



# Rural to urban long-distance commuting in Sweden: Trends, characteristics and pathways



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## ABSTRACT

The rise of ICT and the shift toward jobs with more flexibility in working hours and places of work sparked popular debates about potential for a ‘rural renaissance’. A key argument was that there are increasing possibilities to live in the countryside while being employed in large cities. This paper uses data spanning two decades to examine trends in and characteristics of employee–employer ties between rural and urban areas in Sweden. Our main results suggest that rural-to-urban long-distance commuting is rapidly increasing, but not as fast as commuting flows elsewhere. Compared to the rural population at large, rural residents working in large cities constitute a strongly selected group of workers who are well paid, have long educations, are young and also have advanced knowledge-intensive occupations. Only about 30 percent of those who become rural-to-urban long-distance commuters have moved from urban areas; the vast majority constitute those who already lived in rural areas before starting to commute to urban areas.

## 1. Introduction

Rural areas in several countries have experienced a significant population decline as job opportunities increasingly concentrate in the major cities. Eurostat (2012) reports that, even though rural regions still host more than one-fifth of the total population in the EU27, many rural areas have experienced a population decline. In 2010, for instance, the urban population in the EU27 increased by 0.5 percent, whereas it decreased by 0.8 percent in the rural regions. This population change brings several challenges for both rural and urban areas. Rural areas face the problems of falling housing prices and deteriorating local tax bases, which often results in difficulties maintaining public services as well as poor development prospects in general (Niedomysl and Amcoff, 2011; Hospers, 2013, 2014). Conversely, many urban areas are struggling with housing shortages and various congestion problems owing to the rapid population increase.

In the Swedish case, which we analyze, policymakers have long argued that enlarging spatial labor markets through infrastructure improvements could enable people to live in rural areas and commute to larger cities. A main idea is that this could help mitigate the problems of both rural and urban areas (Sandow, 2008; Amcoff, 2009). If the economy is gradually becoming more flexible in how, where and when

people work, worker mobility could be facilitated and resident in rural areas may start to commute to work in urban areas. After all, cities are the main centers of employment opportunities and career advancement, suggesting that keeping employment links to cities is still important. At the same time, a more balanced population development could help to reduce some of the pressures of fast-growing cities. While large infrastructure investments have been made, improving railroads, broadband, etc., little is known about whether such investments have led to any significant changes benefiting rural areas in recent years.

This paper conducts an exploratory analysis of the extent to which people live in rural areas while being employed by employers in large cities. Using micro data for all inhabitants in Sweden, a country where sufficiently detailed information is available for the two most recent decades, in which IT adoption, as well as a shift from factory and traditional manufacturing jobs, has taken place, we examine three issues: first, the growth and significance of long-distance commuting; second, the characteristics of the commuters and the particulars of their employment; and, third, the pathways to becoming a long-distance commuter. As detailed in the paper, these analyses allow us to address a number of knowledge gaps in the current literature on long-distance ties between employers and employees.

Following this brief introduction, the rest of the paper is structured

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as follows. The next section (Section 2) provides the research context by reviewing previous research on long-distance commuting with a focus on rural areas. Section 3 presents the research design and describes the data employed. In Section 4, the results are presented, before turning to the conclusions in the last section (5).

## 2. Background and contribution

### 2.1. Urbanization and long-distance ties between rural workers and urban employers

It is a well-established fact that the world's population is rapidly becoming more urban. In 2008, for the first time in history, the majority of humanity lived in urban areas (United Nations, 2008). By 2050, it is estimated that 70 percent of the world's population will live in urban areas, compared to only 29 percent in 1950 (United Nations, 2008). In Europe, most rural areas have become increasingly sparsely populated as a result of out-migration to urban areas (Martí-Henneberg, 2005). United Nations (2014) estimates show that approximately 74 percent of the European population now lives in urban areas. To be sure, exceptions do exist, and a trend of counterurbanization was first noticed in the US (Berry, 1976), soon also appearing in other developed countries (Champion 1989; Kontuly 1998; Mitchell 2004; see Amcoff (2006) for a note of caution). The UK, although not a sparsely populated country, appears to be a good example where a reversal of the urbanization trends has been sustained (Bosworth, 2010). That said, for rural areas in most sparsely populated countries, counterurbanization seems distant, and realizing that population constitutes the foundation of any society helps to explain why many local governments are so eager to attract new residents (Hospers, 2011; Niedomysl, 2004, 2007).

If successful in attracting or retaining residents there can be significant community impacts, as shown by the small but growing literature on the economic and community impacts of in-migration to rural areas (see, e.g., Bosworth, 2010; Herslund, 2012). For example, Herslund (2012) describes how rural in-migrants who start businesses are driven to rural areas for their amenities and cheaper housing and are important to local businesses for extending their networks, for bringing in new knowledge from outside and for combining proximate and distant networks. This is of particular interest because, even if the economy is becoming less dependent on fixed locations of workplaces, change is likely to be slow and gradual rather than a dramatic break with the past (Felstead, 2012). Cities obviously still constitute the main centers of economic activity, providing the largest number of employment opportunities. Keeping links with the city is therefore presumably essential for the majority of those who choose to live in the countryside. Increasing long-distance commuting, possibly undertaken a few times per week, could be a sign of positive change for rural areas, which may become increasingly important over time.

The advent and spatial diffusion of information and communication technologies (ICT), most notably the Internet, been coupled with a shift toward a more service-based knowledge economy conceivably less dependent on fixed locations of workplaces, and partly due to the changing nature of work tasks (Cairncross, 1997; Felstead, 2012), sparked popular debates about the potential for rural renaissance. In short, if people were enabled to work from their rural homes, at least on a part-time basis, combined with occasional long-distance commuting, rural areas could benefit from the growth of cities and possibly even turn the flows of migration. Not only would such a reversal increase the tax base and spending power for rural areas, it could also facilitate knowledge transfer to rural areas, enabling further growth. While this should be a familiar story, it is notable how little is known about what has actually happened.

In the Swedish case, which we discuss, there has been a rapid expansion of broadband into rural areas. This has been actively promoted by the Swedish government, which claims that it '... is essential to have access to high-speed broadband throughout the country' (Swedish

government, 2009:3), and sees the new technology as having the potential to change traditional ways of working to enhance the possibilities to live in rural areas. It is, however, still largely unknown whether this development has led to any significant change. Indeed, such on-going investments may not necessarily lead to better services, for in rural areas they might even make things worse. For example, the spread of Internet banking could make banks in rural areas redundant, leading to further losses of jobs. Hence, if such investments are to be beneficial for rural areas, it is likely that they will have to be linked to growth in the number of highly skilled people working in the service sectors. It is likely that such jobs would have strong links to markets in large cities.

While little work has focused specifically on long-distance ties between workers and employers, in particular between workers living in rural areas and employers in urban areas, it seems generally accepted that people travel longer to reach their place of work. In Britain, commuting time and distance to work have been increasing (one in 25 commuters travels longer than 100 km each way to work), but the number of commutes has been decreasing (Lyons and Chatterjee, 2008). Also, in the US (Levinson and Wu, 2005), Finland (Helminen and Ristimäki, 2007) and Sweden (Sandow and Westin, 2010) extensive research shows that travel times have increased. According to Laegran (2008), studies that investigate working from home using ICT has not looked much at the urban/rural dimension. Yet, in the specific context of long-distance commuting between urban and rural areas, it is likely the quality of the environment, along with social ties, that exerts the main pull factor even if it may entail long-distance commuting. Major life decisions such as getting married or having a family, that otherwise may be put off due to, for example, high housing prices or lack of social networks nearby (see e.g. Darcy et al., 2005) may be realized with long-distance commuting to work. For couples, one of the partners may choose to commute, while the other may work closer to home (Green et al., 1999).

However, while longer commutes have obvious drawbacks in terms of monetary costs, they may also be detrimental to health (Lyons and Chatterjee, 2008; Sandow et al., 2014) and lower workers' satisfaction with life (Stutzer and Frey, 2004), which raises the question of why commutes are growing longer. For some, commuting may surely be productive in certain circumstances (Lyons and Urry, 2005). For example, commuting by train might provide working conditions similar to those in an office, or phone calls could be made while driving. For long-distance commuters it is very likely that they have a second apartment close to their workplace (Helminen and Ristimäki, 2007) and long-distance commuters tend to earn a higher income (Sandow and Westin, 2010) to be compensated for inconveniences related to commuting (Leigh, 1986). Even so, it seems likely that other benefits would have to contribute to making longer commutes worthwhile, but it also seems likely that any such benefits are linked to specific groups and circumstances.

### 2.2. Determinants of rural-to-urban long-distance commuting

Despite the common argument that the changing nature of work and new technologies give rise to new opportunities for workers to live in the countryside while still being employed in a large city, relatively few studies have examined the trends in or determinants of long-distance commuting (Dargay and Clark, 2012; Eliasson et al., 2003; van Ham et al., 2001; Limtanakool et al., 2006; McQuaid and Chen, 2012; Öhman and Lindgren, 2003). Existing studies often focus on examining the characteristics of long-distance commuters as well as the sectors they work in (Champion et al., 2009; Sandow, 2008; van Ham et al., 2001).

A handful of studies have investigated long-distance commuting with a focus on rural areas. Interestingly, despite definitions of long-distance commuters differing significantly between studies, there is a surprising coherence in the literature. For example, in some studies, individuals who travel over 30 km to an urban place of work from a

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