

Is There ‘City Flight’ in Middle England?

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the ‘city flight’ concept that is increasingly to be heard in policy debate. Much varied literature is reviewed in order to clarify the key features and drivers related to those trends which the concept is intended to highlight. The paper takes the three largest cities of the English East Midlands as an empirical proving ground of the relevance of the concept to the processes current shaping ‘Middle England’ (i.e. the medium-sized cities, and their city regions, which are home to a large proportion of the British population but which attract far less research attention than either the largest cities or the most rural areas of the country).

Both the conceptual discussion and the empirical work following it focus on migration patterns. To highlight the key issues raised in debates on city flight it is essential to be aware that:

- migration tends to be a highly selective process, so that even if a city is close to balance between its overall inflows and outflows, this may disguise major net shifts in different groups’ movements (egg. the affluent moving out while poorer people move in); and also
- it is essential to separate moves within the city region boundary (mainly for housing and ‘neighbourhood quality’ reasons) from longer-distance flows (mainly for labour market, higher education or family reasons).

The policy concerns raised by cities’ population loss through migration include urban housing market failure and lower economic growth due to skill shortages; in addition, the quality of life which is part of the ‘pull’ of rural areas may be degraded due to rapid growth (where the existing residents may not welcome it). If there is a rise in long-distance commuting then increased pollution and congestion may be shared by urban and rural areas alike.

The paper finally reviews potential policy responses to migration flows from cities:

- improved city educational services, and better secondary schools in particular;

- tackling city problems of crime and anti-social behaviour;
- improving public transport on high density corridors;
- facilitating new employment growth sectors which favour clustering in cities;
- upgrading and extending urban and suburban retail and leisure facilities;
- providing a more diverse housing 'offer' in the main urban areas;
- putting further emphasis on development on brownfield sites; and
- improving access to open space and enhancing the quality of the local environment including the public realm.

Key Words: population migration, city flight policy, England – Midland