Declining internal migration? Patterns, causes and prospects

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Introduction to Population, Space, and Place Special Issue, edited by Ian Shuttleworth and Tony Champion

The genesis of this special issue lies nearly a decade ago when we were alerted to the long-term decline in internal migration in the United States (US) by the work of Thomas Cooke (Cooke 2011). This in itself was sufficient to attract our interest as an extensive literature dating from the 1970s, if not earlier, had conditioned us to expect an increasing rather than decreasing level of spatial mobility with higher incomes and economic development (Zelinsky 1971; Tönnies 1887). To find the opposite, especially for such an important component of spatial mobility as internal migration, was therefore a shock. Heightening further our curiosity was Cooke's observation that one possible explanation for the US migration slowdown, additional to the Great Recession of 2008 and demographic ageing, was what he termed 'secular rootedness' – a feature of late/advanced capitalist societies. This all pointed to one major question – was the US experience replicated elsewhere?

Our attempts to answer this question led us to an analysis of migration trends in England and Wales since 1971 (Champion and Shuttleworth, 2015a, 2015b) and then to our edited book (Champion et al, 2018) which examined cross-national migration trends and put forward explanations for what was found for each country. This experience confirmed one thing we already suspected; that it was difficult to analyse migration levels through time even within a single country and that the difficulties were compounded when framed as a cross-national exercise because of the variety of national statistical systems. It also taught us something new; that there was considerable diversity of experiences both within and between countries, with migration declines at some spatial scales but not others in the same country as well as less marked (or no) declines for other countries. The book also suggested that different explanations for observed trends were at play across our basket of countries, and we also became aware that there was little work on the implications of falling migration rates – a theme to which we will return when discussing a prospective research agenda.

These experiences motivated us to respond when in 2018 the editors of *Population, Space, and Place* put out a call for special issue proposals. The diversity of migration experiences by country prompted us to seek contributions that widened and deepened the national evidence base beyond the seven included in the book ((the UK, US, Germany, Italy, Sweden, Australia, and Japan), aiming for a better understanding of the complex and heterogeneous nature of migration trends. Additionally, the gap identified in explanations of migration trends led us to encourage contributions that considered the processes leading to immobility and which

identified the correlates and associations of changing levels of migration. Our intention in this editorial is to highlight the main features of each paper and the contribution it makes to fulfilling the remit set out in our initial proposal. As a starting point, however, we present the most recently available data for the US and thereby demonstrate that the questions initially raised by Cooke (2011) remain highly relevant.

Our calculations based on the latest US data available at the time of writing (June 2021) extend the series to the year ending in March 2020. As shown in Figure 1, the steep decline in US migration, dating from the 1980s, has been continuing for inter-state and intra-county, but the rate for inter-county moves within states has declined more slowly and even held up in more recent years. A more nuanced version of these data is presented in Table 1 where we examine the timing of the post-1980s migration declines by migration type. One interesting feature is that the pace of decrease accelerated since 2000 and another interesting feature is complexity; since the turn of the millennium the three types of migration have each followed a different trajectory. This is seen most clearly in the bottom panel that shows the % change in the 5-year average rates. The intermediate-distance 'between county within state' rate displays the opposite trajectory to the within-county rate, dropping fastest between 2000-2005 and 2005-2010 (down by 16.0% from 2.8% to 2.3%), then with an 8.6% drop to 2.1% before rising slightly to 2.1%. Meanwhile, the inter-state moving rate, having dropped by 10% or more between 5-year periods up to 2005-2010, has posted a much smaller rate of decline since then, but with the smallest drop being to 2010-2015 (3.7%) before rising again somewhat in 2015-2020 to a 5.1% drop. Other work on the recent US scene by Frey (2021), using data to July 2020, points to some of the sub-regional subtleties of US migration with population losses by migration from many large metropolitan areas, increases from migration in the suburbs and smaller metropolitans, with differences between types of metropolitan area (e.g. New York City experienced out migration but Phoenix, Arizona in migration), with higher levels of migration in some places, less in others, with overall figures masking these details.

Internal migration decline has therefore not gone away and its importance as a topic for research is reinforced by the experience of other 'decline countries' such as Canada (White and Haan 2021). However, the complexity of the US experience and the diversity of the national case studies in our book indicate the continued need to *extend the national evidence base in width and in depth* to understand more about how trends differ between countries that vary in their levels of address changing.

The contribution of Alvarez et al (2021) to this special issue provides a good place to start in terms of *widening* the evidence base. This paper considers a sample of 18 OECD countries

from 1996 to 2018 using time-series analysis in an econometric approach to investigate countries that were big migration-rate fallers and also those which had stable or increasing rates. All their countries (except most of those in Europe) experienced migration falls. Differentials in long- and short-term trends across these countries can be explained by one variable (regional income inequalities), whereas three have only short-term effects (the percentage of young adults, Information and Communications Technology (ICT) take up, and international immigration). The article usefully emphasises the need to be aware of diversity between countries, but it also raises the issue of data. Some of the potentials (and difficulties) of collating data for international analysis are illustrated, as are the differing perspective from different types of data – the conclusions about the UK, for instance, differ from the England and Wales analysis based on the microdata of the Office for National Statistics Longitudinal Study (ONS LS) by Duke-Williams et al (2021).

The three papers by McCollum et al (2021), Shuttleworth et al (2021), and Garðarsdóttir et al (2021) also widen the evidence base. Garðarsdóttir et al (2021) describe internal migration trends for 1986-2017 in a Nordic high-migration country, using data from the excellent Icelandic population data system. Experiencing three of the developments seen in general across the world in advanced economies (the ageing of the population, the 2008 Great Recession, and the growth of immigrant communities), already-high migration rates were found to remain high, except for a decline in migration rates from the provinces to Reykjavik. In this regard, the same factors have led to a different outcome in Iceland than in migration-decline nations, suggestive of a distinctive Nordic migration regime. McCollum et al (2021) and Shuttleworth et al (2021) widen the evidence base by extending analysis using the ONS LS work done by Shuttleworth et al (2019) in England and Wales to the other countries of the UK. Both papers use a census-based longitudinal study (the Scottish Longitudinal Study (SLS) and the Northern Ireland Longitudinal Study (NILS)) and consider migration from 2001 onwards using healthcard registration data. McCollum et al (2021) discover a decline in long-distance migration from 2007 onwards and a fall in short-distance moves from 2010 onwards plus a convergence of migration rates by social class; Scotland appears to be experiencing the same type of migration decline as England and Wales, although the absence of a similar health card data in the ONS LS precludes a direct comparison. Shuttleworth et al (2021) sought to replicate as closely as possible the analytical design of the Scottish study so as to make a robust comparison of migratory trends between Scotland and Northern Ireland from 2001. Despite the special nature of Northern Ireland as a communally-divided society, Northern Ireland saw, in general, the same migration decline as Scotland but differs from the Scottish example in that the fall has been across all distance bands and started earlier.

The papers by Kalemba et al (2021), Bonifazi et al (2021), and Duke-Williams et al (2021) extend the evidence base by *deepening and building on earlier analyses*. Kalemba et al, in their analysis of the substantial migration decline country Australia, add to Bell et al (2018). A key finding is that the net effect of compositional changes in the population is neutral; the downward push of ageing has been counterbalanced by rising education levels and more immigrants in the population. The decline in Australian internal migration rates is therefore attributed to a change in migration behaviour with most demographic sub-groups becoming less mobile. The question, to which we will return later, therefore remains *why* this might be so. Bonifazi et al (2021) extend their earlier analyses of Italy, a low-migration country. Focussing on the regional dynamics of migration there, disaggregating by citizenship, gender, age and regional type and comparing longer- and shorter-distance of inter-municipality moves, they paint a picture of a migration system that is sclerotic, that was hit hard by the Great Recession of 2008, and in which even the normally more mobile immigrant population is becoming now more stuck in place, alongside young people who are delaying their transitions from the parental home. The low migration rates across the board in Italy make it difficult to detect differentials, a startling conclusion. Duke-Williams et al (2021) build on the various previous ONS LS analyses of Champion et al through the lens of cohort analysis. This shows that each age cohort has become less migratory across all distances once past the age of thirty, but that migration rates for those in their twenties grew for more recent cohorts, perhaps because of the expansion of higher education.

The papers of Smith et al (2021) and Champion and Gordon (2021) deal with *causes and consequences*. Smith et al consider gentrification in rural areas of England and Wales via a cheese analogy that represents the maturity of the gentrification process. Their census analysis, combined with qualitative insights from ethnographic research, suggest that older urban-rural migrants, who were associated with past waves of gentrification, have aged *in situ*, thereby blocking the housing market and preventing new entrants from moving into these areas. This is a good example of place attachment and might also be understood as a component of ‘secular rootedness’ with attractions to particular houses in particular places. It also has wider relevance as this is only one form of ‘blocking’; other forms are seen in the US where people, for example, are renovating their homes and staying put as an alternative to moving (MarketWatch 2017) or where slowing job turnover (Molloy and Smith 2019). There is ample scope to address these processes and restrictions in other countries.

Champion and Gordon (2021) examine the implications of slowing migration for social mobility via escalator regions, with the presumption that, everything else being equal, less migration would weaken upward social mobility by starving escalator regions of new entrants. They find,

in fact, that the London escalator grew in strength in the 1990s but declined in relative strength compared to the rest of the South-East and regional cities in the 2000s. That the London escalator continues to operate alongside its regional counterparts is interesting as fewer migrants ought to lead to fewer escalator riders. However, in England and Wales, the migration decline is chiefly seen for moves of less than 10km, so perhaps the relative buoyancy of inter-regional migration acts to lubricate the various escalators.

Besides widening the evidence base, the paper by Alvarez et al (2021) also seeks to deal with causality. We have already discussed how across their basket of countries, they identified the effects of ageing, ICT, and regional disparities and tested some of the hypotheses of potential causes of migration slowdown discussed by Champion et al (2018) using econometric methods. There is scope to extend this type of approach further, as we discuss below.

In conclusion, while the papers collected in this special issue have developed the research agenda, challenges and opportunities remain. When the volume was commissioned in 2018, COVID-19 was unheard of, with viral epidemics featuring in few people's thoughts. The period when most of the papers were being prepared saw a series of shocks as countries weathered the pandemic with different degrees of success. The latest challenge for internal migration scholars, therefore, is to assess the significance and outcomes of the last two years. One possibility is that Covid will turn out to be just a short and sharp shock before the resumption of long-term trends, though the jury is still out on whether in the interim this means a short-term fall in migration (as White and Haan (2021) expect) or an increase in 'flight from density' migration (as argued by Frey, 2021). On the other hand, as argued by Alvarez et al (2021), there is a possibility that an exogenous shock like Covid will create a new long-term equilibrium. There is also the possibility that some age cohorts have been scarred by the experiences of 2020 and 2021, with longer-term implications. Clearly, in the absence of data, at present it is impossible to deal authoritatively with these questions which include themes such as changing rates of migration and origins and destinations. The role of ICT in facilitating or hindering migration will doubtless be a feature of these debates, especially given the growth in homeworking (about which there are questions as to whether this itself is short term or a new long-term pattern).

The papers also illustrate the difficulties of grappling with the causes of temporal changes in migration because the explanations are so wide ranging. Kalemba et al (2021) call for the unpacking of the constant term generated by their decomposition regressions (the general downward push on migration from changed behaviour) to be unpacked – supported by McCollum et al (2021) in arguing for a research focus on immobility and its reasons – and our

special issue collection suggests two ways to do this. One is to do more cross-national quantitative work in the vein of Alvarez et al (2021) by collating longer time series of data on migration, as well as a wider range of the potential explanatory variables. Another approach would be to undertake more detailed ethnographic studies of places and of demographic groups, looking at their current decisions but also taking a longer-term retrospective view.

The availability of data from the 2020/21 census round, and access to survey and administrative data across much of North America, Australasia, and Europe, means that updating the research in this volume to assess whether trends since the 1970s or before continued or reversed will become possible once the data are released. It is noteworthy, however, that in this volume there were no paper offers from Latin America, Africa, or Asia. This begs the question of whether this theme of migration decline, which has guided our work for the best part of a decade, is even an issue in this major part of the world. There is a gap that could usefully be filled with country case studies from there using comparable methods as far as possible. This would enable conclusions to be drawn about whether what have observed in Australia, Scotland, the USA, and the component countries of the UK is a period effect – e.g. something like ICT, experienced across all the world, as a feature of the 21st Century – or a stage effect (something seen in high-income countries because they have a long history behind them of industrialisation and then service employment growth). So far, the answer to this is unclear, especially since its leads into the difficult area of a grand theory to explain the migration decline we have seen in some countries. Is this something to do with the world as it is today, the experience of secular rootedness in late Capitalist societies, or simply the outworkings of national policies and circumstances as argued by McCollum et al (2020)? Once again, there are no obvious answers but there are clear research gaps.

Before ending, it is worthwhile to pose the question 'why does it matter?'. The reason we think why the study of temporal trends in migration matters is that population mobility is fundamental to matching supply and demand in labour and housing markets, to achieving social mobility, and to accessing opportunities in their broadest sense (Institute for Fiscal Studies 2020). Migration is one of the ties that bind places to each other, and its slowing will have implications for how places function and how they relate to each other. As such, it has implications for the success or failure of initiatives like the UK's Levelling Up agenda. More than this, there are strong claims that differences between the attitudes of people who move and those who are immobile shape the political and electoral complexion of places (Lees et al 2018): a more immobile population will tend to be more socially conservative and to be less trusting of change and minority groups.

We conclude by thanking the anonymous referees, the series reviewer, and all the contributing authors for taking part. Finally, we would like to pay tribute to our friend and colleague, Professor Aileen Stockdale, who died on March 27th 2021. As our managing editor, she guided us through the bulk of the preparation of this special issue and was always on hand to offer sage advice. She will be sorely missed, and we would like to dedicate this collection of papers to her memory.

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June 2021

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Table 1. Average annual rate of address changing by type of move, 1985-2020, by 5-year period and change between 5-year periods

5-years to March of end year	All moves	Within county	Between county within state	Between state
Annual average (%)				
1985-1990	17.57	11.09	3.47	3.01
1990-1995	16.41	10.58	3.15	2.67
1995-2000	15.38	9.89	3.09	2.39
2000-2005	12.88	8.13	2.78	1.97
2005-2010	12.39	8.41	2.33	1.65
2010-2015	11.29	7.57	2.13	1.59
2015-2020	9.91	6.24	2.16	1.50
% point change from previous 5 years				
1990-1995	-1.16	-0.51	-0.31	-0.33
1995-2000	-1.03	-0.68	-0.06	-0.28
2000-2005	-2.50	-1.76	-0.32	-0.42
2005-2010	-0.49	0.28	-0.44	-0.33
2010-2015	-1.10	-0.84	-0.20	-0.06
2015-2020	-1.38	-1.33	0.03	-0.08
% change from previous 5 years				
1990-1995	-6.6	-4.6	-9.1	-11.1
1995-2000	-6.2	-6.5	-1.9	-10.5
2000-2005	-16.2	-17.8	-10.3	-17.5
2005-2010	-3.8	3.4	-16.0	-16.6
2010-2015	-8.9	-10.0	-8.6	-3.7
2015-2020	-12.3	-17.6	1.2	-5.1

Source: See Figure 1.

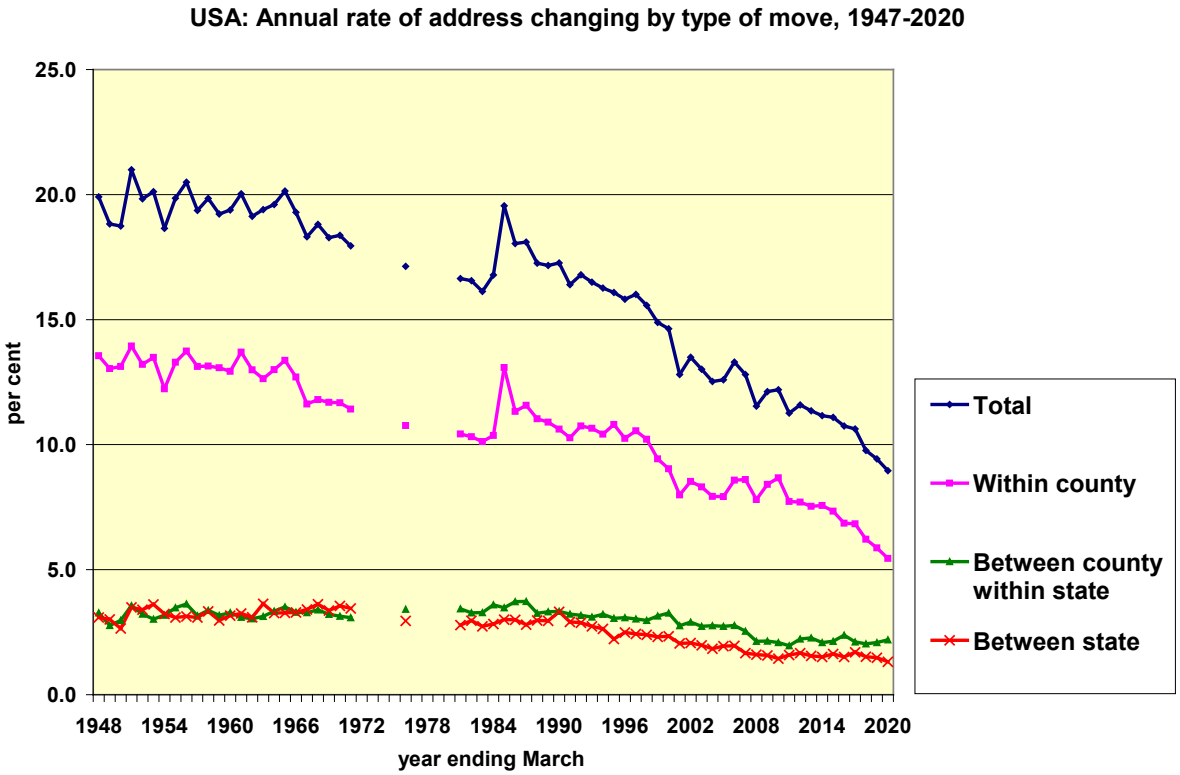

Figure 1. USA: Annual rate of address changing by type of move, 1947-2020 . Source: Calculated by the authors from Current Population Survey (CPS) data on one-year address changing to March of the year shown. The between-state series incorporates the imputation-related adjustments made by Kaplan and Schulhofer-Wolf (2012).