Are the Dutch people migrating from the urban to rural areas: some evidence[1]

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Abstract

The main aim of this article is to look at a more general tendency of the urban-rural migration and find figures that answer the question: is the flow from urban municipalities to owner-occupied homes in rural municipalities increasing lately?

To answer this question the study used the information from the Dutch Kadaster on the homes purchases between 2009/2011 and 2018/2020 and its location in the Netherlands. This type of research is only possible in countries that have a good Land Administration System in place. In the purchase flow, the observation was at the owner-occupied home transactions of natural persons from a specific source area to a receiving area. The purchase flow from urban to rural municipalities thus provides information about natural persons who previously lived in an urban municipality and subsequently purchased a home in the rural area.

The article will start with an introduction, with a small literature review. The next item will be the description of the methods and the indicators utilized. The second item will show the results and the third item will present the main conclusions and their unfolding. Surely the conclusions will present also the proposition of new research in the field.

The main result obtained by the article is that the general tendency is that more homes are being purchased in more rural municipalities than in very urban municipalities, in the period from 2009/2011 to 2018/2020. With many different kinds of statistics, from the type of housing, the prices, the distance from the previews house, the age of the buyer, and others. All of them showed that there was a tendency to increase the number of people getting out of the more densely populated area of the Netherlands (Randstad) and going to more rural areas.

Introduction

The way the countries define how land is going to be used is a consequence of many different factors, from physical, cultural, economic, and from specific policies. That is true in the rural sector, in the urban sector, and in the interrelation between both.

The recent development of the Dutch real estate market can be divided in three large periods as can be seen at Rijksoverheid (2019): a) until 2008; b) from 2008 to 2014 and c) from 2014 onwards. There was a clear trend of increasing prices and purchases of houses until the real estate crisis of 2008. That crisis with a clear reduction in prices and in the trade of housing happened all over the world, but quite intensively in the Netherlands. After that period the market stayed quite still, with low

[1] A previous version is published as

prices, less construction of new housing, and much less purchasing until around 2014. Since 2014 the market has gained dynamics, with steady increases in prices and in trade, reaching an increase in prices of more than 20% a year in some months of 2022.

But there are rumors of another change in tendency: people moving from urban areas to more rural areas. The main reasons for that are linked to the Covid crises, and the requirement for home-working making more people live in better areas and farther away from their working locations. Nederland, because of the housing scarcity and difficulties to supply this need, clear and solid comprehension of this tendency plays a very important role in the housing industry.

The main aim of this article is to fill that gap and find figures that answer the question for a larger region: is the flow from urban municipalities to owner-occupied homes in rural municipalities increasing?

To answer this question the study used the information from the Dutch Kadaster on the homes purchases between 2009/2011 and 2018/2020 and its location in the Netherlands. In the purchase flow, the observation was at the owner-occupied home transactions of natural persons from a specific source area to a receiving area. The purchase flow from urban to rural municipalities thus provides information about natural persons who previously lived in an urban municipality and subsequently purchased a home in the rural area. Besides that, the definition of whether some purchases happened in an urban or rural municipality was based on the CBS (Statistics Netherlands) classification of municipalities. These classes correspond to a certain address density in a municipality. The urbanity classes 1 and 2 are seen as urban municipalities and class 4 and 5 as rural. Class 3 are moderately urban municipalities. The study is based on the urbanization class by the municipality at the time of the transaction.

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1. Literature review

Most of the literature on this issue is focused on finding the personal determinates and motivation of the migration from urban areas to rural areas but only based on a few municipalities in its most. Most of them were also made before the Corona Crises, so they reveal more structural tendencies.

Most probably it is not a coincidence that most of those studies were made in Japan and in Nederland.

As an exception to that tendency, Costelo, (2009) also examines the consequences of migration in the municipality of Castlemaine, in Australia. Besides the personal determinants and motivations, he was aiming to analyze the consequences of that migration. This municipality was chosen because of its specific location and because it has had an increase in its population. His research focuses primarily on filling empirical gaps on the impact of urban-rural migration on receiving areas. This paper examines: who is moving to Castlemaine; the range of motivations behind people moving to rural areas; and the impact of urban-rural migration on the local housing market.

The study showed that the migration to the municipality of Castlemaine is due to its unspecified rural idyll, places that provide amenity, ambiance, and alternative lifestyle. Additionally, the dynamics of the local housing market have changed, as housing prices have risen, making a loss of affordable housing.

On the Dutch reality, Bijker et al (2012) made a study for the region of Northern Nederland, its less urbanized region, to try to understand the migration motivations from more urban areas to more rural areas. To choose the sample municipalities for the analysis and apply the questionary a different classification of municipalities was used: the prices of the houses. The rural regions with the lowest average prices (less popular) were the ones chosen, as the migrants to them are the ones that are really seeking rural areas. All newcomers to these regions received a questionary based on which, using statical methods, was possible to conclude that the main motivation for moving to rural areas was the search for a better quality of life.

In the Japanese reality, Obikwelo (2017) analyses the social and economic circumstances under which families that migrated are living after they moved to rural communities, as well as their reasons for migration. The study was conducted in some selected rural areas in the Kinki Region of Japan. A structured questionnaire was distributed to the newcomers in the research areas and 47 families answered it, descriptive statistics were used to analyze the data. On the reasons for their migration to the rural areas, the study revealed that the main ones are: a preference for quiet and relaxed rural life (51.1%), to be engaged in agriculture (31.9%), and a strong desire to raise kids in the rural environment (29.8%). On the social and economic circumstances of their lives, the study showed that: the economic situation of the newcomers was not favorable as most of them earned a lower income after moving away from the cities. The negative effect of unfavorable economic conditions was offset partly by material assistance and moral support from neighbors, along with the lower cost of living in rural areas. Despite harsh economic conditions and other inconveniences, however, many newcomers expressed their contentment with village life due to various benefits they received from the other villagers, fellow I-turners as well as from the natural environment.

Another, more recent paper on the Japanese urban-rural migration made it possible to see the impact of COVID-19 on it. The paper by Takashi et al (2022) investigated the main reasons for the urban-rural migration to Hokuto City in Japan. The survey statistical analyses, based on 868 newcomers' responses, between April 2017 and January 2019, identified that the main general reason for that migration is an improvement of their common values of migration, i.e., nature, housing, and food. In addition to these common values, households with different demographic characteristics had different priorities: employment for singles ages 16 to 29; favorable environment for raising children for married couples in their 30s and 40s; better 'lifestyle' for migrants in their 50s; and staying with or near family for new-comers over 60 years. Widespread acceptance of teleworking after experiencing the COVID-19 pandemic might offer people of working age, particularly in their 20s and younger, a wider range of options of places to work and live, and thus is likely to influence future urban-rural population flow.

A recent study not linked to the urban-rural migration but on housing preferences made in all of Nederland helps in the discussion. Dijk, D. van en M. van Rooij (2022) had as its main aims to examine what the demand for homes looks like, and what the aging population and the corona pandemic these housing preferences have changed. A questionnaire about housing was sent out in April 2021 in the CentERpanel that is administered by CentERdata, a non-profit research institute at Tilburg University. This household panel – which also includes the forms the basis for the annual DNB Household Survey, and is familiar with questionnaires about, among other things, the housing market – is representative of the (Dutch-speaking) population of sixteen years and older. This survey provides insight into the housing labels of the Dutch, and how corona has changed it. Housing preferences have changed due to the outbreak of the coronavirus, and a large part of the respondents thinks this change is permanent. Not entirely surprisingly, the distance to work becomes less important seen. Corona appears to be partly responsible for extra moves and moving intentions, but for a much larger group, if they ever will move, the corona has led to different living preferences. Eventually, this will be visible are in the relative valuation of house characteristics and locations.

Based on these studies it can be seen, on the motivation side, that the search for more idyllic living conditions plays an important role in urban-rural migration. It could also be seen that the COVID crisis has changed the living conditions or at least the motivation for the type of housing that families are seeking. But what also could be seen from the literature review is that there are no studies on the general tendency of the stream from urban to rural migration. And this study aim is exactly to fill this gap and obtain a better view of how strong this movement is. And this is possible as Kadaster and the Statistics Netherlands (CBS) have the information for all of the country.

2. Methodology

This item will be exposed the methodological aspects of the article, mostly explaining the origin and the meaning of the data used. It will be exposed by each type of data.

i. Sales flow

To begin with, it is important to define the flow of purchases; after all, this forms the basis for all the analyses. Shopping flows are the house purchase transactions of natural persons from a certain source area to a receiving area. Thus, the flow of purchases from urban to rural municipalities provides information on natural persons who previously lived in an urban municipality and then bought a house in the rural area. This flow of purchases includes, in addition to people moving up the housing ladder, first-time buyers from urban municipalities buying a house in rural municipalities.

ii. Urban and rural municipalities

To better understand the movement of people between the urban areas and the more rural areas its definition was developed for this study. The definition used is based on the urbanization classes as from the Statistics Netherlands. Class Very Strong and Strongly urban are characterized in this study as urban municipalities. Residents who move from this group of municipalities to rural municipalities form the research population. Rural municipalities are those municipalities that belong to the groups Few and Non-urban. On January 1, 2021, 9.8 million people lived in urban municipalities and 5.0 million in rural municipalities. 2.6 million people lived in the intermediate group – moderately urban municipalities.

The classification of municipalities according to urbanity is based on the local address density of the municipality. First of all, the address density of an area with a radius of 1 km around that address has been determined for each address within a municipality. The neighborhood address density of a municipality is its average value for all addresses within that municipality.

The five urbanization classes are based on class boundaries of 2,500, 1,500, 1,000 and 500 addresses per km².

The following classes are distinguished:

• Very strongly urban (environmental address density of 2,500 or more);

• Highly urban (environmental address density from 1,500 to 2,500);

• Moderately urban (environmental address density from 1,000 to 1,500);

• Little urban (environmental address density of 500 to 1,000);

• Non-urban (environmental address density less than 500).

These classes correspond with a certain address density in a municipality. Urbanization classes 1 and 2 are considered urban, and classes 4 and 5 are rural. Class 3 is for moderately urban municipalities. The study is based on the urbanization class by the municipality at the time of the transaction.

Alternatives were urbanization classes at the neighborhood or district level. Our study shows that this classification largely overlaps with the urbanity classes at the municipality level. From a policy point of view, it is therefore justified to conduct the research at the municipality level. After all, owner-occupiers move to a rural environment by choosing a rural environment and not a green neighborhood in an urban environment.

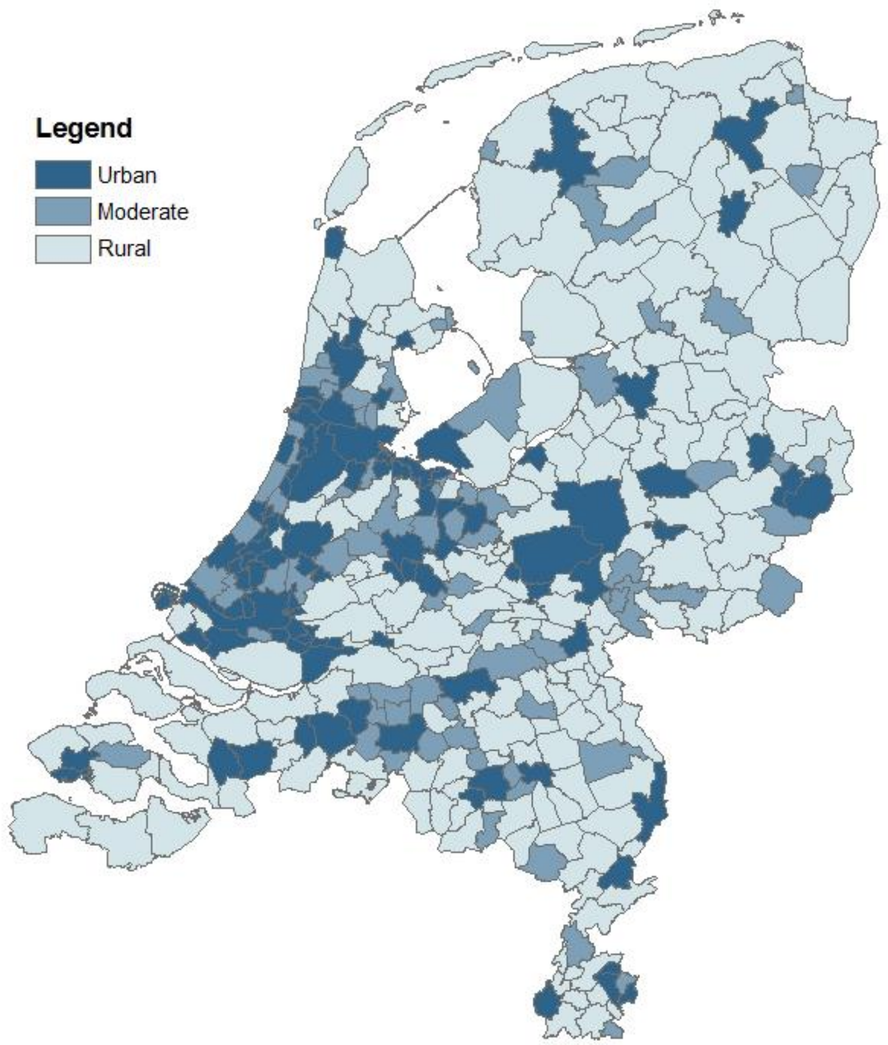


Figure 1. Municipalities by the urbanization level

3. Some results based on housing buying flows

Before we discuss buying flows from urban municipalities and buying flows to rural municipalities, we will first provide a general picture of the buying flows between the three urbanization classes.

3.1. Urbanization class: Most buyers stay in the same living area

Table 1 provides insight into the proportion of buyers from a certain urbanization class who buy a house in a municipality with the same or a different urbanization class. It shows, for example, that in the period 2018-2020, 81% of the 330,578 buyers from an urban area will continue to live in an urban area.

The vast majority of buyers, therefore, find their new home within the same urbanization class. However, compared to ten years ago (2009-2011), the proportion of urban buyers buying in rural areas has increased from 8% in 2009-2011 to 11% in 2018-2020. Also, the proportion of buyers from moderately urban or rural areas buying in rural areas has increased. In total, about 31% of transactions take place in rural areas in 2018-2020, compared to 28% in 2009-2011.

However, the flow of buyers from rural to urban areas, at 14%, is still greater than the flow from urban to rural, and the largest proportion of buyers buy in the urban area (53% in 2018-2020). This is also where most homes are located.

So it can be concluded from this part that there is a growing share of transactions in the rural area, but the largest share of buyers is still buying in the urban area.

Table 1. Share of buyers from urban area municipality (left) per urban area house purchased (top) per period*). And a total number of buyers from urban, moderate or rural area per period (total from).

	Urbanization class municipality previous dwelling (from)	Urbanization class municipality bought house (to)			
		Urban	Moderate	Rural	Total from
2009-2011	Urban	84%	7%	8%	181.867
	Moderate	17%	71%	11%	64.003
	Rural	15%	9%	75%	96.517
	Total	52%	19%	28%	382.884**
2012 - 2014	Urban	84%	7%	8%	175.114
	Moderate	15%	74%	10%	65.494
	Rural	13%	8%	78%	101.490
	Total	49%	20%	30%	393.082**
2015 - 2017	Urban	83%	7%	9%	330.567
	Moderate	18%	70%	11%	96.739
	Rural	15%	7%	78%	157.883
	Total	53%	17%	28%	667.398**
2018 - 2020	Urban	81%	8%	11%	330.578
	Moderate	17%	69%	14%	85.667

	Rural	14%	7%	79%	162.731
	Total	53%	16%	31%	631.363**

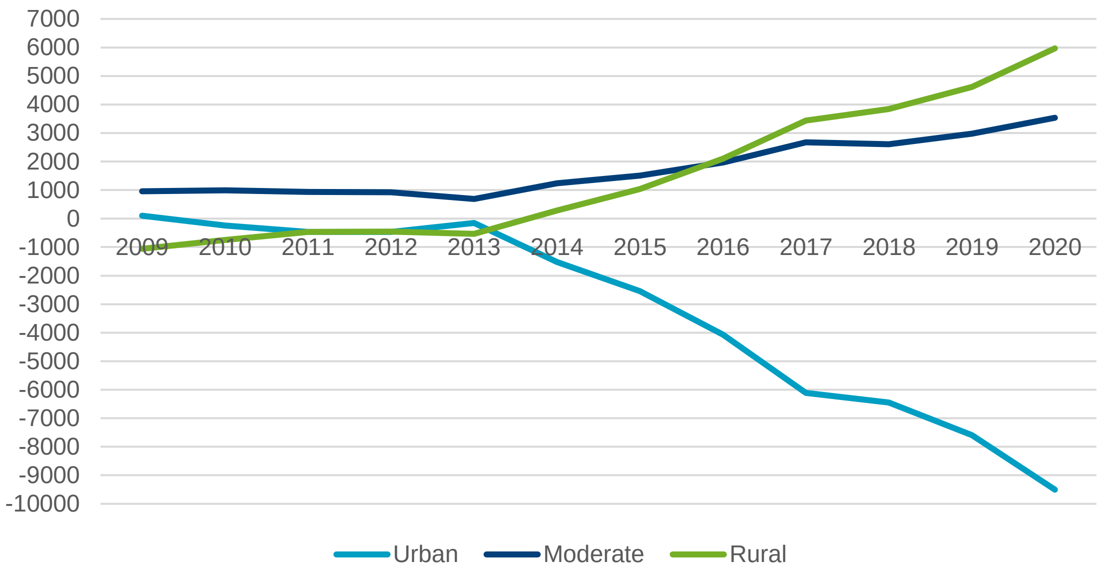
Source: Land Registry
*) period: time of transfer of ownership
**) Total is the total number of transactions in this period, including those for which the urbanity of the origin/destination is unknown. See Appendix 2 for the absolute numbers per year, including the category unknown.

3.2 Balance in land markets

Figure 2 shows the balance of buyers per urbanization class: this is the number of buyers that buy a new house within an urbanization class minus the number of buyers from this urbanization class. This shows that up to and including 2013, the balances for all urbanization classes were fairly stable. In other words, up to and including 2013, people did not predominantly buy in urban or rural areas. However, from 2014 onwards, the balance of buyers in urban municipalities is negative, while the balance of rural municipalities has become positive. In other words, more buyers from urban municipalities have started to buy outside urban municipalities, while rural municipalities have actually started to receive more buyers.

This is in line with the figures in Table 1, the proportion of buyers staying within rural municipalities has increased (79% in 2018-2020 compared to 75% in 2009-2011), while the proportion of urban buyers staying within urban municipalities has decreased (81% in 2018-2020 compared to 84% in 2009-2011). The decline in the balance of purchases by owner-occupiers in urban areas may be explained by the activity of investors in these municipalities: as investors buy homes from owner-occupiers, homes are withdrawn from the housing stock (buy-to-let).

Figure 2. Balance of buyers per urbanization class per year

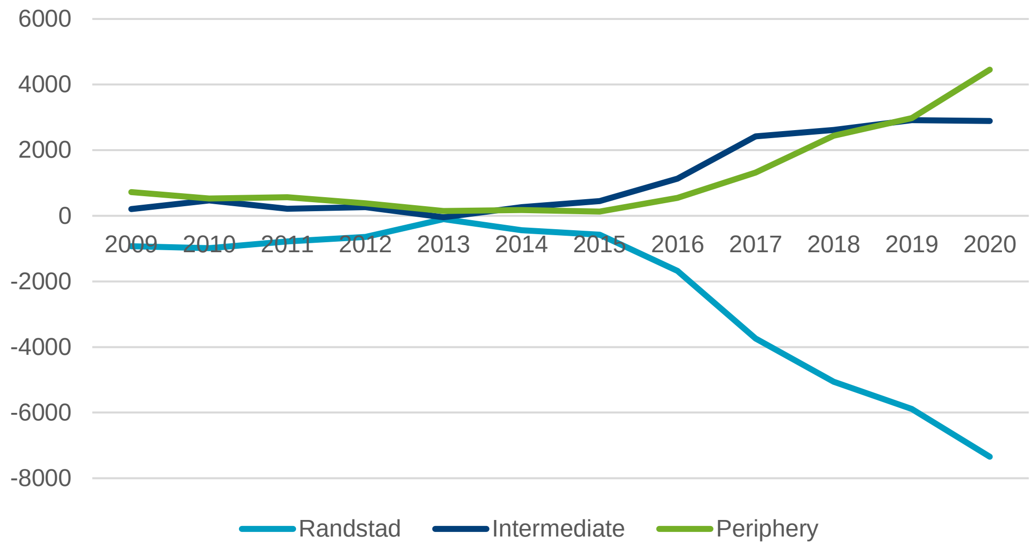


3.3 Purchasing flows by regional division: Randstad, intermediate and periphery

Within the Netherlands, three macro-regions can be distinguished, based on the number of jobs that can be reached within 50 kilometers: Randstad, intermediate zone, and national periphery. In short, Randstad, intermediate zone and periphery. When looking at the relocation movements between urban and rural areas, it is also good to include the movements between these macro-regions.

Figure 3 shows the balance of buyers per macro-region per year. This shows that up to and including 2013, the balances for all macro-regions remained fairly stable. In other words, up to and including 2013 there was no migration to or from the Randstad or to or from the periphery. However, in line with Figure 2, where we saw that since 2014 people have increasingly moved outside the urban municipalities, people have also moved more often to the periphery and the intermediate zone. The balance in both these regions has been positive since 2014, while the balance for the Randstad has been negative. This decline really set in as of 2016. The number of purchases in the Randstad in 2020 is 8% lower than in 2016, while the number of purchases in the intermediate zone and the periphery has increased by 7% and 15% respectively. What is striking in Figure 3 is that although the balance of the intermediate zone seems to stabilize somewhat in 2020, the balance in the periphery has still increased. In other words, more and more people are buying in the periphery.

Figure 3. Yearly balance of buyers per macro region

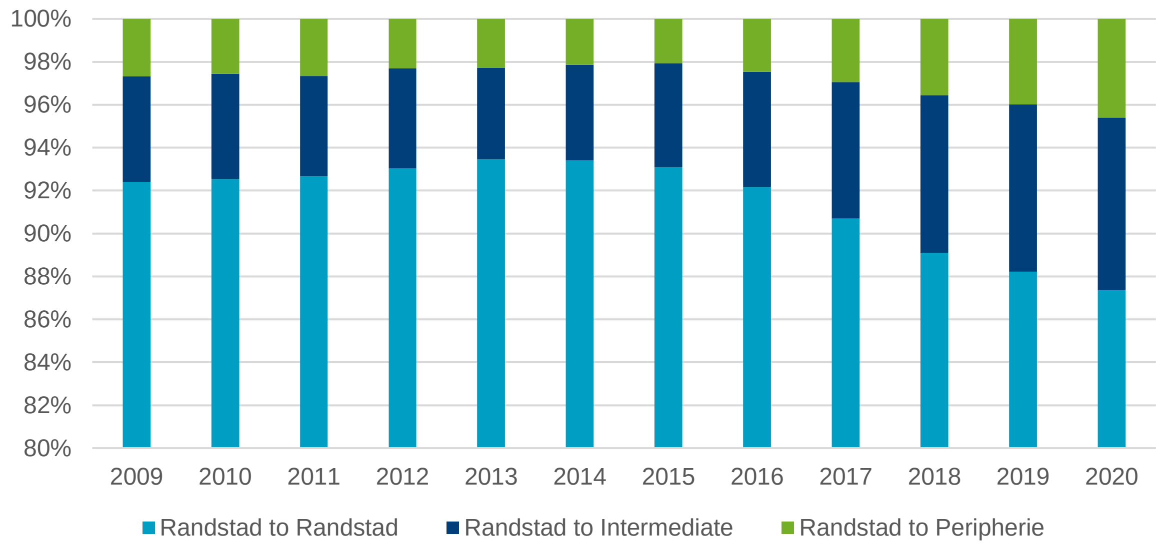


3.3.1 Buyers from the Randstad area

Figure 4 shows the annual percentage of buyers from the Randstad area buying a new home in the Randstad area, the intermediate area and the periphery. It shows that from 2016 onwards, the share of Randstad residents that stay within the Randstad conurbation declined. On the other hand, they buy relatively more often in both the intermediate area and the periphery. In 2020, about 5% of buyers from the Randstad area bought a house in the periphery, and 8% in the intermediate area.

Compared to 2016, the number of buyers staying within the Randstad decreased by 7% in 2020, while the number of buyers from the Randstad buying a home in the intermediate area or the periphery increased by 47% and 82% respectively. However, most Randstad residents still buy within the Randstad.

Figure 4 . Share of buyers from Randstad by region where they buy their new home (note: axis starts at 80%)



In 2020, over 4,500 Randstad buyers bought a house in the periphery. In 2009, 1,500 Randstad residents bought a house in the periphery. The largest share (45%) of buyers moving from the Randstad to the periphery in 2020 move from an urban municipality in the Randstad to a rural municipality in the periphery. In 2009, this was 38% of all buyers in the periphery from the Randstad.

The flow from the Randstad to the periphery has therefore increased (mainly due to a general increase in transactions) and a larger proportion of buyers from the Randstad come from an urban municipality. Of the buyers from the Randstad to the periphery, about 60% bought a house in a rural municipality in 2009 and 59% in 2020.

3.4. By administrative division: buyers tend to move within municipalities

Table 2 shows for all buyers and for each flow between urbanization classes, what percentage of buyers will remain within their own municipality, COROP region[2], province or country district in 2020. The percentages here are cumulative. For example: of all buyers who moved from an urban to a rural municipality in 2020, 54% bought a house within the same COROP region and 69% (54% + 15%) bought within the province. When buyers stay within the same urban region, it is mostly (79%) because they continue to live in the same municipality. Of all buyers, approximately 2 out of 3 continue to live within their own municipality. But even when people move to another municipality,

[2]The Netherlands is divided into 40 COROP regions, consisting of several adjacent municipalities. The division into COROP areas is a regional level between provinces and municipalities. This classification was developed in 1971 by the Regional Research Program Coordinating Committee. When designing the layout, existing commuter relationships and administrative boundaries have been taken into account

they tend to move over short distances. Buyers moving from rural municipalities to urban municipalities most often buy outside the province.

Of the urban buyers who buy in a rural municipality (row 3 in Table 2), more than half buy within their own COROP region. About 1 in 3 buyers who move from an urban to a rural municipality in 2020, move across provincial borders. So, although people move from city to country, they tend to stay in the same region. This pattern has remained fairly stable in the period 2009-2020.

Table 2. Share of buyers in 2020 who stay in their own region or not, total and by current urbanization class. The row percentages add up to 100 % per cent.

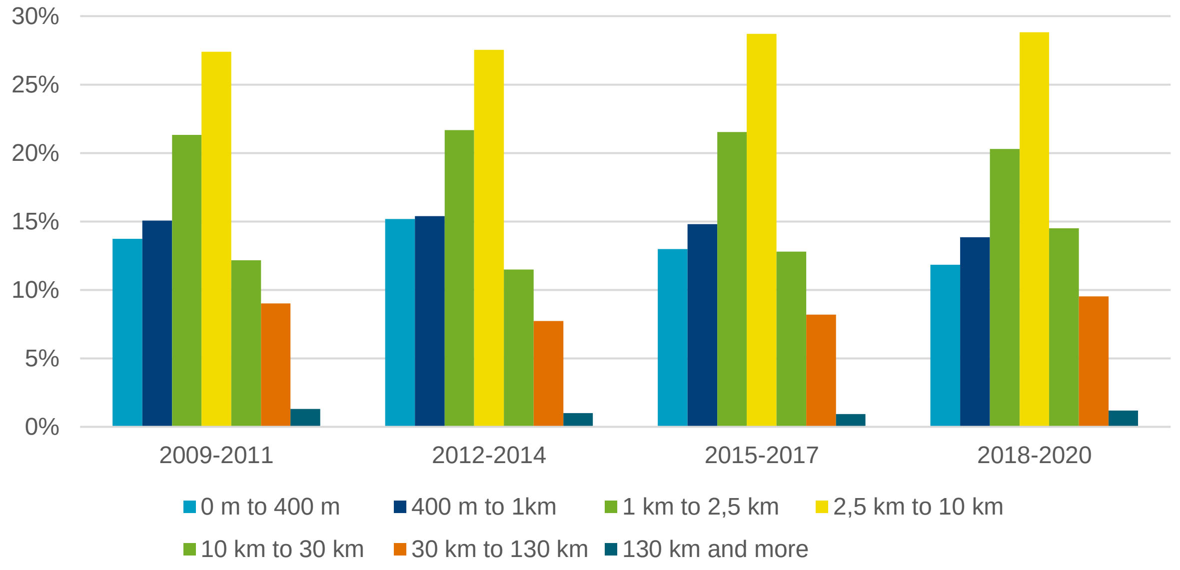
	Within municipality	**Outside municipality in corop**	**Out of corop, inside provincie**	**Outside provincie, inside region**	**Outside region**
Total Buyers	62%	18%	7%	5%	7%
Same very urban	79%	9%	5%	3%	4%
From urban to rural	0%	54%	15%	13%	18%
From rural to moderate urban	0%	48%	14%	14%	25%
From urban to moderate urban	0%	53%	20%	10%	17%
From moderate urban to urban	0%	58%	15%	10%	17%
From rural to moderate urban	0%	48%	18%	11%	22%
Moderate urban to rural	0%	54%	19%	11%	16%

3.5 Moving distances: people have started moving over longer distances more often in recent years

Most buyers move over short distances. However, in the period 2009-2020 the average distance over which people move has increased. People increasingly buy houses further from their previous home:

in the period 2009-2011 half of the buyers bought a house further than 2.5 kilometres (as the crow flies) from their previous home, in the period 2018-2020 this had increased by 4 percentage points to 54% of all buyers. In 2018-2020, 1 in 4 buyers bought a new home further than 10 kilometres from the previous home. Buyers moving from rural to urban municipalities move the greatest distance on average.

Figure 5. Share of buyers by moving distance per period



4. City inhabitants' purchasing flows

This chapter describes the flows of buyers from urban municipalities. Where do buyers buy whose previous home was in an urban municipality? We conclude that relatively more urban residents have started buying in rural areas. But there is also a small flow of urban dwellers to moderately urbanized municipalities.

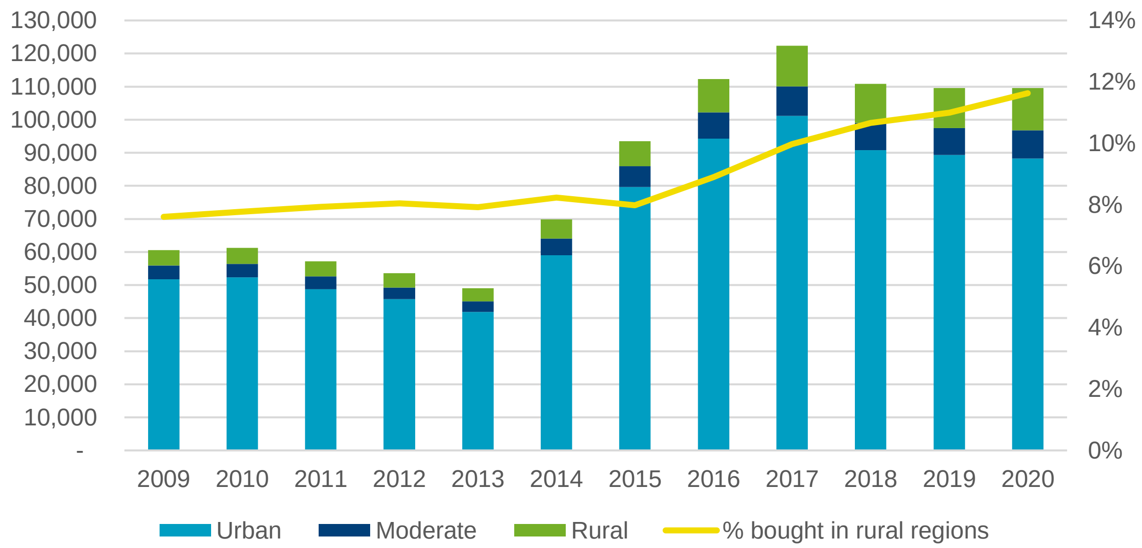
4.1. Urban buyers are relatively more likely to buy in rural municipalities, but most city dwellers still buy in urban municipalities

Urban buyers mainly find their next home in urban areas (2018-2020: 81%). But if people move out of the city, they buy most often in rural municipalities: the flow to rural municipalities is greater than that to moderately urban municipalities (Figure 5).

After 2009, the number of transactions by urban buyers first decreased, but from 2014 onwards, urban buyers are buying more again. This is in line with the national trend. Compared to 2013, the number of purchases by urban buyers in rural municipalities has increased by more than 220%, compared to an increase in purchases of about 110% in urban areas and 160% in moderately urban areas. By way of comparison: in the same period, the number of sales rose from around 111,000 to more than 200,000 throughout the Netherlands, an increase of 82%.

Buyers from urban municipalities are therefore relatively more likely to buy in rural municipalities. The share of urban buyers buying a home in rural areas has increased from 8% in 2009 to 12% in 2020 (right-axis figure 5). This relative increase started in 2015, and was therefore already visible well before the corona pandemic.

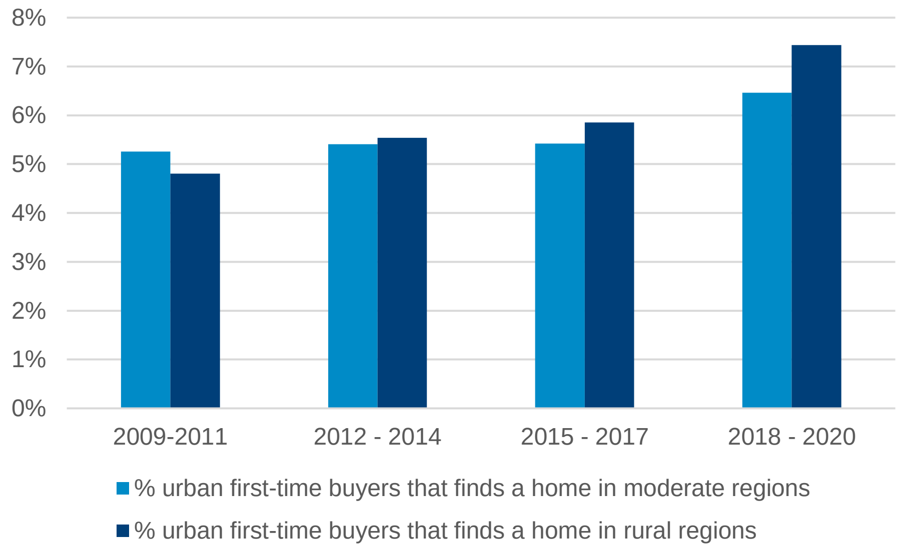
Figure 6. Number of buyers from urban areas by urbanization class of home purchased (left axis) and share of city dwellers who bought a home in rural areas (right axis)



4.2. Urban first-time buyers have also started buying more often in rural municipalities, but they mainly stay in the city

A similar picture applies to first-time buyers, although a considerably smaller proportion of urban first-time buyers buy a home outside the urban municipalities. When first-time buyers buy their first home, they mainly (2018-2020: 93%) find it in the urban environment. Only slightly more than 7% bought their first home in a rural municipality in the past three years (see figure 6). This is just over 9,000 urban first-time buyers who buy their first home in rural municipalities. That is a lot higher than in the period 2009-2011, when this percentage was just under 5% and the absolute number of urban first-time buyers in rural areas was just over 4,000. So also in this group we see an increase in the relative and absolute purchasing flow from an urban municipality to a rural municipality. Moreover, the flow to the rural area has increased more than the flow to moderate urban areas. In the period 2009-2011, first-time buyers from urban municipalities bought relatively more often in moderately urban areas than in rural areas, but in 2018-2020 they bought most often in rural areas.

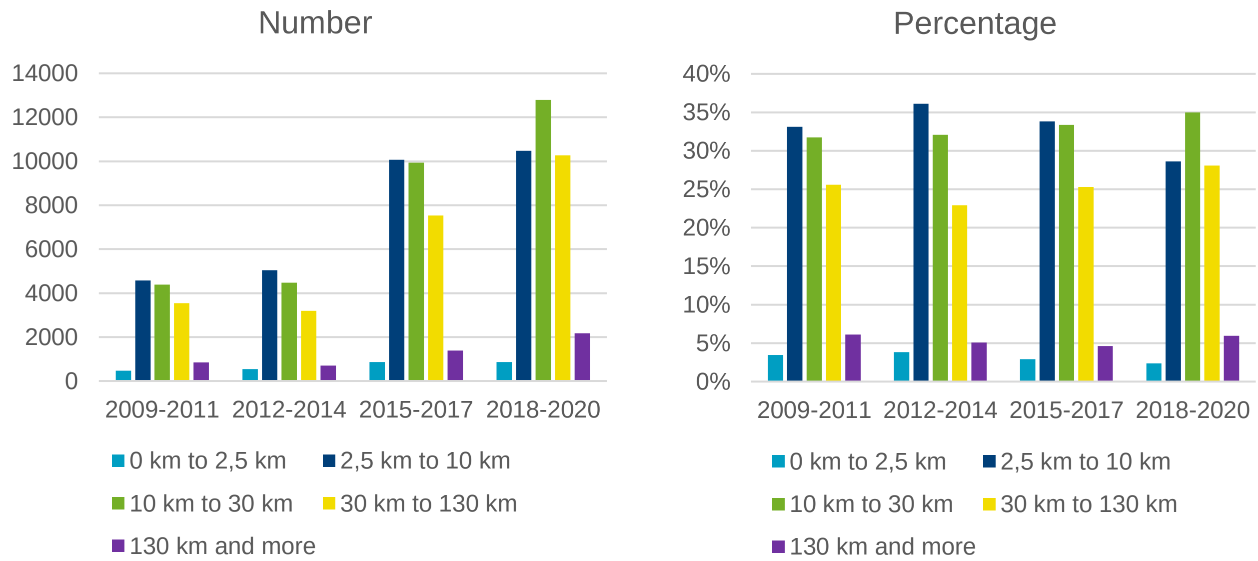
Figure 7. The proportion of first-time buyers from an urban municipality who buy a home in a moderately urban or rural municipality per period



4.3 Moving distances: urban buyers in rural municipalities have moved slightly more often over long distances in recent years

On average, urban buyers buy further away when they buy in rural areas than when they stay within urban areas. This is to be expected, as one has to cross at least the municipal boundary to move to a rural municipality and often further afield. But urban buyers in rural areas have also moved more frequently over slightly greater distances in recent years. This is especially visible in the increase in the number and share of urban buyers who buy between 10 and 30 kilometers and between 30 and 130 kilometers from their previous home. This is remarkable because most urban buyers remain within the province when they move to a rural municipality and this pattern has been stable over the years. So although people often continue to move within their own province, they do so over slightly greater distances.

Figure 7. Number and share of urban buyers who buy in rural municipalities by moving distance per period



*) Because we cannot determine the removal distance for all transactions, the numbers may deviate slightly from the total numbers of transactions (see Appendix 3 for absolute numbers)

Final remarks

This article could show that there are not many quantitative studies on migration from urban areas to rural areas. Most studies are trying to understand the motivations for that type of migration. But the articles that were looking to the recent motivation for that migration, encountered that COVID and the possibility of home-working played a role in the migration. In that sense, this article using the existing data from house purchasing was able to evidence the tendency of the movement to more rural areas.

From 2014 onwards more buyers move to rural municipalities. However, they do not move over large distances. The conclusion is that people have moved from the urban city to the periphery and to the intermediated zones. Likely because most of the work is in the nearby big city. In recent years, most buyers moved over bigger distances. Maybe Covid-19 is the main driver of this phenomime. Research shows that living preferences changed and a green surrounding is a favorite.

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