



MOVING OUT, MOVING IN – THE SOUTH AFRICAN SEMIGRATION STORY

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The rise of remote and hybrid working practices post-pandemic has led to an interesting shift in population growth across South Africa.

Statistical surprises. This is how the 2022 Census was described when the data came in, revealing some unusual population trends. One of the most interesting facts was that traditional areas – those outside of the central business districts – saw population growth of 3.5 million people between 2011 and 2022 compared with 400 000 between 2001 and 2011.

This movement is reflected in Gauteng's figures – the province's population only grew by 1.9% in compound annual growth rate in the same period, significantly slower than the 2.7% of 2001-2011 and the 4.3% of 1996-2001.

This changing pattern of population movement is, says Graeme Götz, Director of Research Strategy at the Gauteng City-Region Observatory (GCRO), an interesting phenomenon that goes beyond post-pandemic workers moving to Zoom towns – towns that have grown in popularity and size based on access to remote working tools such as Zoom.

SLOW-GROW JOBURG

"The census data has of course been questioned," Götz says. "But even with its challenges it may still provide an overall sense

of where big population growth and big declines are taking place." Götz says that parts of the Western and Northern Cape are declining, as well as stretches from the Eastern Cape to KwaZulu-Natal, and there is low growth in the Free State and North West Province.

"Some parts of Gauteng are growing quickly, but Johannesburg is seemingly growing slowly. There's a reverse migration trend happening," says Götz. "You would think it would be the wealthy whites looking to migrate to another province, but the data shows that the higher proportion wanting to migrate out from Gauteng are actually from depressed inner-city areas, informal settlements and some townships."

MEGA-MALLS IN MPUMALANGA

The GCRO Quality of Life Survey 7 (2023/2024) found that Gauteng's quality of life isn't what it should be and that Gauteng residents are less satisfied, feel more uncertain, and are under increased financial pressure.

Götz uses the example of the Bushbuckridge Municipality in the Ehlanzeni District of Mpumalanga to illustrate how this change is reflected within a specific area. "This once rural municipality is



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Collinson and Dr Carren Ginsburg, a Senior Researcher at MRC-Wits-Agincourt, have been examining the movements of people from rural districts and have found that in addition to movement to urban metros, there is a lot of mobility among young adults, post-school, to smaller towns or industrial towns, to access employment. This is perhaps one of the biggest drivers of semigration in the country.

“There’s often this perception that movement is rural to urban with everybody moving into the big cities, but we see a lot of mobility that’s rural to rural, or from rural areas to smaller towns,” says Ginsburg. “It’s not exclusively the case of people flocking to Gauteng. Some of the movement is to access education, but mobility is a vital livelihood strategy due to the limited opportunities for employment locally.”

It’s a sentiment echoed by Collinson, who says: “Some small towns are vivifying because there’s work there. Small towns are linked to bigger towns and to the metropolis as well. We don’t see these as disconnected from one another. It’s more about how fluid people’s movements are, but their movements are also affected by the reality that small towns are growing.”

WORKING THE FESTIVALS AND TOURISM

Collinson points out that many small towns are decaying because they can’t sustain an economy, highlighting areas of the Eastern Cape. As they decline, people are moving to areas like the north-east of the country, which are seeing population and economic growth. “They can find work as game guides or in the tourism industry, and these roles are increasing with people migrating to work in these sectors,” he says.

Another aspect to this shift in growth comes from the ongoing investment by small towns in their own success stories. As Alan Mabin, Emeritus Professor in the School of Architecture and Planning says, “There’s been an explosion in festivals taking place in small towns all over the country. Cradock [Nxuba], for example, has become the capital of Karoo small town festivals, and in Riebeeck-Kasteel, there’s an event called Solo Studios that highlights the rapidly growing communities of artists in these small towns.”

Some municipalities are engaging with locals to develop deeper tourism strategies and in a few cases, says Mabin, that connects with an idea that was exciting 20 years ago – local economic development (LED). Today, however, LED is more fine-grained and starting to deliver some exciting results – despite the dysfunction of local governments and little real support from other spheres. Those changes overlap with the migration of professionals from cities to places where good internet access enables people to work globally from Zoom towns.

“There are lots of tensions that emerge between local initiatives and what agencies may be up to,” says Mabin. “There’s one of my favourite stories of the DA councillor in Aberdeen in the Karoo who was taken to court for repainting fading road markings in the town. As a result, overall, we do not have success in all small-town revival strategies, but there are examples where things are really changing.”

seeing a dramatic transformation with mansions going up across a vast, extended landscape, and with large malls being built to support them. It used to be an area in decline going down at a minus 1.7% growth rate between 2001-2011, and now it’s at a growth rate of 3.6% per annum.”

It’s a picture of urban growth in a previously rural area that reflects shifting perceptions around trust, community and wellbeing within urban environments. However, this movement from urban to peri-urban or more rural environments isn’t exclusively driven by dissatisfaction – it is also powered by the hangover from the pandemic when remote working reimagined geography and the boundaries of work.

POST-SCHOOL YOUTH DRIVE SEMIGRATION

Professor Mark Collinson, a Reader at MRC/Wits Rural Public Health and Health Transitions Research Unit (MRC/Wits-Agincourt), explains: “The geography of work is affected by how far away people live from the workplace. It’s distant living – we call it temporary migration but what we have found is that young people are the ones most likely to migrate. There has also been a very dynamic ascendancy of young women migrating to cities.”