

Bertelsmann Stiftung (Hrsg.)

Comeback ländlicher Räume?

Wanderungsbewegungen in
Nordrhein-Westfalen

Executive Summary

There are various factors contributing to the growing interest in living and working in rural areas in Germany. The COVID-19 pandemic has not only accelerated the need for digitizing administrative processes but has also compelled if not forced many individuals to explore remote work opportunities, enabling a separation between residential decisions and proximity to workplaces. Additionally, the federal and state governments have implemented more robust funding policies to foster the growth of rural areas. Yet even before the pandemic, rural regions served as testing areas for those seeking to experiment with new ways of life.

Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, public debate about **urban-rural migration** has taken on a new dimension. In recent years, many narratives have focused on those who have forsaken an urban lifestyle to seek life in Germany's rural areas. This study draws on empirical data to determine the extent to which perceived trends can be proven. It also identifies explanatory approaches in and causes of urban-rural migration trends.

The study thus begins with an analysis of **migration data from North Rhine-Westphalia** from 1976 to 2021. By focusing on three distinct time periods – 2009 to 2011, 2017 to 2019, and 2020 to 2021 – the study permits a more accurate portrayal of long-term trends. In order to depict spatial patterns, the study draws upon the Thünen Institute's typology of rural areas, which distinguishes between very rural, fairly rural and non-rural regions. The analysis of migration data shows a notable migrant increase in small municipalities located along the outskirts of urban centers and in peripheral areas. The study also points to an amplification of the trend toward spatial decentralization, which was already evident before the pandemic, and now encompasses both rural and very rural regions.

To gain deeper insights into the key factors contributing to this development, the study also features a **case study analysis** of migration data for Germany's Euskirchen and Hochsauerland districts. Both districts, classified as «very rural,” currently register positive net migration, which suggests that such regions are experiencing a comeback as desirable places to live. Structured interviews conducted with stakeholders from both districts have undergone a systematic evaluation process involving qualitative content analysis methods. The study also examines additional data, drawing specific conclusions regarding the appeal of these two districts as attractive places to live and work. For example, both feature low unemployment rates, but they differ in terms of commuter balance and job centrality. An analysis of the interviews points to two significant drivers of the recent growth in net migration: increased residential suburbanization and a growing trend of return migration. While effects of the pandemic remain unclear, an increase in remote work opportunities plays a significant role in residential decision-making.

The study then evaluates – independent of the aforementioned analyses – an **online survey** of experts and explores the correlations between the pandemic, residential choices and spatial growth. Drawing on a literature review, the survey gathers insights from authors of relevant essays and other experts, considering trends and dynamics in spatial growth. Experts note that individual experiences during the pandemic have influenced residential location preferences, with factors such as fast and reliable internet access and the number of rooms in an apartment gaining importance. Social issues, such as heightened social inequalities and increased spatial segregation, are also highlighted as probable motivators.

The current migration trends in rural areas are driven by diverse individual motivations, with urban-suburban migration being the dominant trend in the examined districts, followed by return migration and lifestyle migration. Continued net immigration from abroad has benefited numerous smaller cities and communities. These developments have diverse implications for spatial planning policy, which include relieving housing pressures in Germany's core cities, while fostering car-oriented lifestyles, necessitating land for settlements, and requiring improved transport infrastructure in surrounding areas. Local authorities, particularly in rural regions, have a **number of options** to proactively shape these developments in a positive direction.

Differentiating migration patterns by age group is an important aspect of municipal planning processes. An analysis of further data from the **Wegweiser Kommune portal** highlights the heterogeneous nature of migration patterns within districts. For both the Hochsauerland and Euskirchen districts, there are in some cases significant differences in indicators such as education migration, family migration and elderly migration at the municipal level. These differences impact the population composition of each district and impose specific infrastructure demands on each community.