

Urban Exodus After COVID-19? Internal Migration Trends Pre- and Post-pandemic in Germany

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Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic has been linked to increased net migration gains in suburban, peri-urban, and rural areas, at the expense of larger cities, contributing to suburbanization in many Western countries. Post-pandemic trends are less understood, but recent evidence indicates a return to pre-pandemic levels of internal migration intensity. This study examines internal migration trends in Germany in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, drawing on comprehensive flow data from 1991 to 2024. We analyze migration patterns across four urban-rural categories to assess the destinations of different age groups. The results indicate that net migration losses in the large cities continue to be driven by young adults. The pre-pandemic trend of sub- and counterurbanization persists during and after the pandemic, largely due to stable urban-to-rural migration by family movers. However, the second-most densely populated areas, “urban counties”, emerge as the winners in the internal migration trends across the urban-rural continuum.

Keywords: Internal Migration • Germany • Suburbanization • Urbanization • COVID-19 pandemic

1 Background

The COVID-19 pandemic has been associated with a drop in internal migration intensity and increased net migration gains in suburban, peri-urban, and rural areas, at the expense of larger cities in many industrialized societies (*Borsellino et al. 2022; Fielding/Ishikawa 2021; González-Leonardo et al. 2022; Kotsubo/Nakaya 2023; Rowe et al. 2023; Stawarz et al. 2022; Wolff/Mykhnenko 2022*). This observation occurred within a broader phase of suburbanization and counterurbanization, driven by factors such as shifts in housing markets and changes in the demographic composition of urban and rural areas (e.g., *Ghio et al. 2023; Stawarz et al. 2021*). For Germany, *Steinführer et al. (2024)* claim this suburbanization phase started in 2014, when migration balances shifted in favor of rural areas, particularly those located near larger cities.

Following the onset of the pandemic, researchers have suggested that the expansion of remote work influenced residential decision-making in favor of sub- and counterurbanization (e.g., *Dolls/Mehles* 2021; *Lei/Liu* 2022). Greater opportunities to work from home may enable individuals to live farther from their workplaces and commute less frequently, leading to increased out-migration from cities to suburban areas. However, some argue that the incentive to migrate due to remote work is limited, as significant commuting savings occur only when a high proportion of work is done from home, which few employees experience (e.g., *Rüger et al.* 2024). Additionally, remote work may enhance individuals' appreciation of their place of residence, thereby reducing their intention to migrate (*Konopielko* 2021).

Evidence from Germany revealed that the increased net migration losses of larger cities in 2020 were primarily driven by young adults not moving into cities, rather than by middle-aged and older internal migrants, who continued to move out of cities at similar rates as before the pandemic (*Stawarz et al.* 2022). One factor appears to have been the postponement of plans to leave the parental home among young adults during the pandemic (*Luppi et al.* 2024). This gave rise to speculation that the intensification of suburbanization may be short-lived. In contrast, *Knuepling et al.* (2025) concluded that rural areas benefited from an influx of younger, highly skilled individuals after the pandemic, suggesting a shift in traditional internal migration patterns driven by remote work. However, conclusions drawn solely from net migration provide only a limited perspective for understanding internal migration patterns, which is why more detailed analyses consider both outflows and inflows (*Rogers* 1990).

First evidence comparing 2020 and 2021 indicates a return to pre-pandemic internal migration trends in Spain and Australia (*González-Leonardo et al.* 2022; *Perales/Bernard* 2023). However, insights into post-pandemic internal migration patterns remain scarce. In this paper, we use the most recent internal migration flow data to assess whether the sub- and counterurbanization trends in Germany have continued after COVID-19, and which age groups are driving these changes.

2 Data and Methods

We use time-series data on annual inter-county migration flows, sourced from the German Federal Statistical Office and the Statistical Offices of the Federal States of Germany, covering the years 1991 to 2024 and harmonized for boundary changes. The flow data are considered reliable, as individuals in Germany are legally required to register their residence with the municipality upon moving. However, they are subject to changes in legal practices over time and may be potentially affected by underreporting, especially among young adults leaving their parents' home. Internal migration registry data have also been subject to methodological changes during the study period, most importantly marked by the start of automatically de-registering internal migrants from their origin municipality as of 2002 (*Richter* 2007). However, both data issues are unlikely to affect the time periods that are the focus of this study. Finally, it is important to note that internal migration patterns are

reportedly influenced by the centralized redistribution of refugees after their initial registration. While this had a particularly noticeable effect during the years of high refugee migration to Germany in 2015 and 2016 (*Stawarz et al. 2022; Weber 2022*), internal migration patterns may also be affected by the substantial migration of Ukrainian refugees after 2022 (*Sauer et al. 2023*).

For the years 2019 to 2024, we only have access to age-specific inter-county migration flows by origin and destination in aggregated form, using a pre-defined urban-rural classification described below. For the years 1991 to 2018, detailed flow data by origin and destination at the county level (400 counties) are aggregated accordingly. For the years 2016 to 2018, the data are complemented with flow data from the *Research Data Centre (RDC) of the Federal Statistical Office and Statistical Offices of the Federal States of Germany* (2026) to address data quality issues specific to these years.

To examine how internal migration trends differ between urban and rural areas, we employ an established four-tier classification of counties (NUTS-3 level), developed by the *Federal Institute for Research on Building, Urban Affairs and Spatial Development (BBSR)*, based on administrative boundaries from 2021 (*BBSR 2024*). The classification categorizes counties from most urban to most rural as follows: large cities ($N = 67$), urban counties ($N = 133$), intermediate counties ($N = 97$), and rural counties ($N = 103$). "Large cities" have administrative autonomy and a minimum population of 100,000. "Urban counties" are defined as counties where at least 50 percent of the population resides in cities or towns (population $> 20,000$) and have a population density of at least 150 people/km², or where at least 150 people/km² reside outside of large/medium towns. "Intermediate counties" ("densely populated rural counties") have at least 50 percent of their population in large or medium-sized towns but a population density below 150 people/km² or have less than 50 percent of their population in towns but maintain a density of at least 100 people/km² outside of towns. "Rural counties" ("sparsely populated rural counties") are defined as those with under 50 percent of their population in large or medium-sized towns and a density of under 100 people/km² outside of towns.

Our analyses are based on annual 4x4 matrices of inter-county moves by county type of origin and destination. Since we are particularly interested in age-specific patterns, we also examine these matrices separately by age groups. Thereby, we pay specific attention to young adults (aged 18-29) as well as family and labor market age groups (children under 18 and adults aged 30-49), as those were found to be highly mobile and thus contribute most to regional population redistribution (*Ghio et al. 2023; Stawarz/Sander 2019*). Given the predefined age categories provided in our data, the data are disaggregated into five age groups: under 18, 18-24, 25-29, 30-49, and 50 and above.¹

¹ In principle, the data allow the "50 and above" category to be further divided into "50 to 64" and "65 and above." However, as these age groups are the least mobile and contribute little to the spatial redistribution of the population, we keep them as a single category to simplify the analysis (cf. *Stawarz et al. 2022*).

Internal migration flow data are combined with county-level population data from the German Federal Statistical Office and the Statistical Offices of the Länder (*Statistisches Bundesamt* 2026). It should be noted that the estimated population counts provided by the statistical offices have been shown to be impacted by overreporting, particularly due to issues related to the deregistration of foreigners. This may be especially true for the data prior to the 2011 Census (*Statistisches Bundesamt* 2025).

Using the origin-destination matrix described above, in combination with the population at risk – defined as the mid-year population – we analyze internal migration trends using crude migration intensity (CMI) by age groups and net migration rates (NMR) by county types and age groups (*Bell et al.* 2002; *Rees et al.* 2017). The overall CMI is defined as the total number of inter-county moves M divided by the population at risk P :

$$CMI = \frac{M}{P} \quad (1)$$

The overall NMR of county type i is defined as the net migration flows divided by the population at risk P_i within county type i :

$$NMR_i = \frac{D_i - O_i}{P_i} \quad (2)$$

Where D_i is the total in-migration to county type i and O_i is the total out-migration to other county types. Age-specific CMIs and NMRs for each age group are calculated accordingly.

To gain further insights, we construct a matrix of crude migration rates (CMR) between the four county types. For each combination of county type of origin i and county type of destination j , we calculate the total crude internal migration rate (CMR) as the ratio of the number of moves M_{ij} between i and j to the population at risk P_i within county type i :

$$CMR_{ij} = \frac{M_{ij}}{P_i} \quad (3)$$

Again, this is also done for each age group separately.

While we analyze internal migration trends from 1991 onward, our focus is on the period from 2018 to 2024. This allows us to compare pre-pandemic (2018–2019), pandemic (2020–2021), and post-pandemic trends (2022–2024). We define 2020 and 2021 as the pandemic years in this study. Although some government measures remained in place in 2022 (*Hale et al.* 2021), they were unlikely to have substantially affected internal mobility in Germany.

3 Results

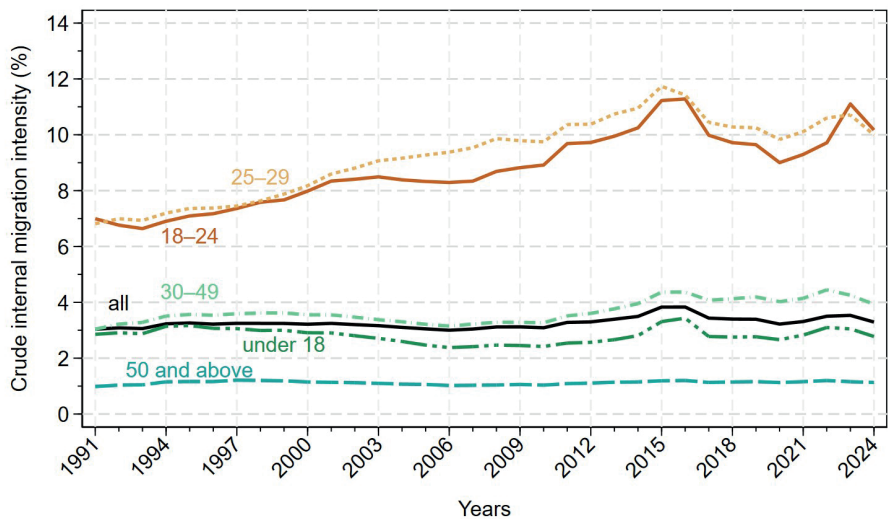
First, we assess trends in age-specific crude migration intensity (CMI). While changes among most age groups have been modest, the increase in CMI among the population aged 18 to 29 is remarkable over the period from 1991 to 2024 (Fig. 1). In 2011, a notable increase in CMI is observed across all age groups, with the exception of those aged 50 and above. As internal migration tends to respond to economic fluctuations, this pattern may reflect a catch-up effect following the 2009 economic crisis (e.g., *Van Der Gaag/Van Wissen* 2008), during which Germany's gross domestic product (GDP) declined by more than 5 percent, followed by a rebound in 2010 and 2011, with growth rates of around 4 percent in each year (*World Bank* 2026). Furthermore, it should be noted that internal migration – particularly among groups below 50 – was temporarily elevated around 2015 due to high immigration levels and the systematic redistribution of asylum seekers recorded in population registers.

The decline in CMI in 2020 due to COVID-19 was most pronounced among 18- to 24-year-olds. However, this age group shows a particularly strong increase in CMI after 2020, with a moderate drop only in 2024. The temporary peak in the CMI of 2023 could also be due to the influx of young adults, especially from Ukraine, in 2022 and 2023, which might have induced secondary migration (*Sauer et al.* 2023). In the other age groups, CMI also rises to at least pre-pandemic levels after 2020, but has been stagnating or falling over the last three years.

Turning toward the spatial patterns of internal migration, different phases of urbanization as well as sub- and counterurbanization can be observed since 1991 (Fig. 2). After an urbanization phase starting in the early 2000s, the NMR of the large cities has been declining since 2011, reaching its lowest level since 1991 in 2022. In the post-pandemic years, the negative NMR of the large cities has been twice as high as before COVID-19 (2022: -0.56 percent; 2019: -0.25 percent). However, the smaller negative rates in 2023 (-0.54 percent) and 2024 (-0.35 percent) suggest a halt in this downward trend. Urban counties have seen stagnating net migration rates prior to the pandemic, followed by fluctuating increases after 2019. Intermediate counties and rural counties experienced peak NMRs in the years following the pandemic, before declining toward their pre-pandemic levels. Particularly notable is the change in the NMR of the intermediate counties, with a decrease of around -0.2 percentage points between 2022 and 2024.

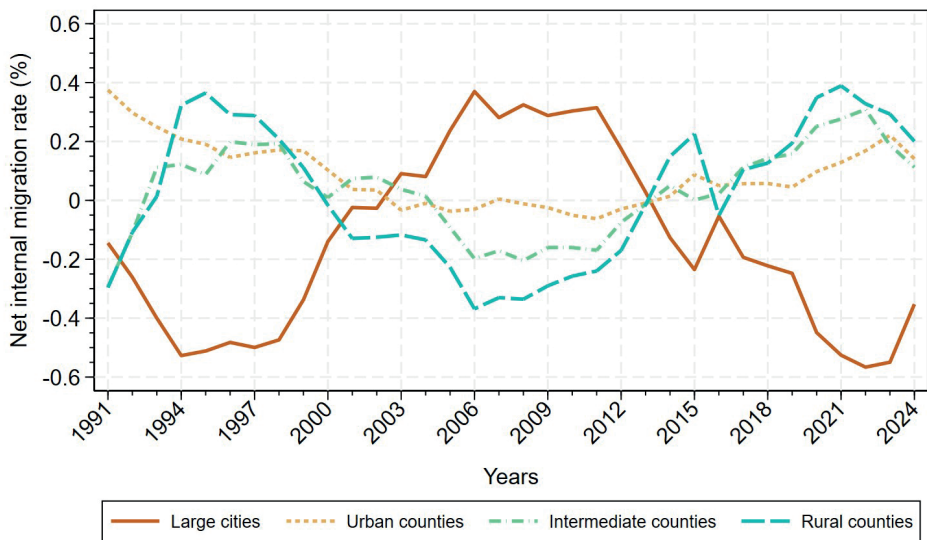
Analyzing NMRs by age group provides further insights into the patterns of internal migration between urban and rural areas (Fig. 3). Among adults aged 18 to 24, NMRs indicate a strong preference for the large cities. However, after the decline in 2020 and a rebound in 2021, NMRs in the large cities have not recovered to pre-pandemic levels. Moreover, the NMRs of the large cities among the 25- to 29-year-olds mostly declined, as they already had before the pandemic, turning even slightly negative in 2023. The beneficiaries of these changes are not only the lowest-density counties (i.e., intermediate counties and rural counties) but also the second-densest regions (i.e., urban counties). Particularly in recent years, urban counties have shown increases in NMRs, with some even turning positive for both age groups. Among children and the population aged 30 to 49 – typically the main drivers of sub- and

Fig. 1: Crude internal migration intensity by age group, years 1991-2024



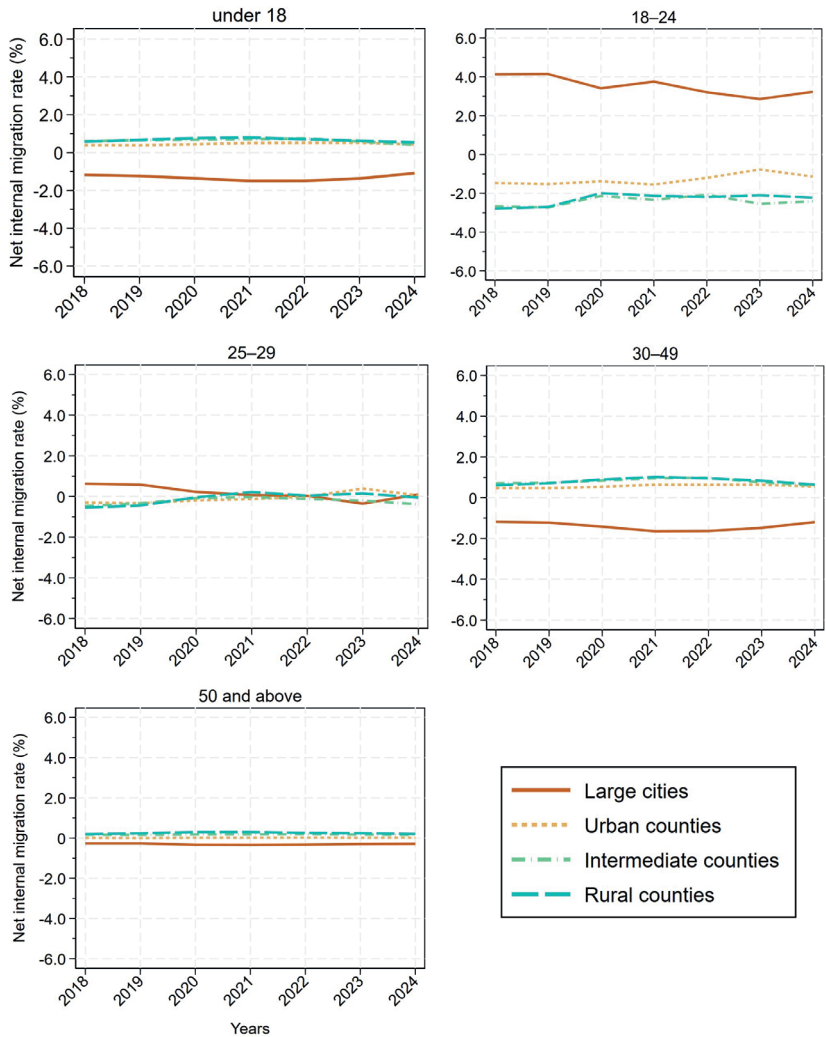
Source: German Federal Statistical Office and the Statistical Offices of the Länder, Research Data Centres, Spatial Monitoring of the BBSR, own calculations.

Fig. 2: Net internal migration rates by county type, years 1991-2024



Source: German Federal Statistical Office and the Statistical Offices of the Länder, Research Data Centres, Spatial Monitoring of the BBSR, own calculations.

Fig. 3: Net internal migration rates by county type and age groups, years 2018-2024



Source: German Federal Statistical Office and the Statistical Offices of the Länder, Research Data Centres, Spatial Monitoring of the BBSR, own calculations.

counterurbanization – NMRs in the large cities have slightly decreased before, during, and after the pandemic, to the benefit of other regions. In 2023 and 2024, however, this trend seems to have halted, as both groups recorded slightly less negative NMRs in the large cities and stagnating or even slightly declining NMRs in urban counties, intermediate counties, and rural counties. Individuals aged 50 and above seem to prefer intermediate counties and rural counties over more urban ones. However, NMRs have remained relatively stable before, during, and after the

pandemic. Paired with a low CMI, individuals aged 50 and above play a relatively minor role in migration trends along the urban–rural continuum.

In a final step, we take a closer look at the age-specific crude migration rates between the four county types (see Fig. 4). The CMR of adults aged 18 to 24 moving toward and between more densely populated counties markedly declined in 2020, followed by slight increases in 2021 and more pronounced rises in 2023 that are only slowed in 2024 (Fig. 4, first row). For example, from intermediate counties to the large cities, the CMR of 18-to-24-year-olds dropped to 4.5 percent in 2020 and recovered to 5.1 percent in 2023 – roughly the same level as in 2019. However, regarding the rates from the large cities (first column), we do not find corresponding strong shifts in 2020, except for the CMR to the urban counties. Interestingly, in the years following the pandemic, CMRs from the large cities to any other county type increased slightly, with the most noticeable increase being from the large cities to urban counties (from 3.5 percent in 2018 to 4.2 percent in 2023). Urban counties have also observed notable increases in migration rates of 18- to 24-year-olds from other regions. This trend appears to have begun before the pandemic and has been only temporarily dampened in 2020. Moreover, we observe a rise in CMRs between more rural areas (intermediate and rural counties) for individuals aged 18 to 24, with minor declines in 2020.

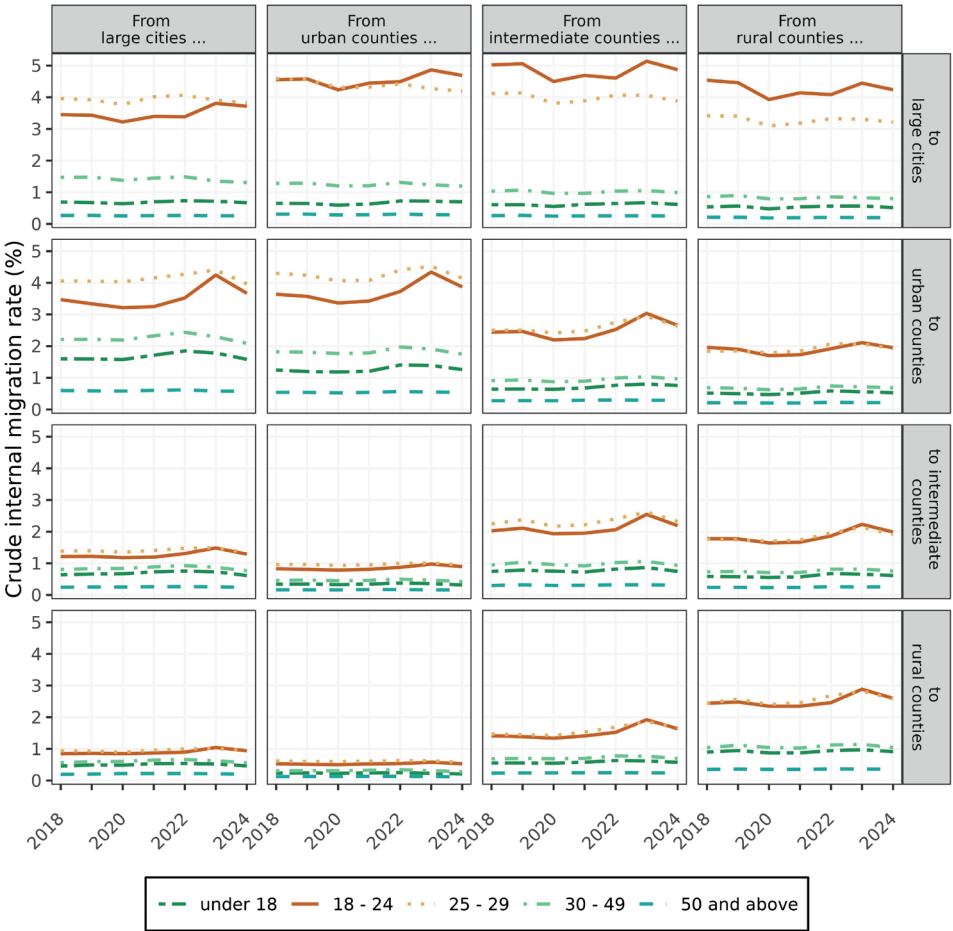
The trends described above also apply to individuals aged 25 to 29, although the patterns appear at a lower level. The main difference is that CMRs between and toward the large cities are stagnating or declining over the observed period. For moves in the age groups of children and 30- to 49-year-olds – often referred to as family movers – we observe only minimal variation since 2018, generally following a pattern of a slight decrease in 2020 and subsequent increases within a limited range. These increases are not sustained in 2023 and 2024.

Finally, the CMRs for individuals aged 50 and above hardly change over the observed period.

We now leverage the insights gained from the origin–destination analysis to explain trends in NMRs reported in Figure 2 and 3. First, decreasing NMRs in the large cities for young adults in the post-pandemic period (see Fig. 3) may be explained by the concurrent increase of CMRs into large cities from anywhere, with even higher outflows largely directed to urban counties. Particularly for the 18- to 24-year-olds, these changes seem to be the main driver of the decreasing NMRs of the large cities, while changes in CMRs from the large cities to more rural areas play a minor role.

Second, the decline in migration rates among the 30- to 49-year-olds from the large cities to other large cities and urban counties in 2023 and 2024 seems to contribute to the slightly increased NMRs of the large cities within this age group (see Fig. 3). Taken together, the trends for young adults and family movers seem to contribute to the overall rising NMRs of urban counties and the slightly less negative NMR of the large cities reported in Figure 2.

Fig. 4: Crude internal migration rates by origin and destination and age groups, years 2018-2024



Source: German Federal Statistical Office and the Statistical Offices of the Länder, Research Data Centres, Spatial Monitoring of the BBSR, own calculations.

4 Summary and Discussion

The aim of this paper is to provide new evidence on internal migration patterns in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. We used the latest internal migration flow data for Germany, covering the period from 1991 to 2024, to analyze age-specific migration along the urban-rural continuum.

Our analysis indicates that overall migration intensity in the post-pandemic period has returned to pre-pandemic levels, consistent with findings from studies for Spain and Australia (González-Leonardo et al. 2022; Perales/Bernard 2023). However, there

are pronounced differences across age groups. While the CMI for all age groups reached at least pre-pandemic levels, the increase in CMI among young adults was remarkable, reaching substantially higher levels than before the pandemic.

Regarding the trends in spatial patterns of internal migration, our findings support previous conclusions that the rapidly declining net migration rates of the large cities during the COVID-19 pandemic were primarily driven by reduced mobility among young adults, supplemented by the relatively stable mobility of family-age movers (*Stawarz et al.* 2022). After the pandemic, net migration rates of the large cities continued to decrease. However, this trend seems to have halted in 2023. In 2024, the net migration rate of large cities almost resembles that of the pre-pandemic years, coinciding with recently declining net migration rates in more rural areas. In contrast, the second most densely populated counties (urban counties) have consistently recorded rising net migration rates, excluding 2024. This rise appears to be driven by heightened migration into urban counties among young adults (aged 18 to 24 and 25 to 29) from the large cities, the intermediate counties, and rural counties. Increased migration from large cities also counterbalances the rising migration toward these cities among 18- to 24-year-olds, which has recently reached levels equal to or even exceeding those seen before the pandemic. In addition, we note an interesting trend of increasing mobility among younger adults, aged 18 to 29, between intermediate counties and rural counties.

Family-age groups appear to play a lesser role in shaping recent spatial patterns, given their relatively stagnant migration behavior. Although we observe a modest rise in migration rates to intermediate counties and rural counties, these regions have not clearly emerged as beneficiaries of increased inflows. The higher net migration rates in intermediate counties and rural counties between 2020 and 2022 seem to be driven by halted education and early-career-related outflows of young adults, alongside steady inflows of family-age groups.

We now turn to potential explanations for some of these trends. Residential mobility behavior is complex (e.g., *Greenwood* 1997; *Mulder/Hooimeijer* 1999); here, we discuss housing, labor markets, and the age composition of the population as a stylized selection of potential factors. The increased migration of young adults to the second most densely populated urban counties, rather than remaining in or relocating to the large cities, may reflect the cost of living – particularly housing expenses and shortages – in large cities (*Kawka* 2023; *Stawarz et al.* 2021). Recently reported data indicate that the proportion of households living in overcrowded housing conditions increased from 10.4 percent in 2013 to 16.6 percent in 2023, reaching a new peak (*ifo Institute* 2024). Housing costs and shortages may also contribute to the increased migration between more rural areas and fewer relocations to urban areas. Spatial differences in the development of labor markets may particularly influence the migration behavior of young adults and may be reflected in the migration behavior of 25-29-year-olds, who are completing their education and migrating for first employment (*Bernard et al.* 2014). A shortage of regional labor market opportunities at the start of young adults' careers can be a push factor out of rural areas and into urban areas, which in peripheral regions can lead to highly age-selective out-migration (*Schäfer et al.* 2020; *Velthuis et al.* 2024;

Vogl *et al.* 2025). Our results may support such thinking, where urban counties have seen higher inflows from intermediate and rural counties by 25-29-year-olds in the post-pandemic period than before. In addition, migration for young adults among non-urban areas has also increased in the post-pandemic period, indicating the need for mobility at this stage in the life course.

Population aging has been shown to affect internal migration intensities in many industrialized countries (Foster 2017; Kalemba *et al.* 2021; Shuttleworth/Champion 2021). In Germany, there are stark disparities in age structure between urban and rural areas, where large cities are aging more slowly than rural areas (Hoymann *et al.* 2024). Spatially heterogeneous population aging, reflected in the declining number of young adults, combined with age-specific internal migration patterns (such as young adults moving to large cities), may influence overall internal migration patterns and, for example, reduce internal migration flows from the most rural regions. To quantify the effect of such regional disparities on internal migration patterns, further research is needed.

The minimal changes in moves from urban to more rural counties among children and family-age adults after mobility restrictions were lifted in 2021 may suggest constraints within this group to execute sub- and counterurbanization plans, despite studies indicating an increased appetite in recent years (Dolls/Lay 2023; Knuepling *et al.* 2025). Many suburban areas within the “intermediate counties” pose several challenges for families looking to relocate, such as saturated housing markets, high prices, elevated interest rates, and a recent surge in construction costs (Gerőházi *et al.* 2023). It is notable that, despite these constraints during COVID-19, planned family relocations to intermediate and rural counties continued. In contrast, job-related moves to cities in this age group stalled, contributing to the lower net migration rates of cities.

Turning to the effects of home-based work opportunities during and after the pandemic, this study did not find increased flows from urban to rural areas in the young professionals age group (25-29) (e.g., Motte-Baumvol/Porcher 2025). Thus, the conclusion that young workers increasingly settle in more remote areas given novel remote work opportunities should be questioned (Knuepling *et al.* 2025). For family-age adults, working from home might not have increased urban-to-rural outflows in the medium term. Relating this to labor markets, however, it may have also depressed employment-related inflows to large cities in post-pandemic years, as more jobs allow for remote work arrangements. This stagnating post-pandemic migration behavior would be in line with findings that working from home tends to influence commuting patterns only at high shares of hours worked remotely (Rüger *et al.* 2024), while Germany is a country with an only moderate share of teleworkable jobs (OECD 2022).

While adding much-needed detail via the origin-destination relationships across the urban hierarchy, this study has limitations. As the available data from 2018 onwards is aggregated to the four urban-rural county types, we cannot investigate the expected regional heterogeneity in the German urban-rural system (Kabisch/Haase 2011; Wolff *et al.* 2022). For instance, the recently increasing inflows of young adults into urban counties may showcase large variation, given the size of the class

alone (133 counties). Similarly, we did not observe a notable increase in outflows of family-age movers from the large cities (67 counties) downward the urban hierarchy. This effect might be observable for a subset of the largest urban centers and their suburban areas, as shown, e.g., in the case of Stockholm as the urban primate in Sweden (Eliasson 2025). Importantly, this trend also largely depends on spatial scale. Counties (NUTS-3), as chosen here, may be too coarse. Internal migration data at a higher spatial resolution, such as municipalities, would allow for much-needed nuance in the analysis (cf., Ghio *et al.* 2023; Kolowa *et al.* 2025; Kotsubo/Nakaya 2024).

Based on these findings, we conclude that the pre-pandemic trend of net migration losses of the large cities has persisted after the pandemic. However, increasing migration into other urban counties has been driving this pattern. Furthermore, the relatively stable migration behavior among family-age internal migrants does not indicate a major migration shift triggered by remote work – contrary to widespread assumptions that remote work enables or encourages individuals to move to rural areas. In fact, in 2024, more rural areas have experienced declining net migration rates, while net migration to the large cities and urban counties appears to be on the rise. It remains to be seen whether this represents a renewed shift toward urbanization.

Acknowledgments

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Data availability

The data for the years 1991–2018 are available on request from the authors. The data on internal migration for the years 2019–2024 are not openly available, but may be requested from the German Federal Statistical Office.

Declaration of generative AI

During the preparation of this work, the authors used *editGPT* in order to address language issues. After using this tool, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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