



Economic Review

How the Pandemic Influenced Trends in Domestic Migration across U.S. Urban Areas

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The pandemic appears to have accelerated moves from larger urban areas to smaller urban areas.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, net domestic migration in the United States was generally increasing in smaller urban areas while declining in the largest urban areas; as people sought to mitigate exposure to COVID-19 and avoid stricter lockdown measures, the pandemic may have accelerated this trend. Changes in domestic migration trends may influence the longer-term growth prospects of places, but investigating recent trends in domestic migration can be challenging because data from official government sources are released with a long lag.

Jason P. Brown and Colton Tousey overcome this lag by using higher frequency information on address changes self-reported by consumers, and use these data to assess whether domestic migration between urban areas changed after the onset of the pandemic. They find that the rate of net domestic migration increased further in small and medium urban areas and declined further in very large urban areas. Moreover, the relationship between net domestic migration and two of its historical driving factors—population density and natural amenities—diminished only slightly during the pandemic. Their findings suggest that though the pandemic influenced net domestic migration, it has not yet drastically altered migration trends to less crowded urban areas with higher natural amenities.

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