

# Urban Outmigration in Times of COVID: The Phenomenon and its Impacts on Local Government

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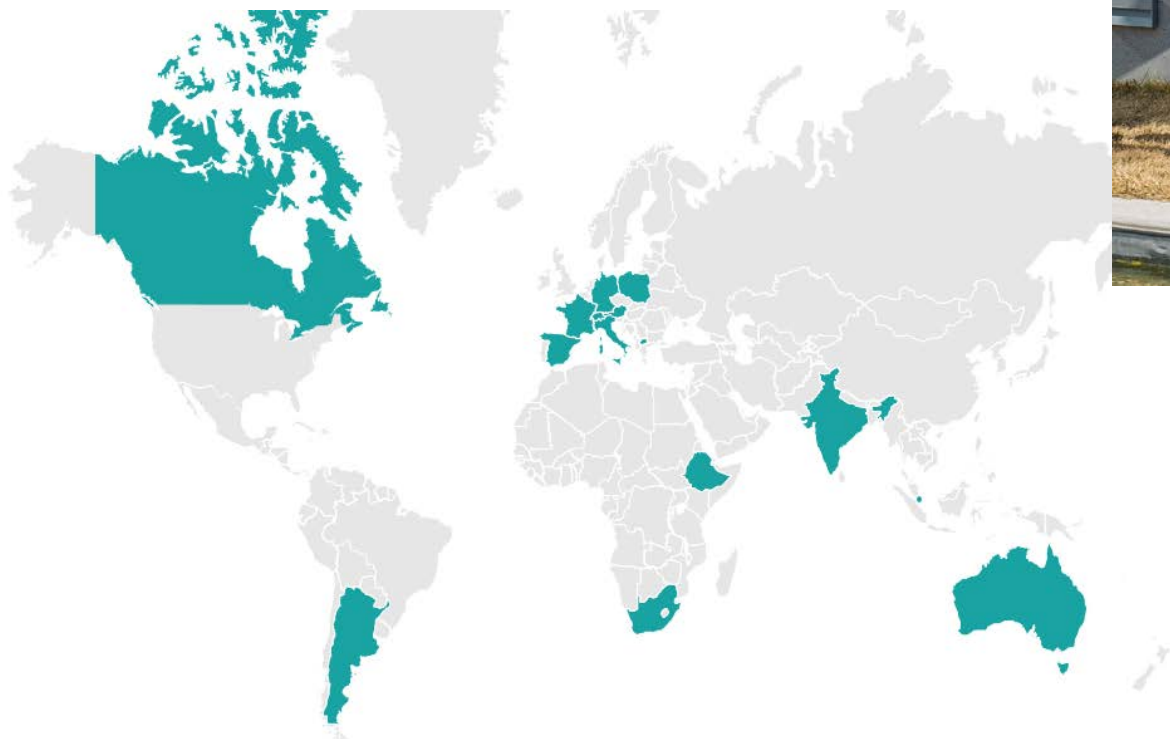
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Western University, August 3 2022

# Who we are



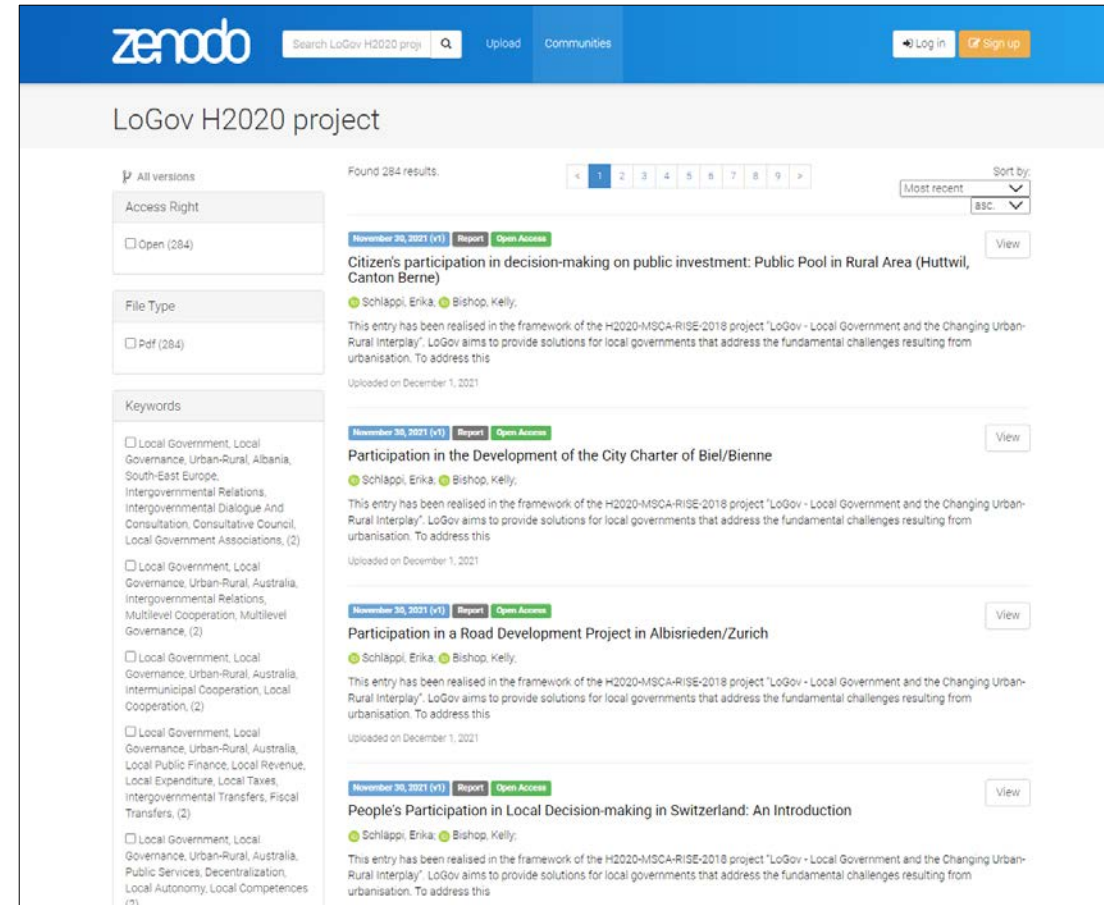
**18**  
partner  
organizations

**15**  
countries

**6**  
continents

# What we do: Five work packages

- 5 Thematic Work Packages: (1) local public services, (2) local finances, (3) local government structure, (4) inter-governmental relations, (5) people's participation
- 16 country reports with 174 local government practices from all five thematic areas
- [LoGov H2020 community](#) on Zenodo: download country reports/interviews
- Identify, evaluate, compare and share practices





# How we do it: Secondments



# Why Study Urban Outmigration?

- Until recently, migration between rural and urban areas has largely been a one way flow from rural to urban.
- Urbanization is of course still dominant worldwide, but in recent years there has also been urban-rural migration in some contexts.
- This ‘urban outmigration’ is distinct from suburbanization: It involves people moving well beyond the boundaries of functional metropolitan areas, to small town and rural settings.
- There is widespread anecdotal evidence that urban outmigration accelerated in many countries during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- But the phenomenon and its impacts haven’t been studied comparatively across different national contexts.

# The Urban Outmigration Project

Our work is an *exploratory cross-national study* of urban outmigration and its local consequences in rural communities in four national / urban contexts.

## Descriptive objective:

- map changing patterns of outmigration – emphasis on possible COVID effects
- identify who is migrating out of cities and why, how this is changing
- identify and compare impacts of outmigration on local communities in rural / small town communities that have received outmigrants – focus on implications for local government and local policy challenges

## Main analytical objective:

- identify and compare **relationships** between *outmigration patterns* (who leaves cities, why) and *local impacts in migrant-receiving communities*

# Theoretical Foundations

Our work is anchored in three distinct bodies of literature:

- **Migration studies (sociology)** – Provides framework for understanding factors of migration
  - Everett Lee’s classic (1966) typology: push factors, pull factors, facilitating conditions, personal characteristics
- **Rural studies (social geography)**– eg. “rurbanization” literature, rural-urban fringe – social/cultural/economic impacts of outmigration
- **Local government studies** – work on local government in each setting helps us to understand impacts of outmigration on local government and governance

# The Empirical Setting: Metro Cores in Context

- Focus on **metropolitan cores** and **surrounding rural areas (outmigration geographies)** in **four countries**
- National contexts: from 15 countries with LoGov network researchers, identified those where: a. urban outmigration clearly present during pandemic; 2. researchers were available to do the work.
- Urban cores selected because they were experiencing significant outmigration (preliminary data analysis)

| URBAN CORE | OUTMIGRATION GEOGRAPHY | NATIONAL CONTEXT | LEAD RESEARCHER   |
|------------|------------------------|------------------|-------------------|
| Toronto    | Ontario                | Canada           | Horak (UWO)       |
| Turin      | Piedmont Region        | Italy            | Kössler (EURAC)   |
| Madrid     | Madrid Region          | Spain            | Navarro (UAM)     |
| Lausanne   | Switzerland            | Switzerland      | Felder (Fribourg) |

- The different scale of jurisdictions across our empirical settings presented some challenges in terms of the selection of valid units of comparison for outmigration geographies.
- In addition, within each outmigration geography, we also selected 3 to 4 rural / small-town municipalities for a detailed study of impacts. We will discuss this in a few minutes.



# Research Methods

- Descriptive analysis of **statistical data** from government statistical offices and real estate associations: population change, migration, housing prices
- **Media scan** of major dailies in each context, as well as local media outlets in communities that have received urban outmigrants
- Analysis of **government documents** produced by local governments in selected communities that have received urban outmigrants
- **Semi-structured interviews** with political leaders, government officials and community leaders in outmigrant-receiving communities; also, a small number of semi-structured interviews with academic experts in each setting
  - Interview coding for analysis using NVivo

# Current State of the Research

- Ontario and Piedmont: descriptive statistical analysis is in process (well advanced); document research is complete; interviews are complete and in the process of being coded.

Research Assistants: Tommaso Librera (EURAC)

Danielle Mastromatteo (Western)

Amanda Gutzke (Western)

- Madrid and Lausanne: statistical analysis is process; document research is in process; interviews are in early stages

*Today's focus:* preliminary results for Toronto/Ontario and Turin/Piedmont

**We look forward to your feedback!**

# The Turin and Toronto Settings Compared

- **Piedmont's geography:** apart from Po Valley mountainous (43%)
- **Piedmont's population:** since 1980 stable at 4.2 - 4.5 million, but in Torino from 1.15 to 0.85 > one factor: outmigration to suburban/rural areas

|                                | POPULATION (MILLIONS) |       | SIZE<br>(KM SQUARED) |
|--------------------------------|-----------------------|-------|----------------------|
|                                | 2011                  | 2021  |                      |
| <u>METRO AREA</u> TURIN        | 1.70                  | 1.71  | 1,346                |
| PIEDMONT                       | 4.36                  | 4.25  | 25,387               |
|                                |                       |       |                      |
| TORONTO CMA                    | 5.56                  | 6.71  | 7,124                |
| ONTARIO (< 200km from Toronto) | 10.25                 | 11.81 | 65,000               |
| ONTARIO                        | 12.85                 | 14.22 | 1,076,000            |

# Receiving Municipality Case Studies: Selection

- Since we are interested in local impacts of outmigration on receiving communities, we adopted a **nested case comparison** approach
- Within **each** outmigration geography, we selected **3 to 4 rural/small-town municipalities** for a detailed study of impacts based on these **criteria**:
  - ✓ Geographic variety in terms of the (“felt”) distance from the metro core
  - ✓ Small communities with demographic variety regarding population size
  - ✓ Expected urban in-migration to these communities



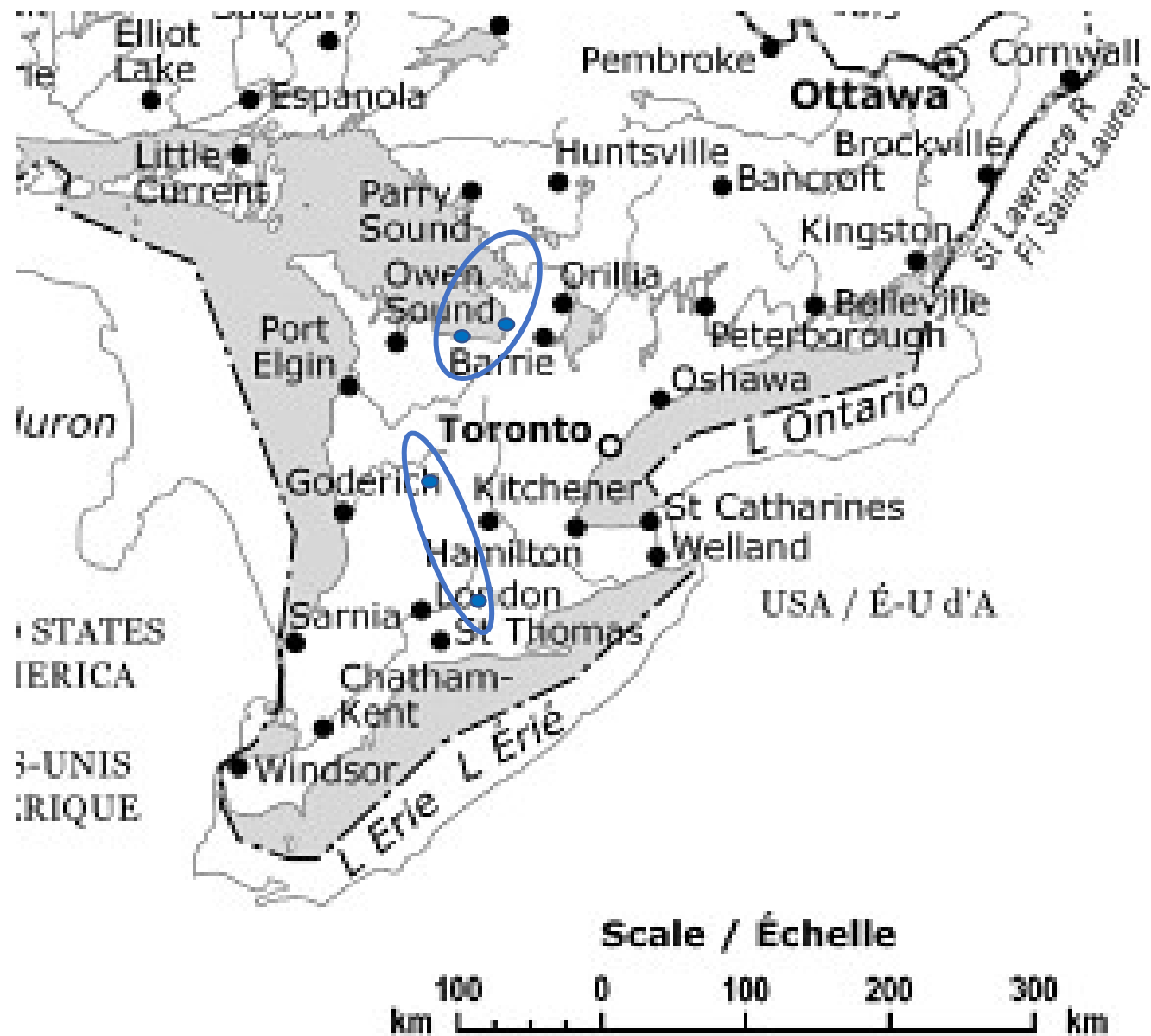
# Receiving LGs: Piedmont

| CASE / ZONE                       | SMALL TOWN / RURAL | 2021 POP. | 2016-21 GROWTH RATE |
|-----------------------------------|--------------------|-----------|---------------------|
| Bussoleno / Turin closer          | Small town         | 5,629     | - 5.8%              |
| Torre Pellice / Turin more remote | Small town         | 4,574     | 1.5%                |
| Ostana / Cuneo very remote        | Rural              | 84        | 2.4%                |

- **Geographical diversity:** “felt” distance from Turin (infrastructure links > personal links)
- **Demographic diversity:** small town and rural based on Eurostat definition
- **Expected in-migration:** no population growth but retention through replacement > qualitative evidence for in-migration since 1990s (association “Dislivelli”, Turin service center) and expert interviews

# Receiving LGs: Ontario

| CASE / ZONE                         | SMALL TOWN / RURAL | 2021 POP. | 2016-21 GROWTH RATE |
|-------------------------------------|--------------------|-----------|---------------------|
| Wasaga Beach / South Georgian Bay   | Small town         | 24,862    | 20.3%               |
| Blue Mountains / South Georgian Bay | Rural              | 9,390     | 33.7%               |
| Tillsonburg / Southwestern Ontario  | Small town         | 18,615    | 17.3%               |
| North Perth / Southwestern Ontario  | Rural              | 15,538    | 18.3%               |



# Semi-Structured Interviews

- In-depth, **semi-structured** interviews with at least 2-3 individuals in each case migrant-receiving municipality.
- **Local government officials:** The Mayor and at least one top administrator were interviewed in each municipality. In some cases, councillors and/or community leaders were also interviewed.
- **Expert interviews:** We also conducted interviews with academic experts on (internal) migration.
- **Total interviews so far:** 14 conducted for the Toronto region work, and 8 for the Turin region work.

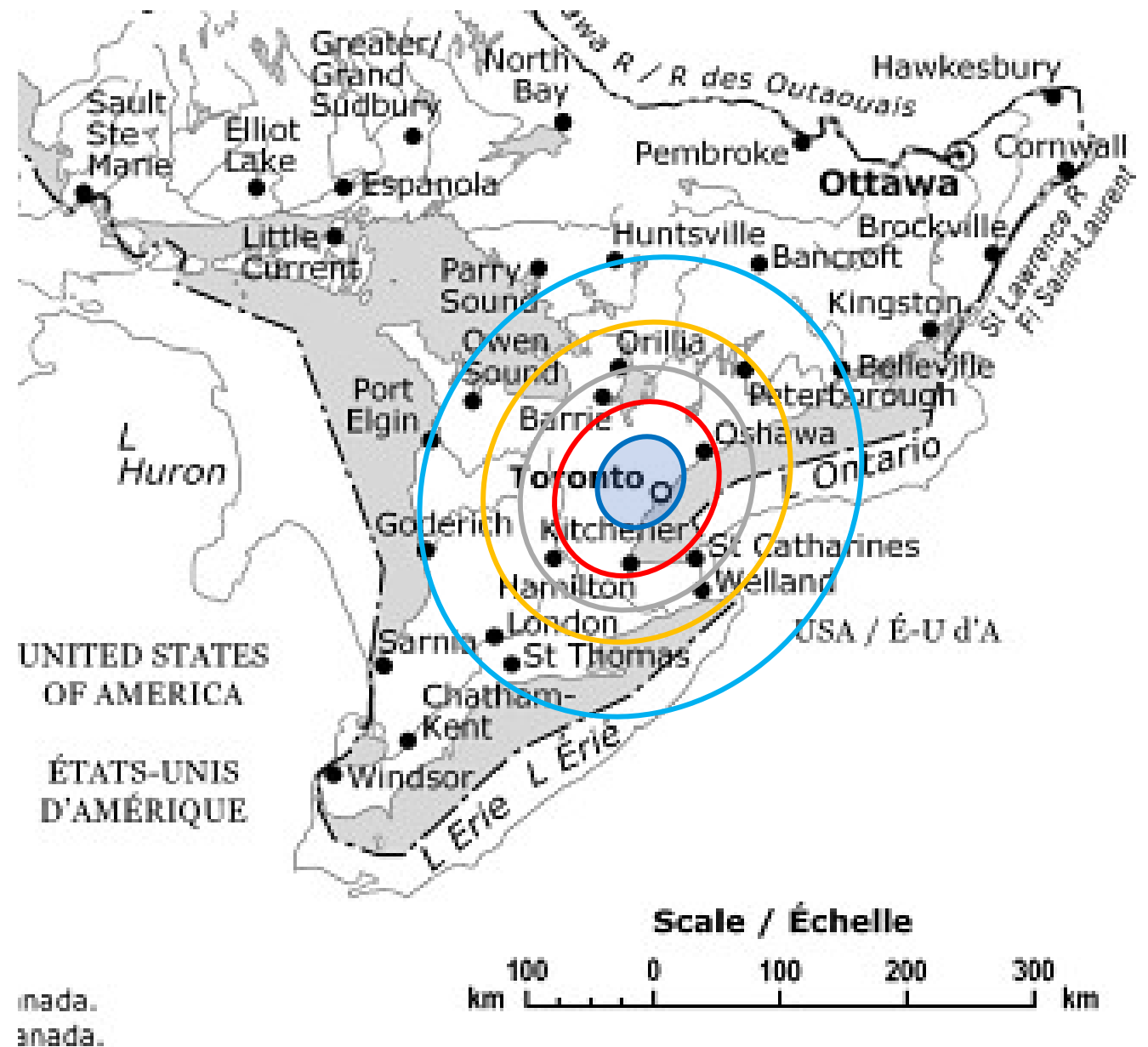
# FINDINGS

## The Geography of Population Change and Net Migration

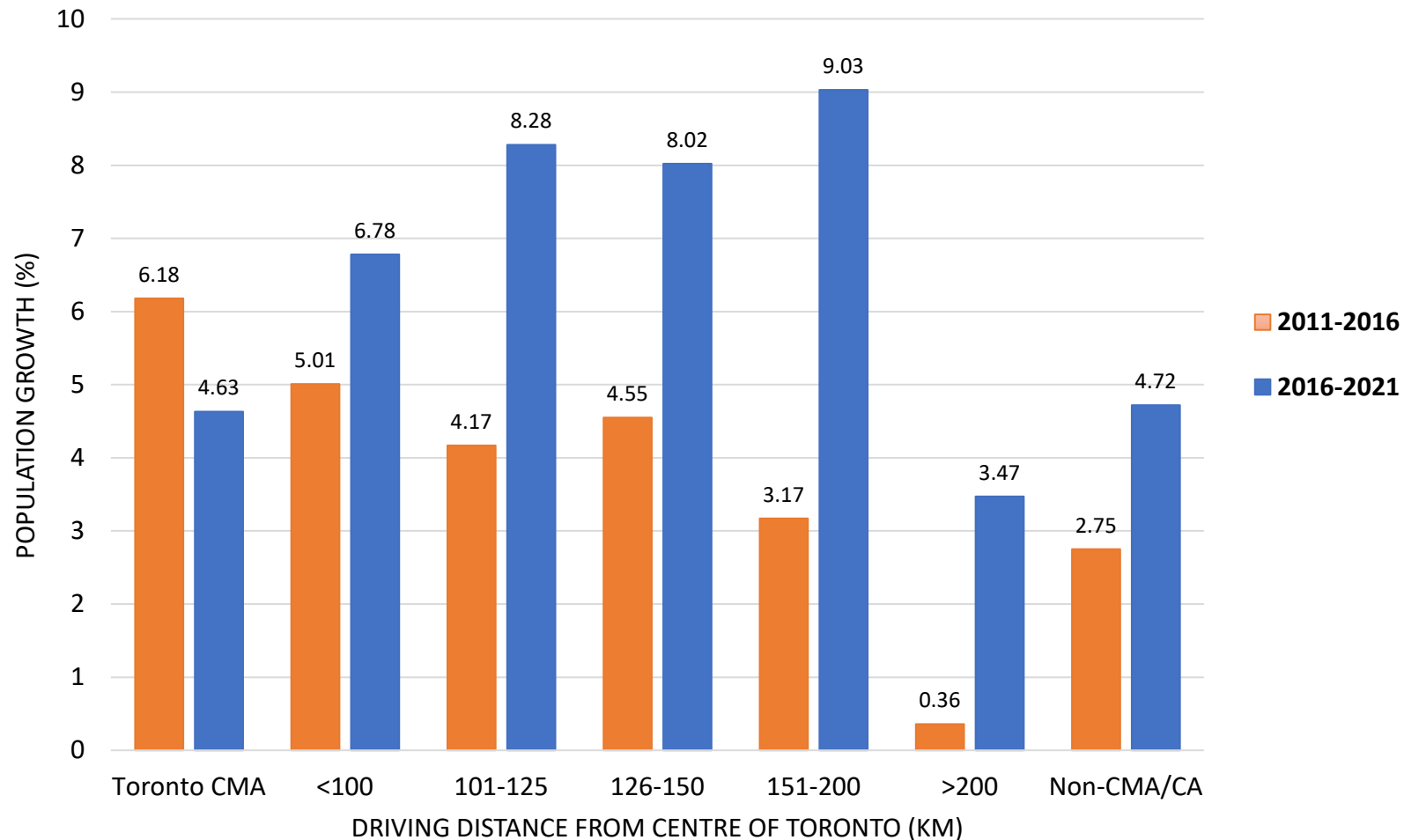


# The Geography of Population Change in Ontario:

A concentric zones model

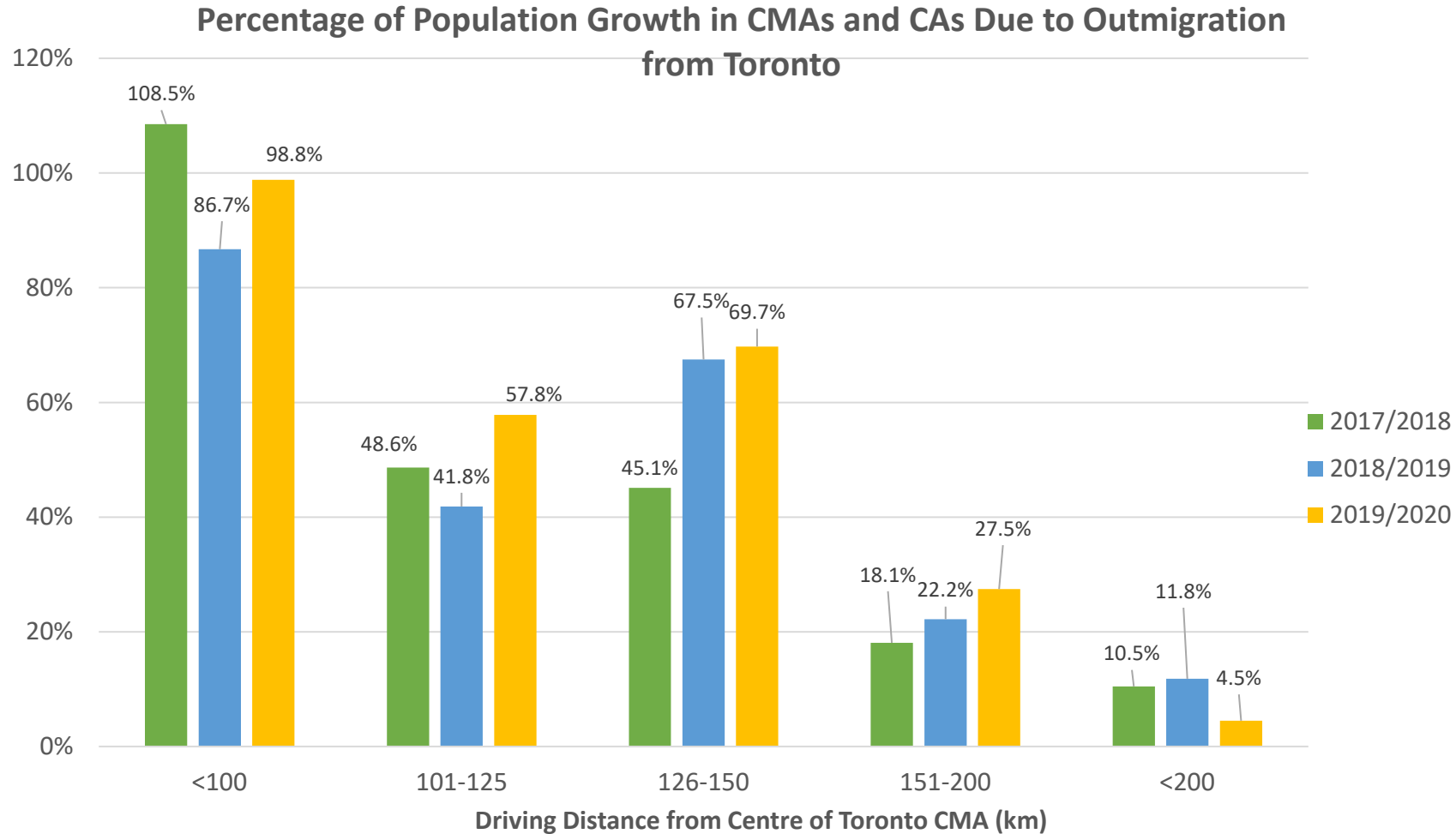


## Population Growth in CMAs and CAs by Distance from Toronto



## KEY POINTS

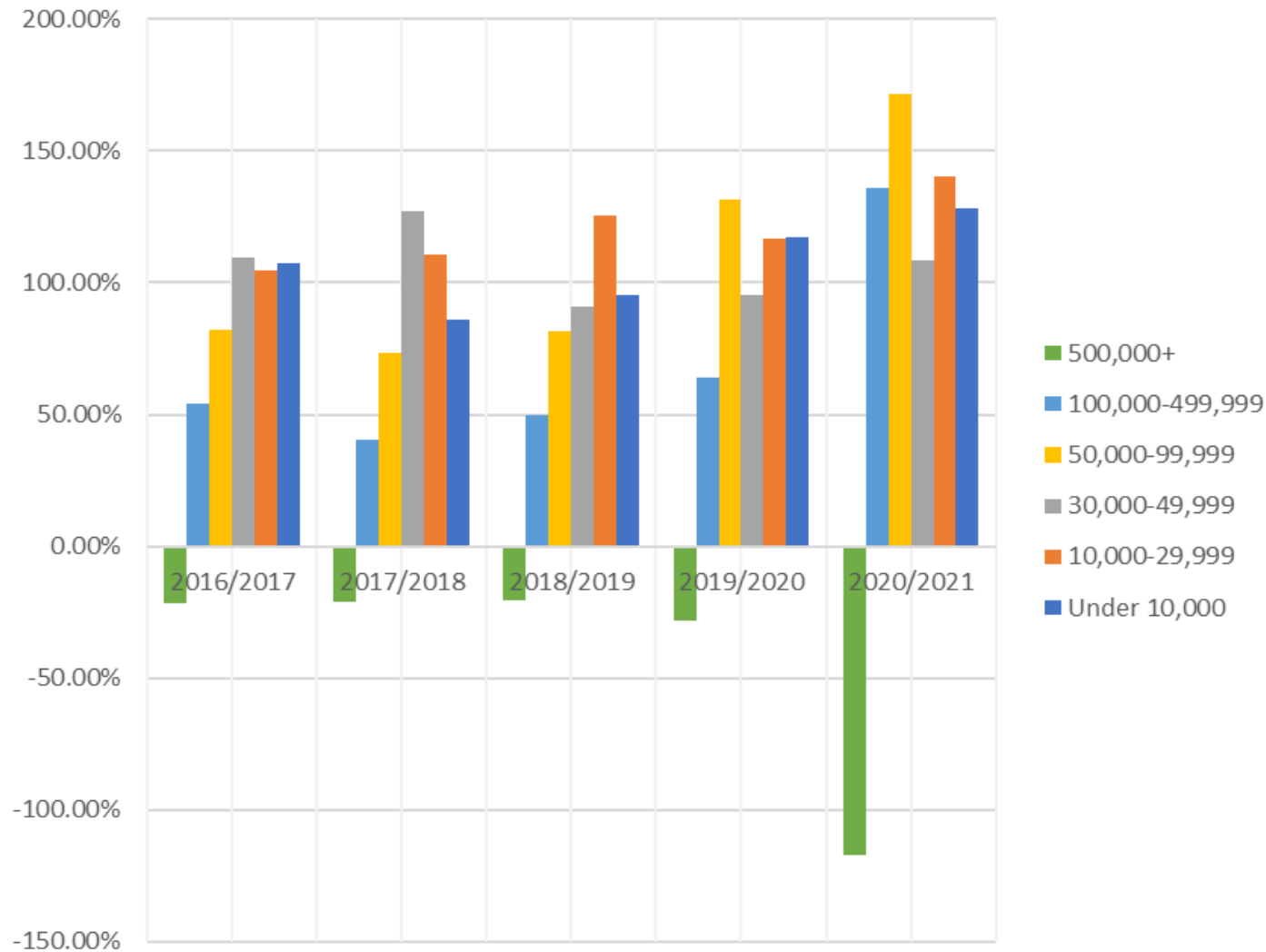
- There has been a major shift of population growth away from the Toronto CMA over last five years.
- Smaller but significant boost in rural growth rates (non-CMA/CA).
- We cannot tell from this analysis how much of this is pandemic-era.
- We also cannot tell how much of this shift is driven by urban outmigration.



## KEY POINTS

- Most of population growth in areas within 150km of Toronto is accounted for by migration **from the Toronto CMA**.
- The importance of outmigration for places that are between 100 and 200km from Toronto seems to be increasing.
- No rural (<10K pop) data here.

Contribution of Net Intraprovincial Migration to Population Change, Ontario CMAs and CAs

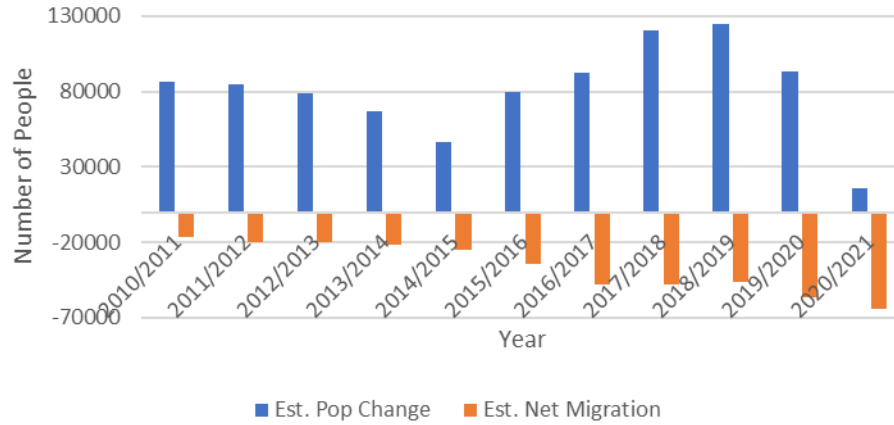


## KEY POINTS

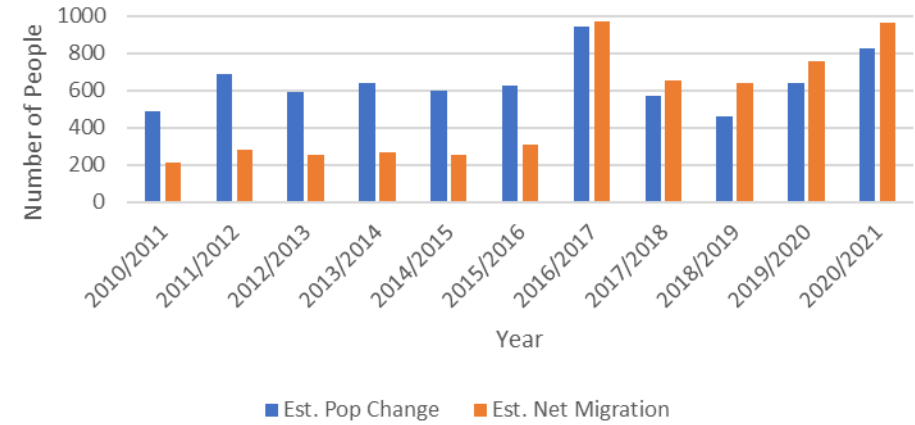
- Large cities – driven by Toronto data – have negative intraprovincial migration, and this accelerated tremendously during the COVID pandemic.
- By 2020/21, population growth in places with less than 500,000 people in Ontario (including rural areas) could be **entirely attributed to migration from big cities.**



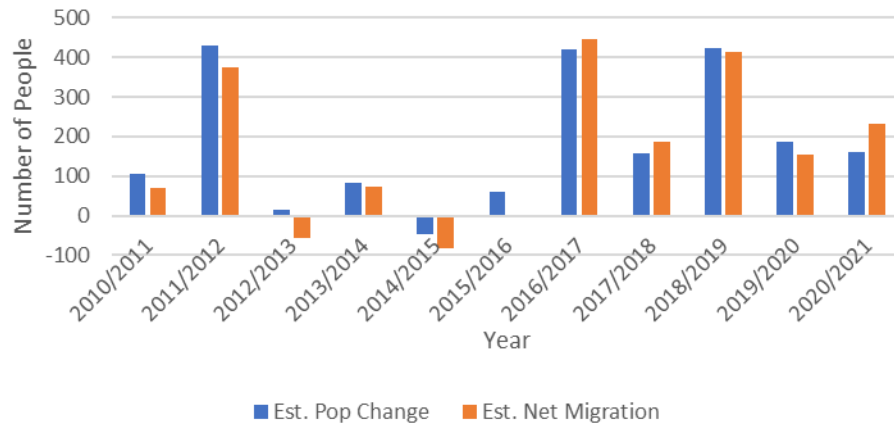
Est. Pop Change and Est. Net Migration for Toronto



Est. Pop Change and Est. Net Migration for Wasaga Beach

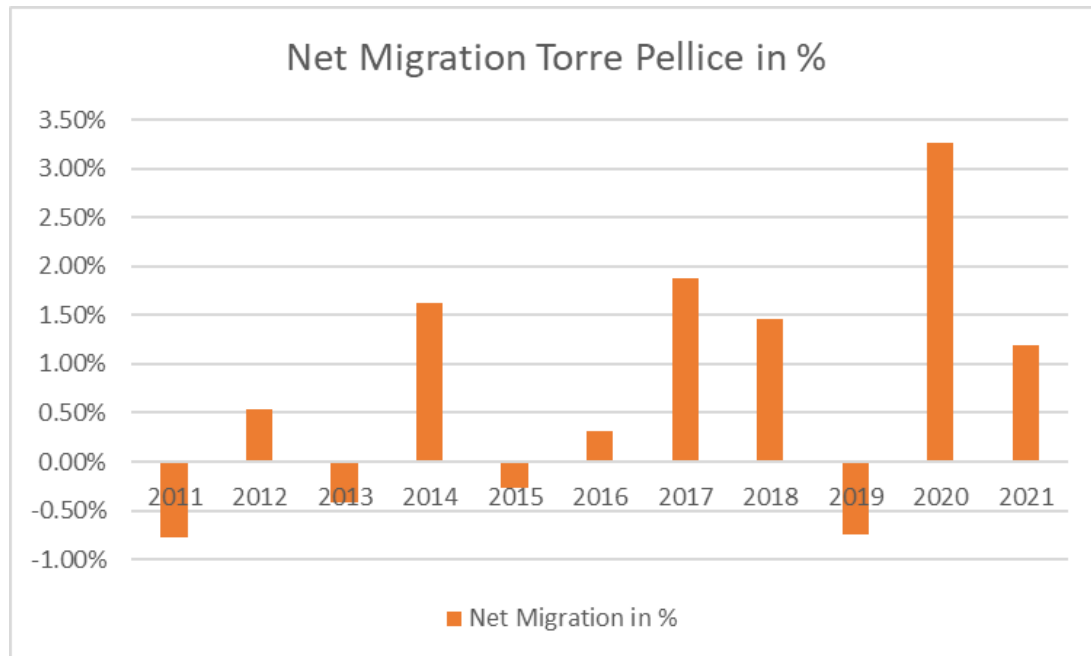
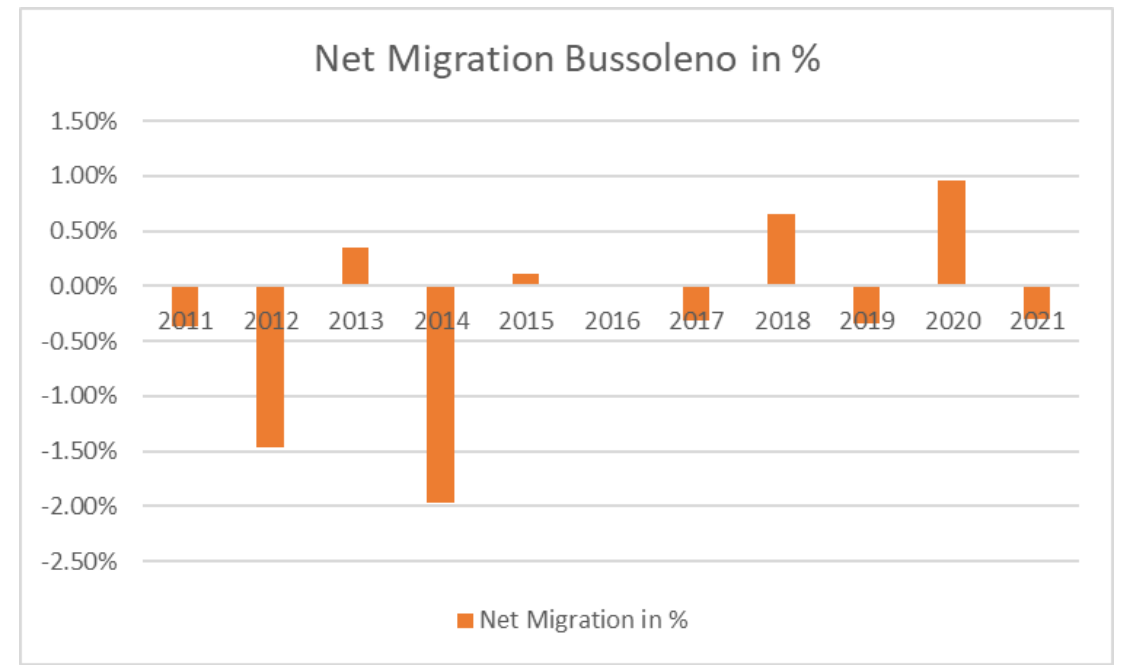
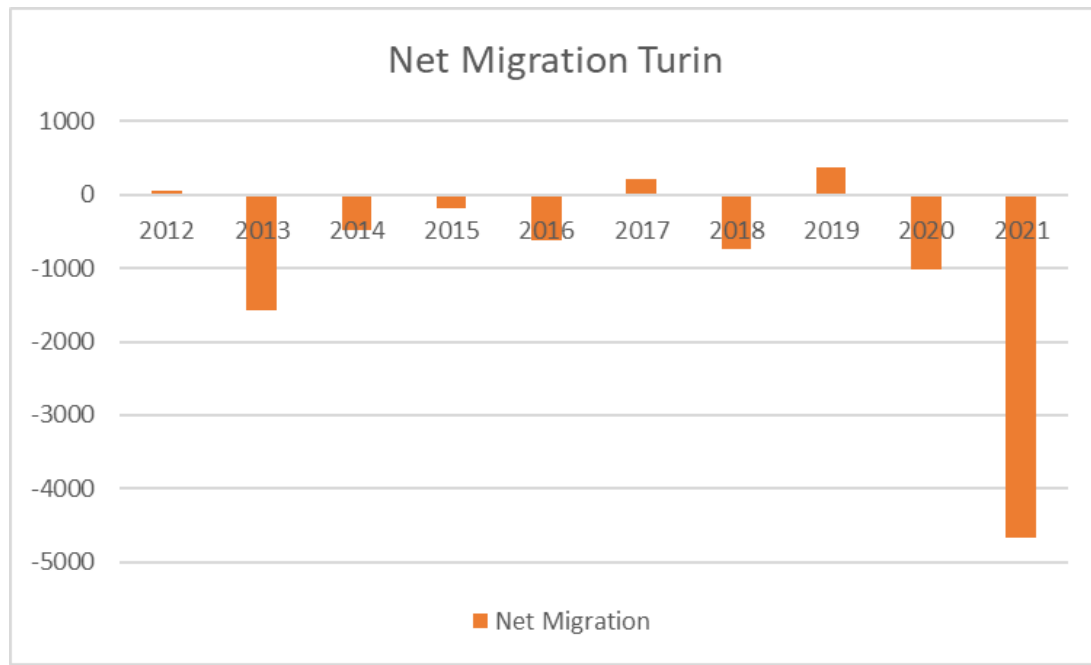


Est. Pop Change and Est. Net Migration for Tillsonburg



## KEY POINTS

- Population growth in the two small towns is, again, driven largely or entirely by migration from other parts of Ontario.
- Pandemic effects of outmigration clear in Toronto.
- Pandemic effects are less visible in the small town data, but this is likely an underestimate due to data limitations.



## KEY POINTS

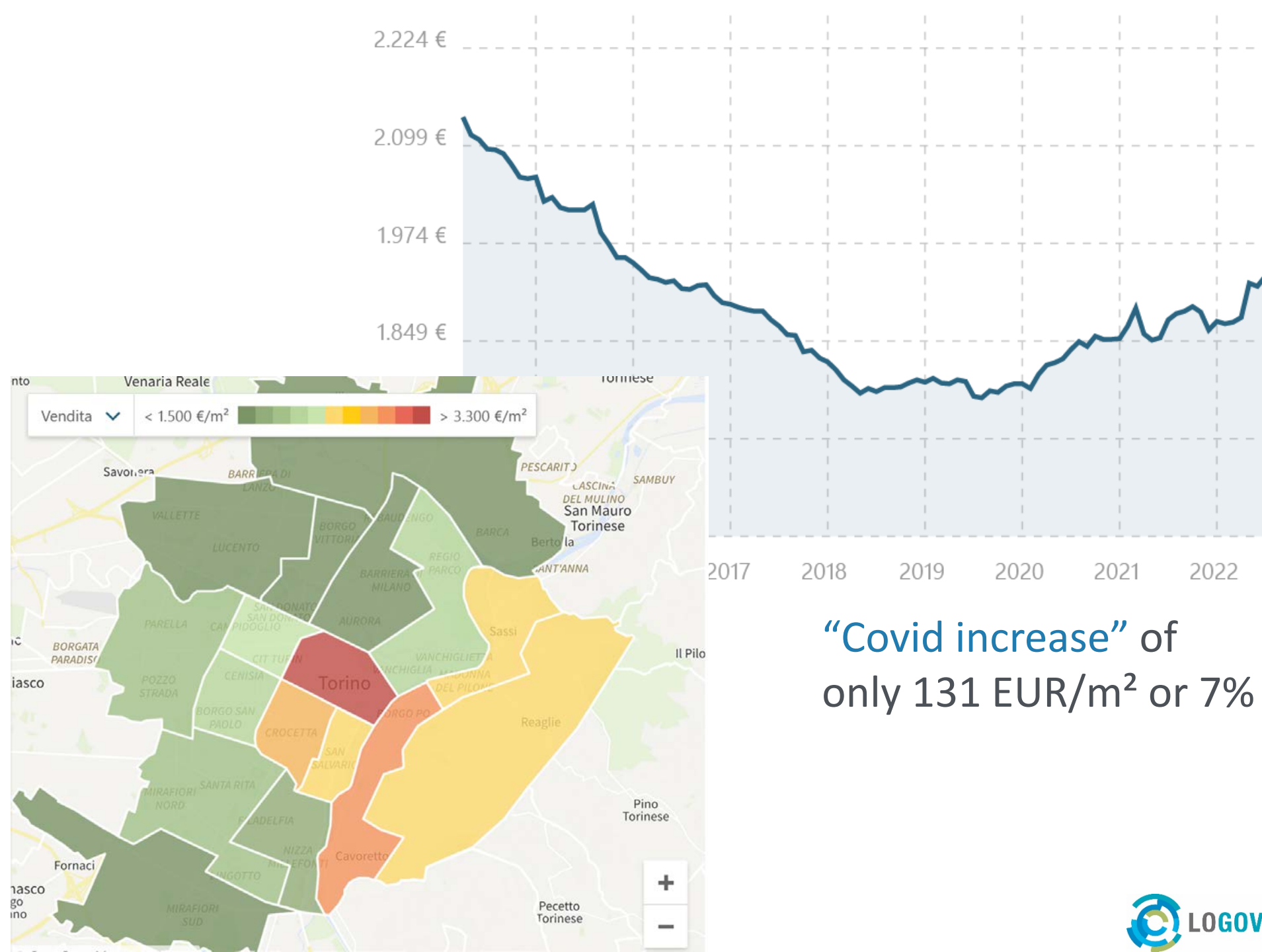
- Net in-migration to the two small towns **slightly positive** with peak in 2020, but then subsides. Longer-term trend?
- Pandemic effects of **outmigration evident for Turin** with clearly negative net migration from May 2020 onwards

# FINDINGS

## Why Do People Move?

# Turin Push Factors

It's Not All  
About  
Housing  
Cost



“Covid increase” of  
only 131 EUR/m<sup>2</sup> or 7%



# Turin Pull Factors

## Lifestyle, Pre-Existing Connections

- **Value-based lifestyle motivations:** especially for outmigration to **more rural communities** radical change to start a new life is key (even with less amenities):
  - ✓ “more sustainable lifestyle”
  - ✓ “being closer to nature”
  - ✓ “living in a place that inspires creativity”

A pull factor predating Covid (“dream of a lifetime”), but reinforced by it through a **change of values** (“new value of space” as opposed to overcrowded areas)

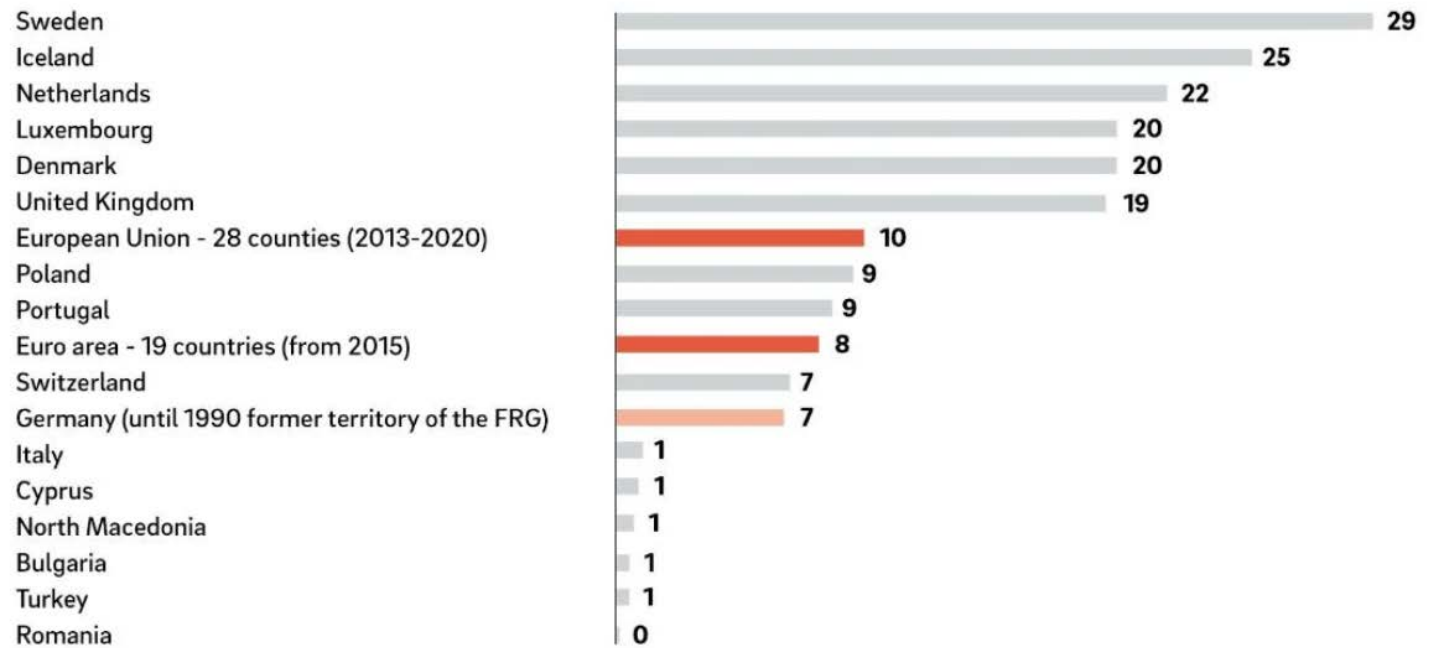
- **Two types of pre-existing connections:** “reverse migration” and conversion of second homes into primary residences

## Turin Facilitating Conditions

## Working from Home

- Covid “smart working”: 10 to 15-fold increase in 2020 and here to stay, even if decrease; outmigrants working-age people

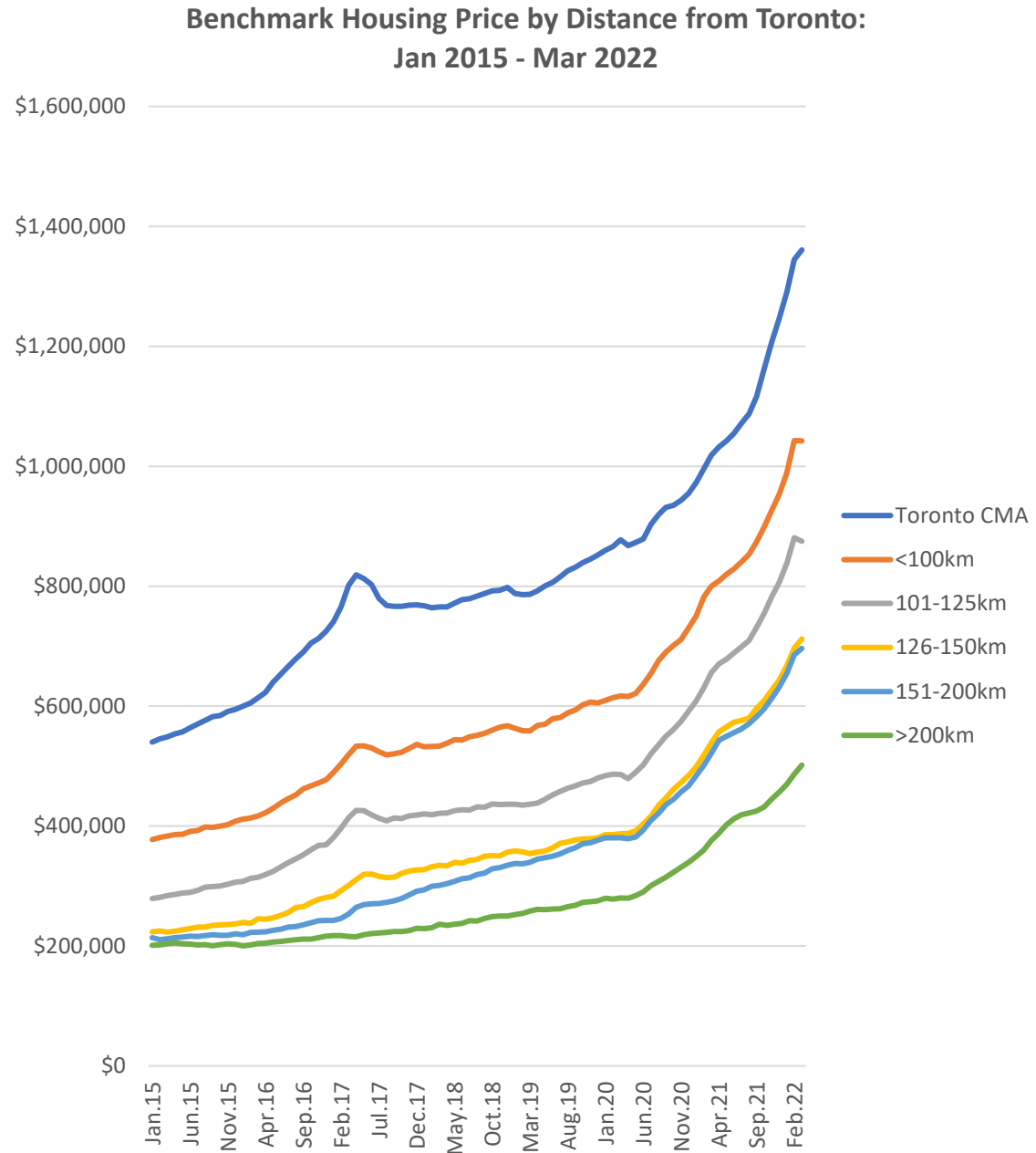
### Employed persons working from home as a percentage of the total employment (2018)



- Skeptical attitude of receiving LGs: seen as impeding integration (Ostana); in no case policy to become a “smart working village”

# Toronto Push Factors

It's All About  
Housing Cost



# Toronto Pull Factors

## Lifestyle, Amenities, Pre-Existing Connections

“I've heard story after story of people getting out of the city, saying, okay, you know, my employer has made it possible, if their employer, were to sort of you know, squeeze them I think some of them would say, screw you! I'll either become a you know a self-employed consultant, or I'll find a job in Perth County somewhere now, because the quality of life is important to me.”

“We decided that we'd rather want to live somewhere where we can hike and be outside, so we moved here.”

“They knew that we had, you know, a brand new school built here. The brand new arena like, you know, there were lots of sort of social amenities and opportunities for them that drew them to our community.”

“We are a community that has a lot of the local amenities of that people are looking for, elementary school, high school, a hospital, recreation facilities. So we have all that.”

“A lot of people who have migrated here actually own their properties here - were part-time residents here and now made the shift.”

# Toronto Facilitating Conditions

“[During the pandemic] employers realized that they didn't need to rule with an iron fist and drag their employees into work every single day ... one of the things that the pandemic did, I think, is it sort of flattened the geographical hierarchy that once existed here in Canada, and Ontario.”

“We were ranked one of the very top for access to broadband to work ... I have a neighbour who works for CBC in Toronto, that lives out this way so and they're working from home. ... They can, you know, maybe commute one or 2 days a week, and then work from home ...”

“In my own family I see that, my son bought a place in Meaford, just down the road here and is now working from home part time and going into the city two days a week.”

# Working from Home

“Brad, and he's oh, he's probably the age of my kids, maybe a little bit older 32-33 ... he's a software developer and brand project manager, and he bought a lovely home out here ... so he's a prime example right, he works from home, he's totally shifted, his employer's letting that happen.”

# FINDINGS

## Impacts in Receiving Municipalities

# Summary: Main Areas of Focus

|   | Ontario | Piedmont |
|---|---------|----------|
| Local economic development                            | X       | X        |
| Housing   | X       |          |
| Physical infrastructure (transportation, water, etc.) | X       | X        |
| Social infrastructure (health care, education)        | X       | X        |
| Digital infrastructure                                | X       | X        |
| Political and cultural conflict                       |         | X        |
| Land use and spatial planning                         | X       | X        |
| Municipal capacity (finances, human resources)        | X       |          |
| Intergovernmental relations                           | X       |          |



# Ontario: the Housing Crisis Goes Rural

## Benchmark Housing Price in Study Sites (thousands of CAD)

|                | 2012 | 2013 | 2014 | 2015 | 2016 | 2017 | 2018 | 2019 | 2020 | 2021 | 2022 |
|----------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Blue Mountains | 321  | 313  | 329  | 338  | 354  | 433  | 510  | 532  | 551  | 680  | 882  |
| Wasaga Beach   | 253  | 244  | 255  | 272  | 278  | 346  | 408  | 439  | 455  | 570  | 763  |
| Tillsonburg    | 191  | 195  | 200  | 213  | 230  | 258  | 336  | 360  | 365  | 625  | 665  |
| North Perth    | 179  | 184  | 206  | 200  | 211  | 237  | 265  | 306  | 343  | 436  | 608  |

Source: Canadian Real Estate Association. All data are for January of each year.

“Now, we have seen dramatic increases in property values over the last couple of years, because the demand has exceeded supply in our area as well.”

“We've got no problem in building houses here we think we had 400, some odd building starts last year it's just that they're all single family 2800 square foot, you know, now upwards of \$2 million homes.”

# Ontario: Implications of the Housing Crisis

“I think the housing thing [is the most important challenge stemming from in-migration] ... because in the absence of housing, none of the other pieces can fall into place, like I can't solve the doctor recruitment problem without a housing strategy that works. I can't solve the [municipal] staffing problem.”

“We've got people who think that housing is not a municipal issue - sitting on some of these councils and they're saying why are we worrying about this? Let the market take care of it and it's like no, no, no, no! The market's not taking care of it.”

“There's always NIMBYism. Specifically, when you start calling it affordable housing, and this sounds terrible, but if you call it seniors affordable housing, there's no complaints. The minute you tag any other target tenant on there, there are complaints. So unfortunately, that becomes very difficult.”

## KEY POINTS

- Rising housing costs have knock-on effects: pricing out service providers, employees.
- Municipal politicians and administrators recognize the problem but are facing push-back from residents on affordable housing.

# Piedmont: Political and Cultural Conflict

- Urban outmigration mixes quite different groups: conservatives from “somewhere” and liberals from “anywhere” with different ideologies and policy preferences
- No irreconcilable conflicts, not even in Ostana is by far most remote and rural municipality (e.g. conflict regarding Pakistani refugees)
- Good inter-group relations, but for different reasons
  - ✓ Bussoleno: repeated waves of immigration in the past; close links of long-established population with Turin (schools, work, leisure, etc.)
  - ✓ Torre Pellice: Waldensian tradition
  - ✓ Ostana: long-established population and newcomers complementary; in several cases gradual movement to Ostana

# Piedmont: Local Economic Development

- Outmigrants working remotely for a company located anywhere
- People working for a local company
- Young entrepreneurs setting up their own (small) local businesses
  - ✓ Local circular economies of production and consumption > Cittàslow Movement 1999, National Strategy for the Inland Areas 2014
  - ✓ Specific advantage through urban-rural links: outmigrants combining urban background with possibilities of rural places > sustainable tourism, (organic) farming, variety of individual services (e.g. guide)
  - ✓ Main problems: (1) lack of match between business idea and needs/possibilities of the rural place; (2) absence of “rural” skills

# Ontario: Local Economic Development

“From an employer standpoint, they cannot attract sufficient employees to work in the service industries. We’re seasonal, in a lot of ways ... and I hear you know stories of the difficulty in attracting employees ... because we do not have the housing in our area that people can live in.”

“Some of those retailers either closed or moved, because they could not generate the revenue to offset [higher rent costs].”

“Many still view KW as where they go to shop and eat at restaurants and all that kind of stuff, and I don't think that trend has really changed. ... So I have that sort of general concern about making sure that newcomers ... understand that our business community needs them to shop local and engage.”

## KEY POINTS

- Many respondents noted positive economic impacts of construction and population boom.
- However, we found striking emphasis on challenges and problems as well
- Local businesses being priced out and/or having trouble finding employees.
- Some new arrivals are not patronizing local businesses.

# Conclusions and Next Steps

## The Geography of Population Change and Urban-Rural Migration

Outmigration trends emerging prior to COVID-19, but were accelerated by it.

## Why Do People Move?

There is a different mix of underlying push/pull factors, but COVID-19 produced a common facilitating factor: increased ability for (some) to work from home.

## Impacts in Receiving Municipalities

There are both common and differential areas of impact across the two contexts. Even in common areas (eg. economic development), actual impacts sometimes differ. There is a clear connection between underlying mix of push/pull factors, and dominant impacts in receiving communities (e.g. housing in Ontario).

## Next Steps: Considering Publication Strategy

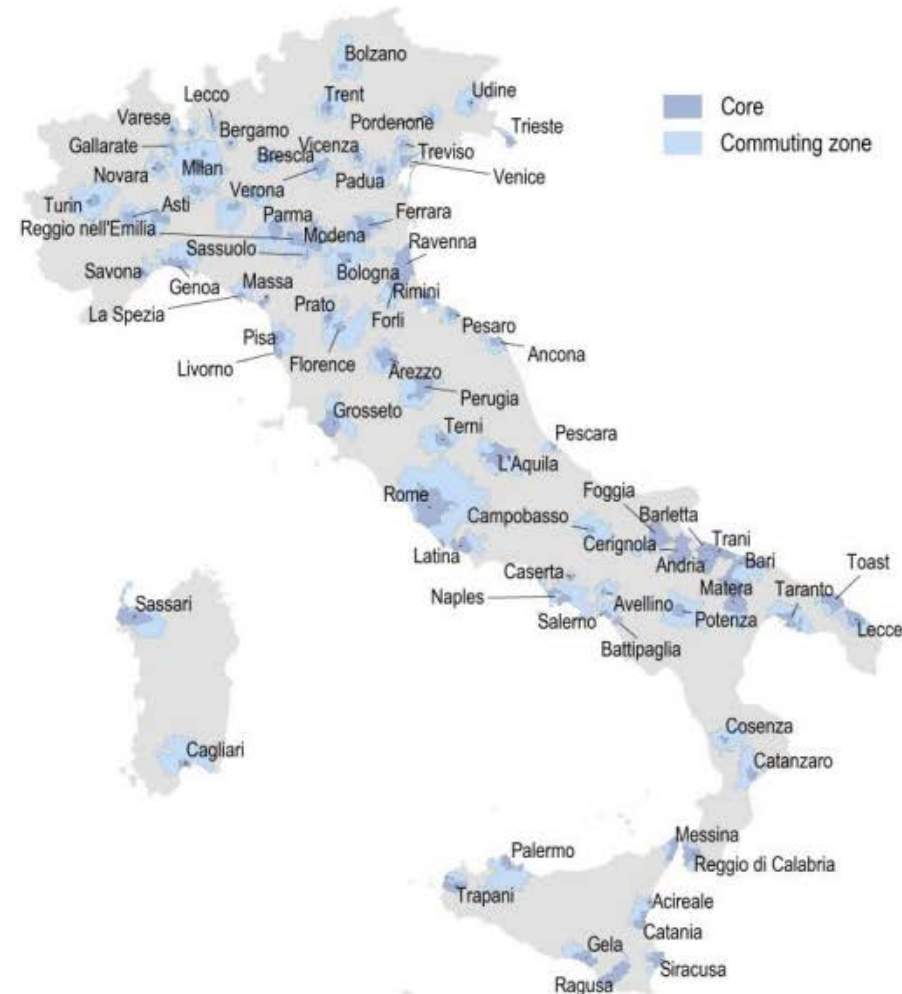
What are the most interesting lines of inquiry / analysis?



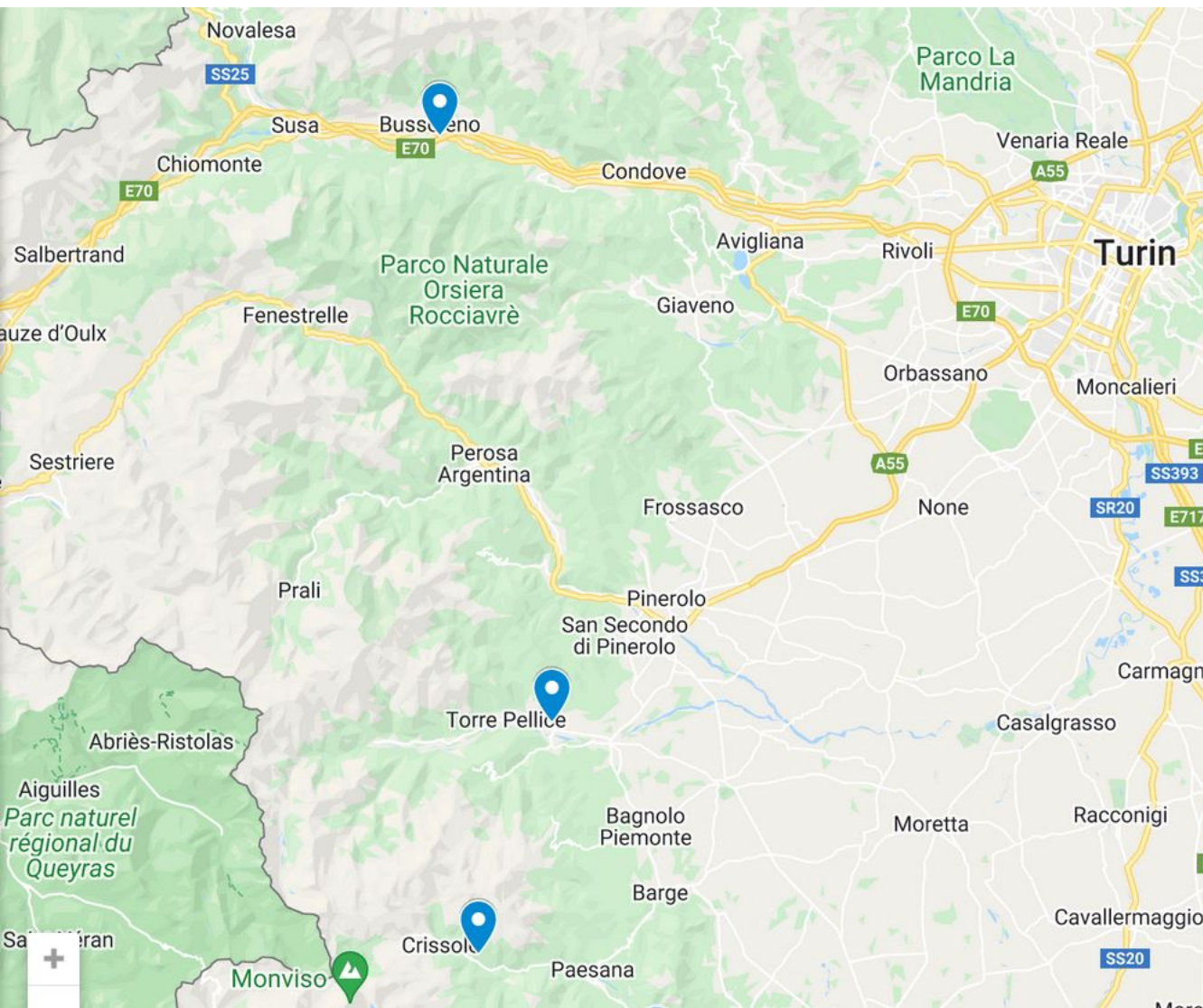




## Italy











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