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UNEMPLOYMENT IN SHAPING RURAL-URBAN MIGRATION PATTERNS IN POLAND

Keywords: internal migration, labour market, unemployment, rural areas, non-agglomeration areas

ABSTRACT. The aim of the research was to determine the relationship between regional unemployment and internal migration in Poland, with a focus on non-agglomeration, low-density areas. Drawing on average data from 2020 to 2023, the analysis investigates how the proportion registered unemployed individuals among the working-age population relates to internal migration balances across voivodeships. The results indicate a clear inverse association: regions with higher unemployment tend to experience greater net outflows of population. This pattern is consistent with economic migration theory, which suggests that individuals relocate in response to regional disparities in employment opportunities. The analysis highlights notable contrasts between regions with persistently high unemployment and negative migration balances, and those with stronger labour markets and positive migration trends. These findings underscore the importance of integrating migration policy with labour market planning, particularly in rural areas facing demographic decline. The study also points to the need for further research into the temporal dynamics of migration, including potential lag effects between economic conditions and population movements.

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, Poland has experienced profound demographic, social, and economic transformations that have significantly shaped the national labour market. Among the major forces influencing these changes are the so-called megatrends, such as population ageing, globalisation, urbanisation, environmental pressures, climate change, infrastructural development, and efforts to mitigate territorial inequalities and rural decline. These dynamics, combined with shifts in food demand, regional accessibility, and mobility, form a complex backdrop against which labour market changes must be understood (Drejerska, 2024).

One of the most pronounced outcomes of these megatrends is internal migration, particularly from rural areas to urban centres. Rural-to-urban migration has intensified, driven predominantly by young individuals seeking improved employment opportunities, access to higher education, and enhanced living conditions (see, for example, Kusio, Fiore, 2022). This migration trend has had a dual impact: while cities benefit from a growing supply of often well-educated young workers, rural areas are increasingly characterised by depopulation, labour shortages, and the progressive ageing of their workforce. The migration primarily involved young, well-educated individuals from economically backward areas with limited employment opportunities. This has led to moderate short- and medium-term impacts on the Polish labour market, but potential long-term effects include demographic shifts and regional labour allocation changes (Kaczmarczyk, 2012).

Concurrently, the process of urbanisation in Poland has been accompanied by an observable trend of suburbanisation. Many migrants are not relocating to central urban areas but rather to the outskirts of cities or adjacent municipalities. According to the OECD (2022), between 1990 and 2015, Poland's core cities lost approximately 8.6% of their population, whereas semi-dense suburban areas recorded a population increase of 5.2%. Notably, 43% of the residents in Poland's Functional Urban Areas (FUAs) now live in commuting zones, underscoring the increasing significance of suburban environments. This transformation is particularly evident in metropolitan regions such as Warsaw, where productivity levels approach those observed in highly developed OECD countries like Belgium (OECD, 2023). It should also be noted that the employment level of rural residents does not necessarily correspond to the number of jobs available within rural areas themselves, as many inhabitants are employed outside their place of residence, often commuting to nearby towns or urban centres (Stanny, Komorowski, 2024). This commuting dynamic further reinforces the functional interdependence between rural and urban spaces, particularly within and around FUAs.

The motivations behind internal migration are complex and interlinked. Economic incentives, such as the pursuit of higher wages and broader career prospects, play a central role. In addition, improved access to public services, including healthcare and

education, acts as a pull factor. Empirical studies support these observations. For example, Kowalewska and Markowski (2024) show that among nursing students from rural Eastern Poland, economic factors and aspirations for professional development are the predominant motivations for planned migration to urban areas.

This paper examines rural-to-urban migration in Poland through the lens of the labour market. The research aims to determine the relationship between regional unemployment and internal migration in Poland, with a focus on non-agglomeration, low-density areas. The study draws on data from the Central Statistical Office (GUS) and integrates findings from recent scholarly research and institutional reports concerning internal migration and regional labour market dynamics in Poland.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Migration theories were initiated in the 19th century through the development of classical economic theories. In the assumptions of this theory, the migrant is presented as a factor balancing the labour market, while the labour market itself is characterised by disequilibrium on both the micro and macroeconomic scale. Assuming that people are not restricted in any way in their movement, both areas (the area of emigration and the area of immigration) can benefit from the fact of migration. This is because in the emigration area, the unemployment rate decreases and wages are raised, while the immigration country experiences economic growth through a greater supply of labour. The classical theory deals primarily with migration between the agricultural and industrial sectors (Adamowicz, Siedlanowski, 2021).

In the neoclassical theory, which was an extension of the classical theory, the assumption was made that migration is a consequence of, and at the same time, an equilibrium (through changes in wages) for the difference between the demand for and supply of labour (Todaro, 1976). In this theory, the education of people who decide to migrate is considered an important factor. This theory also included the “push and pull” assumption, highlighting the interplay between factors that push individuals away from rural areas and those that pull them towards urban centres. Push factors include environmental degradation, including drought and water scarcity (Mianabadi, Davary, Kolahi, Fisher, 2021), but also the traditional ones, economic factors such as poverty and unemployment in rural areas. However, while the push-pull theory is widely accepted, it has faced criticisms. For instance, one study found that the pull factors of average wages, unemployment rates, urbanisation, and income disparity are countered by urban poverty as a pull factor, indicating the complexity of migration dynamics (Gries, Kraft, Simon, 2016). Some authors indicate that, except for extreme cases like slavery or deportation, migration is not a passive or automatic response to external factors (“push” or “pull”),

but involves active decision-making and requires that individuals have the necessary resources to move (de Haas, 2021). Others indicate that to understand migration flows better, analysts could usefully distinguish between predisposing, proximate, precipitating and mediating drivers (van Hear, Bakewell, Long, 2018).

The new migration theory is a further development of the neoclassical theory, but it focuses on explaining the migration phenomenon in microeconomic terms at the household level. Migration is seen here as an element of diversifying the sources of income of household members and as a safeguard against the potential loss of employment by one person. Risk minimisation can be considered not only as physical movement but as Stark and Bloom (1985), co-authors of the new economic theory of migration, point out that the decision to change the sector of employment may be driven by a tendency to avoid risk – if one member of the household changes employment sector to one in which wage is inversely correlated, statistically independent or slightly positively correlated with the salary in the previous sector (in which at least one other household member is still working). There is simply a kind of insurance by diversifying sources of income. Another aspect taken into account in this theory is the fact that the lack of satisfaction with the low level of earnings in the household may also be based on comparing these earnings to other households (Brzozowski, 2011).

Current theories are the dual labour market theory and the labour market segmentation theory. The dual labour market theory developed by Piore and Doeringer in 1971 attaches importance to the term of market segmentation and to the phenomenon of the interaction of capital-intensive and labour-intensive sectors of the economy. The labour-intensive sector is not attractive to citizens of a given country due to low wages, which is why immigrants are usually employed there. On the other hand, the labour market segmentation theory assumes the division of the market into two segments: primary and secondary. The primary segment is characterised by high earnings, stable employment and good working conditions, as well as opportunities for professional development. In turn, the secondary segment is characterised by low wages, unstable employment, lack of professional development. usually, seasonal workers are employed in this segment, most often migrants. There is a barrier to transition between segments, which causes the perpetuation of social inequalities (Doeringer, Piore, 1971). Kogan (2007) develops this direction of thinking, indicating that people often work not just for income but to uphold their social status, which explains why locals may avoid low-status jobs. In times of labour shortages, raising wages to attract native workers can be costly and disruptive for employers, leading them to look for cheaper, more convenient alternatives.

RESEARCH MATERIAL AND METHODS

This article presents a review of the literature on rural-urban migration in Poland, with particular emphasis on its implications for the labour market. While traditional migration flows have predominantly followed a rural-to-urban trajectory, recent years have seen these patterns become increasingly influenced by the processes of suburbanisation. As a result, the relationships between migration trends and labour market dynamics have become more complex and less easily captured using standard statistical approaches.

To better understand these nuanced interactions, the analysis in this study draws on data concerning both the labour market and internal migration, presented according to the “Delimitation of rural areas” developed by Statistics Poland (GUS, 2024a). This delimitation was introduced to enable a consistent and detailed presentation of statistical survey results concerning rural areas in Poland, while accounting for their internal diversity. It is based on the typology of Functional Urban Areas (FUA), which includes cities and their associated commuting zones. Within this framework, the delimitation of rural municipalities (gminas) – encompassing both rural gminas and the rural areas of urban-rural gminas (identified by TERYT unit types 2 and 5, respectively) – takes into account the influence of large urban centres.

The delimitation distinguishes rural areas using a two-level classification. The first level refers to the location of rural areas in relation to FUAs of cities with at least 150,000 inhabitants or the FUAs of voivodeship capitals. The second level is based on the population density of rural areas. This classification results in four distinct types of rural areas:

1. Agglomeration areas – rural areas located within the FUAs of voivodeship capitals or other cities with populations of at least 150,000:
 - agglomeration high-density areas: areas located within FUAs and exhibiting a population density higher than the national average,
 - agglomeration low-density areas: areas located within FUAs but with a population density equal to or below the national average.
2. Non-agglomeration areas – rural areas located outside the FUAs of voivodeship capitals or cities with more than 150,000 residents:
 - non-agglomeration high-density areas: areas outside FUAs with a population density higher than one-third of the national average,
 - non-agglomeration low-density areas: areas outside FUAs with a population density equal to or below one-third of the national average.

For this study, particular attention is given to non-agglomeration low-density areas. These are considered to be regions where the effects of migration and labour market changes are likely to be most pronounced. By focusing on this specific group, the analysis seeks to provide a more refined understanding of how rural depopulation and labour force restructuring manifest in areas that are most vulnerable to socio-economic marginalisation.

RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This analysis examines the relationship between the average share of registered unemployed individuals per 100 working-age people and the internal migration balance per 1,000 inhabitants across Polish voivodeships, using data averaged over the years 2020-2023 provided by Statistics Poland (Figure 1). The dataset focuses on non-agglomeration, low-density regions, where labour market dynamics and migration decisions are often more sensitive to structural economic conditions. Further research could explore how labour dynamics are shaped in non-agglomeration high-density areas or, conversely, in low-density zones within agglomerations. However, the processes occurring in these contexts may differ significantly and exhibit less clarity due to distinct structural conditions. This calls for a more in-depth analysis supported by more specific and disaggregated data sources.

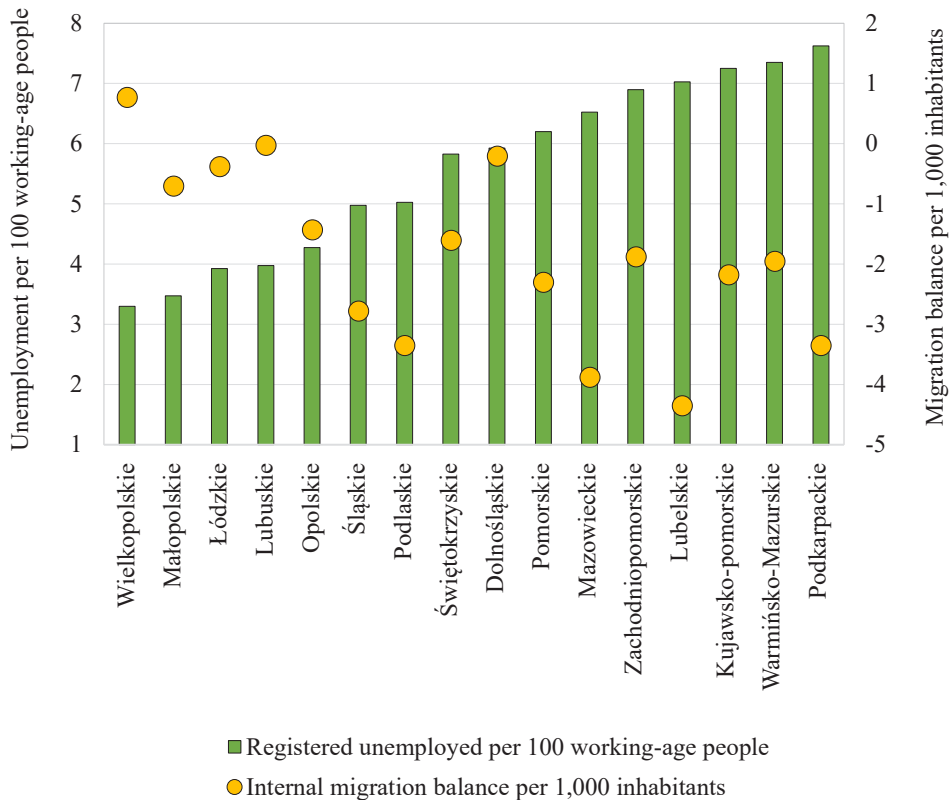


Figure 1. The average share of registered unemployed individuals per 100 working-age people and the internal migration balance per 1,000 inhabitants across Polish regions using data averaged over the years 2020-2023

Source: own elaboration based on (GUS, 2025)

From the perspective of economic migration theory, particularly the neoclassical model, migration is primarily driven by disparities in employment opportunities and income levels. Individuals are expected to move from areas with high unemployment and limited economic prospects (non-agglomeration low-density areas) to regions offering better job availability and higher wages. For instance, in the Lubelskie Voivodeship, where the average share of registered unemployed individuals per 100 working-age people is 7.03% and the migration balance is -4.35 per 1,000 inhabitants, the high unemployment likely contributes to the net outflow of population. Similarly, in the Podlaskie region, with an average share of registered unemployed individuals per 100 working-age people of 5.03 and a migration balance of -3.35, the negative migration balance reflects the economic challenges faced by the residents.

The Pearson correlation coefficient between the proportion of registered unemployed individuals per 100 working-age people and the internal migration balance per 1,000 inhabitants is -0.592. The negative value indicates an inverse relationship – as the unemployment rate increases, the migration balance tends to decrease, suggesting that more people are leaving or fewer are arriving in regions with higher unemployment. A coefficient close to -0.6 reflects a moderate strength of association, not particularly strong, yet noticeable. The Pearson coefficient was chosen because both variables are continuous and measured on an interval scale, which makes them well-suited for this type of correlation analysis. The objective was to assess the strength and direction of a linear relationship between the two variables, which is precisely what Pearson's method quantifies. The data do not exhibit extreme values or evident non-linear patterns, further justifying the use of Pearson's correlation. The scatter plot supports this conclusion, revealing a generally downward trend – although the data points do not align perfectly along a straight line, the overall pattern is sufficiently linear.

To validate the findings, the Spearman rank correlation coefficient was also calculated, yielding a value of -0.571. This also indicates a moderate, negative association, closely mirroring the Pearson result. The similarity between the two coefficients suggests that the relationship is approximately both linear and monotonic, reinforcing the appropriateness of Pearson's method while confirming the robustness of the observed trend.

A 95% confidence interval for the Pearson coefficient was computed, ranging from -0.847 to -0.114, indicating the likely range of the true population correlation. Additionally, the significance level (p-value) associated with the Pearson coefficient is 0.020, implying that there is only a 2% probability that such a strong correlation would occur by chance if no actual relationship existed. Since $p < 0.05$, the correlation is considered statistically significant at the 5% level, providing strong evidence of a genuine negative association between the unemployment rate and internal migration balance.

The observed negative Pearson correlation coefficient (-0.592) between unemployment and migration balance supports this theoretical framework. It suggests that higher

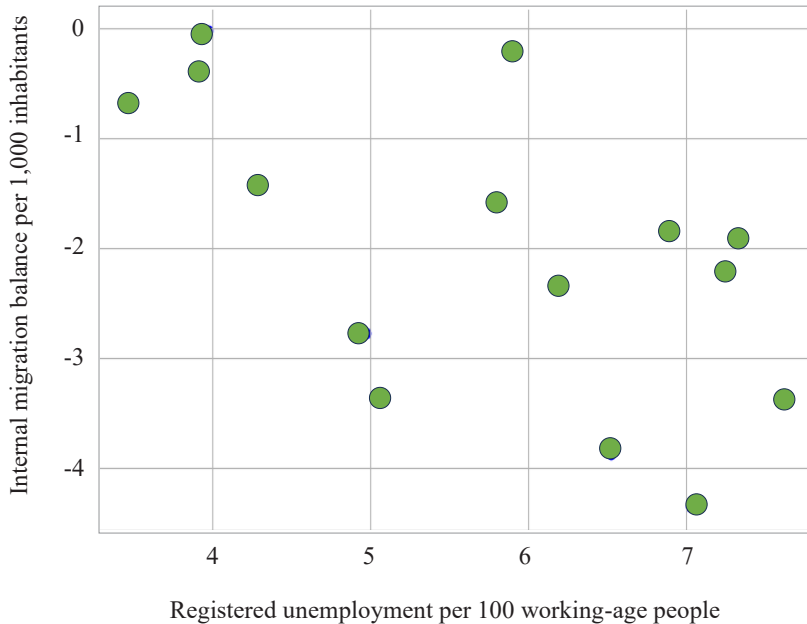


Figure 2. Scatter plot data presented on Figure 1

Source: own elaboration based on (GUS, 2025)

unemployment rates are associated with more negative migration balances – that is, net outflows of population. This pattern aligns with the notion that individuals in economically stagnant regions are incentivised to migrate in search of better opportunities. For example, in the Kujawsko-Pomorskie Voivodeship, the unemployment rate is 7.25%, and the migration balance is -2.18, indicating that the high unemployment rate is a significant factor driving the net outflow of residents. In contrast, the Wielkopolskie Region, with a lower unemployment rate of 3.3% and a positive migration balance of 0.775, demonstrates how better employment prospects can attract and retain population.

In recent years, an unfavourable trend has been observed, namely an increase in the median age of rural residents. According to data from the Central Statistical Office, the average age of a farm user was 47.9 years in 2010, while in 2020 it was 50.7 years. In 2023, 17.2% of rural residents were 65 and older (GUS, 2024b). The 2022 report of CSO indicates that the average age of a farm manager is 53. Over the past 7 years, the demographic old age rate in rural areas has increased by 2.7 percentage points and amounted to 16.7% in 2022 (GUS, 2022).

The findings of this study align with the neoclassical economic theory of migration, which posits that individuals migrate primarily in response to regional disparities in

employment opportunities and income levels, which is noticed for example as the conclusion on the EU residents in rural areas being usually poorer, but they living in a more favourable environment than urban areas (Cyrek, M., Cyrek, P., 2025). The observed negative correlation between unemployment and internal migration balance supports the idea that higher unemployment in a rural region acts as a push factor, encouraging out-migration in search of better economic prospects elsewhere. This is particularly evident in regions such as Lubelskie or Podkarpackie, where elevated unemployment rates coincide with significant net population losses.

However, the relationship between unemployment and migration is not purely mechanical. As highlighted by Stark and Bloom (1985) in the *New Economics of Labour Migration*, migration decisions are often embedded in broader household strategies and influenced by social networks, risk diversification, and access to credit. This perspective suggests that even in regions with high unemployment, migration may be constrained by institutional barriers, social capital, or lack of resources, particularly in non-agglomeration, low-density areas where mobility costs are relatively high.

Furthermore, the macro-level framework proposed by Bernard, Bell, Charles-Edwards and Zhu (2020) emphasises that migration patterns are shaped not only by economic incentives but also by settlement structures, life-course transitions, and historical trajectories of regional development. In this context, the moderate strength of the correlation observed in this study may reflect the complex interplay of economic, demographic, and spatial factors that influence migration behaviour in Poland's peripheral regions.

Fluctuating rural labour resources and external conditions significantly influence rural development (Heffner, 2019). The future of Polish rural areas is therefore facing a major problem of generational replacement. Migration among young people contributes to a decrease in the number of people working on farms, and therefore questions the further development of the agricultural sector. Increasing the professional activity of women is also a challenge in rural areas. In order to counteract the shortage of labour in agriculture, it would be worth starting activities encouraging young farmers to remain on farms and then to take them over. An important aspect is the support for young people on the labour market by granting subsidies, developing start-ups and strengthening the level of education (e.g. CL4Bio Erasmus+, 2025). The development of vocational education and re-industry programs contributes to the development of rural areas. It is also important to develop infrastructure and improve the quality and availability of public services, transport, and access to the Internet. Promoting rural transformation and creating more employment opportunities based on local conditions can attract rural migrants to return and start businesses in the countryside (Ge et al., 2020). In this situation, the design and implementation of rural policy should adopt a more place-based approach that takes into account the specific characteristics, needs, and potentials of individual regions, rather than relying on uniform, one-size-fits-all solutions (Chmieliński, Gospodarowicz, 2018).

CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this analysis underscore the role of internal migration in shaping the socio-economic landscape of rural, low-density regions in Poland. The moderate negative correlation between unemployment and migration balance suggests that out-migration from rural areas is frequently driven by limited employment opportunities. However, this trend is not uniform across the country. Regional differences play a significant role, with some regions characterised by weaker labour markets experiencing more pronounced outflows of working-age populations compared to others, more economically diversified. Moreover, the ongoing emigration from rural areas, when combined with demographic ageing, threatens generational renewal and undermines the long-term resilience and vitality of rural communities, including the sustainability of local services and agricultural systems.

To address these challenges, migration policy must be strategically aligned with education and labour market planning, particularly in rural regions facing demographic decline. In sectors such as agriculture, where labour shortages are increasingly evident, policies should aim to attract individuals with relevant skills or retrain local populations. Strengthening cooperation among employers, local authorities, NGOs, and educational institutions is also essential to improve labour market responsiveness and support place-based employment strategies.

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ZNACZENIE BEZROBOCIA W KSZTAŁTOWANIU MIGRACJI LUDNOŚCI ZE WSI DO MIAST W POLSCE

Słowa kluczowe: migracja wewnętrzna, rynek pracy, bezrobocie, obszary wiejskie,
obszary pozaaglomeracyjne

ABSTRAKT. Celem badań było określenie związku między sytuacją na rynku pracy (bezrobociem) a migracjami wewnętrznymi w Polsce, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem obszarów o niskiej gęstości zaludnienia, niebędących częścią aglomeracji. Wykorzystując dane uśrednione z lat 2020-2023, przeanalizowano, w jaki sposób udział zarejestrowanych bezrobotnych w populacji osób w wieku produkcyjnym wiąże się z saldem migracji wewnętrznych w poszczególnych województwach. Wyniki wskazują na wyraźną odwrotną zależność – regiony o wyższym poziomie bezrobocia częściej doświadczają ujemnego salda migracji. Taki wzorzec jest zgodny z teorią migracji ekonomicznej, zgodnie z którą ludzie przemieszczają się w odpowiedzi na regionalne różnice w dostępności pracy. Wyniki badań wskazują na kontrasty między województwami o utrzymującym się wysokim bezrobociu i odpływie ludności a regionami o silniejszych rynkach pracy i dodatnim saldzie migracji. Dane te podkreślają potrzebę integracji polityki migracyjnej z planowaniem rynku pracy, szczególnie na obszarach wiejskich, które borykają się z problemami demograficznymi. Wskazane jest również prowadzenie dalszych badań nad czasową dynamiką migracji, w tym nad możliwym opóźnieniem reakcji migracyjnych na zmiany warunków ekonomicznych.

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