



BEYOND
'LEFT BEHIND PLACES'



REGIONAL MIGRATION IN
ECONOMICALLY LAGGING
REGIONS IN THE UK,
FRANCE, AND GERMANY

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Introduction

Over the past ten years or so, concern has mounted about places in the Global North that have been ‘left behind’ by the growth and prosperity experienced in superstar cities and other wealthy regions. This briefing paper summarises the findings from the one of the strands of the [‘Beyond Left Behind Places’ project](#), which involved quantitative analysis of residential migration patterns in economically ‘left behind’ regions in the UK, France, and Germany during the immediate pre-COVID period. In addition, we conducted qualitative research with residents of economically ‘left behind’ regions in the three countries to get their perceptions.

We use national administrative and census data for the three countries to examine whether economically lagging regions tend to lose or gain population through migration, and what age groups are moving in or out. Economic theories often assume that individuals migrate from economically lagging regions to areas offering better economic conditions. But actually, economically lagging regions in the UK, France and Germany generally tend to experience net population

inflows. In other words, more people are moving to these regions than are moving out. In fact, when it comes to internal migration (i.e. people moving within the same country), these lagging regions tend to attract more new residents, on average, than more economically successful regions do.

What are ‘left behind places’?

The term ‘left behind places’ has in recent years emerged as a way to describe places negatively affected by austerity, globalisation, and technological change¹. We use it as a shorthand for places experiencing decline or stagnation on economic, demographic and social dimensions, relative to more dynamic and prosperous places. ‘Left-behindness’ can therefore be understood as a multidimensional condition that affects a wide variety of places, ranging from deindustrialised cities to more peripheral and rural regions.

[Read more about the research here.](#)

¹ Andy Pike, Vincent Béal, Nicolas Cauchi-Duval, Rachel Franklin, Nadir Kinossian, Thilo Lang, Tim Leibert, Danny MacKinnon, Max Rousseau, Jeroen Royer, Loris Servillo, John Tomaney & Sanne Velthuis (2023) ‘Left behind places’: a geographical etymology, *Regional Studies*, DOI: [10.1080/00343404.2023.2167972](https://doi.org/10.1080/00343404.2023.2167972)

Executive Summary

Key findings

- Most economically lagging regions in the UK, France and Germany are not experiencing net population outflows through migration. In fact, economically lagging regions tend to have higher rates of net internal migration (i.e. migration from other parts of the same country) than high-GDP, high-growth regions.
- Economically lagging regions also tend to have positive rates of net total migration (i.e. net international plus net international migration).
- Among all age groups except young adults aged 18-29, average rates of net migration in lagging regions are positive, meaning that among those aged 30 and upwards, more people are either moving into or staying in these regions than leaving.
- Economically lagging regions are primarily urban in the UK, rural in France, and mixed in Germany, but across all three countries, neither rural or urban lagging regions have a consistent tendency towards net out-migration.
- Rather than migration flows being primarily driven by economic disparities, academic evidence implies people respond to a variety of factors, such as differences in housing costs, the presence of (natural) amenities, social and family ties, and feelings of place attachment.

Key policy implications

- Due to relatively high rates of 'staying' in economically 'left behind' regions and often fairly healthy rates of in-migration, these regions will remain home to substantial populations, including families with children, people of working age, and pensioners.
- Therefore, it is important to ensure a decent standard of living for residents of lagging regions.
- To enable this, policies for economically 'left behind' regions should seek to protect and enhance local public and private services, infrastructure, and the quality and affordability of housing.
- In addition, policies need to improve access to economic opportunities for residents of economically lagging regions.
- Improving transport connections to economic centres and upgrading digital infrastructure and connectivity are important parts of enhancing access to jobs and services, especially in more remote areas.

Economically lagging regions and regional migration

Background

Many academic and policy studies express concern about out-migration in ‘left behind’ regions in the global North. Influenced by economic theories and historical patterns of population loss during economic crises, policymakers often assume that economically marginalised regions continue to experience net population outflows to other regions.

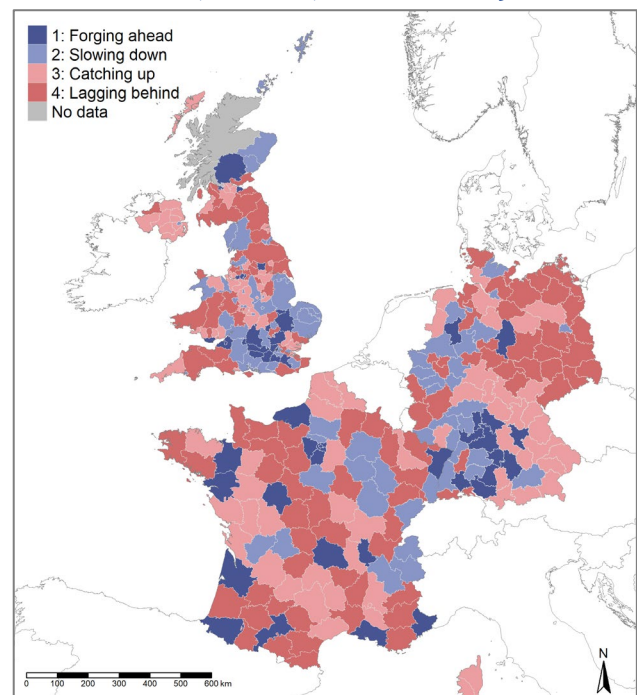
Methodology

We divide regions² into four groups based on their level of per capita GDP in 1991 and rate of per capita GDP growth from 1991 to 2018:

- 1) **Forging ahead**: initial GDP per capita higher than national average and growth faster than national average
- 2) **Slowing down**: initial GDP per capita higher-than-national-average and growth slower than national average
- 3) **Catching up**: initial GDP per capita lower than national average and growth faster than national average
- 4) **Lagging behind**: initial GDP per capita lower than national average and growth lower than national average

For each of these four categories, we measure rates of in- and out-migration per 1,000 residents for the year 2017 to 2018. We isolate internal (i.e domestic) migration from international migration so we can assess regional population flows in the absence of international immigration, which can be subject to fluctuation over time.

Figure 1: Regional economic categories across the UK, France, and Germany



Source : Authors' analysis based on ARDECO data.

² We use NUTS3 regions in France and the UK (except London where NUTS2 geographies are used), and spatial planning regions in Germany since German NUTS3 regions are relatively small and spatial planning regions are more similar in size to British and French NUTS3 regions.

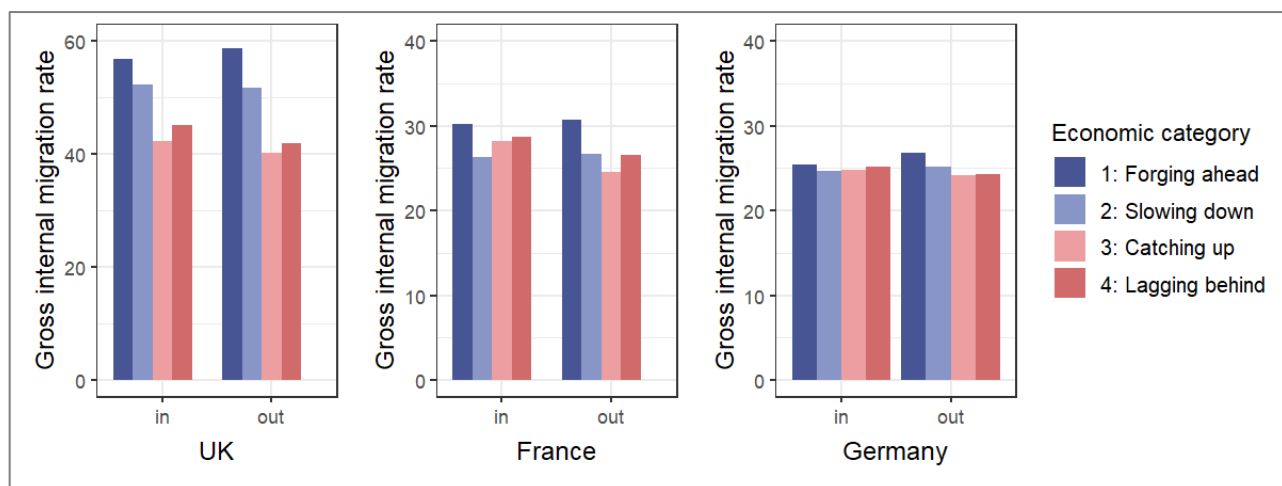
Findings

Contrary to what might be expected, regions in the ‘lagging behind’ category do not tend to have high rates of internal out-migration compared to other regions. In fact, in all three

countries – the UK, France, and Germany – the average internal out-migration rate for ‘lagging behind’ regions is lower than for ‘forging ahead’ regions (see Figure 2)

Figure 2 : Fewer people move out of "left behind" regions than forging ahead regions

Average rates of internal in- and out-migration (per 1,000 residents) by economic category and country, 2017-18



Sources: authors' analysis based on data from the Office of National Statistics, Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, National Records of Scotland, Bundesinstitut für Bau-, Stadt- und Raumforschung, Statistische Ämter des Bundes und der Länder, and the Institut Nationale de la Statistique et des Études Économiques.

Rate of internal in-migration = the number of people moving into the region from other parts of the country, per 1,000 residents.

Rate of internal out-migration = the number of people moving out of the region to other parts of the country, per 1,000 residents.

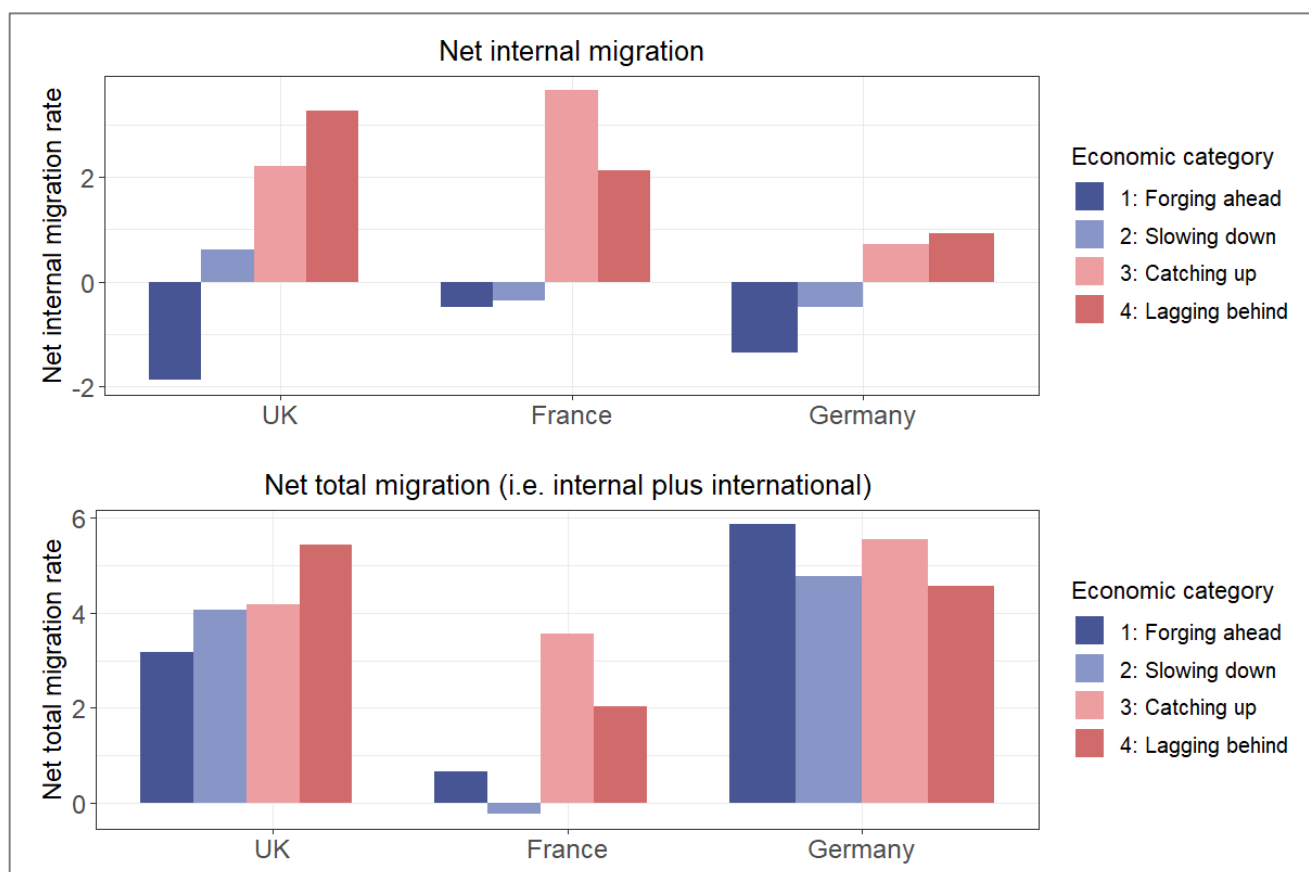
Figure 2 shows the average rates of internal in-migration and internal out-migration for regions in each economic category and each country. For instance, on average, ‘lagging behind’ regions in the UK had an internal in-migration rate of 45.6 people per 1,000 residents in 2017-18.

In Figure 3 we subtract out-migration from in-migration to get the net rate of change. Due in part to their relatively low rates of out-migration, **economically lagging regions tend to see net gains in population through**

internal migration. When considering not just internal migration but total net migration (i.e. including international migration), net migration in lagging regions is even more positive, as shown in bottom panel of Figure 3.

Figure 3: Economically "left behind" regions on average see net gains in population through internal migration

Average rates of net internal migration and net total migration (per 1,000 residents), by economic category and country



Sources: authors' analysis based on data from the Office of National Statistics, Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, National Records of Scotland, Bundesinstitut für Bau-, Stadt- und Raumforschung, Statistische Ämter des Bundes und der Länder, and the Institut Nationale de la Statistique et des Études Économiques.

In 2017-18, 68% of lagging regions had a positive internal migration balance. This increases to 81% of lagging regions when considering total migration (i.e. internal plus international).

Neither rural or urban economically-lagging regions had a disproportionate tendency to be affected by net out-migration. As a result, lagging regions have similarly robust (internal) net migration rates in all three countries,

despite such regions being primarily urban in the UK, mostly rural in France, and a mix of urban and rural in Germany.

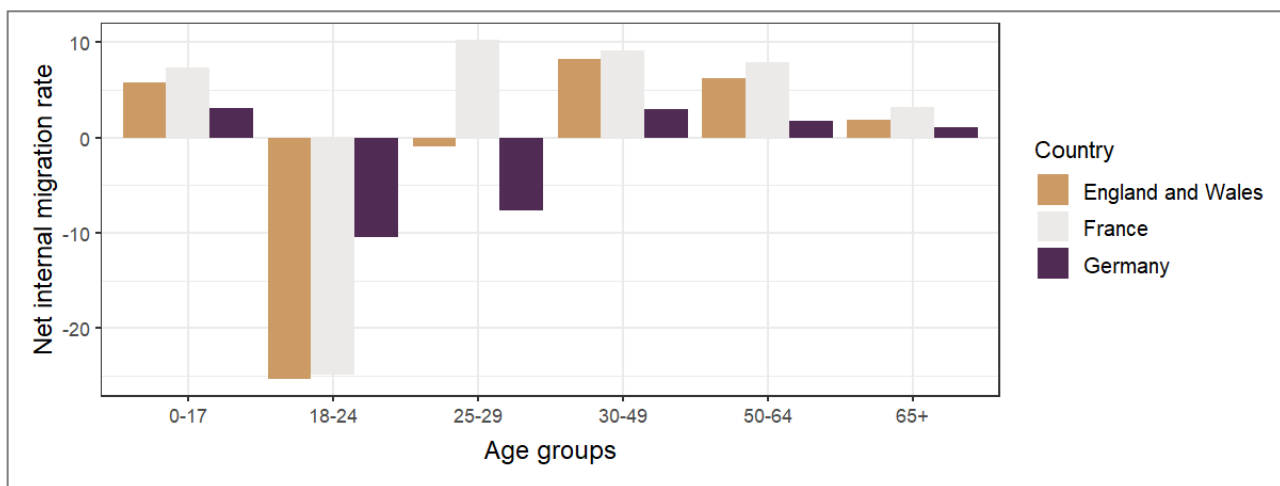
While economically 'left behind' regions tend to have positive migration balances, many have low birth- and high death-rates. This means that the majority of 'lagging behind' regions saw negative natural population growth in 2017-18, and just over a third experienced overall population shrinkage.

Our analysis also shows that ‘lagging behind’ regions generally experience net outflows of those in the 18-24, and to some extent 25-29 age groups, in line with existing reports of young adults moving away from ‘left behind’ regions (see Figure 4).³ Economically lagging regions are not unique in this regard, however, with many regions in the ‘catching up’ and ‘slowing down’ groups also seeing net outflows of 18-29 year olds.

Moreover, among all other age groups – i.e. 0-17, 30-49, 40-64, and 65+ – lagging regions tend to experience net inflows (see Figure 4). In other words, **economically ‘left behind’ regions on average gain families with children, working-age individuals, and pensioners through inter-regional migration.** To a large extent this is driven by higher rates of ‘staying’ among these age groups in lagging regions, though in part also by in-migration to lagging regions.

Figure 4: Economically ‘left behind’ regions gain families with children, working-age individuals, and pensioners through inter-regional migration.

Average rates of net internal migration by age group (per 1,000 residents), in ‘lagging behind’ regions



Sources: authors’ analysis based on data from the Office of National Statistics, Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, National Records of Scotland, Bundesinstitut für Bau-, Stadt- und Raumforschung, Statistische Ämter des Bundes und der Länder, and the Institut Nationale de la Statistique et des Études Économiques.

Rate of net internal migration by age group = the number of people in a particular age group moving into the region from other parts of the country, minus the number of people in that same age group leaving the region for other parts of the country, per 1,000 residents belonging to that age group.

Figure 4 shows the average rates of net internal migration by age group for regions in each economic category and each country. For instance, among the 18-24 year age group ‘lagging behind’ regions in the UK had, on average, a net internal migration rate of -25.3 per 1,000 in 2017-18, meaning that for every 1,000 18-24 year olds in these regions, on average 25.3 were ‘lost’ to the region in net terms through internal migration.

³ García-Arias, M. A., Tolón-Becerra, A., Lastra-Bravo, X., & Torres-Parejo, Ú. (2021). The out-migration of young people from a region of the “Empty Spain”: Between a constant slump cycle and a pending innovation spiral. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 87, 314–326. Plöger, J., & Weck, S. (2014). Confronting Out-Migration and the Skills Gap in Declining German Cities. *European Planning Studies*, 22(2), 437–455.



Shopping center in Neunkirchen, Germany [authors' own image]

The high rates of 'staying' in lagging regions suggest that the economic status of regions is not the only determinant of migration flows.

Other factors, like the cost of housing, the availability of amenities like access to nature, and the presence of social and family networks, appear to be equally important.⁴

Different groups (e.g. the highly-skilled versus those with more moderate skill levels) moreover respond differently to regional economic conditions, and the capability to move varies between groups.⁵ In qualitative interviews conducted in economically 'left behind' regions as part of the project, many residents valued their close networks of family and friends in the local area, and the relatively low cost of housing compared to other regions.

In addition, commuting to either nearby or sometimes far away cities was not an uncommon phenomenon, highlighting that commuting can be a way for residents of lagging regions to access economic opportunities that aren't available locally.

Policy implications

In neoclassical economics, population flows between regions are seen as an adjustment mechanism to even out spatial inequalities. In recent decades, evidence has called this assumption into question⁶, and our analysis further reinforces that **the movement of people will not solve economic disparities.**

Based on our evidence, most economically 'left behind' regions will likely remain home to substantial numbers of families with children, people of working age, and pensioners. **Ensuring a decent standard of living for all of these groups in lagging regions is therefore a crucial task for national and regional policymakers.**

⁴ Berger, M. C., & Blomquist, G. C. (1992). Mobility and destination in migration decisions: The roles of earnings, quality of life, and housing prices. *Journal of Housing Economics*, 2(1), 37–59. [https://doi.org/10.1016/1051-1377\(92\)90018-L](https://doi.org/10.1016/1051-1377(92)90018-L)

Fischer, P. A., & Malmberg, G. (2001). Settled people don't move: On life course and (Im-) mobility in Sweden.

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⁵ Carlsen, F., Johansen, K., & Stambøl, L. S. (2013). Effects of Regional Labour Markets on Migration Flows, by Education Level. *LABOUR*, 27(1), 80–92. Kitching, R. (1990). Migration Behaviour Among the Unemployed and Low-Skilled. *Labour Migration: The Internal Geographical Mobility of Labour in the Developed World*, 172–190. Fielding, T. (2012). Migration in Britain: Paradoxes of the present, prospects for the future. In *Migration in Britain: Paradoxes of the Present, Prospects for the Future*. Edward Elgar Publishing Ltd.

⁶ Fratesi, U., & Percoco, M. (2014). Selective Migration, Regional Growth and Convergence: Evidence from Italy.

Regional Studies, 48(10), 1650–1668. Østbye, S., & Westerlund, O. (2007). Is Migration Important for Regional Convergence? Comparative Evidence for Norwegian and Swedish Counties, 1980–2000. *Regional Studies*, 41(7), 901–915.



Regeneration in Roanne, France [authors' own image]

Given the range of demographic groups living in economically lagging regions, **policies for these regions should seek to protect and enhance local public and private services, such as education, healthcare, and community facilities.** At the same time, infrastructure and the quality and affordability of housing should be safeguarded.

However, even if economically lagging regions are able to retain and/or attract residents despite relatively poor economic conditions, **improving economic opportunities remains important.** Our interviews conducted with residents of economically lagging regions revealed that many would like to see more and better-quality local jobs.

Transport connectivity was also often mentioned as an issue, particularly in more rural and remote regions. **Improving public and private transport connections, as well as digital connectivity, to enable access to economic opportunities and services** will be an important part of addressing living conditions for people living in economically 'left behind' regions.

About the project

The 'Beyond Left Behind Places' project aims to develop a new understanding of demographic and socio-economic change in economically declining and lagging regions, going beyond the label of 'left behind places' through in-depth investigation of their predicaments and prospects. Taking a cross-national comparative approach, it focuses on lagging regions in France, Germany and the UK. This deeper comparative analysis allows us to produce cross-national evidence to support theory building and inform policy-making. As well as quantitative analysis of regional characteristics and trajectories across Western Europe, the project includes: detailed exploration of migration and staying in 'left behind' regions; case studies of six 'left behind' regions in France, Germany and the UK; and reviews of policy approaches for declining and lagging regions.

For more information about the other parts of the project see:

<https://research.ncl.ac.uk/beyondleftbehindplaces/aboutourproject/workpackages/>



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