

# Search for a Socially Sustainable Everyday Life. Motives for Counterurban Moving Families in Sweden.

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## Extended abstract

### Introduction

Despite present urban growth it could be acknowledged that urban living might not be perceived as socially sustainable for all. Living in increasingly crowded metropolitan areas may present challenges in organising everyday life such as access to affordable housing, time-consuming commutes to day-care, school and work, and access to amenities and resources for leisure activities. In this project we study families who have moved out from metropolitan areas and settled in a smaller setting, focusing on their motivation for migration.

Recent research indicates an emerging trend of out-migration from metropolitan areas in the Nordic countries (e.g., Denmark and Sweden) (Aner, 2016; Hansen and Aner, 2017; Sandow and Lundholm, 2020) as well as in the Netherlands (Karsten, 2020). In Sweden, young families constitute an important share of the migration flow out from the major cities (Statistics Sweden 2014; 2015). This group is often identified by local politicians and planners as particularly desirable migrants to attract, partly since in-migration of families with children counteract the trend of population ageing in many parts of the countryside. Much earlier counter-urban research has rather narrowly focused on moves to specifically rural areas, however moving from a larger to a smaller urban setting is a much more common practice (Sandow and Lundholm, 2020). Therefore, aiming to catch a variance in preferred destinations, we are focusing on experiences of young families moving from the three large metropolitan areas of Stockholm, Göteborg and Malmö to various types of non-metropolitan areas.

Based on survey data, this study focus on the extent families' migration motives are influenced by considerations of different aspects of organisation of everyday life in place of origin and destination. The aim is to identify and analyse the main migration motives expressed by the counterurban families and how they differ between destinations. Thereby, this study will contribute with enhancing our understanding of the spectrum of drivers, and how they shape the geographical destination choices, among counterurban moving families.

### Theoretical focus

#### *Counterurban migration and lifestyle*

While research on interregional migration has focused on economic, educational and work-related motives for moving, a growing body of research have identified various *lifestyle factors* within migration narratives, e.g., community, opportunities for meaningful activities, climate, proximity to nature and other amenities, novelty and experiences, authenticity and health (Benson and O'Reilly, 2009; Torkington et al., 2015). Elements of self-reflexivity and

self-transformation are also sometimes present when the move is a strategy to “downsize” and escape from the city as urban life is perceived as stressful and cramped (Hoey, 2014). These narratives closely resemble the often described pull of the romanticized countryside, and in this aspect counterurbanisation has been framed as a form of *lifestyle migration* (Eimermann et al., 2012; Halfacree, 2014; Hoey, 2014).

The counterurban literature is often trying to distinguish between counterurban movers depending on their motives (Halfacree, 2008; Karsten, 2020; Mitchell, 2004). The degree of emphasis on the preference for rural environments is one factor, which in some cases also entail aversion against urban life. Researcher have sought to broaden the view of the counter-urban migrant and incorporate movers and rural destinations that does not fit the “typical” counter urban movement (Bijker et al., 2013; Grimsrud, 2011; Halfacree, 2008). Several studies have also found that among suburbanisers and counterurbanisers there are migrants moving to rural areas more out of practical reasons or being displaced by high property prices rather than being pulled by images of ‘rural idyll’ (Bijker and Haartsen, 2012; Karsten, 2020).

Drawing from research on lifestyle migration, it is understood that the migrants’ ideas and aspirations of living “a good life” is based on their access to varying resources which allow them to fulfil desired needs in their everyday lives (Åkerlund, 2013). These resources can be, for example, access to nature, school, meaningful activities, social relationships and public services. The availability or quality of the resources vary in different contexts and can therefore play a vital role in the migration decision. These resources are valued differently depending on the individual preferences and perceptions of migrants (Åkerlund and Sandberg, 2015; Åkerlund, 2013).

One point of departure in this study is that lifestyle factors and organisation of everyday life shapes migration motives. We assume that families strive to achieve a “socially sustainable everyday life”. By this, we mean being able to provide a satisfactory work-life-balance for all family members and an overall perceived quality of life (Dempsey et al., 2011). A lay definition may be understood as living “a good life”, which can be connected to the access of place-bound resources (for example child-care provision, schools, shops, public and infrastructure services, natural amenities, social networks) that families can utilize, and which help them organise their everyday lives, and/or fulfil aspects of quality of life. Relocating the family to a geographical context outside a metropolitan area could then be a strategy to achieve a more socially sustainable everyday life.

### *Life course*

The concept of *life course* is a useful theoretical framework to understand the needs and desires families have in their everyday life and is often used in migration research (Bernard et al., 2014; Feijten et al., 2008; Stockdale and Catney, 2014). For our research, the life course perspective is useful for two reasons. Firstly, because it sets focus on the situation that families with small children are in. Central to the life course perspective is that specific life course events, such as changes of employment or changes in the household composition, may raise the need to adapt the housing situation. Families with small children are in a transitional period in the life course where the new life course stage could bring reconsideration of priorities when it comes to how

and where the daily life best can be organised. Family formation can trigger migration, typically residential migration, but when moving across longer distances, families are a group with a tendency to move downwards in the urban hierarchy (Kulu, 2008; Lindgren, 2003). Secondly, in line with recent discussions regarding migration and life courses, we argue that migration should be viewed not so much as a discrete event but rather acknowledging that mobility is relational, linking lives in space and time (Findlay et al., 2015). For example, families may have links to parents who may live close by which can enable or constrain the migration decision. Returning to the roots and moving closer to existing family networks has been identified as important motives for counter-urban migration, especially for young families (Haartsen and Thissen, 2014; Scott et al., 2017). Experiences of prior migration and places throughout the life course are also potentially important for future migration decisions. Feijten et al. (2008) found that persons with experience of rural living early in life were more prone than others to move to rural areas in general in later stages of their life course. We argue that a life course perspective where links to family and friends as well as previous residential experience contributes to our understanding of counter-urban migration of young families.

## **Data and methods**

The empirical results are based on a survey conducted in 2019. The survey was sent out to households including children under the age of 13 who moved from one of the three metropolitan areas in Sweden (Stockholm, Göteborg and Malmö) to a non-metropolitan area in the time-period 2017-2019. Only intact couples who had lived 3 years or longer in metropolitan areas before the move were included. 5,807 couples met the criteria above and the questionnaires were sent to one individual in the couple. A total of 2,801 people answered the questionnaire, corresponding to a response rate of 48.4 percent

To identify the factors which influence families with young children to out-migrate from metropolitan areas a Factor Analysis Approach will be used. The general purpose of factor analysis is to find a way in condensing the information contained in a number of original variables into a smaller set of new, composite dimensions (factors) with a minimum loss of information. 27 Likert-scale items were used in the questionnaire, and these will be used to estimate the motives for making a counterurban move and to analyse their relation to destination choices. The analysis will be conducted separately for counterurban moves to the metropolitan hinterland, middle-sized and small towns, and rural areas.

## **(Expected) findings**

This research will contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of recent counterurban migration behaviour among families with young children. Through identifying the main migration motives among young families leaving the metropolitan areas and analysing how they differ between families with different socio-economic characteristics and different types of destinations, we will be able to provide insights in contemporary counterurban migration behaviour. Preliminary results indicate that the overarching aspiration for these families is to find a better environment for the upbringing of their children and a search for more time with the family. We also find differences between subgroups of movers where for instance about half moved back to where they grew up. Housing prices are as expected often stressed as a motive, both for return migrants and other counterurban movers.

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