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A critical response to the (non-)place of rural leisure users within the counterurban imagination

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Abstract: The concept of 'counterurbanisation' is now widely recognised within several branches of academia. Over the last four decades it has come to represent the net migration of people to more rural areas, notably although not exclusively across many countries within the Global North. It focuses on 'permanent' relocation, having separated itself within scholarship from more 'temporary' movements to rural areas, not least those undertaken for leisure purposes. This paper addresses this intellectual positioning of counterurbanisation and its exclusion of leisure users, arguing that, in some circumstances, it may now be unhelpful. In particular, recent discussions around the idea that we now live in an era of mobilities can lead to questioning both the idea of 'permanent' migration and its separation and implicit prioritisation over other forms of mobility. This leads to the paper advocating reconciliation between rural in-migrants and rural leisure users within a much broader counterurban imagination.

Key Words: counterurbanisation, rural leisure, mobilities, classification, rural populations.

A resposta da crítica ao (não) lugar dos usuários de lazer rurais no contexto do conceito 'counterurban'

Resumo: O conceito de 'counterurbanisation' é hoje amplamente reconhecido dentro de vários ramos da academia. Ao longo das últimas quatro décadas tem vindo a representar essencialmente a imigração de pessoas para áreas rurais, embora não em exclusivo, mormente em muitos países do Norte. O conceito centra-se na 'permanente' deslocalização, tendo-se distinguido dos estudos de movimentos mais ' temporários ' para as áreas rurais , não tanto aqueles realizados para fins de lazer. Este artigo aborda, assim, o posicionamento de 'counterurbanisation' e, em particular, os recentes debates em torno da ideia de que agora vivemos numa era de mobilidades conduzindo ao questionamento do conceito de migração 'permanente' e da sua separação e priorização implícita relativamente a outras formas de mobilidade. Deste modo, somos conduzidos à questão da reconciliação entre (in)migrantes para o espaço rural e os usuários de lazer rurais adentro de uma idealização dita 'counterurban' muito mais ampla.

Palabras-chave: counterurbanisation, lazer rural, mobilidades, classificação, as populações rurais

1. Introduction: consuming the dynamic European countryside

It has now become something of a truism that the European countryside should be recognized as a highly dynamic and rapidly changing environment. This is apparent both from the perspective of land use and ecology and in terms of socio-economic and cultural issues. Change has long been a core expressive feature of the urban world – possibly one of its defining features, expressing renewal, revitalisation and renaissance – but the need to make a similar case for the rural reflects a predominantly dualistic perspective on urban and rural. This has historically placed them as socio-spatial opposites: the urban epitomises change, the rural reproduces stasis. Oliva (2010: 284) summarises the position thus:

'the rural world was generally considered the antithesis of urban changeability and speed. The inertia and stability of rural life... were imagined somewhere in the background to the social whirl and mobility of modern cities'.

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But, as has been said, all that has now changed; although this shift in representation may be largely confined to academia, and to rural studies in particular. Any cursory examination of how popular culture represents rural life immediately reveals it still reproducing and thriving on the old dualism! Nonetheless, returning to academia, in a background paper for a major EU-funded project on *Developing Europe's Rural Regions in the Era of Globalization*, Michael Woods (2009: 6) emphasizes how:

'the differentiated geography of rural Europe is not static, but dynamic, shifting according to patterns of social and economic restructuring and trajectories of political reform. The contemporary era of globalisation and late capitalism arguably represents a heightened period of flux.'

Besides the importance of seeing a rural aspect to globalisation, rural dynamism also comes through in models of rurality such as that of post-productivism, which engages with ongoing dimensions of rural change and can even encompass more potential dimensions (Halfacree, 2006a). All of this, in turn, feeds into, for example, the OECD (2006) calling for a 'new paradigm' for rural development policy.

This essay argues that now we have attained a much more dynamic sense of rurality and a firmer recognition and acceptance of rural change, we are in a position to revisit and reflect critically on some of the intellectual devices through which appreciation of this dynamism has been achieved. This review should encompass our classificatory practices, whereby how we construct objects of academic analysis itself comes under reflexive scrutiny (Bourdieu, 1998; Halfacree, 2001). This is because the necessary process of categorisation nonetheless typically involves what Law and Whittaker (1988: 178-9) termed 'discrimination', whereby:

'new classes of objects are brought into being, objects whose boundaries and properties are clearer than those they have replaced, objects that may more easily be interrelated with one another.'

How consistently discrete or robust these 'new objects' actually are (Sayer, 1989) is a question to be continuously asked if we are ultimately to develop a fuller understanding of the entangled, messy, confused and unstable totality of the social world of which we are all part (Ingold, 2011).

Specifically for the present essay, critical scrutiny can be given to how we academics have predominantly come to frame rural leisure users, consuming the countryside for various pleasurable purposes, relative to people undertaking residential migration towards more rural locations. This scrutiny needs to be set within a heightened appreciation of the dynamics of rural populations (Milbourne, 2007), which can be seen to blur, confuse and even transcend seemingly established categories. Awareness of these dynamics within the noted increasing consumption role and potential of rural places provided a core dimension to the overall appreciation of rural change.

The argument of this essay is, in short, that one consequence of seeing rural localities as having been and continuing to be transformed through economic restructuring (globalisation) and social recomposition (Cloke and Goodwin, 1992) is that two previously closely aligned sets of rural consumption practices - leisure users and in-migrants - have become largely separated within research practice and imagination. On the one hand, a key aspect of rural economic restructuring has been identified as leisure- and tourism-related commodification. On the other hand, rural social recomposition has been especially associated with in-migration. Whilst this separation is sometimes informative, at other times the divergence it has promoted within scholarship may be detrimental to understanding changing rural places.

The rest of the essay is structured as follows. First, it turns briefly to the relative place of rural leisure users and counterurbanisers within three British Rural Geography texts, from the 1970s, 1980s and 2000s, respectively. This traces divergence between work on leisure users and in-migrants but also hints at reconciliation. Second, the essay presents a précis of academic understanding of in-migration - the 'counterurbanisation story' (Champion, 1998) - whose seeming finale, namely that it largely expresses bourgeois lifestyle migration, becomes the subject of critical query in the third section. This challenges the emphasis given in the counterurbanisation literature - and in migration scholarship generally (Barcus and Halfacree, forthcoming) - to the 'permanence' of migration. Fourth, a brief digression into the 'era of mobilities' reiterates this querying of permanence, which leads to the concluding section's call to rethink academia's counterurban imagination. Specifically, such a rethink allows - in certain circumstances at least - rural leisure users to become a crucial element within an expanded counterurban imagination.

2. Rural leisure users and counterurbanisers within Rural Geography

Early in his career, Paul Cloke (1980: 182) hailed Hugh Clout's (1972) *Rural Geography:* an Introductory Survey as 'one of the first rural geographical texts to remove itself from the main tenor of agricultural economics' and establish 'a legitimized subdiscipline'. As such, it is a good place to start reviewing the relative academic position and prominence of rural leisure users and in-migrants, henceforth 'counterurbanisers', two groups which had started to be noted in scholarship.

Clout's book associated both groups of rural consumers together. Leisure users and the 'adventitious population' - who lived in rural areas by choice but did not work there (Stamp, 1949) – were united as representing urban encroachment into the countryside. They expressed an 'urbanization of the countryside [that] can be produced by a variety of mechanisms and take on a number of nuances' (Clout, 1972: 43), a combined 'movement of city people' (Clout, 1972: 44), whether for living or recreation. Urban origin and mobility, in short, united them.

Subsequently, within the newly vibrant rural geography sub-discipline (Cloke, 1980), the two groups of 'urban' consumers soon attracted considerable research attention. Reflecting this, by David Phillips's and Allan Williams's (1984) Rural Britain: a Social Geography, little more than a decade after Clout, they had acquired both heightened and separate prominence. First, 'counter-urbanization' informed strongly the 'Population and social change chapter', whilst five chapters further on a whole chapter was allotted to 'Recreation and leisure'. By 1984, the pattern and content of this separate development of scholarship within these two areas was also already apparent. Numbers, classification, motivations and socio-economic and cultural characteristics tended to dominate work on counterurbanisation, whilst rural leisure and tourism research adopted a more applied, planning and economic emphasis. This distinction, although not developed further here, immediately suggests how dialogue between the two bodies of work might be most fruitful.

Finally, two decades further on, Michael Woods's (2005) *Rural Geography* again had the two groups separated by several chapters. 'Counterurbanization' dominated the 'Social and demographic change' chapter, whilst the enhanced consumption role of the rural was expressed strongly in the 'Selling the countryside' chapter where, for example, even farming was now seen as being shaped by the demands and expectations of the urban consumer. Markedly different literatures, concepts and priorities were sharply represented within the two contributions. Nonetheless, it is also prescient for this essay to note that the social and demographic change chapter contained near the end a short section on second homes, presented as a key expression of rural gentrification. After years of separate development, therefore, is it the case that counterurbanisation scholars are beginning to (re-)engage with rural leisure users? If so, how are these links being made and how might a rapprochement develop further for mutual benefit? The present essay begins to address these questions, approaching them from the 'counterurbanisation' perspective the author has most experience with (e.g. Halfacree, 2008, 2009). This requires first telling, after Champion (1998), the 'story' of counterurbanisation.

3. The counterurbanisation story

Until at least the 1970s, the overwhelmingly dominant image of rural populations throughout Europe in the 20th century was one of decline (e.g. Johnston, 1966); a demographic loss captured evocatively in the phrase the 'drift from the land'. Indeed, it is an image that persists today and, of course, still accurately depicts the overall demographic experience of many rural areas across Europe.

Nonetheless, drift from the land, stimulated in particular by agricultural decline, is certainly no longer the only rural demographic game in town. Particularly stimulated by evidence from US census data from the late 1960s and early 1970s (e.g. Beale, 1975), demographers and population geographers began to notice that, in some parts of some rural areas of some countries in Europe, populations were increasing. This growth was not substantially due to 'natural increase' - births over deaths - but was coming about through net population in-migration. Again pioneered by US researchers, commentators went on to speak of a 'population turnaround' (Brown and Wardwell, 1980), even a 'rural renaissance' (Morrison and Wheeler, 1976), with the long-dominant trend of net migration towards the cities being checked or even replaced. What replaced it was labelled counterurbanisation (with a 'z' in the US), its considerable significance heralding '[a] turning point... in the American urban experience. Counterurbanization has replaced urbanization as the dominant force shaping the nation's settlement patterns' (Berry, 1976: 17).

It was soon recognized that what was happening was not simply metropolitan expansion but an expression of people 'voting with their feet' and choosing to live within more rural residential environments. A complex pattern of counterurbanisation soon emerged, covering much of the Global North (e.g. Champion, 1989; Boyle and Halfacree, 1998). In general, it could be expressed via a negative linear correlation between population growth and settlement size (Fielding, 1982). However, as researchers such as Tony Fielding and Tony Champion consistently made clear, counterurbanisation creates a population mosaic, not a monochrome painting, as it was also seen to express at least three key types of selectivity. First, it was socially selective, biased in favour of: higher social classes; people in self-employment; middle aged and retired adults: non return migrants: owners of houses: households of two or more adults. Second, it was historically selective, not just in having developed as a numerically significant phenomenon from the middle 20th Century but also fluctuating with the state of the economy, being strongest in economically buoyant times. Third, counterurbanisation was and remains highly geographically uneven, at both national scales and intra-nationally. In terms of the latter, it tends to be strongest in the more accessible countryside, with many isolated, remote rural areas still experiencing net out-migration.

In telling the 'counterurbanisation story' 16 vears ago, Champion (1998) recognised a tale then entering its third decade. Indeed, it remains a key research area within both Population and Rural Geography and further afield. Much effort has been expended trying to explain it. Early understandings moved from seeing it as some kind of 'natural' phenomenon of human evolution to recognising how it was enabled by technological developments - from modern private transportation to labour saving devices in the home - that allowed people to live often many kilometres from their workplace. Culture soon came into the equation, too, with Berry's (1976: 24) initial assertion that counterurbanisation was the 'reassertion of fundamental predispositions of the American culture... antithetical to urban concentration' becoming carefully and critically nuanced. Elsewhere, though also with a strong cultural dimension, counterurbanisation received a 'wholly darker, more hard-edged, materialistic and realistic explanation' (Fielding, 1998: 42) that linked its emergence and growth with dynamics of the capitalist class structure, notably in terms of rural areas increasingly presenting economic opportunities (the rise of rural consumption noted earlier) and providing a geographical habitus (Bourdieu, 1984) for 'service class' identity.

Within all of this debate on the causes of counterurbanisation, a key role has been given – not least within the present author's own work – to potential and actual migrants' place images (Shields, 1991), imaginative geographies (Gregory, 1994), or spatial representations (Halfacree, 1993) of rural (and urban) places. Indeed, qualifying any emphasis on the role of practical living, Dirksmeier (2008: 160, my emphases) could even assert that '[t]he *structure and situation of a rural area... are of* *little relevance* to the newcomers' motives. It is the *conception* of an idealized rural lifestyle which is crucial in determining the actions and attitudes of people at the time of their arrival'. These conceptions of the counterurbanisers, as the quote suggests, predominantly represent rural places as residentially quasi-idyllic, in contrast to the largely anti-idyllic city (Halfacree, 1995).

From all of this counterurbanisation scholarship, one might conclude, as this author hypothesised a few years ago (Halfacree, 2008), that scholars may see little more very original to investigate or insightful to say about counterurbanisation. Indeed, within the last few years counterurbanisation has increasingly become somewhat subsumed within the wider suite of so-called lifestyle migrations and their diverse attempts to 'escape to the good life' (Benson and O'Reilly, 2009). Academically, in other words, one might suggest the counterurbanisation story has largely run its course. Arguing now that this is actually far from the case (Halfacree, 2008), the present essay will eventually return, in fact, to rural leisure users...

4. Counterurbanisation beyond lifestyle migration

Any seeming consensus of counterurbanisation being reducible to a form of bourgeois lifestyle migration (e.g. Murdoch, 2006: 177) can be challenged through bringing to the fore a range of 'other' counterurbanisations (e.g. Halfacree, 2001, 2008, 2011). Three particular strands can be identified. Whilst not as prevalent as the bourgeois lifestyle category, all reveal counterurbanisation *in its totality* to be a more complex, multi-stranded phenomenon or set of phenomena. Moreover, whilst the origin of all these moves may not be 'urban', their movement into the rural makes them counter-urban from a rural perspective (Cloke, 1985).

First, there are 'back-to-the-land' migrants (Halfacree, 2006b). These are broadly countercultural people who relocate to a rural location in order to combine agricultural smallholding with degree of self-sufficiency. Epitomised by proponents of what Fairlie (2009) has termed 'low impact development', back-to-the-land lives centre very much around a practical ethics that centres on relationships with humans and non-humans within an overall land-working network. Clearly, there is a degree of overlap with bourgeois lifestyle counterurbanisers, not least as going back-to-the-land still represents lifestyle migration, but it is instructive sometimes to distinguish the group (Halfacree, 2001).

Second, whilst the counterurbanisation literature has been dominated by what are known as internal or intra-national moves, engagement with broader lifestyle migration scholarship has demonstrated that counterurbanisation has some distinctly international strands. For example, there is 'heliotropic' (King, 2002) migration, not least of retired people. to sunnier parts of Europe and beyond. More clearly rural focused, however, are a number of detailed studies of Britons who have moved to rural France, for example. Pioneered by Buller and Hoggart (1994), this work now extends to detailed case studies by Benson (2011). Neal (2013) and others. Of course, these studies still position counterurbanisation as lifestyle migration, and also fit the dominant model in terms of social class, motivations, and so on. More complex in this respect is another form of international counterurban migration that involves 'returning' to a rural location left years before. Such expressions of return migration, such as Irish returning to rural Ireland from London or the US, 'complicate... dualistic categories of migrant and local' (Ní Laoire, 2007: 343) and are less clearly lifestyle migrations in any amenity-focused sense.

Third, there are expressions of international labour migration that can take a strongly counterurban character. These flows return attention to the value of always relating counterurbanisation to the changing spatial and social divisions of labour, thereby reviving 'economic' explanations (Fielding, 1998). For example, there is migration to rural areas linked to continued high labour demand from some forms of agriculture. These include flows of North Africans to Spain and Eastern Europeans to the UK (e.g. Woods and Watkins, 2008). Such migration is certainly *not* lifestyle migration (as usually understood) and has little space for 'idyllic' rural representations, thus fundamentally challenging any bourgeois lifestyle consensus.

One objection to bringing the latter group into the counterurbanisation universe would be to point out that they are generally 'temporary migrants', coming for the work and then returning to their origin countries. However, this essay refutes such an objection from at least two directions. First, how can one be certain that such migrants will definitely be 'temporary'? Even with an intention to return - and even with state policies insisting on this, such as providing temporary work visas only - some always stay, whether legally sanctioned or not. Second, even if presence is temporary - perhaps for just a summer - the impacts of international migrants on a rural place can be significant. For example, they will contribute to the local economy, they may have children requiring schooling, and they will, through their labour, support local businesses. Furthermore, even if *individuals* may be temporary residents of a rural place, institutionalisation of the labour migration system makes the presence

that recognized by Stamp (1949). What has been argued in this section, therefore, is that no sooner has the counterurban 'untamed becomes domesticated' (Billig, 1985: 86) conceptually into a story that revolves around bourgeois lifestyles than this contented picture is found wanting. New strands and forces come into the picture, a key consequence of which is to destabilise the permanent-binary dualism that features strongly within migration scholarship (Barcus and Halfacree, forthcoming; King, 2002), including that discussing counterurbanisation. It is from this vantage point that the essay will shortly go on to argue for the 'return' of rural leisure users to the embrace of the broad counterurban family. However, the vantage point will now be reinforced via a short digression into the 'era of mobilities' (Halfacree, 2012).

5. The era of mobilities

Over a century and a half ago, Marx and Engels (1848) famously declared how 'all that is solid melts into air'. Whilst the dynamism of capitalism being referred to has remained one of its defining features, such a sense of mobility and dynamism has recently been accorded more general significance, both metaphorically and experientially. Mobility, in short, is for some a (the?) contemporary *zeitgeist*: we live in an 'age of migration' (Castles *et al.*, 2013: *cf.* Bauman, 2000; Cresswell, 2006; Urry, 2007).

To get to grips with this mobile age, understandings based on 'movement, mobility and contingent ordering' must replace those emphasising 'stasis, structure and social order' (Urry, 2000: 18). Such new understandings challenge, in particular, a core societal assumption of 'sedentarism' (Cresswell, 2006). This assumption, arguably reflected in the ideas of philosophers such as Martin Heidegger, for example, proposes that being still, bounded and 'authentic' through 'being-in-place' is a core foundational feature of (proper) human life.

Acknowledging within any proposed era of mobilities the increased quantitative and qualitative significance of migration within everyday life, while necessary, is not enough. Migration's own sedentarist underpinnings, presenting residential relocation as inherently both unsettling and abnormal, must be challenged (Halfacree, 2012). One way to do this is to present migration as part of the more general mobile rhythms of lives led (Barcus and Halfacree, forthcoming). Perspectives must shift from regarding residential migration as an essentially unique or distinctive form of movement to locating it within a broad spectrum of mobility (Pooley *at el.*, 2005) that both expresses and shapes everyday life. Within this spectrum, mundane, everyday mobilities, for example, can be seen having numerous significant impacts upon the human condition.

Conceptual re-imagining of the place of migration vis-à-vis both its societal significance and its relations to other forms of mobility has significant implications for the scope of Population Geography's interest in people 'on the move' (Barcus and Halfacree, forthcoming). In particular, it suggests that we should not automatically bracket out 'permanent' migration for specific circumscribed analysis. Instead, acknowledging 'the never-straightforward boundary between migration and mobility' (King, 2002: 90), we should recognize migration's connections and parallels with other forms of mobility; independent not separate spheres (Sheller and Urry, 2006). Reiterating, we must attend to the full spectrum of mobilities (Pooley et al., 2005) if the relative place of migration within lives lived across space is to be adequately understood and appreciated.

A mobilities sensitivity raises many questions within many areas of scholarship. One such area concerns what is meant by 'home', also a central topic within migration research. Conventionally, the home has been presented as an essentially sedentarist singular, fixed and rooted place. Yet, very simply, does home have to comprise one place? Think how slippery the concept is in terms of how it may be defined spatially - house, village, region, country, and so on (Blunt and Dowling, 2006). Consequently, scholars promoting ideas such as transnationalism (McEwan, 2004) challenge simple and singular ideas of home. Generally, one can recognise homes as *becoming*, routed through and emergent from people's everyday connections with places of diverse 'everyday texture' (Conradson and Latham, 2005: 228). Within such an imaginary, whilst 'work, home and play are separated in time and place, ...meanings and identity are structured around not one but several places' (McIntyre et al., 2006: 314). Rural second home consumers can exemplify this situation well (Halfacree, 2011, 2012).

A predominant theme within academic work on rural second home consumption is, understandably, the mapping of patterns, trends and practices of leisure usage (e.g. Hall and Müller, 2004). Yet, scholarship has proceeded also to present second homes as providing an 'escape' or 'vacation' from the often challenging demands of 'modern' lifestyles (e.g. Kaltenborn, 1998) and even to regard the second home as becoming an integral part of everyday dwelling (e.g. Overvåg, 2009; Gallent, 2007). In other words, what might be seen as an ephemeral expression of leisure consumption becomes entwined within a more mobile conception of home. Leisure practices – as, of course, its leading scholars have long argued – take centre stage within the practices of everyday life. This realisation provides the final piece of the jigsaw that now allows this essay to propose leisure users being 'reconciled' with more 'permanent' residential migrants within a renewed counterurban imagination.

6. Conclusion: rural leisure users within the counterurban imagination

This essay has argued several points within its account of the development of counterurbanisation and counterurbanisation scholarship. First, whilst early to mid-20th Century British rural scholarship tended to associate both rural leisure users and more permanent in-migrants together, as expressions of an adventitious rural 'population', these two groups subsequently became increasingly separated. Whilst both expressed the growing importance of rural consumption, one can argue that it became necessary to separate and discriminate them in order to appreciate their significance. This was especially the case for the emergence of large-scale migrations to rural locations, which became known as counterurbanisation. Briefly tracing this demographic shift revealed that, second, by the end of the 20th Century it had largely been reduced to an important, interesting but quite well understood expression of lifestyle migration. Third, the essay argued that this domesticated and discriminated representation of 'counterurbanisation' has increasingly been found wanting, at least in qualitative terms of the range of people expressing a counterurban shift. Within this critique, crucially, the confidence we can have in defining counterurbanisation as a 'permanent' relocation has been queried. This may have enabled it to be discriminated from 'temporary' leisure users but the validity of this hard divide is problematic. Fourth, this discrimination is challenged further by the mobilities paradigm and its implications, for example, for sedentarist representations of home. Consequently, it can be argued that forms of leisure consumption, such as rural second homes, can present rural environments as home places, even when no 'permanent' relocation has taken place.

The consequence of this narrative is that it may now be time to consider rural leisure users in general as important components *within* rather than external to the counterurban imagination, as Woods (2005) began to imply. Rural leisure users can become part of a counterurbanisation story that has been told to date largely without them. The full implication of the mobilities turn is that 'temporary' residence alone is inadequate to exclude such rural leisure users. This new imaginary firmly represents counterurbanisation as being more than just a permanent residential shift 'from urban A to rural B'. Leisure users are reconciled with residential migrants, one again through their 'urban' origins and their mobilities.

Finally, going further still, rural leisure users can go on to take their place together with more conventionally understood counterurbanisers and other rural residents within Figure 1's diagrammatic depiction of the contemporary rural population (simplified from Halfacree, 2012). This figure identifies some 14 'slices' of rural place consumer, the slices imperfectly and unstably determined according to what can be called 'place commitment'. Roughly speaking, this commitment can be defined by the proportion of time (and consequent effort?) spent 'within' the identified rural environment. It draws inspiration from Gallent's (2007: 99) proposal of an immersed to inhabited hierarchy, which ranges 'from those who thoroughly dwell - and become (or are) immersed within a place - to those who merely "inhabit" in a more detached sense'. It centres the (em)place(ment) issue within a mobile world: stability--within-movement as Sheller and Urry (2006: 214) express it. Leisure users, within this imaginary, have at least as much stake in the 21st Century dynamic rural as many more 'permanent' rural residents. The adventitious, in all their diversity, have thus truly come of age...

Figure 1. Consumers of Rural Places by 'Place Commitment'



In-transit visitors

Occasional visitors (non-residential) Occasional visitors (residential) Regular visitors (non-residential) Regular visitors (residential) Second-home owners (irregular users) Second-home owners (regular users) Dual location households Long-distance workers (rarely at home) Long-distance commuters (weekly) Long-distance commuters (daily) Short-distance commuters (urban) Short-distance commuters (rural) Non-commuters (*in-situ*)

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