



Moving from opportunity: Intergenerational mobility of rural–urban return migrants in Sweden, 1890s–1940s

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What happened to all those rural–urban migrants who returned to the countryside during industrialization? We show that they saw massive gains in terms of intergenerational mobility.

Did rural–urban migrants who returned to the countryside during the industrialization period fail to achieve intergenerational mobility? Using a novel dataset on Swedish brothers, we show that return migrants did achieve intergenerational mobility.

Abstract

Using a novel longitudinal dataset, we study the intergenerational mobility of rural–urban migrants who returned to the countryside in due course. By examining pairs of brothers during the entire migration lifecycle – from childhood until age 34 – we estimate the effect of temporarily relocating to an urban area on occupational income over the mature working ages of 35–44 between the 1890s and the 1940s in Sweden. The results show that rural–urban migrants who returned to the countryside were not failures who did not improve their social position, but instead experienced substantial gains compared with their non-migrant brothers. These gains were similar to those of migrants who had permanently settled in urban areas. This pattern is mainly attributed to their capacities to leave farming and enter white-collar positions to a greater extent than non-migrants. The extent of temporary rural–urban migration, combined with the high levels of intergenerational mobility of return migrants in Sweden during the period examined, suggests that rural–urban migration to towns resulted in positive feedback effects for the countryside.

KEYWORDS

cities, intergenerational mobility, migration

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It is widely recognized that particular places within nations offer greater opportunities for people to improve their positions in society when compared with their family backgrounds.¹ In the historical context of industrializing Europe and North America, towns emerged as quintessential centres of such possibilities.² Accordingly, there is consensus in the economic history literature that those who moved from the countryside to urban areas during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – in most industrializing economies – upgraded their occupational statuses relative to their fathers.³ Nevertheless, the prevailing debate, often relying on decennial census data, has typically approached rural–urban migration as a permanent event, thereby overlooking the transient nature that characterizes rural–urban migration at the time. It is, however, well documented in history that many migrants who moved to towns only remained for a few years before returning to the countryside.⁴ For instance, in some Swedish⁵ and German⁶ urban areas during the late nineteenth century, more than half of all internal migrants would depart within 5 years. This leads to a salient question: did migrants return because they failed to improve their positions, as Long suggests was possible,⁷ or did they return with more skills and higher incomes, resulting in positive feedback effects for the countryside?

In this article, we study occupational outcomes of rural-born individuals who migrated to urban areas but eventually returned to the countryside in Sweden from the 1890s to the 1940s. We employ a new nationally representative dataset that covers complete lifetime information on about 650 men, or 325 pairs of brothers, born in Sweden during the late nineteenth century. The data consist of detailed yearly information on the occupation and residency of brothers sampled from the entire country, spanning from childhood to their early 40s. During the period being examined, Sweden underwent significant economic development and structural change, with economic activity shifting towards urban areas. High rates of internal migration to towns were a prominent feature of the time, but as elsewhere in the industrializing world, many rural–urban migrants would subsequently return to rural areas.⁸ The new dataset allows for the tracking of these internal migrants as they grew up, migrated to towns, and returned to their rural origins.

Moreover, data on brothers allow for control of unobservable household-invariant characteristics to address the question of self-selection into migration across households. This is a common approach in the economic history literature.⁹ With this, we can answer the question of whether return migrants failed to improve upon their positions when compared with permanent rural–urban migrants and non-migrants. While the empirical strategy mitigates unobservable self-selection biases that are constant within households, it does not eliminate the possibility that migrant and non-migrant brothers may differ significantly. Although it is not possible to account for unobservable differences between migrant and non-migrant brothers, we take three measures to address observable differences to ensure that the interpretation is robust. First, we control for

¹ Chetty et al., ‘Where is the land of opportunity?’.

² Thernstrom, *The other Bostonians*; Connor and Storper, ‘The changing geography’.

³ Long, ‘Rural-urban migration’; Eriksson, *Dynamic decades*; Ward, ‘Internal migration’; Berger et al., ‘Social mobility’.

⁴ Baines, ‘European labor markets’; Moch, *Moving Europeans*.

⁵ Brändström et al., ‘Two cities’.

⁶ Hochstadt, ‘Migration and industrialization’.

⁷ Long, ‘Rural-urban migration’.

⁸ Norman, *Från Bergslagen*.

⁹ Abramitzky et al., ‘Europe’s tired, poor, huddled masses’; Collins and Wanamaker, ‘Selection and economic gains’; Ward, ‘Internal migration’.



birth order and year of birth. This accounts for the possible family strategy of sending younger sons to urban areas and keeping the eldest son at home to inherit the family business. Additionally, controlling for birth year adjusts for generational effects, in which younger cohorts may have experienced better labour market outcomes as the economy modernized. Second, in an alternative specification we include a proxy for educational attainment to control for potential disparities in schooling between migrant and non-migrant brothers. Third, to rule out the concern that the brother with the 'best' occupation relocated, we examine the occupational outcomes of brothers before any of them relocated to an urban area.

We find that rural–urban migrants who returned to the countryside did not experience occupational setbacks: instead, they achieved substantial gains when compared with their non-migrant brothers, similar to those of migrants who permanently settled in towns. To measure occupational outcomes, we leverage income scores for each occupation represented in the database. When employing an across-households measure – that is, differences in occupational outcomes using simple ordinary least squares (OLS) – return migrants increased their occupational income by 21 per cent when compared with the counterfactual event of not moving. By exploiting within-household variation – noted as differences in occupational outcomes between brothers – we find that return migrants experienced a 20 per cent increase in occupational income compared with what they would have enjoyed had they chosen to remain in the countryside. Consequently, while some of the differences in occupational income can be attributed to positive self-selection into temporary rural–urban migration, the substantial share is explained by the effect on the occupational status of living in an urban environment. The premium is similar, albeit smaller, to permanent rural–urban migrants, who experienced a 27 per cent increase in the within-household estimation.

Here, we address the central question of whether the observed upward mobility simply reflects a migration premium. In the period under investigation, migration was not solely directed towards towns, as a large portion of migrants moved to other rural areas. It could be suggested that the prospects of upward mobility played a central role in individual-level migration decisions, whether directed towards urban or rural areas. However, while our results show that rural long-distance migrants who permanently settled at the destination experienced gains, rural return migrants did not. Furthermore, by investigating the outcomes of brothers born in urban areas, we find that urban–rural migrants did not improve their position compared with their staying brothers. This suggests that, while people could improve their positions by moving to distant rural destinations, intergenerational mobility through circular migration was linked to rural–urban migration.

We further explore the potential mechanisms that explain the high mobility rates of rural–urban migrants by investigating their occupational outcomes relative to their brothers in greater detail. We divide all occupations into four broad categories: unskilled, farmer, skilled, and white collar. Then, we proceed to regress the particular occupational outcomes of all individuals in the dataset in the migrant category while accounting for within-household variation and individual-level controls in four separate regressions. Both permanent and return rural–urban migrants were more likely to have a white-collar occupation compared with their non-migrant brothers. Moreover, migrants were less likely to be farmers. However, we find no differences between migrants and non-migrants in terms of having either a skilled or unskilled occupation. These results suggest that the disparities in intergenerational mobility between brothers were primarily driven by the movement out of farming and the attainment of white-collar occupations in urban areas.

Our results are relevant to four strands of literature. Primarily, we contribute to the debate in economic history concerning the interrelationship between internal migration and social



mobility, emphasizing an underexplored – yet important – dimension of migration: return migration. In older literature dealing with this topic, most researchers relied on regional samples and descriptive methods.¹⁰ In recent years, however, research in this domain has been dominated by the use of linked full-count census data and modern econometric techniques. In his seminal study, Long notably argues that rural–urban migrants in Victorian England experienced substantial gains from leaving the countryside.¹¹ This observation also applies to other countries, such as the United States, Sweden, and Finland.¹² However, as is noted by Long, linked census data, while suitable for examining permanent migration decisions, fails to capture non-permanent moves. Circular rural–urban migration was, nevertheless, a key feature of the urbanizing world.¹³ Thus, the question of whether return migrants could also gain from having lived in cities remains unanswered.

Secondly, we contribute to the literature on migration and brain drain. It is widely believed that migration results in a net loss for the sending communities by depleting them of their most talented individuals, thus impeding economic development.¹⁴ However, other researchers have stressed that outmigrants can have a positive impact on their origin communities through return migration and remittances.¹⁵ Most of this research has notably been concerned with international migration. Accordingly, in the economic history literature, much of this research has tended to focus on the case of U.S. return migrants during the Age of Mass Migration. For instance, Ejermeo et al. examine the case of Swedish return migrants from the United States in the nineteenth century and find that they experienced significant wealth gains. However, the return migrants did not experience upward intergenerational occupational mobility, nor did they outperform their non-emigrant brothers regarding occupational income. Similarly, Abramitzky et al. show that returnees from the United States to Norway in the same period were negatively selected from the migrant pool but outperformed non-migrants.¹⁶ Lastly, Ward shows that self-selection patterns of emigrants from the United States during the early twentieth century varied by source country and over time.¹⁷ The historical case of rural–urban return migration has, however, been neglected in this literature. Consequently, we know little about the occupational outcomes of this large group of migrants. Our results show that, in contrast to international return migrants during the same period, return migrants from urban areas improved their outcomes in terms of occupational income compared with their non-migrant brothers.

Third, we speak to the growing literature examining intergenerational mobility in different countries and across time.¹⁸ Traditionally, the New World has stood out as a place with much higher rates of intergenerational mobility than the Old World, which, at least in the case of the

¹⁰ Thernstrom, *The other Bostonians*; Norman, *Från Bergslagen*; Åkerman, 'Swedish migration'; Pooley and Turnbull, *Migration and mobility*.

¹¹ Long, 'Rural-urban migration'.

¹² Long and Ferrie, 'Intergenerational occupational mobility'; Eriksson, *Dynamic decades*; Sarvimäki et al., 'Habit formation'.

¹³ Baines, 'European labor markets'.

¹⁴ Todaro and Smith, *Economic development*.

¹⁵ Santos and Postel-Vinay, 'Migration'; Rapoport and Docquier, 'The economics of migrants' remittances'.

¹⁶ Abramitzky et al., 'To the new world'.

¹⁷ Ward, 'Birds of passage'.

¹⁸ Clark, *The son also rises*; Modalsli, 'Intergenerational mobility'; Song et al., 'Long-term decline'; Antonie et al., 'Intergenerational mobility'.



United States, has been attributed to high rates of internal migration.¹⁹ Recent research, however, has shown examples of countries from the Old World where intergenerational mobility was high. For example, [Berger et al.](#) argue that late nineteenth-century Sweden had intergenerational occupational mobility rates equal to those of New World countries, which can be attributed to high rates of internal migration and economic growth.²⁰ Yet, we know little about the relationship between different forms of migration and intergenerational mobility at the individual level.

Finally, we make an empirical contribution to the debate on measurement error in studies of historical social mobility. In studies on intergenerational mobility in contemporary settings – where researchers have access to income data – it is widely accepted that mobility should be estimated using data on permanent incomes as income fluctuates.²¹ Using snapshot observations has, however, been the default method in historical studies dealing with intergenerational occupational mobility, especially historical studies dealing with migration and intergenerational mobility.²² Yet, occupations may vary from year to year. Recently, [Ward](#) has shown that fathers' occupations alter substantially between historical censuses in the United States. When averaging the observations across three census years, the father–son relationship in occupational status increases by 23–30 per cent.²³ In this spirit, the dataset utilized in this article allows us to observe the occupational income of the same individual for multiple sequential years. On average, people had more than two occupations, and more than 10 per cent had at least four occupations between the ages of 15 and 44. Furthermore, about 15 per cent of all fathers had at least two different occupations when the individuals were growing up. Thus, by being able to observe occupational incomes for several years for both fathers and sons, we mitigate the impact of career mobility and observe a more accurate status for each individual.

The rest of this article is organized as follows. First, we provide the historical background on inequality and intergenerational mobility in Sweden during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and the characteristics of urbanization and rural–urban migration during that same period. Second, we present the data used in the article. Third, we explain the regression framework. We then proceed to present and analyse the results, as well as run several sensitivity tests. Finally, we give conclusions.

I | HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Sweden, at the turn of the twentieth century, exhibited relatively high inequality levels in income, wealth, and voting.²⁴ Despite this, there are conflicting interpretations regarding the extent of intergenerational mobility – indicative of the degree of equality of opportunity – in Sweden during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For instance, [Erikson and Goldthorpe](#) underscore the role of the postwar welfare policies in fostering the high rates of intergenerational

¹⁹ [Perez](#), 'Intergenerational occupational mobility'; [Long and Ferrie](#), 'Intergenerational occupational mobility'.

²⁰ [Berger et al.](#), 'Social mobility'.

²¹ [Mazumder](#), 'Fortunate sons'; [Mello et al.](#), 'A lifecycle estimator'.

²² [Long](#), 'Rural-urban migration'; [Eriksson](#), *Dynamic decades*; [Modalsli](#), 'Intergenerational mobility'; [Perez](#), 'Intergenerational occupational mobility'; [Ward](#), 'Internal migration'.

²³ [Ward](#), 'Intergenerational mobility'.

²⁴ [Roine and Waldenström](#), 'The evolution of top incomes'; [Bengtsson et al.](#), 'Wealth inequality'; [Bengtsson](#) 'The Swedish Sonderweg'.



mobility that characterize Sweden today.²⁵ Conversely, [Lindahl et al.](#) and [Clark](#) argue that, when considering multi-generational intergenerational mobility, the persistence in socio-economic status across generations is strong in Sweden, both presently and historically.²⁶ Moreover, [Berger et al.](#) provide evidence suggesting that Sweden between 1880 and 1910 – predating the welfare state expansion by several decades – had higher levels of intergenerational occupational mobility than Great Britain and Norway and was more similar to New World countries, such as the United States and Argentina. The authors show that more than half of Swedish sons ended up in different occupational categories than their fathers. They attribute this pattern to high levels of economic growth and internal migration that characterized Sweden in that era.²⁷ The interpretation that internal migration fostered intergenerational mobility is corroborated by a range of historical works on Sweden.²⁸ Notably, [Åkerman](#) finds that urban-born internal migrants from working-class backgrounds were more than twice as likely to transition into white-collar occupations than those who remained in their town of birth in the late nineteenth century.²⁹

Industrialization in Sweden had its significant onset during the 1870s, a decade marked as the true industrial take-off period. While a considerable portion of Sweden's industrialization was a rural phenomenon, especially in the early period, the locus of economic activity began to shift towards towns in the early twentieth century. Population statistics show this transition: the urban share of the population doubled between 1860 and 1900.³⁰ As opportunities outside of agriculture emerged, an increasing number of rural residents sought their fortunes in towns. Notably, a surge in long-distance migration occurred in the industrialization period, which can be attributed to the improvements in passenger travel during the second half of the nineteenth century.³¹ Furthermore, institutional changes played a pivotal role in enhancing migration and occupational mobility. Most significantly, free-trade reforms in the 1840s and 1860s, along with the removal of the internal passport system, which made internal migration unrestricted for those with the means to support themselves, contributed to these developments.³²

In the early twentieth century, most of Sweden's approximately 90 urban areas had origins dating back to the medieval era, established as centres for trade and craftsmanship. Other urban areas were founded during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as Sweden transitioned into a European great power. However, during the industrialization phase, a significant majority – three-quarters – of the urban population lived in towns established in the Middle Ages.³³ Many of these urban areas were small, defined as urban by city rights rather than by the number of residents or population density. Consequently, in 1910, only about half of Sweden's urban areas had populations exceeding 5000 residents. Yet, despite the prevalence of smaller urban areas, the largest cities such as Stockholm and Gothenburg had substantial populations, with 350 000 and 170 000 residents in 1910, respectively.³⁴

²⁵ [Erikson and Goldthorpe](#), *The constant flux*.

²⁶ [Lindahl et al.](#), 'Long-term intergenerational persistence'; [Clark](#), *The son also rises*.

²⁷ [Berger et al.](#), 'Social mobility'.

²⁸ [Norman](#), *Från Bergslagen*; [Eriksson and Rogers](#) *Rural labor*.

²⁹ [Åkerman](#), 'Swedish migration'.

³⁰ [Statistics Sweden](#), *Befolkningsutvecklingen*.

³¹ [Dribe](#), *Liv och rörelse*; [Westlund](#), 'State and market forces'.

³² [Lundh](#), *Spelets regler*.

³³ [Nilsson](#), *Den urbana transitionen*.

³⁴ [Nilsson](#), *Historisk tätortsstatistik*.



In pre-industrial society, it is commonly emphasized that internal migration follows a circular pattern. The bulk of all migrants were farm workers, often farm servants, who were employed on yearly contracts, and accordingly, frequently changed employers located in different parishes.³⁵ This form of circular migration is usually contrasted with long-distance and urban migration during industrialization, which is assumed to have been more permanent. However, it is important to note that a substantial share of migrants moving from the countryside to towns did not become permanent urban residents. Instead, they spent a limited time in urban areas, ranging from one to a few years, before returning to their rural origins.³⁶

Although Sweden's industrialization had a more rural character than countries such as the United Kingdom and Germany, the pattern of transient rural–urban migration was a prominent feature in those countries to a similar extent as Sweden. Most notably, in the context of the United Kingdom, but with broader relevance for the entire European continent, [Baines](#) argues that extreme transience was the most consistent characteristic of all forms of internal migration in agrarian society, as well as throughout the industrialization period. Although the magnitude of circular movements between the countryside and towns was substantial, quite little is known about the economic impact of this form of migration.³⁷

[Norman](#) contributes with some empirical support that underscores the prominence of transient migration in Sweden during industrialization. About 70 per cent of migrants arriving in the town of Örebro from the surrounding countryside, along with 80 per cent of long-distance migrants, would move on to another destination around the turn of the twentieth century.³⁸ Emphasizing cultural factors, [Ahlberg](#) argues that rural–urban return migrants from Stockholm returned to the countryside because they failed to assimilate into the urban environment.³⁹ Other scholars have underscored the life-cycle patterns in temporary rural–urban migration. However, this was mainly the case for young women who ventured to towns in pursuit of opportunities in the expanding domestic service sector.⁴⁰ Another related point is integrated rural and urban labour markets: workers were able to relocate between urban and rural areas in response to wage differences. [Lundh and Prado](#) argue that the industrial and agrarian labour markets in Sweden were fairly integrated through the 1880s until the First World War.⁴¹ This suggests that workers were quick to respond to wage differences between these sectors.

Another related aspect of non-permanent migration is the phenomenon of seasonal, temporary migration. This will not be examined here. This form of migration, typically involving railroad workers, traders, and temporary sawmill workers, likely held significant importance for the economy but is rarely documented adequately in historical sources. It should be distinguished from return migration, as seasonal migrants typically had an understanding before migrating that they would not remain at their destinations, whereas this was less certain for return migrants. This aspect of migration is, however, challenging to capture in any historical work.

³⁵ [Dribe and Lundh](#), 'People on the move'.

³⁶ [Brändström et al.](#), 'Two cities'; [Vikström](#), *Gendered routes*.

³⁷ [Baines](#), 'European labor markets'.

³⁸ [Norman](#), *Från Bergslagen*.

³⁹ [Ahlberg](#), *Stockholms befolkningsutveckling*.

⁴⁰ [Vikström](#), *Gendered routes*.

⁴¹ [Lundh and Prado](#), 'Markets and politics'.



II | DATA AND EMPIRICAL STRATEGY

To analyse the outcomes in terms of the intergenerational mobility of temporary rural–urban migrants, we need access to longitudinal data with full migration and occupational histories of sons and observations of their fathers when the sons were maturing. Moreover, we need a measure of economic status that matches the occupations. This is achieved by employing two sets of data: a longitudinal individual-level database and occupational income scores.

In this article, we utilize a longitudinal individual-level dataset of men that has been compiled using information from church records. The dataset is drawn from a larger database comprising about 1500 Swedish men and women, born in the second half of the nineteenth century. It is constructed from a representative sample drawn randomly from censuses and birth registers. The dataset is distinguished from other information based on census data or regional populations by its unique feature of continuously tracking individuals within Sweden throughout their lives in church records, regardless of their place of residence. In Sweden during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, each individual was mandated to register with the local clergy, who recorded their full name, birth date, occupational title, and household position. Whenever someone moved, they had to report to the clergy at the parish of origin and at the destination parish, leaving detailed information in the church book on the parish of destination and date of departure. As the data have been collected by hand, individuals have been thoroughly tracked between church records even when relocating and have not been lost due to, for example, variations in the spelling of names or birth dates. Even in cases in which people changed their surnames, it was fully possible to correctly identify that individual in a church record as the clergy would cross over the old name and enter the new surname.

In this article, we confine our analysis to men born in rural areas in the baseline model. This is for two reasons: first, women's occupations during this period are inadequately documented in church records, limiting the possibility to observe their occupational statuses. Therefore, the female share of the original database had not been expanded to include a sibling. Second, as we study rural–urban migration, solely including men born in the countryside aligns with the research objective of studying the effect of rural–urban migration on intergenerational mobility. However, as we have information on urban-born men, we include that data in a separate model examining the returns to urban–rural migration.

The dataset includes information on household members of the subjects being studied. Accordingly, it is possible to observe the occupations of their fathers, which is necessary for intergenerational mobility research. In this case, we have chosen to compare the occupational status of the father when the son was growing up – defined as the average occupational status over the first 14 years observed – to the son's average occupational status in adulthood.

We leverage an extended version of the larger database that includes all sampled men who lived in Sweden until at least the age of 35. Each individual has been matched to his randomly selected brother, who was tracked to the same extent as those in the original sample. The brother was selected by reading a dataset comprised of every brother that had resided with the individual from the main database. Subsequently, one brother was chosen randomly by employing the sample function in *R*. By examining the life of that brother in the church records, we could determine whether he lived and remained in Sweden until at least the age of 35. If those criteria were met, we proceeded to collect information on the residency and occupation of that person to the same extent as his brother from the main database. In cases in which the brother had died or emigrated before the age of 35, another brother was selected using the same previous sampling technique. From the original rural dataset comprising 652 rural-born men, 105 individuals emigrated before



the age of 35, and are, accordingly, excluded from the analysis. A total of 56 people passed away before that age, and 31 people disappeared from the church records unregistered,⁴² adding to the attrition. An additional 114 people lived in Sweden until at least the age of 35, however, they did not have a brother who met the same age criteria. Finally, 23 people did not have occupational titles, excluding them from the regressions. This leaves us with an analytical sample of 646 people, or 323 pairs of brothers.

The final sample size is markedly smaller than studies of intergenerational mobility or the returns to migration in history utilize digitized census records, which often leverage large datasets comprising thousands⁴³ to millions⁴⁴ of individual-level observations. However, the scale of the final sample is comparable with several studies addressing novel or less understood domains of history. For instance, [Klein](#) utilizes a dataset of 1300 families to study the role of children's education in rural–urban migration decisions in 1900 Pilsen.⁴⁵ Similarly, [Dribe et al.](#) explore the association between industrialization and social mobility in the long run, leveraging a dataset ranging from 350 to about 700 people for periods in the nineteenth century, expanding their sample size for the twentieth century.⁴⁶ [Lindahl et al.](#) investigate the multigenerational persistence of educational attainment by employing a sample of about 900 family dynasties.⁴⁷ This study aligns with such precedents, utilizing a longitudinal sample capable of exploring a poorly understood aspect of internal migration. As [Long](#) acknowledges, longitudinal data are indispensable for understanding the outcomes of return migrants.⁴⁸ Yet, the comprehensive collection of such data by hand, which to our knowledge is currently the only feasible method when using continuously updated church records, inherently limits the sample size.

Researchers analysing intergenerational mobility often aim to examine lifetime incomes to mitigate effects related to lifecycle factors. Moreover, recent literature has highlighted the fact that using a single observation of a father's and sons' occupations poses a great risk that results in measurement error.⁴⁹ In the historical literature, where longitudinal data often is unavailable, researchers typically have to rely on occupational information for individuals when they have reached a certain age as a proxy for lifetime income. However, our dataset allows us to overcome the potential errors by examining occupational income for multiple years in each individual's life as the dataset contains, on average, 28 observations per father and 42 observations per son.

To estimate the lifetime or mature occupational status, we calculate the median income score from observations collected from the ages of 35–44. This age bracket has been selected for two reasons. First, the probability of engaging in rural–urban migration was very low during this part of the life cycle, making it an appropriate bracket to use for studying the effects of migration on occupational status (see [figure A1](#) in the appendix). Second, occupational status tends to remain more stable from the age of 35 onwards (see [figure A3](#) in the appendix). Additionally, this range has been used as a cut-off age in previous research on intergenerational mobility.⁵⁰

⁴² It is likely that these people also emigrated, as 1–20 per cent of Swedish net emigration rates in the late nineteenth century was unrecorded ([Johansson](#), 'Registrering av flyttare').

⁴³ [Long and Ferrie](#), 'Intergenerational occupational mobility'.

⁴⁴ [Tan](#), 'A different land of opportunity'.

⁴⁵ [Klein](#), 'Did children's education matter?'.

⁴⁶ [Dribe et al.](#), 'Did social mobility increase'.

⁴⁷ [Lindahl et al.](#), 'Long-term intergenerational persistence'.

⁴⁸ [Long](#), 'Rural-urban migration'.

⁴⁹ [Ward](#), 'Intergenerational mobility'.

⁵⁰ See [Ward](#), 'Internal migration'.



Moreover, and most importantly, the dataset offers an opportunity to study return migration accurately. Previous research has relied on single observations in linked census data to define migration as either permanent or temporary. However, this method is unreliable as more than half of all rural–urban migration takes place between the ages of 20 and 29 (see [figure A1](#) in the appendix). Furthermore, the median duration of residency for a temporary migrant in an urban area was only 6 years.⁵¹ Consequently, the likelihood of correctly observing a representative share of temporary rural–urban migrants at their place of origin, temporary place of destination, and yet another location in a 10-year span is quite small. Transient migration can only be studied reliably through the use of longitudinal data that correctly specifies the migrants' relative location for every year.

We address the question of transient migration by examining individual-level rural–urban migration during the entire course of life from the age of 15 up to the age of 34. We define rural–urban migration as migration to urban parishes, using the contemporary official classification. Moreover, we exclude non-territorial army or navy parishes. This distinction is necessary, as military conscripts were not a part of the urban labour market. For those who originated in rural areas and subsequently relocated to towns, but later returned to the countryside, we classify them as return rural–urban migrants. Those who originated in rural areas and relocated permanently to towns are classified as permanent rural–urban migrants. Finally, individuals who never engaged in rural–urban migration are classified as non-migrants.

An important limitation when studying intergenerational mobility in history is that it is typically not possible to observe actual incomes as a measure of status. Consequently, researchers have to rely on alternative measures of social status, usually by using occupation as a proxy. Occupational status can then be imputed either by skill level, education, average income, or by other measures. In this article, we employ the closest approximation to income, namely occupational income or income scores. These have been generated by collecting data on incomes across various occupations for a specific year, followed by calculating the average income for each occupation. Subsequently, individuals are assigned incomes on the basis of their occupational titles. This method has become the standard approach in the historical literature when information on actual income is absent from the sources.⁵²

We specifically utilize income scores from the 1930 Swedish population census. These income scores have been calculated as the median income for each occupation in the census together with an assigned Historical International Standard Classification of Occupations (HISCO) code.⁵³ Subsequently, the average income of each occupation has been linked to each HISCO-coded occupational title in the analytical dataset.⁵⁴ These income scores encompass each occupation included in the dataset used here and sufficiently reflect the occupational status of each occupation. In the occupational income distribution, unskilled occupations such as farmhands and domestic servants are positioned at the lower end. Medium-skilled occupations, such as carpenters and metal workers, are found in the middle range. Finally, positioned at the upper end of the distribution are high-skilled professions, including doctors and lawyers. Consequently, occupational income scores efficiently capture incomes as well as occupational skills and status.

⁵¹ This figure is calculated using data on rural–urban migrants from the longitudinal dataset.

⁵² See, for example, [Abramitzky](#) 'Europe's tired, poor, huddled masses'.

⁵³ [van Leeuwen et al.](#), *HISCO*.

⁵⁴ The occupations have been HISCO coded using the [SwedPop](#), 'HISCO codes'.

**TABLE 1** Descriptive statistics of the sample of rural-born men.

	Share (%)	ln (1 + occupational income)	Fathers' ln (1 + occupational income)
Non-migrants	77.9	7.19	7.03
Urban migrants	15.2	7.39	7.11
Urban return migrants	7.0	7.34	6.90
No. obs.	646	646	628

Source: The HISP database.

Additionally, we leverage occupational income scores from Bengtsson and Molinder to test whether the results are similar when using alternative measures.⁵⁵ These occupational income scores are compiled from Swedish tax records from 1900. Moreover, we employ the HISCLASS scheme. This is a broader categorization of occupational titles that classify them into 12 class categories on the basis of several factors. This is done to test the strength of our results further. Finally, to compare the estimates from the regressions with previous research on the link between internal migration and intergenerational mobility in Sweden's history, we also utilize the HISCAM stratification scale.⁵⁶

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics on the mean log occupational incomes of the two categories of migrants and non-migrants, as well as the size of their respective share within the dataset. These observations shed light upon the significance of transient rural–urban migration, as well as the potential benefits related to rural–urban migration. Although the majority of individuals never engaged in rural–urban migration, a significant portion did. At some point, more than one in five relocated from the countryside to an urban area. Moreover, about one-third of these migrants eventually returned to the countryside. Notably, all migrants had substantially higher occupational incomes than non-migrants, even though the differences between their fathers' occupational incomes were small.

The sample size, notably, is slightly reduced when taking the fathers' occupational incomes into account. The reason for this is three-fold. First, not all individuals had a father present in their households growing up. Second, not all fathers could be observed during the age span of interest. Third, not all fathers had occupational titles that could be coded into HISCO. However, the results remain the same whether using the full sample or solely the sample in which the occupational titles of fathers have been successfully coded. In the appendix table A8, the results from regressions using this restricted dataset are presented.

Almost one-fourth migrated to urban areas at one point. However, it is difficult to assess the exact reasons behind the migration decisions. It could be to accumulate capital to invest in a countryside business, human capital attainment, or in the case of return migrants, find temporary employment in the urban sector and then return to agricultural work when forming a family. Yet, it is possible to draw some tentative conclusions on the basis of the information in the database. Education appears not to have been an important motivation behind the move, as merely 1 in 20 of all rural–urban migrants became either a student or an apprentice after relocating. Marital changes post-moving occurred, but marriage was not likely the main motivation in migration decisions. While more than half of all migrants married after relocating, only one in six married

⁵⁵ Bengtsson and Molinder, 'Incomes and income inequality'.

⁵⁶ Lambert et al., 'The construction of HISCAM'.



immediately upon arrival to the urban setting. Occupational changes are more clearly linked to migration, as over half of the migrants took up a new occupation upon arriving in the urban setting. Yet, for return migrants, the pattern is slightly different. Merely one in three transitioned into a new occupation when returning. Moreover, only 10 per cent of the returnees transitioned into an occupation with a lower average income compared with the occupation that they had in urban areas. Thus, return migrants tended to keep their urban occupations when relocating to the countryside.

An important issue to address is whether there are notable differences between permanent migrants and returnees. Appendix table A10 presents an analysis exploring potential disparities pertaining to family background and occupational outcomes. In terms of their initial occupational outcomes in urban areas, both migrant categories performed similarly with no statistically significant differences in occupational income. Thus, return migrants did not constitute a negatively selected group in terms of urban labour market performance. Moreover, sons of farmers – who could be expected to display a greater propensity to return home to inherit agricultural land – were not more likely to return to the countryside than others. Furthermore, there is no significant association between the interaction of being the son of a farmer with one's birth order. This corroborates with the descriptive statistics showing that return migrants typically remained in the same occupation once having relocated back to the countryside. However, one notable distinction remains: return migrants tended to come from slightly less affluent family backgrounds. Specifically, a one-log increase in the occupational income of one's father decreased the probability of returning to the countryside by 10 percentage points.

First, we estimate the occupational income of each father, βy_{fi}^* , by calculating his median occupational income over the first 14 years when he was first observed. Following previous works on intergenerational mobility, this corresponds to the permanent family status of the individuals in the dataset.⁵⁷ Second, we estimate the mature occupational status of each son, y_{si}^* , by calculating his median occupational income score between the ages of 35 and 44. This is when they reached a mature point in their careers: after occupational mobility and migration rates had peaked.⁵⁸ First, measuring occupational income over several years makes the results more robust to intragenerational mobility. Second, as argued by Norman (1974), the clergy may not have always updated occupational titles in the exact year that the transition took place, thereby inducing a lag in church records.⁵⁹

The regression model in intergenerational mobility research is written as

$$y_{(s,i)}^* = \beta y_{(f,i)}^* + \varepsilon_i$$

where $y_{s,i}^*$ is the log lifetime occupational income of the son in family i , $y_{f,i}^*$ is the log lifetime occupational income of the son's father, ε_i is an error term, and β denotes the statistical relationship between the occupational status of two generations. This is typically referred to as the intergenerational income elasticity: the larger the coefficient, the stronger the persistence in occupational status between two generations.

⁵⁷ Chetty et al., 'Where is the land of opportunity?'

⁵⁸ See the appendix figures A1 and A2.

⁵⁹ Norman, *Från Bergslagen*.



III | REGRESSION FRAMEWORK

We now shift the focus to the regression formulas utilized in the analysis. The initial regression that we specify is the same intergenerational income elasticity regression as above. However, we also include two categorical variables capturing different forms of rural–urban migration

$$y_{ih} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 y_{fih} + \beta_2 \text{Urban migrant}_{ih} + \beta_3 \text{Urban return migrant}_{ih} + \gamma' X_{ih} + \varepsilon_{ih} \quad (1)$$

where y_{ih} is the log (1 + median occupational income) of individual i from household h between the ages of 35 and 44. The median occupational income score then serves as a proxy for mature occupational status. Similarly, $\beta_1 y_{fih}$ is the log (1 + median occupational income) of the father of individual i from household h when the father was between the ages 35 and 44. $\beta_2 \text{Urban migrant}_{ih}$ indicates whether the individual i from household h by the age of 34, had migrated and permanently settled in an urban area. $\beta_3 \text{Urban return migrant}_{ih}$ states whether or not individual i from household h was a rural–urban return migrant by the age of 34. $\gamma' X_{ih}$ is a vector of control at the individual level, controlling for birth order and birth year. This is because these variables could influence occupational outcomes.

Following previous literature, we also estimate the association between migration and intergenerational mobility using variation within households, and as a result, control for unobservable effects that are constant within the household.⁶⁰ The regression is specified as

$$y_{ih} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Urban migrant}_{ih} + \beta_2 \text{Urban return migrant}_{ih} + \gamma' X_{ih} + v_h + \varepsilon_{ih} \quad (2)$$

where v_h is a household fixed effects variable that absorbs the father's lifetime occupational income, since the father's lifetime occupational income is the same within households. Assuming that the choice to migrate from the countryside to an urban area is random among members of the same household, this specification removed selection bias.

Finally, previous researchers have shown that the intergenerational income elasticity in studies of historical episodes is susceptible to different proxies for income.⁶¹ Moreover, there might be some worry that the selected point in the lifecycle when income status is being observed can heavily influence the results. For instance, a farmer's son may not have had the opportunity to inherit the family farm until the father died or retired, reaching the height of their careers later in life than other groups. We address these potential issues by running several robustness checks that use alternative proxies for income, different age brackets to measure lifetime income, and different times in the lifecycle for the migration decision.

IV | RESULTS

The impact of rural–urban migration on intergenerational mobility is summarized in table 2. The baseline unconditional across-households estimate of the gains from rural–urban migration (see column 1) suggests that relocating permanently to an urban area increased occupational income by about 21 per cent. The impact of migration on intergenerational mobility was similar

⁶⁰ Abramitzky et al., 'Europe's tired, poor, huddled masses'; Ward, 'Internal migration'.

⁶¹ Feigenbaum, 'Multiple measures'; Ward, 'Intergenerational mobility'.

**TABLE 2** The effect of migration on occupational income.

	Dependent variable: $\ln(1 + \text{occupational income})$			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Migrant				
Urban migrant	0.19*** (0.053)	0.19*** (0.052)	0.25*** (0.071)	0.24*** (0.060)
Urban return migrant	0.19*** (0.076)	0.18** (0.083)	0.16** (0.066)	0.18*** (0.066)
Within-household fixed effects	No	No	Yes	Yes
Birth year and birth order controls	No	Yes	No	Yes
No. obs.	628	628	646	646
Adjusted R^2	0.072	0.1	0.501	0.498

Baseline results.

Notes: Robust standard errors within parentheses are clustered at households.

*** $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.05$; * $p < 0.1$.

Source: The HISP database.

for return migrants, about 21 per cent, which suggests that the impact of temporarily migrating to an urban area had an equally large effect on intergenerational mobility compared with permanent relocation. By introducing the control variables for birth order and birth year the estimates change marginally, albeit with permanent urban migrants experiencing slightly larger gains than return migrants. However, in these estimations, we do not account for potential self-selection into migration that varies between individuals from different households. To address this issue, we present the results from the household fixed-effects regressions in columns 3 and 4. Using these specifications, the within-household gains increase to 27 per cent for permanent rural–urban migrants and decrease slightly to 20 per cent for return migrants in the model with controls, which implies that self-selection on unobservable factors explains little of the gains made by migrants. Similar to the across-households models, either when including or excluding control variables, the coefficients are highly similar.

Although the within-household specification removes selection between households, there might be some concern that the observed gains reflect pre-migration trends in which people with certain high-paying occupations, obtained in the countryside before migrating, are more likely to move to places of greater opportunity, that is, towns. For instance, artisans might have clustered in urban areas due to the higher returns to skill, whereas unskilled labourers were hesitant to transition from the rural to the urban sector. To test for pre-migration trends, we run a regression in which we compare brothers when they were the same age, but before any of them had migrated to a town. The results are presented in appendix table A7. Brothers, strikingly, did not display statistically significant differences in occupational income at the same age before one of them moved.

As was described in the historical background, Swedish urban areas varied substantially in size during the examined period, with the smallest comprising a few hundred people. While agglomeration economies would predict that living and working in large cities would have had a greater impact on intergenerational mobility compared with small towns on the basis of previous studies on Sweden during the period being examined, we do not expect that migrants in large cities were more socially mobile than migrants moving to smaller towns. For instance, Norman finds no evidence for higher rates of intergenerational mobility of people from a Swedish town

**TABLE 3** The effect of migration on occupational income using 1900 occupational income.

	Dependent variable: ln (1 + occupational income)			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Migrant				
Urban migrant	0.21*** (0.048)	0.21*** (0.05)	0.24*** (0.058)	0.22*** (0.055)
Urban return migrant	0.22*** (0.073)	0.21*** (0.078)	0.13** (0.063)	0.16** (0.061)
Within-household fixed effects	No	No	Yes	Yes
Birth year and birth order controls	No	Yes	No	Yes
No. obs.	614	614	632	632
Adjusted R ²	0.09	0.1	0.58	0.565

Notes: Robust standard errors within parentheses are clustered at households.

*** $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.05$; * $p < 0.1$.

Source: The HISP database.

who moved to Stockholm during the late nineteenth century.⁶² Moreover, in the context of the early twentieth-century United States, Ward finds that the effects of rural–urban migration did not vary substantially by the size of the urban destination. Nevertheless, we perform an alternative regression solely examining the impact of moving to one of the largest cities – Stockholm or Gothenburg – while excluding all observations for the smaller towns. The results from this exercise are presented in appendix table A1. The magnitude of the estimates increased in these models, with permanent migrants increasing their occupational income by 26 per cent compared with their non-migrant brothers and return migrants increasing their occupational income by 39 per cent. Yet, it should be emphasized that the statistical power is lower in these models since most observations of urban residents are excluded. Nevertheless, it suggests that the returns may have been slightly larger for migrants moving to larger cities.

An issue with the choice of outcome variable in the models estimated above is that it could be sensitive to the influence of incomes in the year 1930 if the income ratios varied substantially in that year compared with other years, or if older occupations are poorly represented in the 1930 occupational income scores. As Feigenbaum has shown, using occupational incomes compiled from different years can result in dramatically different interpretations.⁶³ Consequently, the outcomes might only accurately reflect conditions during the final years under study. We address this concern by testing for the influence of the choice of the year by using occupational incomes from 1900 tax records.⁶⁴ Again, we run the same regressions as those used in the baseline model. Table 3 presents the results from these regressions. As is evident from the table, the overall interpretation is not altered, although the coefficients decrease in magnitude in the final specification (column 4).

Moreover, to ensure that the results are not solely dependent on the use of occupational incomes, we employ the HISCLASS classification scheme of occupations.⁶⁵ Similar to the

⁶² Norman, *Från Bergslagen*; Ward, 'Internal migration'.

⁶³ Feigenbaum, 'Multiple measures'.

⁶⁴ Compiled by Bengtsson and Molinder, 'Incomes and income inequality'.

⁶⁵ van Leeuwen and Maas, 'HISCLASS'.



occupational income scores, HISCLASS is linked to HISCO. With this, occupational titles can be coded into HISCO and, subsequently, into HISCLASS. In turn, occupations are categorized into 12 different classes. As an illustration, those with the highest socio-economic status, such as doctors and lawyers, are in the first class. Those with the lowest socio-economic status, such as farm labourers, are likewise in the twelfth class. Consequently, if the results from previous regressions hold, there should be a negative effect on HISCLASS classification from moving to an urban area. The regressions presented in table A3 in the appendix correspondingly show a negative sign for both rural–urban and return migrants in all four specifications.

Furthermore, there may be some worry that the results are driven by differences between brothers, a factor that is not captured by the within-household specification. While it is plausible that households sent their most gifted son to urban areas as the expected net returns would be greater, it is also possible that families held a preference for the most gifted to remain in the place of origin to take over the family business. Although we cannot control for unobservable differences such as talent, the data source records whether an individual was a student or an apprentice. Therefore, we can control for higher educational attainment to some extent, but we cannot examine the number of years in school. Yet, it should be noted that while Sweden had a widespread system of elementary schooling since the 1840s, secondary education was very limited in Sweden, even in the final years of the examined period. According to the 1930 census, only 2.5 per cent of the male population from the age of 15 had received a secondary degree.⁶⁶ The result from this alternative specification is presented in appendix table A4. As the baseline result is not altered when introducing this control variable, this provides further evidence that the differences in occupational outcomes are driven by ‘migration to opportunity’ rather than educational attainment.

Finally, the choice of using the mid-30s as the cut-off age may still pose challenges if a substantial portion migrate after the age of 34. In a scenario in which urban occupations offer higher incomes compared with rural occupations and many engage in repeat migration between towns and the country after the age of 34, the occupational incomes of return migrants might be inflated. However, given the low migration rates after the age of 34, this is a relatively minor concern. Nevertheless, we test the robustness of the results by changing the cut-off ages to 37 and 39. Moreover, there might be a worry that assigning 44 as the final age might risk losing farmers who inherited their father’s farm later in life. Although the sample typically only includes observations up until the age of 44, we also run a regression in which lifetime occupational income is calculated using all observations from the age of 35 and beyond. Furthermore, in small samples, the coefficients may be considerably influenced by outliers. To mitigate this, we adjust the dataset by excluding return migrants who fall within the top 10 per cent of occupational incomes. None of these adjustments alter the interpretations of the results. The results of these exercises are presented in appendix tables A5 and A6.

Many previous works have emphasized that moving to an opportunity was the key determinant for achieving occupational upgrading in Sweden during the period examined.⁶⁷ Yet, urban areas were not the only places that offered such prospects. Acquiring farmland in distant places or finding work in mines or factories in rural industrialized areas could also result in upward mobility. Thus, the effect of moving to an urban area might solely reflect a premium given to all migrants and not the direct impact of relocating to an urban area.

In this section, we distinguish between permanent rural–urban migrants, return rural–urban migrants, rural intercounty migrants, and rural intercounty return migrants. This is done to test

⁶⁶ Statistics Sweden, *Folkräkningen 1930*.

⁶⁷ Eriksson and Rogers, *Rural labor*.

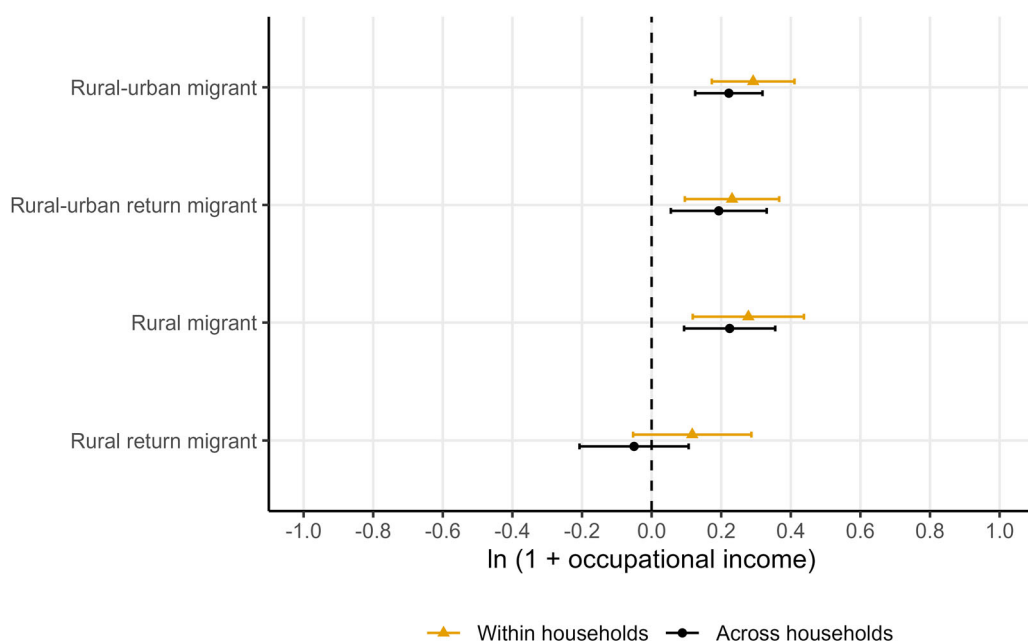


FIGURE 1 Returns to migration by type of move. *Note:* The figure shows point estimates and 95% confidence intervals for the impact of migration. Standard errors are clustered at the household and birth-year level. The regressions control for birth year and birth order, and in the across-households model, the father's log occupational income. *Source:* The HISP database.

whether upward mobility was possible by only engaging in long-distance migration, and if this was the case, whether the effect of migration was similar for all types of migrants. Consequently, we add categorical variables for non-urban, permanent, and return intercounty migrants to the regression formula. Permanent rural intercounty migrants are defined as migrants who permanently left their counties of origin in favour of other rural areas, whereas rural return migrants moved to other rural areas but eventually returned to their counties of origin. Figure 1 below presents the coefficients from the regression with confidence intervals. The figure presents the across-household variation in returns to migration, which is estimated using simple OLS. The within-household variation, which is estimated using a fixed-effects model, is also included. In both models, we control for birth order and birth year.

Taken together, the results suggest that there was no discernible migration premium, as only urban and permanent long-distance migrants benefitted from moving. The effect of rural long-distance migration in which the migrant returned to his county of origin was statistically insignificant in both the across-household and within-household regression models. The effect on the occupational income of permanently relocating to an urban area was stable, about 24–34 per cent, in both specifications. The effect of permanently relocating to another county was, likewise, about 25–32 per cent. Finally, the occupational income gains from rural–urban return migration were 21–26 per cent. Thus, while we cannot rule out that migrants would have benefitted from permanently relocating to another rural destination, circular migration in rural areas did not result in occupational upgrading.

These results align with the findings by Eriksson, who, by examining the intergenerational mobility of permanent migrants conditional on moving distance and urban–rural destination,



shows that both urban and rural migrants typically exhibited substantially higher upward occupational mobility compared with their stayer brothers. Using the occupational stratification scale 'HISCAM', he finds that urban migrants increased their occupational status by 4.4 log points (0–25 km), 6.8 log points (25–75 km), and 9.4 log points (>75 km) in comparison with their non-migrant brothers. For rural migrants moving similar distances, the occupational outcomes for migrant brothers were also positive, albeit smaller (1.6, 4.6, and 7.6 log points, respectively).⁶⁸ In appendix table A12, the estimates from regressions using the alternative HISCAM scale show similar outcomes of rural–urban migrants as those moving to urban areas (8.9 log points), and return migrants witnessed even better outcomes (11.1 log points) in the within-households specification. Moreover, rural migrants increased their occupational outcomes somewhat more than urban migrants (10.2 log points). Thus, the interpretation is slightly altered using the HISCAM scale, as rural residents receive a higher status, whereas the estimate for permanent urban migration is reduced.

Moreover, we further test the extent to which migrants benefitted from moving by including urban-born men in the analysis to examine whether they improved their position when relocating to a rural area. In the within-household specification, presented in appendix table A2, we find no differences in occupational income between urban-born stayers and urban–rural migrants. Yet, the estimated returns for rural–urban migrants and return migrants remain robust.

Having established that return rural–urban migrants experienced substantial gains from temporarily relocating to towns, we now turn to analysing the potential mechanisms that can explain this pattern. The high rates of intergenerational mobility of internal migrants in Swedish history have been explained by the fact that they transitioned into white-collar and skilled occupations.⁶⁹ While this can be expected for migrants moving to places of opportunity, such as urban areas, it may not be expected for people who returned to the countryside since the agricultural sector dominated. However, in the analytical dataset, several rural residents had white-collar occupations, such as merchants, engineers, salesmen, teachers, and bookkeepers. Moreover, multiple people held skilled professions, such as carpenters, shoemakers, tailors, and masons. To what extent did return migrants attain these occupations? We examine the outcomes of permanent urban migrants and urban return migrants in relation to non-migrants utilizing the HISCLASS occupational class scheme to construct four broad occupational groups: unskilled worker, farmer, skilled worker, and white-collar professional or worker. We run a linear probability model for each of these outcomes, resulting in four regressions. Furthermore, we control for birth order and birth year, as well as taking into account within-household variation in all specifications.

The first two columns in table 4 focus on the probabilities of migrants relative to non-migrants to have either an unskilled or a farming occupation. Men who relocated permanently to urban areas were 18 percentage points less likely to have been farmers compared with their non-migrant brothers. Similarly, return migrants were 14 percentage points less likely to have been farmers than their non-migrant brothers. Yet, there were no significant differences in the probability of being an unskilled worker for both migrant categories.

Turning to the skilled and white-collar occupations presented in columns 3–4, the results are similar for permanent and return migrants. While the coefficients of 0.07 and 0.11 indicate that they were more likely to have a skilled occupation compared with their non-migrant brothers, the results are not statistically significant. However, permanent urban migrants were 20 percentage points more likely, and urban return migrants were 11 percentage points more likely,

⁶⁸ Eriksson, *Dynamics decades*, p. 174.

⁶⁹ Berger et al., 'Social mobility'.

**TABLE 4** The effects of rural–urban migration on occupational outcomes.

	Dependent variable:			
	(1) Unskilled worker	(2) Farmer	(3) Skilled worker	(4) White collar
Migrant				
Urban migrant	−0.12 (0.083)	−0.18*** (0.042)	0.07 (0.070)	0.20*** (0.057)
Urban return migrant	−0.09 (0.094)	−0.14** (0.064)	0.11 (0.087)	0.11* (0.060)
Within-household fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Birth year and birth order controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
No. obs.	646	646	646	646
Adjusted R^2	0.263	0.460	0.153	0.307

Notes: Robust standard errors within parentheses are clustered at households.

*** $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.05$; * $p < 0.1$.

Source: The HISP database.

to have a white-collar occupation compared with their non-migrant brothers. These results suggest that the upward occupational mobility of migrants – permanent as well as return migrants – was primarily a result of movements into white-collar occupations obtained in urban environments. However, once rural–urban individuals returned to the countryside, they remained in the white-collar occupation that they entered in an urban area.

These enhanced outcomes of migrants in comparison with their non-migrant brothers were, however, not driven by self-employment. As is presented in appendix table A11, permanent urban migrants were less likely than their brothers to own a business, whereas there were no statistically significant differences in the probability of owning a business between non-migrants and return migrants.

V | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

A long scholarly tradition has established a positive link between internal migration from rural to urban areas and intergenerational mobility during the industrialization phase in most countries. Yet, return migration to the countryside was a key feature of rural–urban migration in Western Europe and North America during the transformative late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Since return migrants are notoriously difficult to study, there has been some debate about the potential occupational outcomes of this important group of migrants: whether they failed or succeeded in improving their position relative to their family background. Notably, if failed migrants returned to the countryside while migrants who succeeded remained in cities, then the massive movements towards urban areas during industrialization should have been detrimental to the countryside. Therefore, this topic has major implications for our knowledge of internal migration and intergenerational mobility, as well as economic development during industrialization. Accordingly, in this article, we have attempted to understand whether individuals who engaged in return migration from urban areas benefitted in terms of intergenerational mobility to the same extent as permanent rural–urban migrants. The results confirm this hypothesis by



demonstrating that return migrants saw large gains from their temporary residency in towns. On average, return migrants experienced a 20 per cent increase in occupational income compared with non-migrants. This increase is similar to permanent rural–urban migrants, who had a 27 per cent increase.

We have focused on the case of Sweden between 1890 and 1940, a period in Swedish history characterized by economic restructuring, driven by industrialization and paralleled by rapid urbanization. Sweden, at that time, had high levels of occupational intergenerational mobility, despite being an unequal society in terms of wealth, income, and suffrage. Previous research has especially emphasized internal migration as a key factor contributing to this mobility. However, the link between return migration and intergenerational mobility has remained unexplored.

We studied the impact of temporarily moving to an urban area on intergenerational mobility, while simultaneously benchmarking it to the outcomes of rural–urban migrants who permanently settled at their destinations. To remove disparities in occupational outcomes, driven solely by positive self-selection into rural–urban migration, we followed previous literature and estimated the effects of migration on occupational outcomes within households by examining pairs of brothers. Moreover, to remove the suspicion that the returns were simply a premium for migration and not an impact of living in a town, we also explored the occupational outcomes of permanent and circular rural migrants as well as urban-born migrants. In these analyses, we found that individuals who engaged in rural circular or urban–rural migration did not experience similar gains as those who returned from urban areas. These results suggest that the positive effect of migration on intergenerational mobility is derived primarily from living in urban areas rather than simply reflecting a migration premium.

We estimated that the returns from relocating to an urban environment and subsequently returning to the countryside was 20 per cent, which was slightly lower than that of permanent rural–urban migration. However, to give a sense of the magnitude, the estimate can also be compared with that of similar studies. For instance, in a study of Swedish emigrants returning from overseas, [Ejeramo et al.](#) find a 2 per cent decrease in occupational income in a within-household specification similar to the present study.⁷⁰ [Ward](#) finds an increase in occupational income of rural–urban migrants in the early twentieth-century United States of slightly more than 30 per cent. Finally, in a study of forced migration in Finland during the Second World War as an exogenous shock, [Sarvimäki et al.](#) find that the displaced increased their long-term income by 16–30 per cent among men working in agriculture before the war, and they were also more likely to move to urban locations. Thus, the estimated returns for return migrants in Sweden in the early twentieth century resemble the returns found for permanent migrants in other historical contexts.

Much of the gains made by migrants must be explained by their successful entry into white-collar occupations and exit from farming. Migrants who settled permanently in urban areas, as well as those who returned to the countryside, were considerably more likely to have a white-collar occupation than their non-migrant brothers. Moreover, they were less likely to have been farmers. These outcomes can again be compared with those of return migrants from overseas, who were more likely than stayers to work in agriculture and less likely to work in non-manual occupations.⁷¹ Thus, the outcomes of circular rural–urban migrants went in the opposite direction.

The results have implications for the understanding of the impact of rural–urban migration on the countryside. Rural–urban migration was crucial in fostering intergenerational mobility,

⁷⁰ [Ejeramo et al.](#), ‘Home, sweet home’; [Ward](#), ‘Internal migration’; [Sarvimäki et al.](#), ‘Habit formation’.

⁷¹ [Ejeramo et al.](#), ‘Home, sweet home’.



which was something that could not be facilitated in the countryside to the same extent. Consequently, intergenerational mobility was a result of relocating to places of opportunity. However, the gains made in urban areas were not lost once the migrants left those places. Accordingly, the countryside gained substantially from the massive migration movements towards towns. People in large numbers returned to the countryside with better occupations than they would have been able to acquire had they never left their rural origins.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Jakob Molinder, Kristina Lilja, Martin Dribe, and the participants at the 15th Swedish Economic History Meeting, Lund University, September 2023, for providing valuable comments. Moreover, I am grateful to Sarah Linden Pasay for proofreading the text. Finally, I am grateful to the editor Tirthankar Roy and the two anonymous referees for their suggestions and feedback.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

How to cite this article: Andersson, J., 'Moving from opportunity: Intergenerational mobility of rural–urban return migrants in Sweden, 1890s–1940s', *Economic History Review*, (2024), pp. 1–23. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ehr.13374>