



The Migration-commuting nexus in rural England. A longitudinal analysis



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ABSTRACT

This research examines the commuting behavior of workers who have recently moved to or within rural areas in England. While internal migration and commuting are often examined separately, the present study sees them as interrelated, hence the term ‘migration-commuting nexus.’ This study uses the ASHE data in the first longitudinal study of changes in residence and subsequent changes (or lack thereof) of place of work. In particular, this study examines persistence and change of commuting distance status, the time trend of such changes, and their association with recent rural migration and with socio-economic attributes of English workers.

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1. Introduction

Migration and commuting are the two main forms of internal population mobility within nation states. Migration is a permanent or semi-permanent change of residence of sufficient duration and distance to interrupt everyday activity patterns (Long, 1988). Commuting, in contrast, is a form of population circulation that typically involves a daily journey between a permanent residence and a fixed workplace (Green, 2004).¹ While the rate of internal migration tends to fluctuate in response to the business cycle and other social and economic circumstances, in the UK on average about one in ten people have changed residence annually during the last 35 years, indicating that change of residence is fairly common (Champion, 2014). This is particularly true in comparison with other EU countries such as France or Germany where residential change is less common (International Organization for Migration, 2013; Clark and Drever, 2000). Similarly, while

working at home has increased recently (to about 10% in England), the vast majority of workers in England and Wales commute to jobs outside of their homes (ONS, 2014).

Internal migration and commuting are often examined separately with the implicit assumption that they are independent forms of geographic mobility. However, some researchers see these two spatial processes as interrelated, and have identified the so called “migration-commuting nexus” (Sandow and Westin, 2010). A main question motivating research on this nexus concerns the extent to which migration can be a substitute for commuting, or vice versa. For example, Sandow and Westin (2010) contend that longer distance commuting has replaced much internal migration in Sweden, becoming more prevalent because of enhanced transportation and communication infrastructure, housing restrictions in urban areas, and residential preferences for lower density areas. The difficulties which dual worker families often encounter in finding an optimal residential location for both workers is also thought to make longer distance commuting, at least by one spouse, more acceptable. According to Green (1999a), some families engage in long distance weekly commuting in lieu of migrating even though such arrangements were shown to place the “stay at home spouse” at an economic and social disadvantage.

Understanding how migration and commuting might substitute for each other is an important research question, but this paper’s focus is somewhat different. Rather than considering the potential

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¹ Commuting typically involves a daily journey to work, but can also involve longer duration, albeit temporary, trips between permanent residence and a fixed workplace.

substitutability of these two forms of internal population movement, this research examines the commuting behavior of workers who have recently moved to or within rural England. This is an important question because the drivers of moves from the city to the countryside, or within the countryside, are generally considered to be consumption-related, e.g., motivated by amenities and perceived community attributes associated with quality of life rather than by employment-related concerns. As [Champion \(2001:45\)](#) observed, urban–rural migration has persisted in Britain because of the British people's "love affair with the countryside" which he contends has been reinforced by planning policies of urban containment. Hence, workers who move from the city to the countryside, or within the countryside, for amenity reasons might be expected to tolerate a longer commute in return for a perceived enhancement of their quality of life. Similar to the short distance intra-city consumption-related moves researched by [Green \(2004\)](#), urban to rural and rural to rural migrations are not necessarily accompanied by workplace moves, suggesting that many people who are employed both before and after migrating commute back to their pre-migration workplaces. [Partridge et al. \(2010\)](#) report findings supporting this position in Canada, e.g., when persons move to rural areas for lifestyle reasons, they tend to retain their urban employment. This expectation is generally consistent with previous research, although as will be discussed below, such research has used cross sectional data, and hence is unable to directly examine whether such migrants retain or switch their workplaces subsequent to moving.² Trading off increased commuting time for perceived enhancements of quality of life is also consistent with the notion of "commuting time tolerance." In a study of Lisbon, Portugal, for example, [Vale \(2003\)](#) found that employees tended to retain their previous residences after their employers moved production facilities into central city development zones.³ Similarly, [Romani et al. \(2003\)](#) showed that Catalan workers who migrated to a new municipality were more likely to commute outside of their residence sub-region than workers who were residentially stable. They explain this by noting that persons who moved to the suburbs for consumption reasons typically commute back to central city jobs. In other words, urban to sub-urban migration resulted in longer commutes. The authors pointed out that this finding is at variance with the conventional theory of urban land use change proposed by [Alonso \(1964\)](#) that workers typically change their residence in order to minimize their journey to work.

The present authors agree that the persistence of longer distance commuting among persons who might otherwise be expected to reduce their journey to work through migration is an important focus of research, but it is not the same as examining the actual commuting behavior of persons who have *already migrated*, especially workers who migrate from urban to rural areas. Rural England is experiencing a significant amount of internal migration among rural areas as well as from urban to rural areas ([ONS, 2013](#)). This has placed many rural migrants far from their pre-migration jobs. Accordingly, this paper examines the commuting behavior of recent migrants living in rural areas. The following interrelated questions are investigated:

1. Do rural workers who move from urban to rural areas, or among places within rural regions, commute farther than rural workers who are stayers?

- a. If so, can this association between migration and commuting distance be explained by controlling for other attributes of rural workers that are associated with commuting distance?
2. Are rural workers who move from urban to rural areas, or among places within rural regions, more likely to change their commuting distance subsequent to moving compared with rural workers who are stayers?
 - a. If so, is retaining or changing one's commuting distance subsequent to moving associated with one's commuting distance prior to moving?
 - b. What attributes of workers, other than initial commuting distance, are associated with the likelihood of increasing or decreasing one's commuting distance?
3. Do workers residing in rural areas who change their commuting distance do so by changing workplace, residence, or both?

Little research to date has directly examined these questions. This paper seeks to fill this gap by analyzing a longitudinal data file that includes annual information on place of residence and place of work in England from 2002 through 2006.

Our analysis of these questions is organized in three main sections. First we briefly review previous research on migration and commuting and indicate how conducting a longitudinal study with panel data can be expected to add to current knowledge. Next we discuss our research strategy introducing the ASHE data set, our definitions of migration and commuting, and our statistical approach. The data analysis that follows examines our three research questions as indicated above.

2. Background

2.1. Geographic mobility and changing settlement structure

Both migration and commuting contribute to what [Castells \(2000\)](#) has characterized as a 'world of flows' that is characterized by a heightened movement of labor, population, information, capital, ideas and objects. Spatially-oriented social scientists refer to this perspective as the 'mobilities paradigm.' [Urry \(2007\)](#) coined this term to call attention to the increased levels of mobility, and new forms of mobility, that structure today's increasingly interdependent world. The mobilities paradigm includes 'movements of people, objects, capital, and information across the world, as well as more local processes of daily transportation, movement through public and private spaces, and the travel of material things in everyday life' ([Urry, 2007:6](#)). The mobilities paradigm 'connects the analysis of different forms of travel, transport, and communication with the multiple ways in which economic and social life is performed and organized through time and various spaces.' ([Urry, 2007:6](#))⁴ In this article, we are interested in population mobility and especially in the migration and commuting that occurs between urban and rural England as well as within the rural sector itself.

2.1.1. Rural migration

[Champion \(2013\)](#) showed that even though urban and rural areas of the UK grew by approximately the same rate between 2001 and 2011, the net direction of internal migration has continued to favor rural areas, albeit at a lower rate during 2007–2012 than

² Similarly, the present authors believe that migration between different rural places is not typically associated with a change of workplace.

³ Although they might change the mode of transportation.

⁴ It should be noted that several researchers have determined that the rate of internal migration has declined significantly since around 1990 in more developed nations. (see [Molloy et al., 2013](#) for a review).

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