

Counterurbanization and Coronavirus: Probing the Evidence for the UK

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*Paper presented at the European Population
Conference side meeting on 'An End to Rural
Population Decline?', held at the University of
Groningen, 29 June 2022*

- The remit for this side meeting asks some **very good questions**, but also admits that it may be **too soon** for definitive answers
- **This is certainly the case for the UK:** its latest official population estimates are for mid 2020 and the latest internal migration data are for the whole year ending mid 2020, i.e. for 4 months of pandemic combined with the 8 months before
- **This presentation** focuses on the middle part of the paper, given that this meeting is itself providing the international ‘overview’, but there is also a preliminary attempt to answer the three questions posed for the meeting
- In relation to **the title of this meeting**, note that rural Britain has not experienced overall population decline for many decades, with the exodus of its young adults being offset by its net gain of other ages which also compensates for any natural decrease (for most periods and places)

Analysis of ONS migration data:

(1) Overall migration rate, 1975-2020

Any surge in migration in the early stages of COVID?

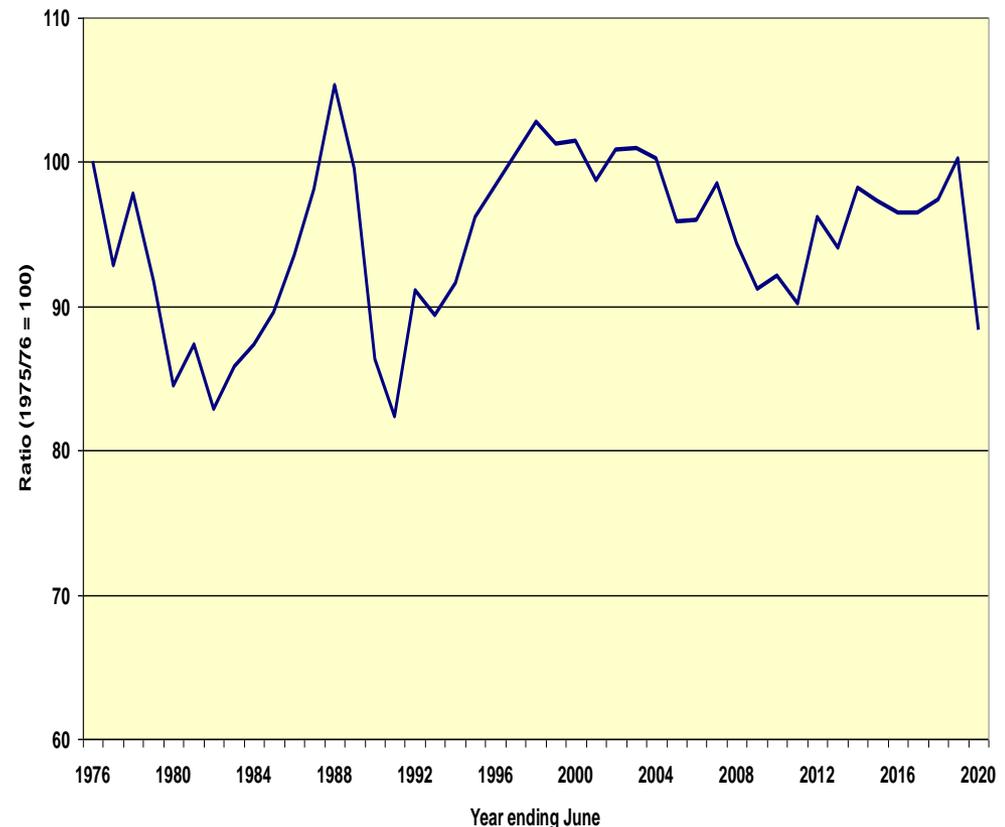
No, assuming the first 8 months of 2019/20 was like 2018/19.

The first 4 months of pandemic reduced the annual rate of all between-area migration by 11.5%

This was the sharpest one-year fall since the late 1980s.

Not surprising, given imposition of stringent lockdown rules on 23 March 2020 – though possibly exaggerated by the difficulty of registering a move then

Index of estimated rate of migration between 80 areas of England & Wales, 1975-2020, all ages (1975/76 = 100)



Source: Author's calculations based on ONS data

Analysis of ONS migration data: (2) for London, 2019/20 cf 2018/19

Any major exodus from London in the early stages of COVID?

London normally has a net outflow to rest of UK (which is offset by strong natural increase and gains from international migration)

This net outflow was higher in the year ending June 2020 than for the previous year: up by nearly 8k or 8.3%

BUT the gross outflow actually fell (down by 28k), so it was the larger reduction in gross inflow (by 36k or 14.5%) that was wholly responsible for the increased net outflow.

London's UK migration	Year ending June 2019	Year ending June 2020	Difference in number	% change
Net flow	-93,047	-100,811	-7,764	-8.3
Gross inflow	246,643	210,848	-35,795	-14.5
Gross outflow	339,690	311,659	-28,031	-8.2

Analysis of ONS migration data:

(3) Rural Britain, 2019/20 cf 2018/19

Any rural population boost in the early stages of COVID?

Hardly to be expected given London's gross outflow being lower, though possibly fewer left rural areas for the towns and cities?

General picture (from right-hand panel below) is of reduced migration flows both in and out of these 3 rural area types

Two of the 3 types follow London in seeing a larger % fall in inflow than outflow, so a lower net gain in 2019/20 for these. BUT the 'most rural' type posts a larger fall in outflow than inflow and so has a stronger net migration gain than in 2018/19 (0.46 cf 0.36).

Table: Internal migration rates (%) for Great Britain's most rural district types for the year ending June 2020 compared with the previous year

Local authority classification	Year ending June 2019			Year ending June 2020			Difference (% point)		
	In	Out	Net	In	Out	Net	In	Out	Net
Urban/rural fringe	5.76	4.95	0.81	4.98	4.25	0.73	-0.78	-0.70	-0.08
Agricultural fringe	5.23	4.52	0.71	4.60	3.90	0.69	-0.63	-0.62	-0.02
Rural extremes	3.85	3.49	0.36	3.35	2.89	0.46	-0.49	-0.60	0.11

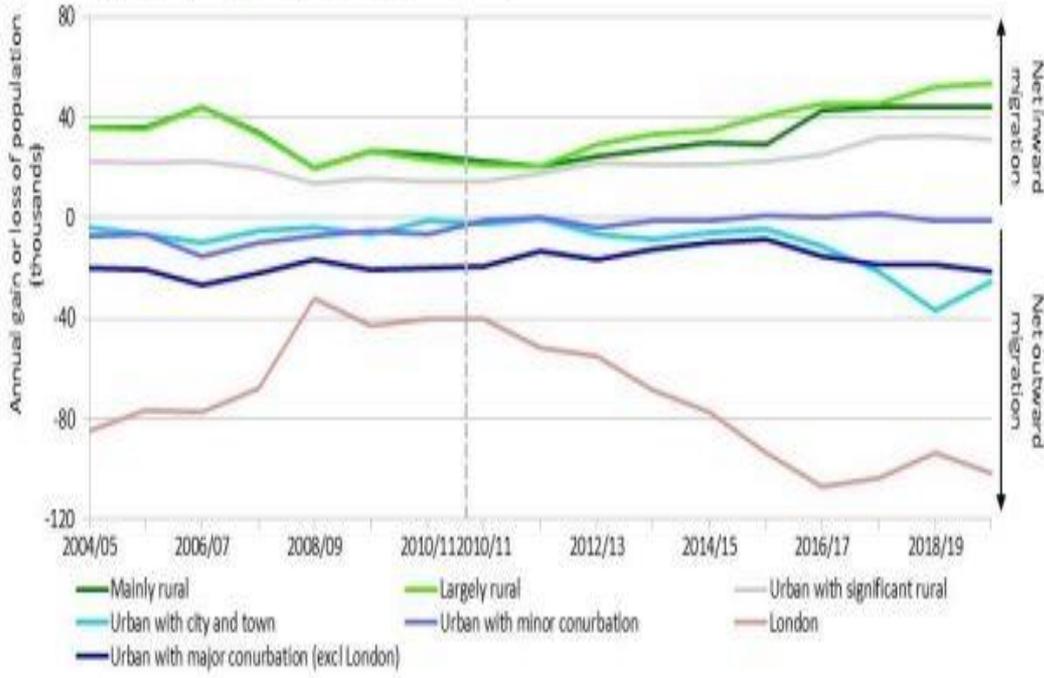
Analysis of ONS migration data:

(4) England's rural-urban typology

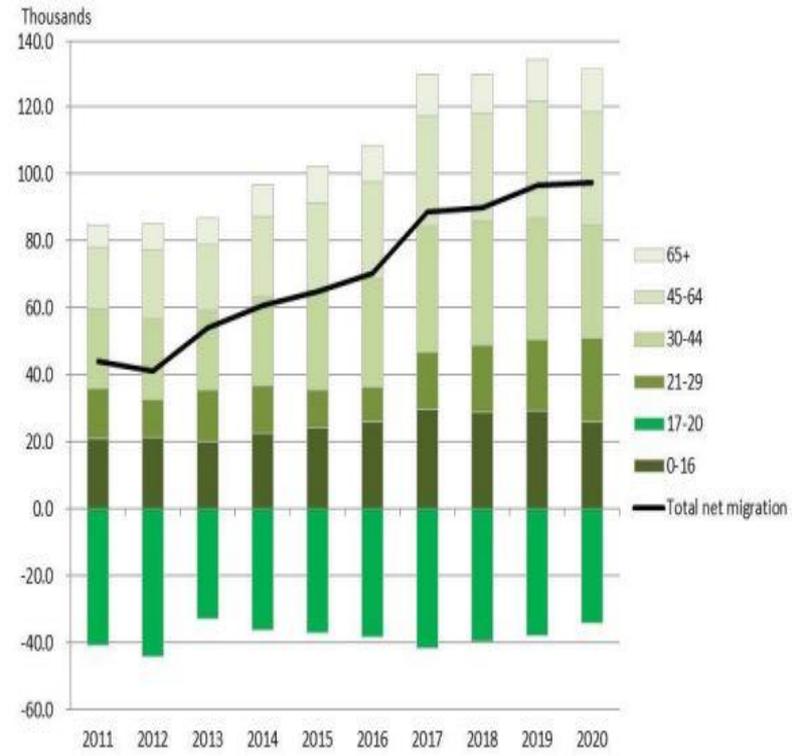
Largest net gains for the 2 types of Predominantly Rural areas (in green)

Net inflow to Predominantly Rural areas of all ages except 17-20s

Internal migration, England, 2004/05 to 2019/20



Net internal migration (within UK) to Predominantly Rural areas by age bands, mid-year 2011 to mid-year 2020, England



Note: The RUC01 for Local Authorities has been applied to all data up to 2009/10. Data for 2010/11 has been classified using both RUC01 and RUC11 to show the comparison. From 2011/12 onwards the RUC11 for Local Authorities has been applied.

Beyond 30th June 2020.....

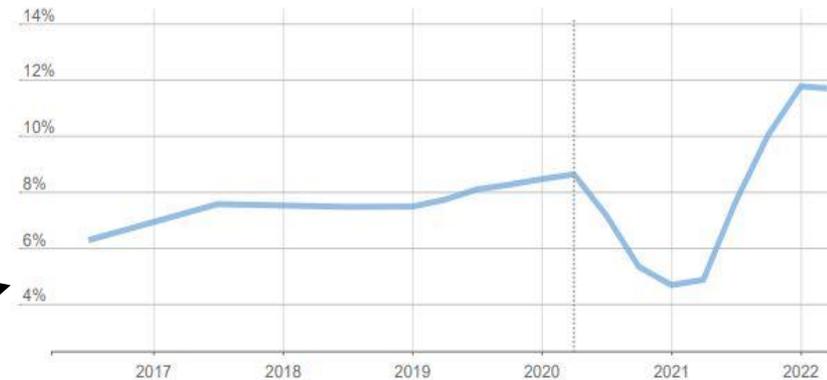
VERY DIFFICULT!!

- Estimate for year ending mid 2021 not expected until the post-2011 annual series is revised in line with 2021 Census results
- LFS/APS sample data affected by bias owing to ONS needing to alter its survey methods during the pandemic lockdowns
- Some information from Social Media and related sources (e.g. Facebook, Google Mobility) but not directly about migration
- Various reports on housing transactions and prices that relate to residential mobility, but can be subject to estate-agent 'hype'
- Other official survey and admin-based data series (e.g. on unemployment, crime, well-being), but only indicative
- Clearly, scope for triangulation across these sources, but a major task
- Best source for now (probably!) is the official monthly count of people registered with doctors (GPs), though issues over speed with which movers register and with which GPs remove former patients from their lists – but let's try, thanks to GLA ...

London's age cohort change through to April 2022

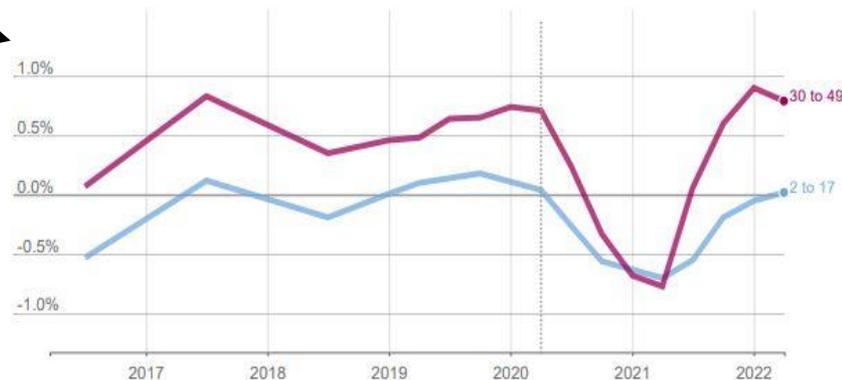
- Calculations using NHS Digital's 'Patients Registered': change from cohort size one year before
- Big drop in growth of young adults (18-29) after first lockdown (dotted line), then strong recovery
- Increased net outflow of family ages (2-17 and 30-49) after first lockdown, then return to pre-pandemic levels
- Breakdown of <17s (not shown) gives greater and more persistent net outflow for pre-school children
- NB: Data are for all migration – so higher domestic outflows or reduced international inflows before reversal?

Figure 3: Annual change in patient register: young adults (age 18 to 29)
Change in count from year before, London



Source: NHS Digital - Patients Registered at a GP Practice. GLA calculations.
Note: Dotted line at 1 April 2020. Change relative to previous counts of persons one year younger.

Figure 4: Annual change in patient register: family ages
Change in count from year before, London



Source: NHS Digital - Patients Registered at a GP Practice. GLA calculations.
Note: Dotted line at 1 April 2020. Change relative to previous counts of persons one year younger

Evidence from property prices & related commentary

Three trends noted for London region by academic researchers (e.g. Gallent & Madeddu, 2021):

- Tilt in demand towards suburban family homes and away from urban apartments
- Decentralization of demand to near-urban locations with good connectivity to London
- Rise in demand for more distant countryside beyond London's Green Belt

BUT little concrete data on migration impact of first lockdown and even less on more recent trends

ALSO difficult to separate out the effect of turning rural second homes into primary residence from 'more permanent moves'

Conclusions?

Basically NONE! The UK is currently a 'data desert' for recent internal migration statistics and will remain so for many months (despite yesterday's release of first results from 2021 Census)

BUT in response to Leo's questions, some 'informed' speculation:

- 1) First COVID lockdown produced a reduction in between-place moves rather than accelerated urban exodus (not surprisingly!)
- 2) By 2022, signs of a return to pre-pandemic migration patterns (some with overshoot = catch-up?), so probably not structural
- 3) Just because of COVID? Possibly not, because in the UK it is mixed up with effects of BREXIT (and climate change?)

INDEED the media are predicting 'a return to the 1970s' (strikes, stagflation, recession, etc.) = 'decade of counterurbanization'

SO maybe there will also be a reversal of the post-2000 'urban renaissance' over the coming decade(s)?!

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