

# The effects of migration on rural population decline: A case study of Northern Netherlands

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## **Abstract**

Rural depopulation is a longstanding issue affecting many European countries. One of the proposed long term solutions is an influx of foreign immigrants into rural areas. However, there are questions just how effective or viable this influx is. This thesis focused on a study of rural municipalities in Northern Netherlands, using a mixed methods approach, analyzing the overall demographic trends in relevant municipalities, as well as conducting in depth interviews with migrants who arrived into rural areas, inquiring about their experiences and long term plans.

The thesis concludes that while foreign immigration can help slow down rural depopulation, it does not necessarily stop it by itself and there are other factors at play. The thesis found that immigrants and people of foreign background account for most of the growth in most studied municipalities, suggesting that they not only immigrate but are also more likely to stay, however, most studied municipalities also experienced a decline in native born population, suggesting these two phenomenons are not strongly related. The interviews also revealed that while some migrants prefer rural areas, especially those of younger age may share similar inclination to leave for urban areas as their native born peers.

Overall, the thesis results are not fully conclusive and further research in this area should be undertaken.

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## **1. Introduction**

While the overall population of the 27 countries of the European Union has grown by almost 7 million since 2021 (Eurostat, 2021), there are large regional disparities in terms of population growth. These differences appear on the national level, such as between Lithuania, whose population decreased in the same time period by almost 200 000 people, and Ireland, which grew by 400 000 (Eurostat, 2021). However, there are also significant differences on a regional and local level, and, crucially for the purposes of this thesis, between urban and rural areas. In the case of Lithuania, while the country itself shrunk in population, the capital and largest city Vilnius saw an increase (Registru Centras, 2021). This means that the majority of the decline occurred in smaller cities and rural areas.

Rural population decline in Europe is not a new phenomenon, and has been observed since the start of the industrial revolution, driven by the prospect of more job availability and higher wages in the emerging urban areas, as well as agriculture becoming less labor intensive thanks to technological progress. However, in the latter decades of the 20th century, many countries have started experiencing sharp rural decline as a combination of rural - urban migration, migration abroad, as well as population aging and declining birth rates (Coleman and Rowthorn, 2011). While the latter issues tend to be observed in urban areas as well, rural areas tend to be most affected, with many villages becoming severely depopulated or abandoned completely. The effects of this decline are negatively reflected in economic productivity of these areas, as fewer and fewer residents are economically active and capable of generating growth. In addition, the effects tend to be self-reinforcing - as Elshof et. al. (2014) observed, residents of declining areas are themselves more likely to leave than in non declining areas.

Furthermore, the decreasing numbers of economically active residents negatively affect local business, which struggles for customers, as well as the local infrastructure, be it public transport or medical, and this drop in quality of life in turn causes further decline.

Ever since the issue of population decline entered public and academic consciousness, immigration has been proposed as a solution. Indeed, many European countries which experienced overall population growth would actually experience a decline instead without immigration (Coleman and Rowthorn, 2011). Although immigrants tend to settle in urban areas (Gil-Alonso, 2008), some choose rural areas, primarily to work in agriculture, but also tourism and other industries. In some countries, particularly the Mediterranean, foreign retirees also constitute a significant amount of rural migrants (Bayona and Gil-Alonso, 2013). However, questions remain to what extent this inflow of migrants can mitigate the natural death rates and outflow of residents from rural areas, as well as to how many of these migrants will choose to stay in rural areas for the long term.

## **1.1 Research problem**

Based on the aforementioned background, the primary aim of the thesis is to investigate the impact of immigration to rural areas on population decline, through a combination of quantitative and qualitative research. While similar research has been done in the past (Bayona and Gil-Alonso, 2013), demographic changes are constantly evolving, and this older research for example predates the large influx of migrants during the 2015 refugee crisis. As the task of analyzing all of the EU would be far too broad of a scope, the thesis is restricted to the area of Northern Netherlands - specifically the provinces of Friesland, Groningen and Drenthe. While the Netherlands is a highly urbanized country, this region is quite sparsely populated by the national standard of about 508 persons per square kilometer (Statistics Netherlands, 2022) and unlike most of the rest of the country, some areas experiences rural depopulation, making it a suitable focus for this thesis,

One part of the thesis is focused on analyzing secondary, municipal - level demographic data in regards to population changes, aging changes, and percentages and numbers of international migrants and foreign residents. In addition to answering demographic questions, the thesis also conducts qualitative research in order to investigate the experiences and future intentions of migrants who have settled in rural areas, in order to better understand the various motivations they had for choosing their preferred location, as well as their motivations for staying or leaving.

This thesis will not be concerned with the causes or sociological impacts of population decline or counterurbanization, as it is outside of its scope.

Thus, the research objectives can be summed up as:

- 1) Investigate the links between population increase or decline in rural areas and changes in immigration over a 5 year period
- 2) Analyze the results and try to identify a relationship between the population changes and immigration as well as other relevant factors
- 3) Gain insight into migrants' motivations and long term plans in order to find out whether international counterurbanization can constitute a long term demographic uplift or a temporary one, as well as what factors might influence the decisions of foreign born residents to stay or leave in rural areas, and what rural areas can do to attract further migrants.

The central research question of the thesis can be formulated as **“To what extent does international immigration affect rural population decline in Northern Netherlands?”**

In addition, three subquestions will attempt to answer the research objectives:

- 1) Is there a relationship present between the number of immigrants/foreign residents and population change in rural areas?
- 2) If so, is it stronger than other considered factors affecting residential choice?
- 3) What are the reasons for migrants choosing rural areas, and what are their motivations for staying or leaving?

## **2. Theoretical framework**

The thesis deals with the issue of rural depopulation, which is the process of population decline in villages and small towns, caused by a variety of factors, namely by migration to cities, international migration, population aging, lack of economic opportunities, declining birth rates, or more (Coleman and Rowthorn, 2011). According to Pinilla and Saez (2017), rural depopulation in Europe intensified especially in the second half of the 20th century, as rural dwellers sought higher wages, better opportunities and higher quality services in the cities. Rural depopulation was driven mainly by the young, leaving many rural settlements with a lack of active workforce and beginning a self-reinforcing circle (Elshof et. al. 2014). Places affected by rural depopulation risk population aging, economic decline and even complete abandonment. Hence, scholars and policy makers have been working on studying this phenomenon and trying to create solutions.

One of such solutions is the concept of counterurbanization, or specifically international counterurbanization, which will be the focus of this thesis. Counterurbanization refers to the flow of population from cities to rural areas, while international counterurbanization refers to international migrants settling in rural areas (Halfacree, 2008). According to Halfacree, while counterurbanization has often been understood as largely a domestic phenomenon, driven largely by wealthy urban dwellers and retirees, this is ignoring the large international flows that occur. Several types of international counterurbanization have been identified. Buller and Hoggart (1994) identified retirement migration, which refers to migrating to spend one's retirement abroad, as a major source of counterurbanization, particularly in warmer, sunnier climates, such as southern France. Additionally, Ni Laoarie (2007) refers to "return migration", or residents who had previously lived abroad returning to their homes in rural areas. She illustrates this phenomenon in rural Ireland, for example. A final, and often considered dominant, form of international counterurbanization is labor or economic counterurbanization (Halfacree, 2008), referring to international migrants seeking jobs or economic opportunities in rural areas. Pinilla, et. al. (2008) also posits that migrants might be

attracted to rural areas due to a more comfortable environment and higher quality of life. As Bijker, et. al. (2012) explored in their study of motivations of rural migrants moving into depopulating municipalities also covered by this thesis, these rural moves are often motivated by personal relationships, as well as a desire to live in a calmer, more natural environment. According to the research, typical rural movers were quite young and less well off than the average Dutch citizen. Although Bijker et al. (2012) did not find house prices to be a very common reason for moving, with house and rent prices rising steeply across Europe (Eurostat, 2021), this might have become a more powerful motivator. While Bijker et. al. (2012)'s study focuses on Dutch urban-rural migrants, some of the motivations they uncovered might be shared by international migrants, or international migrants already living in the Netherlands.

Another aspect that has not been included in counterurbanization research so far has been the European migrant crisis of 2015 - 2016. From 2015 to 2019, net immigration to the Netherlands had reached more than 50 000 per year (CBS.nl, 2022). While as Gil-Alonso (2008) pointed out, immigrants tend to be attracted to cities, for reasons outlined above some are choosing to settle in rural areas. Another dimension to this issue is resettlement of refugees and persons granted asylum, which can also take place in rural areas. Whie De Hoon, et. al. (2020) found that most refugees allocated to rural areas choose to relocate over time, they could serve as another piece to the puzzle of solving rural depopulation.

For definitions of what is considered "rural" in this thesis, see the Methodology section.

## **2.1 Conceptual framework**

Pictured below (Figure 1) is a conceptual framework visualizing how the rural population is affected by population decline as well as counterurbanization, as well as their respective subfactors. It also takes into account that the respective elements of rural depopulation and counterurbanization can affect natural growth, such as high rates of emigration of young residents driving down birth rates, or an influx of young migrants resulting in the opposite effect, resulting in self reinforcing effects described by Elshof et. al. (2014). I will utilize this framework to analyze and draw conclusions from demographic data.

As research by Elshof et. al. (2014) showed, the various causes and effects of rural population decline are highly interconnected and can cause each other to escalate. For example, economic decline can cause out-migration of the young and economically productive into cities, causing population aging to worsen, and birth rates to drop further as there are fewer young residents left. This might lead to further economic decline, as

the loss of economically productive workers and customers affects local businesses, causing further job loss and out-migration, escalating the issues. On the other hand, counterurbanization brings population increase into the area - however, it can vary in its forms and causes. While for example retirement migration brings new residents, with the influx of new customers boosting local business and encouraging investments from authorities, their advanced age might not provide solutions to population aging or low birth rates. On the other hand, for example labor migration brings economically productive individuals, who might provide a boost to local industries and businesses, as well as increase birth rates. As Elshof et. al. showed, this inflow of new residents and activity can also cause a positive feedback loop, encouraging further new residents to move in, or previous residents to move back in. Therefore, both the forms of population decline and counterurbanization can have influence on the natural growth rate of the area, which might prove significant in the long term.

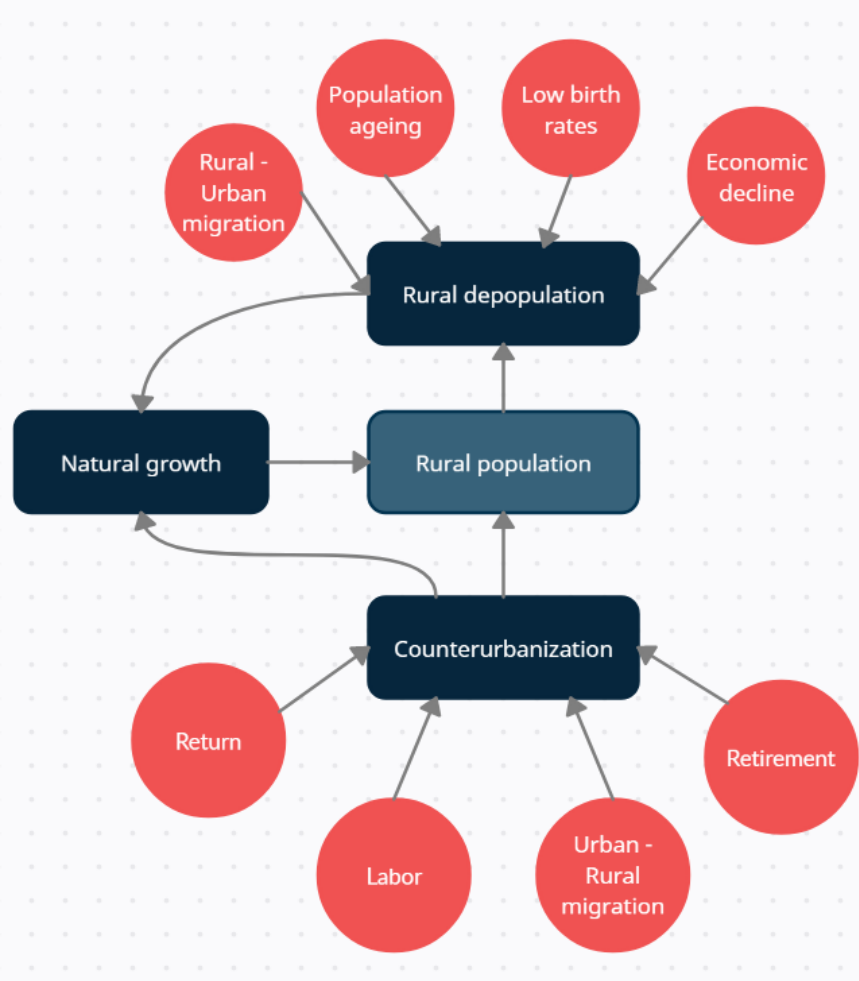


Fig. 1: Conceptual framework of rural population decline and counterurbanization

## **2.2 Expectations**

Based on the literature, it can be expected that foreign immigration to rural areas will have some relationship with population change, however it can also depend on a wide range of factors, such as population size, density, and so on, since as Bayona and Gil-Alonzo (2013) point out, the counterurbanization effect is most pronounced in places with better amenities and within commuting distance of larger cities. However, it is also possible that certain other factors, as listed in the Methodology section, will have a stronger effect on population change than immigration.

In terms of qualitative research, based on available research it can be expected that economic concerns will play a major role in the migrants' motivations, as well as familial bonds. Retirement migration is not expected to play a big role, due to retirement migrants' general preference for a warm climate (Buller and Hoggart, 1994).

## **3. Methodology**

The mixed-approach methods used for the purposes of this thesis consists of two parts: an analysis of secondary data obtained from Statistics Netherlands was used to answer research questions 1 and 2, and a qualitative analysis using in-depth interviews with migrants will be used to answer research question 3.

In order to answer the subquestion: **Is there a relationship present between the number of immigrants/foreign residents and population decline in rural areas**, secondary demographic data on the municipal level were utilized. This method was chosen because due to the COVID-19 pandemic, availability of collecting a large number of questionnaires from relevant populations, for example, was severely limited.

The researcher took advantage of data provided for public access by Statistics Netherlands, through the use of the Statline tool. This data is collected from municipalities on a regular basis and is thus fairly recent. For the purposes of the thesis, data were collected on the individual municipalities in the Northern Dutch regions of Friesland, Groningen, and Drenthe. In terms of the time period it was chosen to compare 2015, at the height of the refugee crisis, with 2020, which is the most recent period for which accurate data were available.

Population density of below 500 people per square kilometer total population of less than 20 000 were used as a criteria to select which municipalities were eligible for the thesis, in order to exclude larger cities in the region, such as Groningen, Leeuwarden, Assen, Meppel or Delfzijl. Total population of the municipality was not considered, since



thanks to the Dutch municipal structure, they usually contain many individual settlements of differing sizes and structure.

The full table of included municipalities can be found in Attachments. The abbreviations used for convenience to refer to provinces will be FR (Friesland), DR (Drenthe) and GR (Groningen).

It should also be noted that as the most recent data reference point is 2020, the municipalities of Appingedam and Loppersum are listed separately, although as of 2021 they are included in the municipality of Eemsdelta.

As for the variables used, they include the total population change between the given time period, the net number of arrivals due to immigration, measures as the total increase or decrease of first-generation immigrants residing in the municipality between the measures years, the proportion of inhabitants older than 65, the unemployment rate, the birth rate per 1000 people and the population density of the municipality, as these are all factors that literature has suggested can be indicative of or have effect on rural depopulation.

Furthermore, the researcher has also calculated the net changes in the number of inhabitants of Dutch and foreign descent, as well as the percentages of foreign residents in both considered years, and the percentage of net total immigration in relation to total population, as these figures can be used to further help explain demographic changes. The demographic data were analyzed and used to comment or interpolate on certain demographic trends. The results are discussed in further sections. Unfortunately due to technical difficulties throughout the research process a statistical analysis using SPSS could not be performed as originally planned.

In order to answer the research subquestion: **What are the reasons for migrants choosing rural areas, and what are their motivations for staying or leaving,** qualitative research was undertaken. This took the form of semi-structured interviews with current residents of the Netherlands who were born outside the country and have relocated to a rural area (as defined above). This method was chosen because it allows for a deeper insight into the various, often personal, reasons one might have for choosing their place of residence.

Please see Attachments for the interview guide.

While the focus of the thesis is on the North of Netherlands, due to the difficulties of finding willing interviewees during a pandemic and the language barrier, as well as the chosen focus group being somewhat small, the interviewees were selected from the entirety of the Netherlands, as long as they fulfilled the other criteria. The interviews were structured as to follow specific points, but also allow the interviewees to share their experiences and motivations more in depth. The questions were primarily focused on the subject's economic and social circumstances and experiences in their current place of residence, as well as their future plans and factors that might influence their decision

to stay or leave, such as familiar relations, attachment to community, job availability, etc. This relates to investigating possible reasons one might have for moving to a rural area, such as suggested by Bijker et. al. (2012).

The intention was to interview at least 10 interviewees fitting the profile, however due to difficulties posed by the COVID-19 pandemic as well as communication issues, in the end only 5 interviews were successfully undertaken. To compensate for this, the interviews went more in depth on the aforementioned topics.

The primary medium used to contact potential interviewees was social media, thanks to the aforementioned issues with finding suitable individuals through other methods. The two mediums used included Facebook groups for expats and immigrants in the Groningen area and the Netherlands as a whole, including a group focusing on Czech and Slovak immigrants. Additionally, the platform Reddit was used.

The interviews were conducted online thanks to convenience to both parties. Once collected, the data were analyzed for relevant concepts in order to draw conclusions, which will be discussed below.

### **3.1 Limits of data collection**

Unfortunately, due to the thesis being written during the COVID-19 pandemic, the research was forced to adapt and make sacrifices. The main limitation was the inability to conduct field research, either to distribute questionnaires or seek out and interview potential respondents more efficiently. While reaching out over social media has been a somewhat effective method, it severely limits the researcher in the manner and number of interviewees they can recruit. For example, four out of five respondents interviewed in this thesis are of a European or Western background, and most are of a relatively high social status. It would've been beneficial for the quality of the thesis to be able to reach out to wider diversity of backgrounds and perspectives. In addition, the online format of interviews is vulnerable to interviewees forgetting or simply not showing up to the interview, which unfortunately occurred several times.

In regards to secondary data, while the data available at Statistics Netherlands' website is of very high quality, there are some aspects of international counterurbanization that are impossible to properly measure, such as return migration, since returning migrants would simply be counted as native citizens. Furthermore, due to municipality mergers and changes between the chosen data points, the data for several municipalities had to be counted with a level of inaccuracy, however these slight inaccuracies shouldn't affect the conclusions in any major way.

## **4. Results**

This section presents the result of secondary data analysis as well as the interviews.

### **4.1 Quantitative analysis**

As described in the Methodology section above, the main method of analysis was collecting relevant data from Statistics Netherlands into a comprehensive spreadsheet and then interpolating the results. Below are presented some of the most relevant and interesting results, describing both general trends and illustrative examples.

First off, when looking at broad trends, the rural municipalities of Northern Netherlands can be divided into three groups based on demographic trends:

- 1) Population of both Dutch and foreign background is growing
- 2) Population of Dutch background is falling, but of foreign background is growing
- 3) Population of both Dutch and foreign background is falling

Please see the table below for the overview of these groups.

<b>Group 1</b>	<b>Group 2</b>	<b>Group 3</b>
Ameland (FR) De Wolden (DR) Sudwest-Fryslan (FR) Tynarloo (DR) Westerkwartier (GR) Westerveld (DR) Weststellingwerf (FR)	Achtkarspalen (FR) Aan een Hunze (DR) Borger-Oodorn (DR) Dantumadiel (FR) De Fryske Maren (FR) Het Hogeland (GR) Loppersum (GR) Midden-Drenthe (DR) Midden-Groningen (GR) Noordenveld (DR) Nordaest-Fryslan (FR) Oldambt (GR) Ooststellingwert (FR) Opsterland (FR) Pekela (GR) Schiermonikoog (FR) Terschelling (FR) Tytsjerksteradiel (FR) Vlieland (FR) Waadhoeke (FR) Westerwolde (GR)	Pekela (GR) Stadskanaal (GR)

*Table 1: Municipalities grouped based on their net growth., 2015 - 2020. (Statistics Netherlands, 2022).*

Let us examine these groups. Starting with group 1, which exhibits positive population growth amidst both population of Dutch and foreign background. While this list includes municipalities closely adjacent to a larger city, such as Tynarlo, Westerkwartier or Sudwest-Fryslan, which would support the conclusions of Gil-Alonso (2008), it also contains a remote island (Ameland), as well as quite rural and remote municipalities such as Weststellingswerf.

Finding commonalities between these municipalities is quite challenging - however it can be said that with the exception of Sudwest-Fryslan they all feature unemployment rate below average for the studied area, and except for Westerveld all have higher than average birth rates. Due to the diversity of the characteristics of these municipalities, it can be theorized that their growth occurs thanks to different dynamics dependent on local circumstances.

For example, Ameland's position as a tourist destination can serve to attract both migrants looking for job opportunities in the tourism industry, as well as older, wealthier migrants looking for a change in lifestyle, perhaps suggesting a connection to retirement migration proposed by Buller and Haggart (1994). On the other hand, refugee resettlement on Ameland seems unlikely due to its small size and remoteness.

Examining the national background of Ameland residents of foreign background (Table 2) reveals that while the number of residents of African background dropped and of Asian background increased only slightly, the number of European residents almost doubled.

Continental background	2015	2020
African	8	4
Asian	25	31
American	8	11
European (non Dutch)	84	135
Oceanian	1	1

*Table 2: First-generation migrants in Ameland, Friesland by background. (Statistics Netherlands, 2022)*

On the other hand, the demographics of Tynarlo (DR), which lies just south of the city of Groningen, suggest a more diverse ethnic makeup, with the number of arrivals from

both Africa and Asia hugely increasing, while the number of European immigrants only grew slightly. This suggests a combination of arrivals during the refugee crisis with conventional migration due to the proximity of a large city providing access to jobs and a university.

Background by continent	2015	2020
African	10	189
Asian	305	441
American	128	141
European (non Dutch)	416	489
Oceanian	6	7

*Table 3: First-generation migrants in Tynarloo, Drenthe by background. (Statistics Netherlands, 2022)*

However, studying the demographics of another municipality, such as Weststellingwerf (FR), reveals a very balanced increase alongside a similar-sized increase in Dutch population, suggesting the hypothesis that the amount and characteristics of these population increases are highly dependent on local circumstances. Curiously, the net-growing municipality of Westerveld also provided the only example of negative net-foreign immigration, losing 50 first-generation migrants over the five year time period. As this drop occurred almost entirely within persons of African background, this can perhaps suggest some larger scale organized action.

In regards to group 2, which features municipalities where population with Dutch background fell but population with foreign background increased, one will note that it is by far the most numerous, suggesting an overall trend. When looking at the data, it can be said that while foreign migration does not always prevent overall population from falling, it at least mitigates it somewhat in almost every municipality, with certain exceptions to be discussed later. In fact, even in net-growing municipalities, the population with foreign backgrounds is growing faster than those with Dutch backgrounds. Only three municipalities out of 30 studied saw a decline in net foreign migration, and in fact active migration does not seem to be the only active contributor. In fact, only in one municipality, Loppersum (GR), did the increase in the number of net first generation migrants exceed the net foreign born population increase. Table 3 showcases the demographics of a typical municipality falling into this group, Borger-Odoorn (DR).

Net population change percentage	Net population change (Dutch)	Net population change (foreign)	Net foreign immigration	Change in % of foreign population
+0,22%	-167	+224	+136	+0,86%

Table 3: Net changes in demographics of Borger-Odoorn, Drenthe. (Statistics Netherlands, 2022)

From this example it can be seen that despite the overall decline in the number of the population of Dutch background, the municipality saw a modest population increase. However, it can also be seen that immigration alone would not be enough to offset the losses. The higher growth among inhabitants of foreign backgrounds could have different explanations, such as not leaving at the same rates as inhabitants of Dutch background, or having more children. This statistic might also suggest that foreign-born residents intend to stay in their new home for the long term, contending the suggestion of Gil-Alonso (2013) that migrants may be using rural areas to simply enter a country's labor market before moving on to urban areas. This topic will be explored more in depth in the qualitative analysis.

To present a complete picture, Table 4 also presents the demographics of another municipality from the group, Appingedam (GR). Positive net immigration and increase of population of foreign background could not by themselves offset the loss of the Dutch population, leaving Appingedam with one of the highest overall population losses by percentage at negative 3%. In fact, over half of the municipalities in this group net lost population, reinforcing the argument that while foreign immigrants and residents can help staunch population loss, they cannot necessarily reverse it completely.

Net population change percentage	Net population change (Dutch)	Net population change (foreign)	Net foreign immigration	Change in % of foreign population
-3%	-452	+152	+112	+2%

As was discussed in the previous group, it is difficult to find relevant commonalities in this group, or even between municipalities that net lost or gained population. It can be said with more confidence that municipalities that gained population generally lie in the vicinity of larger cities, such as Groningen, Leeuwarden or Assen, although there are exceptions, such as Westervolde (GR). It can also be generally observed that most

municipalities saw proportionally larger increases in the amount of immigrants of African and Asian backgrounds than from other continents, suggesting an impact of the refugee crisis. If this were true, its impacts might be mitigated over time, as research by De Hoorn (2020) suggests that refugees settled in rural areas tend to move again. As mentioned before, an exception can be made for the islands, such as Terschelling, Vlieland and Schiermonikoog (all FR), which saw some of the largest proportional population increases, mostly coming from European migrants, with only a minor amount of migrants with African and Asian backgrounds.

Finally, group 3, which includes municipalities which net lost both Dutch and foreign population, has only two entries, Pekela and Stadskanaal, both in the east of the province of Groningen. They are also the only two municipalities studied which saw a drop in the percentage of foreign residents, suggesting residents of foreign backgrounds were even more likely to leave than Dutch residents, in a reversal of trends in every other municipality. Why this occurs is unclear and likely depends on local circumstances. It also seems to concur with the conclusions of Elshof et. al. (2014), who argued that depopulation begets more depopulation. Pekela lies close to larger towns of Veendam and Winschoten while Stadskanaal is a sizable town in itself, yet they both fare worse than much more rural and remote municipalities. Both municipalities feature slightly above average unemployment, which seems to be a common feature among municipalities with the highest percentage population losses, though there are also municipalities with higher than average unemployment which saw a population increase.

In terms of general observations, population density seems to have no relationship with immigration rate or population increase. There are both more urban and more rural municipalities both losing and gaining population. Similarly, the proportion of residents aged 65 and older does not seem to play a significant role, suggesting that the ageing of population described as an adverse effect of rural depopulation (Coleman and Rowthorn, 2011) is not in itself a deterrent for immigration or population growth. The steepest percentual population decline was observed in Loppersum (GR) at -5,94%, which despite seeing a very minor positive net migration and net increase in foreign population suffered a heavy loss of Dutch residents. The next two are Pekela and Appingedam. The largest percentage population increase occurred in Sudwest-Fryslan at +6,91, likely influenced by its inclusion of Sneek, one of the major cities in Friesland, followed by the island of Vlieland and the suburban municipality of Tynarlo (DR).

Now, the results of the qualitative analysis of interviews shall be discussed.

## **4.2 Quantitative analysis**

As mentioned, the qualitative research took place in the form of five semi-structured interviews with non-Dutch born residents of rural areas in the Netherlands on the topic of their motivations to choose a rural area to live and their reasons for choosing to stay or leave. Three of the respondents were male and two female, and aged in range from 18 to 50. Geographically, the respondents are spread throughout the Netherlands, mostly concentrated in the western and central area of the country. Their countries of origin include the United States, the Philippines, Slovakia, Bulgaria and Latvia. The interviews produced interesting insights into the issue, which shall now be presented. When it comes to motivations for choosing a rural area over a city, the respondents cited either family reasons, which was somewhat expected based on the literature, or cost of living, which was surprising to an extent.

***“The availability and prices of property were the main reason for me”***

In fact, two interviewees cited buying affordable property as their primary reason for choosing the countryside, one also talking about being able to access more spacious living quarters and a more open environment compared to the city. Another, a student, cited lower rents outside of the city he studies in. This is in slight contention to the findings of Bijker et al. (2012), who found property prices were not a common reason for moving to the countryside.

Other two interviewees cited family reasons. One cited family connections to their eventual place of residence.

***“My mother grew up here, so we have lots of family, and I wanted to be close to a place that means a lot to me”***

Another interviewee, a high school student, said that he had no choice in the matter, as his family had decided to move to the Netherlands and settle in the area for relationship reasons.

Job availability doesn't seem to have been a major draw or deterrent for any of the interviewees in employment, who said they either have an easy commute into a larger city, or run a business from their home. Another respondent, a student, said that they would've preferred to live closer to school but wasn't afraid of the commute. However, one respondent said that a family member had difficulty finding employment due to a lack of proficiency in Dutch, and that it is hard to find a job in rural areas without speaking the language.



Before moving to rural areas, two of the interviewees lived in cities close to their current residence, while two moved from abroad. While some of the interviewees acknowledged the calmer countryside environment as an advantage, none raised it as a primary reason for choosing their residence, more of a side benefit. After arriving in the rural area, most respondents favorably raised up the friendliness and openness of their neighbors and other locals.

***“Everyone’s superficially friendly, and I think if I would make the effort to be included, I would be”***

One interviewee said the locals in the village were friendlier and more tolerant than locals in the city where they previously lived. Another respondent who had family in the area said that they found it easy to “step into” a community, adding that many saw them as a bit of a curiosity. However, one respondent said that they didn’t feel particularly welcome initially, adding that Dutch people aren’t very friendly at first and that they mostly interact with other immigrants. However, they also added that they had no problem interacting with the Dutch, and that most of them were accepting and tolerant. In general, all respondents agreed that the younger generation was friendlier and quicker to open than the older locals.

Some respondents expressed a feeling of isolation from their ethnic community - even citing it as a reason for leaving later.

***“It’s a bit difficult because there are only a few other Filipinos here, and they’re much older than me”***

However, others did not mind at all. One described their situation as living in a “cozy shelter” and feeling included in the community, adding that they have some contact with other foreigners but do not actively miss it, however they also added that they had an easier time connecting with other immigrants than the locals.

In general, the interviewees spoke some Dutch but not completely fluently, and agreed that while it did not pose difficulties in day to day life, it made connecting with locals difficult.

The interviewees also said they had never run into problems with local or governmental authorities and found them generally helpful, although one noted the quality of Dutch courses provided could be improved.

When asked about the positives of living in a rural area, some respondents noted the closeness of the community and feeling of safety, others noted open space, calm and proximity to nature.

***“It’s a very stress free living here”***

However, when asked about the negatives of rural life, most mentioned lack of amenities, especially cultural venues and dining options, as an issue. While the older interviewees generally considered it an annoyance but not a major issue, the younger respondents said that the lack of things to do and peers to talk to can lead to boredom.

***“Sometimes you just really want to go to a Mexican restaurant, you know”***

When asked about plans to leave their place of residence, the respondents were split. While two stated that they had no plans to leave anytime soon, three planned to move either to a different city or abroad within the near future. However, their reasons varied. One respondent, who was set to leave for university, said that they’d rather move to the city than commute, which they found tiring. They also said that they’d prefer urban life in general.

***“It’s more convenient when you live in a city”***

The respondent also spoke about wanting to be closer to members of his own ethnicity, as well as better job prospects. Job availability was also a major reason for another respondent, also a student, who also said that they wanted to move to a larger city to be closer to friends and facilities for their hobbies. They however also noted that they were being deterred by the cost of living in cities, and noted that they could imagine settling down in a smaller town when they were older for the peace and quiet.

***“I would choose to live in a bigger city to not have to travel to sports facilities”***

Another respondent spoke about being comfortable in the Netherlands, but feeling lonely and isolated and wanting to go back to their home country to be closer to family and friends, however they said that if they were to move within the Netherlands, they’d choose a rural area again.

***“I miss my family and friends a lot”***

However, the other two respondents were happy with their current place of residence and had no current plans to leave. One said that they had a strong connection to their

town through family relationships, but that they also appreciated the quality of life and the opportunities their hometown gave them.

***“I think personal relationships play the biggest role”***

They said that if they were to leave, it would be for a very good job offer for their partner, or simply wanting to move to a warmer climate during retirement after their family members move out. They also spoke about job opportunities, and said that while they are limited outside of cities, the small towns offer a very good business environment.

The last respondent said that they were happy with their current environment, appreciated the friendly locals and quiet environment, and especially liked the larger space they could afford.

***“The infrastructure for me to function as a happy human is all there”***

They noted that they get bored occasionally, but quickly get over it with a trip to the city. They said that only something “completely outlandish”, like a huge construction project on their street, would make them leave, but probably not.

Finally, when asked what local authorities could do to improve their satisfaction with their current home, the interviewees wished for amenities and quality of life improvements, such more cafes or street improvements, or more investments into encouraging cultural life in the town. One respondent wished for a place to meet people of a similar background. Another wished for better availability of English paperwork and documents, especially regarding business.

## **5. Discussion and Conclusion**

The qualitative and quantitative analyses have revealed some interesting findings. Firstly, while there seems to be a slight correlation between the proximity of a municipality to a larger city and its attractiveness to migrants, it does not seem as definitive as in the research of Bayona and Gil-Alonso (2013). This can be assumed to be caused by the differences in local characteristics and circumstances between Spain and the Netherlands. However, in the interviews, even the respondents who are content with remaining in rural areas state being within commuting distance of a city as an advantage, suggesting a connection after all.

The population density of a municipality seems to have no relationship with its attractiveness to migrants. In terms of the core research question - Is there a relationship between international migration and rural depopulation? - the answer seems inconclusive. The collected data show that immigration and foreign born residents can staunch and even reverse the decline of population in a municipality, but it cannot seem to stop the outflow of locals by itself and there are likely many local characteristics and circumstances at play. More intensive and detailed research is needed in this area.

In terms of the effects of other indicators, there seems to be somewhat of a relationship between population increase and low unemployment, but nothing can be stated decisively, while the share of persons aged over 65 and birth rates seem to be even more weakly related, if they are at all. Relating to Coleman and Rowthorn (2011), aging population and low birth rates seem to be a byproduct of rural depopulation, rather than its cause. Some interesting figures on immigration include the insight that the Frisian Islands seem to be growing mostly thanks to European immigration, which also due to their high share of over 65s potentially includes some retirement migration, despite Buller and Hoggart's (1994) assertions, albeit to what extent this is true is unclear. In other areas of the studied area that are receiving migration, immigration sources tend to be split relatively evenly, or include a rapid increase in the number of residents of African and Asian background.

One very good news for the rural population could be that the number of residents of foreign descent is consistently higher than active immigration, meaning that many migrants are staying and not immediately continuing onto urban labor markets as Bayona and Gil-Alonso (2013) allege might happen. However, as De Hoorn, et. al. (2020) suggests, many of the growth accounted for from settled refugees might decrease in upcoming years, as refugees move on. Whether this will truly occur, however, is unclear.

The results of the qualitative research are mixed. While some migrants seem determined to stay, some are already planning to leave. As was asserted by Bijker et. al. (2012), personal relationships play a major role in decisions to leave or stay. A potential bad news for rural depopulation is that young migrants interviewed seem determined to leave for more amenities and opportunities in urban areas, similar to many native born young rural residents, however they also expressed fondness for aspects of rural life and potentially plan to return. However, even those who wish to stay note their wish for easy access to city amenities, potentially spelling trouble for more remote municipalities and reinforcing the argument of Bayona-i-Carasco and Gil-Alonso (2013). However, it is good news that all have described Dutch rural

residents and generally friendly and welcoming, and neither have spoken of any displays of discrimination and hatred.

In its relation to the topic of international counterurbanization, as described by Halfacree (2008), the research is inconclusive. While, as mentioned in section 3.1, return migration as described by Ní Laoire (2017) was not possible to quantify, there seems to be some indications of a retirement migration, especially in touristically attractive locations such as the islands of Friesland. With regards to economic migration, interview results seem to indicate that economic and job aspects seem to play a secondary role, with interviewees actually indicating lack of economic opportunities as a downside rather than a pull-factor. On the other hand, economic factors relating to cost of living and property costs seem to play a major role, unlike what Bijker et. al. (2012) found.

The research topic has potential for further and more in depth research in the area of rural depopulation, its causes and relations with migration. Future researchers should attempt to engage a wider and more diverse scope of migrants in order to capture more unique perspectives and experiences, while also digging deeper into the characteristics and circumstances that cause some municipalities to lose their native population while others gain. Possible future research topics might include tracking the relocation patterns of refugees settled in rural areas during the 2010s, the differences in relocation patterns of young rural residents of Dutch and foreign background, or the impact of local economic circumstances on the decision to relocate for Dutch and foreign residents.

## **5.1 Reflection**

Writing the thesis has given me an excellent opportunity to dive deep into a fascinating topic while honing my research and data collection skills. I feel like I've become a more confident researcher and would be able to do even better, were I to start over again. Although the thesis has been marred by issues caused by the pandemic and technical issues and in ideal conditions would probably look much different, I still consider it a worthy piece of academic research. It has also taught me an excellent lesson about time management and not leaving things for the last minute I will not soon forget.

With research results in mind, the conceptual framework would look quite different. For example, a category of migration seeking a lower cost of living would be included as a subsection of international counterurbanization. The impact of refugee settlement would not be omitted as well.

Lastly, I want to reflect on my positionality as a researcher. As a white male of a European background who only speaks English, my access to a crucial group of potential interviewees, that being refugees and other immigrants of lower social class or education status, who might not speak English, or are wary of interacting with people of my group out of fear or caution, was very limited. Unfortunately this resulted in the qualitative research reflecting a relatively narrow scope of largely white, higher class migrants, which might not be entirely reflective of migrants on the whole and should be improved upon in future research. I was also studying in a country which I have no familial or ethnic connection to and don't speak the language of fluently, which might have affected some of my perceptions and made me miss some nuances, as well as made gathering information more difficult. However, also being a fellow immigrant might have made the interviewees more comfortable and less afraid of being judged or seeming ungrateful.

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## **7. Attachments**

### **7.1 Interview guide**

Thank you for agreeing to take part of the interview. Before we begin, I must ask you if you read the information sheet and consent to your data being used.

What is your region or country of origin?

What is your approximate age? You don't have to be specific, a rough range is enough.

What is your occupation? Again, don't have to be specific if you don't want to, just a general area.

How long have you lived in X?

Have you lived elsewhere in the Netherlands before moving to X? If so, where?

What would you say was the primary reason you came to X? (React with follow up questions depending on the answer)

- Would you say your occupation was a factor?
- Did you find employment on your own, or has an employer reached out to you?
- Did you find the process of gaining employment difficult?
- Did you have any personal connections to the area, such as relatives or friends? Did they influence your choice?
- Did the rural environment play any role in your choice? Such as in terms of calm, safety, etc?



After you arrived, did you feel welcome? If so, why? If not, why not?

Did you find the language barrier an issue?

Did you find it easy or hard to find housing?

How were you treated when dealing with the authorities? Have you ever felt like you were treated differently than native-born residents?

Do you feel accepted by the older residents? Why or why not?

Do you feel isolated from other members of your ethnic or religious group? Do you consider this an issue?

Can you recall any particular positive or negative experiences after coming to X?

Would you say you have personal connections in X, such as family or friends? How strong would you say they are?

What would you say are your main likes and dislikes about living in X? Please elaborate.

Do you have plans to leave X? If so, why? If not, why not? (React with follow up questions depending on given reasons)

- If so, for how much longer do you want to stay?
- If so, what kind of environment would you like to live in? Urban, suburban or rural?
- Are there any particular aspects you're looking for?
- Do economic factors play a role in your decisions, such as job availability or higher wages?
- Do you have personal relationships elsewhere that might influence your decisions?
- Do you seek to live closer to more people of your ethnic or religious community?
- Can you think of something that would make you stay in X if it were to change?
- If not, what would you say is the main reason you want to stay? Is it economic? Due to personal attachments? Something else?
- Is there anything that would make you leave if it were to change?

Finally, can you think of something the local government could do to make your life in X happier or easier?

Thank you and have a good day (end interview)

## **7.2. List of municipalities**

<b>Municipality name</b>	<b>Province</b>
Appingedam	Groningen
Loppersum	Groningen
Het Hogeland	Groningen
Midden-Groningen	Groningen
Oldambt	Groningen
Pekela	Groningen
Stadskanaal	Groningen
Westerkwartier	Groningen
Westerwolde	Groningen
Aa en Hunze	Drenthe
Borger-Odoorn	Drenthe
Midden-Drenthe	Drenthe
Noordenveld	Drenthe
Tynarloo	Drenthe
Westerveld	Drenthe
De Wolden	Drenthe
Achtkarspalen	Friesland
Ameland	Friesland
Dantumadiel	Friesland
De Fryske Maren	Friesland
Nordaest-Fryslan	Friesland
Ooststellingwerf	Friesland

Opsterland	Friesland
Schiermonikoog	Friesland
Sudwest-Fryslan	Friesland
Terschelling	Friesland
Tytsjerksteradiel	Friesland
Vlieland	Friesland
Waadhoeke	Friesland
Weststellingwerf	Friesland