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Summary

Rural depopulation is a concern in many countries and various policy initiatives have been taken to combat such trends. This paper examines whether a hidden potential for rural population growth can be found in Sweden. If such potential exists, it implies that the development prospects for many rural areas are not as unpromising as they may seem today. If not, rapid rural depopulation can be expected and policymakers will have to increase their focus on how to lessen problems associated with population decline. In this paper we employ a combination of survey data and register data to identify the characteristics of people who have expressed a desire to move to rural areas and compare this population with those who actually do move to these areas. The results show that more people have rural residential preferences than the actual number of migrants to rural areas suggest. The findings indicate that there is a general potential for rural population growth, however, the characteristics of these two groups are similar and we can not discern any group as constituting this hidden potential. Nonetheless, we argue that this potential is unlikely to be realised in terms of rural population growth and the further implications of these findings are discussed.

Keywords: Rural; Population growth; Migration; Residential preferences; Sweden

Sammanfattning

Negativ befolkningsutveckling på landsbygden är ett problem i många länder och olika insatser görs för att hindra eller vända denna utveckling. Föreliggande rapport undersöker huruvida det finns en "dold befolkningspotential" för den svenska landsbygden. Om en sådan potential finns, kan det innebära att utvecklingsmöjligheterna inte ser så dystra ut som de förefaller idag. Om inte, så är en snabb befolkningsminskning troligen att vänta och ökade ansträngningar måste göras för att minska problem förknippade med avfolkning. I rapporten används en kombination av enkät- och registerdata för att identifiera egenskaper hos personer som uttryckt en önskan om att flytta till landsbygden vilka jämförs med personer som faktiskt flyttar till landsbygden. Resultaten visar att fler personer har en önskan att bosätta sig på landsbygden än som faktiskt gör det. Dessa resultat tyder på att det finns en generell befolkningspotential för landsbygdstillväxt, men det finns inga direkta skillnader i egenskaper mellan de två grupperna och det går därför inte att urskilja någon särskild grupp som utgör denna potential. I rapporten argumenteras det emellertid för att befolkningspotentialen sannolikt inte kommer att realiseras.

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1 Introduction

Rural areas in Sweden are, on the whole, experiencing population decline at the beginning of the new century, a situation found in many sparsely populated countries (e.g. Amcoff, 2006; Cawley, 1993; Muilu and Rusanen, 2003; Otterstrom and Shumway, 2003; Rye, 2006a; Smailes et al., 2002; Wilson and Rees, 2005). This is the result of an extended period of out-migration of young people, coupled with low fertility rates in these rural areas that have led to an increasingly ageing population. Recent population projections in Sweden have shown that, certainly in peripheral rural areas, this situation is likely to worsen in the coming decades (Amcoff and Westholm, 2007). Since the rejuvenation problem can no longer be solved by means of natural population change (the elderly are more likely to die than to have children), only in-migration remains as a possible remedy for future population decline. Having realised this, rural policymakers are increasingly turning to marketing campaigns in hope of attracting new residents from more populous regions, but evaluations of such campaigns show no evidence of success (Nedomysl, 2004; 2007). The future population development for many of these areas therefore looks increasingly troublesome, unless some currently unknown pool of potential rural in-migrants can be found.

Certainly, there are many potential reasons why some people never get to realise their rural residential preferences. For example, rural areas cannot compete with the labour markets available in urban areas and this has been recognised as an obstacle for the possibilities of two-earner households to settle in rural areas (Stockdale, 2006a; but see Green, 1997). In particular,

this is likely to be the case for the highly educated or those with specialist skills. Another example is that although Swedish rural areas have much lower housing-prices in comparison to urban areas, current trends of depopulation in rural areas may inhibit the possibility of securing loans from banks who may fear not getting their money back (Glesbygdsverket, 2003; SKL, 2007). Low-income earners are presumably more affected by this problem compared to people with higher incomes. The problem is amplified by the one-sided structure of dwellings in rural Sweden where apartments and dwellings to rent are almost absent, which prevents small households and people unwilling or unable to buy a house from settling there. In addition, the scarce supply of services in rural areas implies a need for car-ownership and willingness or ability to travel, which may certainly be a concern for older people in particular. Nonetheless, the aforementioned problems may be lessened by appropriate policy measures and it seems reasonable to expect a willingness on behalf of policymakers to help people realise their residential preferences, should that population turn out to be a significant one. An example of the latter is the post-war baby boomers who are rapidly reaching retirement age. Since this group will soon no longer be restricted to living close to their work places, they potentially constitute an important source of in-migrants for rural areas (Jauhiainen, 2009; Stockdale, 2006b).

The paper at hand sets out to examine whether a 'hidden potential' for rural population growth can be found in Sweden. This hidden potential is understood as people who claim to have a desire to move to the countryside, but for whatever reason appear not to do so. If a hidden potential can be found, it implies that the development prospects for many rural areas are not as unpromising as they may seem today. More specifically, the paper aims to address the following five research questions: (1) How widespread are preferences for rural living in relation to the actual number of moves to rural destinations? (2) What are the characteristics of people who have expressed a desire to move to the countryside compared to people who would rather move elsewhere? (3) What are the characteristics of people who move to the countryside? (4) Are there any differences in terms of characteristics between those who have expressed a desire to move to the countryside compared to those who actually do move to the countryside? (5) What insights may be reached from the answers to these questions as regards the future population development of rural areas?

2 Research context

2.1 General trends of population redistribution

It is a well-established fact that the world is rapidly undergoing a global urbanisation trend. In 2008, for the first time in history, a majority of humanity live in urban areas (United Nations, 2008). By year 2050, it is estimated that 70 per cent of the world's population will live in urban regions, which can be compared with only 29 per cent in 1950 (United Nations, 2008). Although there are numerous problems with data quality and varying definitions, there is no doubt about the direction of this development. In Europe, these forces have been at work for quite some time and most rural areas have become increasingly sparsely populated as a result of out-migration to urban areas (Martí-Henneberg, 2005); primarily of young adults, and as a consequence fewer births and greater mortality take place in rural areas. However, general accounts usually contain a great deal of variation between countries and even more so when it comes to variation between regions within a country (e.g. Ainsaar, 2004; Gans 2000; Walford and Kurek, 2008) although it is hard to tell to what extent the different tendencies of development actually reflects a comparable reality or just different ways to define and/or operationalize urban and rural (c.f. Amcoff, 2006).

In Sweden, where the long-term trend from the early 19th century has been population dispersal at macro-regional level and population concentration at local and regional level, it is clear that processes of population redistribution vary quite significantly over time and space (Håkansson, 2000). On the regional level, population concentration has been the dominating trend since the 1960s (Borgegård et al., 1995). However, at a local level, Amcoff (2005) has established that the decline of rural population in Sweden slowed during the 1970s, was reversed during the 1980s, but declined once again in the 1990s. At a regional level, the trend toward concentration is likely to continue as recent population estimations have revealed an accelerating ageing of the rural population (Amcoff and Westholm, 2007). While this is the general trend for Sweden, exceptions do exist and some rural areas, mainly those close to the larger cities experience an increase of population and these areas prosper due to in-migration (Amcoff, 2000; 2006; Westlund, 2002).

2.2 Migration to and from rural areas

As indicated by the cited research above, the fundamental driving force of population change in rural areas is net out-migration, and it is therefore not

surprising that a great deal of research has been carried out in this field. Against this background, it is however noteworthy that the bulk of recent work has focussed on migration from urban to rural areas and not vice versa. The interest in rural bound migration was awakened over thirty years ago when rural and non-metropolitan population growth was discovered in several countries, and Berry (1976) coined the term 'counterurbanisation' to describe these tendencies. Since then, the phenomenon of counterurbanisation has attracted a lot of attention in international research (for overviews see Champion, 1989; Kontuly, 1998; Mitchell, 2004) and Stockdale (2004 p. 167) has noted that counterurbanisation has become 'virtually hegemonic in the literature as an explanation of rural change'. Whatever that may say about the research literature, including that in Sweden – where the overall impact of counterurbanisation tendencies nonetheless seem to have been more related to changes in attitudes towards the countryside and rural living than imprints made in the migration statistics (Lindgren, 2003) – most rural related migration research has focussed on in-migration to rural areas (e.g. Amcoff, 2000; Hjort and Malmberg, 2006; Johansson and Stenbacka 2001; Kåks and Westholm, 1994; Lindgren, 2003; Stenbacka, 2001).

The need to better understand the forces behind this unexpected change of population redistribution in many countries has resulted in a large volume of studies that have examined the reasons why people choose to move to the countryside. Most studies are however relatively small-scale, forcing a treatment of rural in-migrants as a rather homogeneous mass. Comparisons between motives for moving to and from the countryside are relatively few, making it somewhat problematic to discuss whether motives for moving to the countryside are significantly different from the motives of migrants moving elsewhere. The literature nonetheless suggests that environmental, housing and lifestyle factors are overrepresented in rural bound migration (e.g. Champion, 1998; Halfacree, 1994; Halliday and Coombes, 1995; Williams and Jobes, 1990).

Studies of contemporary out-migration from rural areas are in comparison relatively few and mainly appear to be based on interviews or small scale surveys (Stockdale, 2002). Studies of aggregate out-migration flows are exemplified by Rye (2006a) who with data from Norway showed that rural-to-urban migration is beneficial for migrants in terms of acquisition of economic and cultural capital, where urban bound migrants have higher wage levels and are better educated compared to those who remain in rural areas (Rye, 2006a). A Swedish study points to the importance of social class, where young people whose parents were blue-

collar or self-employed were less likely to move to a city (Nilsson, 2003). Stockdale (2006a) adds that it is often 'the brightest' among the young adults that leave. This brings forth the question of whether people are forced to leave the countryside due to a lack of development prospects. However, a study where migrants were asked whether they felt that their move was made willingly or whether they felt compelled to migrate, showed that an overwhelming majority migrated because they wished to do so, and they also felt that their migration was a positive life-event (Garvill et al., 2000). Thus, reluctant or perceived forced migration seems rare in Sweden. However, such questions have only been asked to those who actually have migrated; no research has explored those who might move to the countryside if the circumstances permitted them to do so.

2.3 Rural residential preferences

Since young adults are the most important sub-group in rural out-migration a lot of attention has been paid to how young people perceive the countryside versus the city. From research on these matters it is clear that young people very often feel that the countryside is less attractive compared to the 'bright lights effect' of amusement, education and job opportunities that the cities have to offer (e.g. Bjarnason and Thorlindsson, 2006; Kloep et al., 2003; Niedomysl, 2008; Rye, 2006b). In addition, rural areas have often been depicted as less attractive for young women in particular; a consequence of prevailing male norms and structures in the countryside (Dahlström, 1996; Rye, 2006b). As expected, such results stand in stark contrast to the more positive images of rural areas that usually appear in Swedish interview-based studies carried out with those who move to the countryside (Johansson and Stenbacka, 2001; Kåks and Westholm, 1994; Stenbacka 2001). It may be noted that these studies have mainly been carried out with middle-aged rural in-migrants, which points to the fact that peoples' residential preferences may vary in different life phases and perhaps also a result of 'after rationalization' in the sense that interviewees are likely to put their own actions in a favourable light.

Addressing the issue of changing preferences over the life-course, Rye (2006b), in an innovative study, asked young people currently residing in rural Norway how they view the city versus the countryside as potential *future* areas of residence. As expected, he found that young people consider the city more attractive compared to the countryside for their current life-situations. However, when asked where they want to live as adults, the countryside emerged as the most desirable place to live. What in addition may seem surprising is the 'strength' of the results; there were no

statistically significant differences between men and women, nor were there any differences depending on the type of education these youngsters were pursuing – a majority of those surveyed agreed that the countryside would be an excellent place to live as grown-ups. Only 12 per cent stated that they want to live in a city when they have children of their own and even fewer (9 per cent) want to live in a city when retired. Rye (2006b) emphasises however that expected future residential preferences may not be the same as those one actually has later on in life. He also points out that the opportunities to satisfy one's preferences may collide with needs and demands from for instance work opportunities etc., and not only from the individual him/herself but also from family and society.

2.4 Residential preferences and population redistribution

Interest in residential preferences to help explain population redistribution has attracted a lot of attention, primarily in the U.S., where researchers saw the potential of preferences to explain the “unexpected” shift to counterurbanisation during the early 1970s. Similarly to the present study, researchers used survey data to find out where people would like to live and compared those findings with actual population redistribution. Reviewing the early literature Fuguitt and Zuiches (1975) concluded that most respondents in these surveys would like to live in small towns and rural areas and that the proportion having this preference exceeded the proportion of people that lived in those areas. Such findings strongly pointed to the importance of research on residential preferences for understanding population redistribution.

Fuguitt and Zuiches (1975) made an important contribution by adding the possibility of a preference for proximity to a larger city when surveying people's residential preferences. They found that the rural areas many desired, were not the remote ones, but rather those within commuting range of a metropolitan central city. Further refinements were made and Carpenter (1977) added to this literature by investigating whether people would maintain their rural residential preferences if faced with a ten per cent loss of income or if distance to a larger city exceeded an hour's drive. He found that interest declined greatly and this suggests that rural population growth is most likely to occur in proximity to larger cities. McAuley and Nutty (1982) examined residential preferences and moving behaviour for people at different life-cycle stages and found that young adults, in particular, were more likely to follow through on their residential preferences (see also Zuiches and Rieger, 1978).

However, as mentioned earlier, rural population growth in the U.S. was reversed during the 1980s, and once again during the 1990s, but Brown et al., (1997) – who analysed place preferences during 1972-1992 – nonetheless found that residential preferences appear not to change much over time. Most people prefer their current residence type and those that do not are almost twice as likely to prefer smaller and/or less dense locations. Since population redistribution has shifted back and forth over time Brown et al., (1997) argued that residential preferences cannot solely explain population redistribution trends, but can play an important role together with economic opportunities in rural and urban origins and destinations.

3 Research design

To find out whether a hidden potential for rural population growth exists in Sweden, a straightforward approach is employed. First, survey data on residential preferences is used to establish how widespread rural residential preferences are and to charter differences between people expressing a desire for living in rural areas versus urban areas. Second, register data is analysed to identify the number of people who actually do move to rural areas and their characteristics. As we have argued above, the possible obstacles to fulfil rural living preferences can be expected to affect different sub-groups differently, which has been largely overlooked by previous research. By comparing the findings from these two sources, we hope to uncover populations that say they want to move to the countryside, but for whatever reason appear not to move there. The results are finally used to discuss potential obstacles to rural living and the future prospects for rural population development in Sweden.

3.1 Survey data

Information on where people want to live has been drawn from a large scale survey on residential preferences for migration in Sweden (for a full account of the survey, see Nedomysl, 2008). The survey was sent to a random sample of Swedes during May to August 2005 and dropout analysis showed that this is a representative sample of the Swedish population. The key survey question relevant for the paper at hand was to which kind of place the respondent would like to move (if a move was possible and desirable). This was a question with five fixed response alternatives and of the approximately 2,600 respondents answering the survey, 800 respondents stated that they wanted to move to “the countryside” (405), alternatively to “a small community in the countryside” (395); these 800 respondents are henceforth referred to as those with rural residential

preferences. Furthermore, 1,822 respondents stated that they would rather move to an altogether different kind of place, such as a larger city, and this category of respondents will be used as a control group (referred to as those with urban residential preferences). It is a notably large share (30.5 per cent) who have rural preferences given that only 22 per cent of the total Swedish population currently live in the countryside (according to the definition we employ; see section 3.2). However, the share of people with rural residential preferences is similar to an unpublished attitude survey reported by the Swedish National Rural Development Agency (Glesbygdsverket) a few years ago.

It could be noted that the available data does not allow for examining rural residential preferences in relation to distances to urban areas (c.f. Fuguitt and Zuiches, 1975; Carpenter, 1977). Those categorised as having rural residential preferences might want to live in rural areas in close proximity to urban areas, but not in remote rural areas. Such distinctions are, regrettably, not possible to make with this data. Other Swedish studies have distinguished different types of rural areas and analysed the different types of migration streams to these areas (i.e. Johannison et al., 1989; Lindgren, 2003).

The survey data also included individual information on the respondents, such as sex, age, occupation, education etc. In two cases (income and municipality type) this information was retrieved from Statistics Sweden, but the other information was self-reported by the respondents. The categorisation of municipality types have been made by the Swedish Association of Local Authorities, where all municipalities have been divided into nine categories on the basis of structural parameters such as population, commuting patterns and economic structure (for a detailed account see Niedomysl, 2008). The survey response group characteristics are shown in table 1 below.

In order to determine the influence of the individual characteristics on the desire to move to the countryside, binary logistic regression modelling is used. This is an appropriate method to apply when the key dependent variables are categorical, as is the case with having a desire to move to the countryside or having a desire to move elsewhere.

Table 1. Survey response group characteristics

	Urban preferences		Rural preferences	
	<i>N</i> = 1822	%	<i>N</i> = 800	%
Sex				
male	785	43.1%	400	50.0%
female	1037	56.9%	400	50.0%
Age (years)				
18 - 24	200	11.0%	35	4.4%
25 - 30	186	10.2%	66	8.3%
31 - 40	331	18.2%	146	18.3%
41 - 50	332	18.2%	178	22.3%
51 - 64	590	32.4%	291	36.4%
65 - 70	183	10.0%	84	10.5%
Children living at home				
children	689	38.1%	357	45.1%
no children	1119	61.9%	434	54.9%
Education				
low	425	23.4%	262	32.8%
middle	731	40.3%	324	40.6%
high	659	36.3%	212	26.6%
Occupation				
employed	1041	57.1%	466	58.3%
unemployed	75	4.1%	32	4.0%
self-employed	98	5.4%	83	10.4%
student	188	10.3%	26	3.3%
retired	238	13.1%	122	15.3%
other	182	10.0%	71	8.9%
Income				
low	616	33.9%	249	31.2%
middle	577	31.8%	297	37.2%
high	622	34.3%	252	31.6%
Municipality type				
metropolitan	338	18.6%	70	8.8%
suburban	290	15.9%	92	11.5%
large cities	561	30.8%	187	23.4%
commuter	80	4.4%	83	10.4%
sparsely populated	43	2.4%	59	7.4%
manufacturing	101	5.5%	85	10.6%
other major	253	13.9%	121	15.1%
other medium	116	6.4%	61	7.6%
other smaller	40	2.2%	42	5.3%

3.2 Register data

Information on the characteristics of people who actually do move to rural areas has been drawn from a longitudinal register database compiled by Statistics Sweden and made available for geographical research. This database contains unique annual information on a number of demographic and socioeconomic characteristics for all Swedish residents, on a very detailed geographical level. An individual is defined as a migrant in cases where the individual changed his or her place of residence from one locality [*tätort* in Swedish, meaning geographically separated built up areas defined by Statistics Sweden] to another locality or a rural area between the years 1999 and 2000. However, to be able to identify long-distance inter-rural moves, and since some localities are geographically quite extensive (mainly in larger urban areas), we also added the criteria that an individual who changed his or her place of residence from one municipality to another is also defined as a migrant. These computations resulted in approximately 396,000 migrants, equivalent to 4.4 per cent of the total Swedish population.

Distinguishing rural bound migrants from other migrants requires specific attention. In this study, stated preferences for rural living are compared to actual moves to the countryside. It could be underlined here that the preferences hardly refer to a certain kind of labour market; actually it would be very peculiar to expect someone to long for living in a certain region of that kind. The reasonable way to interpret the preferences stated in the enquiry is rather as referring to rural and urban living milieus and actually both kinds of these milieus can be found in both the Stockholm region as well as the most peripheral parts of the country. Thus, to categorize moves in the register data we need a geographical subdivision of the country into urban and rural on a detailed rather than general level of scale. Ideally it should equal the ways these concepts are understood by the enquiry respondents.

Unfortunately, there are no Swedish studies to rely on regarding what Swedes actually mean when talking about “rural areas” and by the way this might well vary within the population. However, the ways this concept has been operationalized could well be interpreted as expressions of these social representations. At the one extreme we find the semi-official definition by Statistics Sweden regarding any cluster of houses with more than 200 inhabitants as “urban”. However, this operationalization was criticized already before it was launched back in 1960, for deviating from the reality observable in the field (e.g. Enequist, 1951). At the other extreme, the National Rural Development Agency considers any place with less than

3,000 inhabitants as “rural” (Glesbygdverket 2008a). As a result several municipal centres, where a majority of the population is residing in block of flats, are categorized as “rural”. In this study we have taken a position in between these extremes, well aware that we will never end up with more than an approximation, by defining any cluster of buildings hosting more than 1,000 inhabitants in the year 2000 as urban, and the rest as rural. Hence, any migrant moving to one of these two types of areas is defined as a rural- or urban migrant. We do not consider migrants moving between locations within the same locality or within the rural parts of one single municipality. This is also in accordance with the results of Halfacree (1995) who directly studied the social representations of the rural, let be in another country.

According to our definitions, of the approximately 396,000 migrants in year 2000, 23.6 per cent moved to rural areas and the remaining share was urban bound. The characteristics of the migrants are shown in table 2 above. It should be noted that all of these characteristics were derived from register data, whereas in table 1 some of the characteristics were self-reported by the survey respondents. We use the same binary logistic regression approach to examine differences between migrants moving to rural areas versus those moving elsewhere, as employed when testing the probability of having rural residential preferences versus preferences for living elsewhere.

Table 2. Migrant characteristics

	Urban destinations		Rural destinations	
	<i>N</i> = 302 279	%	<i>N</i> = 93 531	%
Sex				
male	152 407	50.4%	47 607	50.9%
female	149 872	49.6%	45 924	49.1%
Age (years)				
18 - 24	103 036	34.1%	17 174	18.4%
25 - 30	76 708	25.4%	20 488	21.9%
31 - 40	59 200	19.6%	24 429	26.1%
41 - 50	30 149	10.0%	14 421	15.4%
51 - 64	26 608	8.8%	14 422	15.4%
65 - 70	6 578	2.2%	2 597	2.8%
Children living at home				
children	87 594	29.0%	40 011	42.8%
no children	214 685	71.0%	53 520	57.2%
Education				
low	45 276	15.0%	18 945	20.3%
middle	148 538	49.1%	51 255	54.8%
high	108 465	35.9%	23 331	24.9%
Occupation				
employed	164 611	54.5%	58 598	62.7%
unemployed	9 145	3.0%	3 443	3.7%
self-employed	4 448	1.5%	2 513	2.7%
student	87 156	28.8%	12 952	13.8%
retired	23 550	7.8%	10 967	11.7%
other	13 369	4.4%	5 058	5.4%
Income				
low	158 099	52.3%	40 175	43.0%
middle	79 654	26.4%	31 012	33.2%
high	64 526	21.3%	22 344	23.9%
Municipality type				
metropolitan	42 213	14.0%	9 105	9.7%
suburban	52 780	17.5%	10 662	11.4%
large cities	89 773	29.7%	27 460	29.4%
commuter	19 636	6.5%	7 031	7.5%
sparsely populated	9 775	3.2%	4 622	4.9%
manufacturing	17 904	5.9%	7 210	7.7%
other major	40 283	13.3%	15 123	16.2%
other medium	20 609	6.8%	8 305	8.9%
other smaller	8 883	2.9%	3 854	4.1%
missing	423	0.1%	159	0.1%

4 Analysis

4.1 Preferences for rural and actual migration to rural destinations

Given that villages hosting less than 1,000 inhabitants really are equivalent to the way 'rural' is understood by the survey respondents, we conclude that the potential for rural in-migration is larger than the actual migration to rural destinations. Of the survey respondents, 30.5 per cent stated rural preferences while only 22 per cent of the population actually lives in such milieus and no more than 23.6 per cent of the migrants end up there. Thus, the potential can be expected to equal a further 7-8 percentage points of the migrants. However, this figure should be viewed as very approximate as it is dependent on our assumption that villages larger than 1000 inhabitants are perceived as 'urban'. Nonetheless, it would be obviously unreasonable to presuppose that more than 30 percent of the Swedish population/migrants lived/moved to rural locations, as that would equal all towns smaller than approximately 3,400 inhabitants. Such an assumption would leave Sweden with less than 300 de facto urban localities (compared to the almost 2,000 identified by Statistics Sweden), and it would also imply that a lot of towns identified as central places in the Swedish system of municipalities are actually perceived as rural.

4.2 What are the characteristics of people who want to move to rural areas?

In table 3 below the results of the logistic regression are shown. Regarding the first of the independent variables, *gender*, we find that men appear to have much stronger preferences for rural living compared to their female counterparts. When it comes to the different *age groups* it is obvious that all age groups, in comparison to the youngest age group (the reference group) have higher odds of stating a preference for living in the countryside. Interestingly, all the older age groups show statistically significant estimates, with one exception: the oldest age group (65-70 year-olds). While the odds for this group are positive, the difference is not statistically significant from the youngest age group. We also find that people who have *children living at home* have a higher probability of having a desire to live in the countryside.

Table 3. Estimates of binary logistic regression results for rural preferences

Category (ref = urban preferences)	Rural preferences	
	Odds ratio ^a	95% C.I.
Gender (ref = male)		
female	0.74**	0.60-0.89
Age (ref 18 - 24 years)		
25 - 30	2.14**	1.20-3.82
31 - 40	2.15**	1.21-3.82
41 - 50	2.13**	1.19-3.80
51 - 64	2.22**	1.27-3.88
65 - 70	1.66	0.83-3.32
Children living at home (ref = no children)		
children	1.36**	1.08-1.71
Education (ref = low education)		
middle	0.81	0.63-1.05
high	0.62**	0.47-0.80
Occupation (ref = employed)		
self-employed	1.70**	1.21-2.31
student	0.38**	0.22-0.65
retired	1.14	0.77-1.68
unemployed	0.86	0.54-1.36
Income (ref = low)		
middle	0.91	0.71-1.17
high	0.68**	0.52-0.90
Municipality type (ref = metropolitan)		
suburban	1.40*	0.97-2.04
large cities	1.52**	1.10-2.11
commuter	4.55**	2.95-7.02
sparsely populated	6.07**	3.63-10.14
manufacturing	3.46**	2.28-5.24
other major	2.00**	1.39-2.87
other medium	2.27**	1.46-3.53
other smaller	4.02**	2.31-7.02
Constant (B)	-1.722**	
Log-L	2639,909	

*= p<0.05, **= p<0.01.

^a Exp.(B).

Table 3 also shows that people with higher *education* are less prone to rural living in comparison to people with a low level of education. This implies that the increasing educational levels among Swedes will presumably decrease the potential for rural population growth. One of the most interesting findings appears in relation to the respondents' *occupations*. Respondents who are self-employed have much higher odds for stating a preference for rural living in comparison to the reference group (employed people). This group is of course of high relevance for the development prospects of any region (regardless of whether that region is rural or urban), and as far as known, only one study has focussed on the migration of self-employed people to the countryside (that study, Findlay et al., 2000, showed a considerable positive labour-market impact from people moving to rural areas and this impact as particularly significant when it comes to self-employed migrants). Students, on the other hand, have much lower odds in comparison to the reference group. While the odds for the two last occupational categories, the retired and the unemployed, are not significantly different to the reference category, it could nonetheless be noted that retired people have a somewhat higher probability of stating a rural preference and the opposite is true for the unemployed who have a slightly lower probability of stating a rural preference. As regards the last of the socioeconomic variables, *income*, we find that the higher the income of a respondent, the lower the probability of preferences for rural living (although it may be noted that the difference between low and middle income respondents is not statistically significant).

The geographical variable, the *municipality type* where the respondents currently live, display expected odds. In comparison to the reference category (living in a metropolitan municipality type) all other groups have higher preferences for rural living. This is particularly the case when it comes to people living in sparsely populated municipalities, commuter municipalities and manufacturing municipalities (the three municipality types that are most rural in their character). In general, people seem to have preferences in agreement to where they currently live (Brown et al., 1997; Niedomysl, 2008), but we also know that people tend to move every now and then. Having noted this result, the variable municipality type is of course less informative in comparison to the other variables, due to the variety of living environments available in these municipalities (i.e. the data does not tell whether people live in the urban or rural areas within these municipalities).

4.3 What are the characteristics of those who actually do move to rural areas?

Table 4 shows the regression results where the probability is tested that a migrant with certain characteristics is rural versus urban bound (reference category). As mentioned earlier, 23.6 per cent of the migrants move to rural destinations and the results show a great similarity between this group and the group who stated rural residential preferences (table 3). There are however some interesting differences and nuances that add to the analyses. *Gender* constitutes one of those differences, where women have a marginally higher probability of moving to a rural destination compared to their male counterparts (c.f. Amcoff 2000 who did a similar observation). The various *age-groups* show that there is an increasing propensity for older people to be headed towards rural areas. The highest probability is reached by the 51-64 year olds, from where the probability decreases (although it is still much higher than for people under the age of 30). Those who have *children living at home* show a higher probability of moving to the countryside and, conversely, the higher the level of *education* the lower the probability of moving to the countryside; in both cases in agreement with the characteristics of people who have rural residential preferences. As regards *occupation*, we also find results that are very similar to those found in table 3.

Turning to *income*, it appears as if middle-income earners have a somewhat higher probability of moving to a rural destination and that high-income earners have a lower probability in comparison to the reference group (low-income earners). It could be noted that high-income earners had lower estimates for rural preferences than suggested by table 3 (although in both cases they had a lower probability, it is only the magnitude that differs somewhat). The last variable, *municipality type*, also show similar results to those found in table 3, but with one exception: people who prior to migration lived in a suburban municipality now show a lower probability of moving to a rural destination.

Table 4. Estimates of binary logistic regression results for migration to rural destinations

Category (ref = urban destinations)	Rural destinations	
	Odds ratio ^a	95% C.I.
Gender (ref = male)		
female	1.03**	1.02-1.05
Age (ref 18 - 24 years)		
25 - 30	1.54**	1.50-1.58
31 - 40	1.97**	1.92-2.02
41 - 50	2.13**	2.07-2.20
51 - 64	2.84**	2.75-2.94
65 - 70	2.07**	1.95-2.20
Children living at home (ref = no children)		
children	1.77**	1.74-1.80
Education (ref = low education)		
middle	0.90**	0.88-0.92
high	0.58**	0.57-0.60
Occupation (ref = employed)		
self-employed	1.33**	1.26-1.40
student	0.60**	0.59-0.62
retired	1.00	0.96-1.03
unemployed	0.83**	0.80-0.87
Income (ref = low)		
middle	1.10**	1.08-1.13
high	0.96**	0.93-0.98
Municipality type (ref = metropolitan)		
suburban	0.90**	0.87-0.93
large cities	1.57**	1.52-1.61
commuter	1.60**	1.54-1.66
sparsely populated	2.23**	2.13-2.33
manufacturing	1.92**	1.85-2.00
other major	1.79**	1.74-1.85
other medium	1.90**	1.84-1.98
other smaller	2.01**	1.92-2.11
Constant (B)	0.138**	
Log-L	381815.9	

*= p<0.05, **= p<0.01.

^a Exp.(B).

5 Concluding discussion

This paper set out to examine whether a hidden potential for rural population growth exists in Sweden. Current debates have suggested that a range of obstacles, such as problems with securing housing loans in rural areas, may prevent people from following through on their stated rural residential preferences and actually move to the countryside. Empirically this paper has investigated both the extent to which people state preferences for rural living as well as the extent to which they actually do move to rural areas. The results show that preferences for rural living (stated by 30.5 per cent of survey respondents) are greater than the actual share of migrants moving to rural areas (23.6 per cent according to the register data). This difference indicates a clear potential for rural population growth, although the exact size of this potential remains somewhat unclear.

Moreover, the individual characteristics of people with rural preferences and people moving to the countryside have been studied in detail and these findings are of interest on their own. However, the focus in this paper has been comparative, aiming to see if some population group is revealed as constituting a hidden potential for rural population growth. The results showed that the characteristics of those with rural preferences were remarkably similar to the migrants who move to rural areas. Therefore, notions that some specific group is somehow restricted from moving to rural areas find no support in our data.

In light of these findings it is appropriate to ask whether the potential found is likely to ever become realised or whether it simply reflects a romanticised image of rural living that people may cherish but would not realise should the opportunity even arise. Since no actual group distinguished themselves, even though there were reasons to believe that certain groups might be restricted to move to the countryside, it is the authors' interpretation that the potential found appears somewhat imaginary. It seems almost unthinkable that a similar romanticised image of urban living would be widespread among the Swedish population. Similar imaginations, often discussed under the heading 'the rural idyll', have been identified in many countries.

Also the extraordinary access to second homes in Sweden should be mentioned in this discussion as these generally are located in rural areas and as there is nothing exclusive about having such access. In enquiries carried out by Statistics Sweden almost half of the population – and in a big and undeniable urban city such as Stockholm, a majority – answer that they have access to a second home. The share is over 1/3 even in the weakest

socioeconomic groups such as early retired people or disability pensioners. An alternative or complementary way to interpret our results imply that many people fulfil their rural dreams by spending time in a second home instead of permanently moving there.

What do these findings imply for the future population development of rural areas in Sweden? It is important to keep in mind that rural depopulation is a key concern in many countries, but the extent to which depopulation really should be considered a problem depends on perspective. Since previous research has shown that those who leave the countryside (partly causing the depopulation) do so voluntarily and appear happy with their decision to leave, for these out-migrants, depopulation is unlikely to be a concern other than perhaps for nostalgic reasons. Since those that move to the countryside are too few to alter the depopulation trend, but – as indicated by the results of the present study – are very likely to constitute the lion's share of those who actually do want to live in rural areas, it is difficult to see how the situation might change. The latter group may of course mourn that they do not have enough followers to stop the depopulation trend. But it seems as if little can be done if others do not share their residential preferences, or if those that have them do not put their preferences into action. This leaves us with the ageing population that remains in rural areas. This group is facing the problems associated with population decline such as a shrinking public and private service sector, falling housing-values and concern for who is going to care for the elderly. Will the government have to force people to move to rural areas to work in the caretaking sector (if the unemployed are reluctant to move there), will Sweden have to adopt a system of fly-in-fly-out caretaking services or will the elderly be forced to move? Needless to say, such questions make the concerns of policymakers' very understandable.

Recent population projections in Sweden (Amcoff and Westholm, 2007) show that rural areas will experience further population decline and the results of this paper add further insights about the future prospects for rural in-migration. It is inevitable that the population of Sweden (and those of many other developed countries) is aging. At the same time as large cohorts are leaving the labour market, the latest Swedish baby-boom cohort, born in the early 1990s, will reach the age of 18. These large cohorts will however enter into age-groups normally characterized by low preference for rural living and low probabilities of moving to rural areas. In addition, since we know that a large share of those born in the early 1990s will become highly educated, this will also increase the level of education in the total population making the prospects for rural population growth even

smaller. In short, there are strong reasons to foresee a negative population development in Swedish rural areas.

Lastly, however, there are two notable aspects that should be mentioned as they may contribute to a less negative development for rural areas. Firstly, Sweden is currently experiencing unprecedented high levels of immigration. Because the vast majority of these immigrants (mainly refugees) settle in densely populated urban areas, increasing levels of immigration is unlikely to be helpful for population development in rural areas. However, immigration from other European countries may also increase and, possibly, become more rural in character (see Glesbygdverket, 2008b). Sparsely populated countries, with an abundance of natural resources and good recreational opportunities, may appear particularly attractive to people living in the more densely populated and polluted areas of central Europe. Secondly, the post-war baby boomers, that constitute a significant share of the total Swedish population, are rapidly reaching retirement age. Some of them may decide to leave urban areas when no longer being constrained to living close to their work places and could possibly be an important source for rural in-migration (Jauhiainen, 2009; Stockdale, 2006b). Even if our analyses did not reveal this group as being particularly prone to move to rural areas, this cohort is large enough to make a significant impact even if only a minority of them would decide to move to the countryside.

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