor access; 1 = good access]	2,749	$\bar{x} = 0.7$
Social support	Expectations about emotional 'understanding' and 'concrete help' from close friends in case of need [0 = not at all; 10 = a great deal]	2,738	$\bar{x} = 7.5$
Family breakdown during childhood	Parents' separation or death	511	12.1 per cent
Parents' highest educational level achieved	At least one parent with higher education completed	503	13.9 per cent
Parents' social class	Working class	1,467	38.1 per cent
Parents' nationality background	At least one non-Swiss national	1,254	32.4 per cent
Age at wave 16	Number of years	4,451	$\bar{x} = 49.7$
Sex	Women	2,351	52.9 per cent
Variables used in sensitivity checks			
Childhood mobility abroad	Moving across international borders	264	5.9 per cent
Childhood mobility crossing linguistic borders	Moving across Switzerland's internal linguistic borders	196	4.4 per cent
Adulthood mobility (after age 16)	Frequency of moves as an adult	4,448	$\bar{x} = 3.2$

One of the two mediators measures the feeling of belonging to a 'collective self-identity'. The exact question in the survey asks *to what extent is belonging to [the municipality of residence, the canton, the linguistic region, or Switzerland] important for your identity* on a 10-point scale. We grouped these four items into a single indicator (arithmetic mean). The second mediator is a proxy for the 'sense of agency' based on the achievement orientation scale proposed by Strodtbeck (1958). We retrieved data from four questions that investigate the self-perceived mastering of unpredictability (after reverse coding the scale extracted from this question: cf. '*Often it is not worth to make plans, because too much is unpredictable*'), the influence on life events (from the reverse-coded: cf. *I feel like I have little influence on the events of my life*), the ability to solve problems (cf. *I am easily overcome unexpected problems*), and the capacity to choose between two possibilities (cf. *I have no difficulty choosing between two possibilities*). As such, we obtained a final mean score where high values pointed to higher levels of personal agency and vice versa.

The indirect relationship between residential trajectories in childhood and later social capital was adjusted for the effect of sex (1 = *man*; 2 = *women*). Because childhood residential trajectories were reported retrospectively, with outcomes and mediators collected later in adulthood, we accounted for potential recall biases and cohort-specific mobility patterns by adjusting for age at interview. This adjustment captures both the quality of retrospective recall (which tends to decline with age) and cohort-specific exposure to structural conditions shaping residential mobility (e.g., housing market, educational transitions). To allow for nonlinear age effects, both age and age squared were included in the model. Age was rescaled into decades, representing the deviation from age 16 in units of 10 years, to improve interpretability and model stability.

Additional confounders look at childhood conditions: any possible traumatic family event before age 16 such as parents' separation or death (0 = *no*; 1 = *yes*); the nationality at birth of the respondent's parents (0 = *both Swiss nationals*; 1 = *at least one non-Swiss parent*); the parental highest educational level (0 = *education stopped before university*; 1 = *university degree*); the parental social class at age 15, as a categorical variable extracted from the Wright social class scheme (1 = *petty bourgeoise*; 2 = *service class*; 3 = *working class*). We regressed parental education and class on age in 2014 (i.e., when the retrospective calendar was filled in), saved the residuals and used the residualized variables in our regressions. This strategy allows us to treat these characteristics as stable indicators of family social origin independent of any variation due to age at reporting.

After data preparation, we run a structural equation model with observed variables. Indirect paths are estimated with non-parametric bootstrapping (1,000 replications). The analysis was carried out using the *lavaan* package for R.

Sensitivity analyses

To enhance the robustness of our findings, we implemented further tests for mediation and moderated mediation. In the first of these tests, the frequency of moves as an adult was included as an additional confounder. By including adulthood moves, we account for the possibility that childhood movers are socialized into a more mobile lifestyle (Bernard and Vidal, 2020), and that any association between childhood moves and later agency or collective self could reflect this broader life-course pattern rather than developmental processes specific to childhood itself. As for moderated mediation tests, the goal was to verify whether the indirect effects between childhood mobility and social capital outcomes were conditional on the geography of childhood mobility (i.e., moving across international borders or Switzerland's internal linguistic borders) and family social conditions in childhood (i.e., parental education and social class).

Results

Childhood residential mobility patterns within the SHP_III sample

Descriptive analysis of retrospective data extracted from the life calendars offers an image of Switzerland as a highly mobile society. During the period, we defined as childhood for this paper (from birth to age 16), 31.7 per cent of the sample moved at least once or twice, and 7.6 per cent did it three times or more. As for residential mobility by subgroups of age, frequency tables reveal that 24.9 per cent of very young children (0–6 years old) moved at least once. In contrast, residential mobility becomes a relatively less common experience later in childhood (14.9 per cent, on average, between 7 and 16 years old), which is consistent with age patterns of migration (Rogers and Castro, 1981) and the institutional and social anchors that make families less likely to relocate once children enter compulsory schooling. From a geographical point of view, internal mobility within Switzerland implied a change of linguistic region in 4.4 per cent of cases. People arriving in (or returning to) Switzerland from abroad account for another 5.9 per cent of the sample. As expected, residential mobility spikes when respondents age and start to emancipate from their families of origin. In our sample, 84.3 per cent of respondents moved at least once after age 16.

Table 2. Early-life conditions associated with childhood mobility frequency

	1–2 moves	95 per cent cI	3 + moves	95 per cent cI
Family conditions during childhood				
Family breakdown (*ref.=no*)				
Parents' separation or death of one of the parents	.10(.02)***	.06, .15	.09(.01)***	06, .13
Parents' nationality background (*ref.=both Swiss nationals*)				
At least one non-Swiss	.00(.01)	−.03, .03	.00(.00)	−.01, .02
Parents' educational level (*ref.=lower than university*)				
At least one parent with higher education	.03(.02)	−.01, .08	.02(.01)	−01, .05
Parent's social class (*ref.=petty bourgeoisie*)				
Service class	.11(.02)***	.07, .15	.02(.01)*	.01, .05
Working class	.08(.01)***	.04, .12	.00(.01)	−.01, .01

Note: Some estimates appear as zero due to rounding conventions applied to the table.
*** $P \leq .001$; ** $P \leq .01$; * $P \leq .05$.

Direct and indirect effects of childhood mobility on social capital in adulthood

Fit indices point to a satisfactory fit of the structural equation model (SEM) to the data ($x^2/df = 6.9$; comparative fit index = 0.98; root mean square error of approximation = 0.03; standardized root mean square residual = 0.01). Bootstrapped parameter estimates for the predictors of childhood mobility, the direct paths on the mediating variables and towards social capital measures are reported in Tables 2 and 3, respectively.

The results in Table 2 corroborate initial expectations derived from the literature by showing that the breakdown of the respondent's family of origin (due to parents' separation or the death of one or both) is consistently associated with higher rates of childhood mobility. There is also some evidence that parental (lower) social background might factor in the decision to move. In contrast, variables referring to parents' educational attainment and nationality fail to reach statistical significance levels in explaining mobility trajectories during childhood. Moving towards the right end of the model, the interpretation of the regression coefficients in Table 3 points to an uneven effect of childhood mobility on the two mediators. Repeated mobility in childhood is negatively associated with the symbolic attachment to collective entities, i.e., the municipality, the canton, the linguistic region, and Switzerland as a country. Adverse effects are only marginally significant among occasional movers ($b = -0.13$; $P = 0.06$) but further accentuated if the respondent moved thrice or more during the first 16 years of life ($b = -0.37$; $P \leq 0.01$). As for the relationship between childhood mobility and the sense of agency in adulthood, it is of positive sign, being statistically significant for frequent movers ($b = 0.21$; $P \leq 0.05$) but not for occasional ones ($b = 0.04$; $P = 0.44$).

The results also reveal a complex interplay between age, childhood residential mobility, personal agency, and collective self-identity development. Age at interview, operationalized both as age in decades since 16 and age squared in decades, shows a curvilinear association with our mediators. Specifically, agency tends to increase with age ($b = 0.23$, $P \leq 0.001$), but the positive effect diminishes at older ages ($b = -0.04$, $P \leq 0.001$). This pattern suggests that as individuals accumulate experiences, responsibilities, and control over their environments, their sense of agency typically increases, though these gains tend to level off in later life. For the collective self-identity, a different trajectory emerges. Older respondents report lower identification with collective entities ($b = -0.24$, $P \leq 0.001$), but this negative relationship softens at older ages ($b = 0.07$, $P \leq 0.001$). This trajectory points to a shift from reliance on collective identities towards increasing individual autonomy in early adulthood, followed by a potential reengagement with family and community ties in later life.

Looking at the effect of the mediators on social capital adulthood outcomes, the friendship network, measured as the number of friends and the frequency of contact with them, benefits from attachment to collective entities. As reported in Table 3, the effect is small but significant at $P \leq 0.01$. Collective self-identification appears statistically negligible to perceived social support in adulthood. Frequent mobility has a negative and marginally significant effect on the friendship network, mediated by the collective self ($b_{ind} = -0.01$; $P = 0.06$). In contrast, we did not find support that a loss in terms of a collective self-identity would undermine future levels of social capital in its agentic component of perceived social support. The sense of agency

Table 3. Full set of SEM estimates

	Effects on mediating variables				Effects on social capital outcomes			
	Collective self-identity	95 per cent CI	Sense of agency	95 per cent CI	Friendship network	95 per cent CI	Social support	95 per cent CI
Childhood mobility								
1–2 moves as a child (*ref.=zero moves*)	−.13(.06)	−.25, .00	.04(.05)	−.07, .14	−.00(.00)	−.01, .01	.02(.06)	−.11, .14
3 + moves as a child (*ref.=zero moves*)	−.37(.12)**	−.63, −.10	.21(.09)*	.02, .38	.00(.01)	−.02, .02	.26(.11)*	.03, .47
Mediators								
Collective self-identity	—	—	—	—	.01(.00)**	.00, .00	.01(.01)	−.01, .05
Sense of agency	—	—	—	—	.00(.00)	−.00, .01	.16(.02)***	.11, .21
Family conditions during childhood								
Family breakdown (*ref.=no*)								
Parents' separation or death of one of the parents	−.26(.10)**	−.47, −.07	−.00(.07)	−.15, .15	.00(.01)	−.01, .02	.08(.09)	−.15, .24
Parents' nationality background (*ref.=both Swiss nationals*)								
At least one non-Swiss	−.16(.07)*	−.31, −.02	−.11(.05)*	−.21, −.01	.00(.00)	−.01, .01	−.16(.06)*	−.28, −.01
Parents' educational level (*ref.=lower than university*)								
At least one parent with higher education	−.72(.11)***	−.94, −.50	.18(.08)*	.02, .35	.01(.01)	−.00, .03	−.15(.09)	−.34, .01
Parent's social class (*ref.=petty bourgeoisie*)								
Service class	−.25(.08)**	−.42, −.08	.20(.06)**	.07, .34	−.00(.00)	−.02, .01	.14(.08)	−.00, .32
Working class	−.00(.07)	−.16, .15	−.04(.05)	−.15, .08	−.00(.00)	−.02, .01	.10(.08)	−.03, .29
Demographic features								
Age at the interview (linear term)	−.24(.06)***	−.36, −.11	.23(.05)***	.11, .32	−.05(.00)***	−.06, −.04	.09(.00)	−.04, .24
Age squared (quadratic term)	.07(.00)***	.05, .09	−.04(.00)***	−.06, −.02	.01(.00)***	.00, .01	−.06(.00)***	−.09, −.04
Sex (*ref.=male*)								
Female	.02(.06)	−.10, .14	−.33(.04)***	−.42, −.24	.01(.00)*	.00, .02	.71(.06)***	.60, .85

Note: Some estimates appear as zero due to rounding conventions applied to the table.
*** $P \leq .001$; ** $P \leq .01$; * $P \leq .05$.

positively correlates with the social backing in adulthood ($b = 0.16$; $P \leq 0.001$), which significantly mediates a positive effect of frequent mobility in childhood on social support ($b_{ind} = 0.03$; $P \leq 0.05$). This indirect effect is positive, suggesting that frequent mobility enhances the perception of social support in adulthood through an increase in the sense of agency. This mediation accounts for 10.8 per cent of the total effect. A graphical visualization of the main results is presented in Figure 2.

Results from robustness checks

In short, results from our baseline model reveal that frequent mobility in childhood, quantified as three or more family moves from birth to the age of 16, has direct and indirect statistically significant effects on the agentic component of social capital in adulthood but not on the size of the friendship network and the frequency of access to it. The collective self-identity does not exert a comparable impact on the outcomes.

We implemented additional tests to dig into the implications of these findings. First, we included mobility experiences later in adulthood (after the age of 16) as a confounder control in a follow-up model to disentangle the unique contribution of childhood residential mobility from the broader, cumulative mobility trajectory across the life course. The results in Table 4 indicate that moving frequently after age 16, especially moving three or more times, is strongly associated with lower levels of collective self-identity and poorer friendship networks. Frequent adult movers also reported lower perceived support, although this effect is weaker. These findings suggest that relocating as an adult may be particularly disruptive for maintaining long-term social ties, as these moves often uproot individuals from their established networks and place them in unfamiliar social contexts. At the same time, adulthood mobility

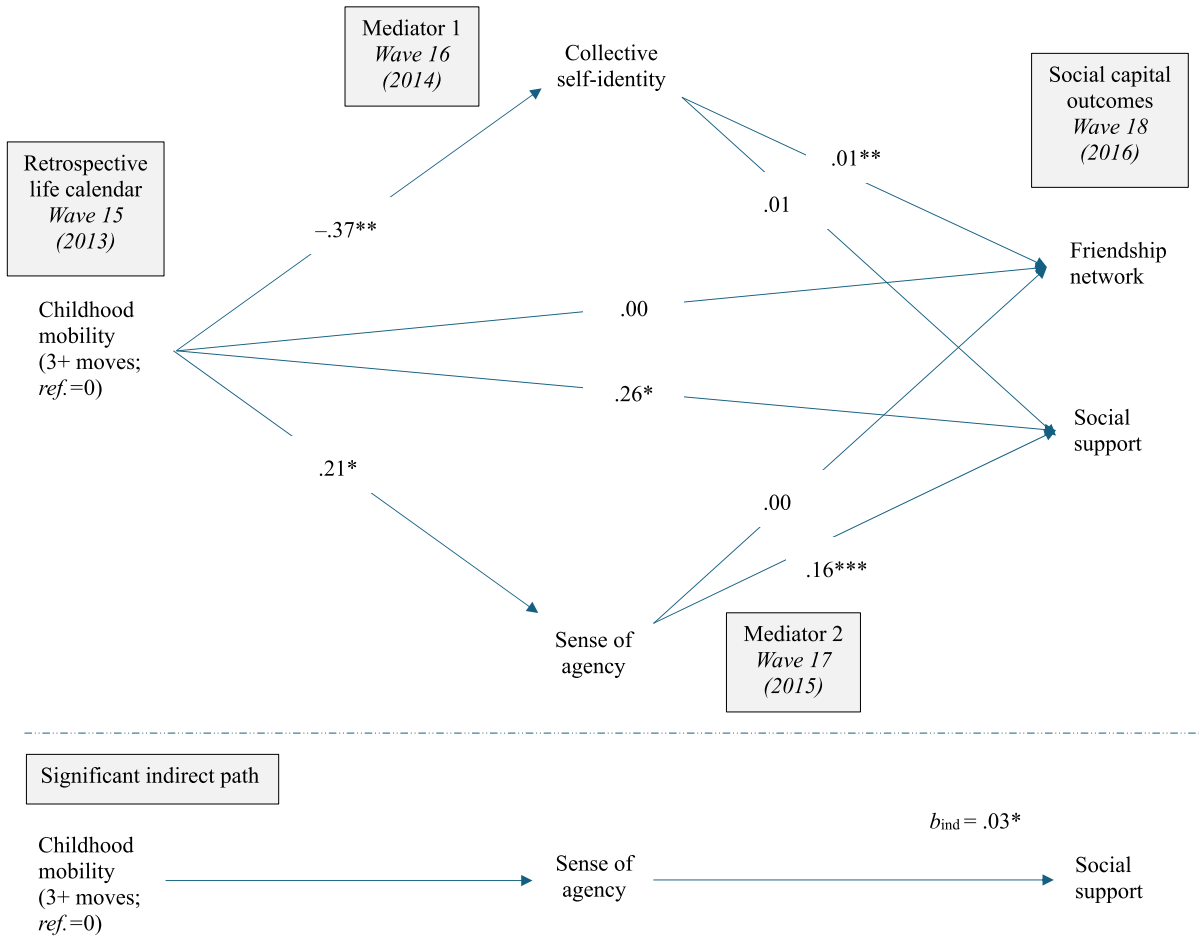

Figure 2. Results of the path analysis

Table 4. Follow-up adjustment model

	Collective self-identity	Sense of agency	Friendship network	Social support
Childhood mobility				
1–2 moves as a child (*ref.=zero moves*)	−.06(.06)	.02(.05)	−.00(.00)	.03(.07)
3 + moves as a child (*ref.=zero moves*)	−.28(.13)*	.18(.08)*	.00(.01)	.28(.12)*
Adulthood mobility				
1–2 moves after age 16 (*ref.=zero moves*)	−.38(.10)***	.02(.08)	−.02(.01)*	−.16(.11)
3 + moves after age 16 (*ref.=zero moves*)	−.88(.10)***	.21(.08)*	−.03(.01)**	−.22(.11)

Note: Some estimates appear as zero due to rounding conventions applied to the table.
*** $P \leq .001$; ** $P \leq .01$; * $P \leq .05$.

Table 5. Conditional effects and moderated mediation

	Sense of agency
Geographical mobility	
International mobility (ref.=no)	−.25(.09)**
International mobility * Childhood 3 + moves	−.01(.17)
Linguistic mobility (ref.=no)	−.13(.11)
Linguistic mobility * Childhood 3 + moves	−.15(.21)
Family conditions	
Parental higher educational level (ref.=lower than university)	.17(.08)*
Parental higher educational level * Childhood 3 + moves	.15(.26)
Service class (ref.=petty bourgeoisie)	.20(.06)**
Service class * Childhood 3 + moves	−.14(.23)
Working class (ref.=petty bourgeoisie)	−.01(.06)
Working class * Childhood 3 + moves	−.01(.24)

*** $P \leq .001$; ** $P \leq .01$; * $P \leq .05$.

showed a positive association with agency, similar to childhood mobility, reinforcing the hypothesis that adapting to new places and circumstances continues to demand (and perhaps cultivate) personal efficacy and a sense of control. However, moving in adulthood has fewer developmental benefits and more clearly undermines existing social capital.

Second, moderated mediation tests were implemented to check for conditional effects due to the types of geographical mobility and family-related social conditions during childhood. We narrowed our focus on the indirect pathway from frequent childhood mobility (moving three times or more) to perceived support via agency, as this was the only indirect effect that emerged as significant in the baseline model. When international mobility is added to the model, as in Table 5, it emerges as a disruptive force for agency, with those who experienced international mobility showing lower levels of agency than movers who stayed within the same country (b=−0.25; $P \leq 0.01$). However, the interaction between frequent moving and international mobility does not significantly moderate the effect of childhood mobility on perceived social support. A similar null moderation pattern was found for linguistic mobility. These results highlight that frequent mobility shapes adult outcomes, with or without crossing borders or languages, but that cross-border mobility presents additional risks to agency development. The interaction terms between frequent childhood mobility and key social conditions (working-class origin, service-class origin, and parental education) were not statistically significant either. Therefore, there is no evidence in our tests that the effect of frequent mobility on agency varies systematically across these social backgrounds.

Conclusions

This paper addresses a blind spot in the literature on childhood residential mobility by examining its long-term consequences for social capital in adulthood.

Leaving one's home to move elsewhere requires psychological and social adaptation processes that may have enduring implications for social relations. In this paper, we consider a dual adaptation process involving both a redefinition of children's identities and a change in their sense of individual agency, resulting from their adjustment to new environments and repeated relocations. To date, the literature has not clearly explained how these processes are interrelated. By linking social capital outcomes to the processes of identity formation and agency over time, this paper offers a new angle of exploration within the literature on childhood residential mobility. Our findings reveal a significant positive long-term effect of frequent residential mobility during childhood on perceived social support in adulthood. This effect operates through an enhanced sense of agency—namely, the capacity to cope with difficulties and make independent decisions—which tends to be stronger among adults who moved more frequently as children. Frequent movers also report a weaker identification with the city, region, and country in which they live; yet, this lower sense of collective belonging does not appear to have a significant effect on social capital indicators over time.

These findings shed light on an innovative mechanism within the literature on childhood mobility. On the surface, one might expect that any form of residential instability would undermine a child's sense of security and continuity, thereby reducing their confidence in shaping their environment. However, our results suggest a different developmental response. For children who experience repeated relocations, mobility becomes a process they learn to anticipate, manage, and eventually master (Oishi, 2010). Each move confronts these children with a predictable set of challenges: entering new schools, navigating unfamiliar neighbourhoods, and integrating into different peer networks. Over time, these repeated experiences provide a form of experiential learning through which children acquire the social and practical skills necessary to manage change. This gradual accumulation of adaptive resources cultivates a stronger belief that one can manage difficult transitions. (Masten, 2014).

We can read these results along the same lines as Erikson (1950) and subsequent extensions of his theory (Crocetti *et al.*, 2023). In the event of residential resettlement, children explore different identity options and pick up those that are functional to their adaptation. If this works out, then we might expect an extra benefit in terms of self-perceived control over life events (Oishi, Lun and Sherman, 2007). What is more, feeling integrated after relocation not only represents a major achievement for movers but also seems to be related to their ability to recreate and maintain a supportive network of relationships throughout adulthood (Bidart and Lavenu, 2005; Lubbers *et al.*, 2010). Frequent residential moves urge the activation of a network of support that, according to Nisic and Petermann (2013: p. 200), is 'more oriented towards actual needs'. Over the short term, this activation reduces the consequences of residential relocation, whereas over the long term, it can improve movers' familiarity with social capital functional mobilization. In this sense, frequent childhood mobility can be understood not just as a rupture, but as a biographical training ground.

Other results emerging from our analysis align with our expectations and the conclusions of earlier research (Mann, 1972; Oishi, Lun and Sherman, 2007). Respondents in our sample who reported repeated moves from birth to age 16 tend to consider that belonging to collective and symbolic entities (e.g., the municipality, the canton, the linguistic region, and Switzerland) is not a great deal for their identity. Even though there is no evidence that this loss in terms of a collective self-identity would undermine future levels of social capital, we cannot disregard possible negative spill-over effects on other variables that were not considered in our model, linked, for instance, with community investment and social cohesion. Finally, we found no clear association between moving as a child and the size and frequency of contact with friendship networks later in life.

The limitations of this analysis refer to both conceptual and empirical issues. First, childhood residential mobility was measured retrospectively, which makes our definition susceptible to recall bias, especially for moves occurring early in life. Although age at interview was controlled to account for this, retrospective data remain subject to imperfect memory and selective reporting. Second, the analysis focused primarily on the frequency of moves without capturing the subjective meaning of these relocations, such as whether moves were experienced as disruptive, voluntary, or beneficial. This limits the ability to fully understand the qualitative aspects of mobility that may matter for agency and social capital. Third, the study does not account for the precise geographic scale of moves (e.g., within the same neighbourhood vs. across regions or countries), meaning that different types of mobility are collapsed into a single count, potentially obscuring heterogeneous effects.

Despite these limitations, this study contributes to moving beyond the state of the art by disclosing some of the mechanisms that play a significant role in imprinting individual and social dynamics with lifelong repercussions for social assets. Frequent residential mobility as a child is often assumed to be an adverse childhood experience *per se* by previous literature. However, our research reveals it as a more multifaceted influence

on self and social outcomes, warranting further scrutiny. Overall, studies like ours highlight mobility as a developmental process embedded in broader patterns of social reproduction. Addressing these inequalities requires viewing mobility not merely as a geographic movement but as a social process with far-reaching life-course implications.

Author contributions

Riccardo Valente (Conceptualization [lead], Data curation [lead], Formal analysis [lead], Writing—original draft [equal]), and Mattia Vacchiano (Conceptualization [supporting], Formal analysis [supporting], Writing—original draft [equal])

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Data Availability

This study uses data from the Swiss Household Panel (SHP), conducted by FORS—the Swiss Centre of Expertise in the Social Sciences, University of Lausanne. The SHP data are freely available for research purposes through SWISSUbase (https://www.swissubase.ch) upon registration and acceptance of the user contract.

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