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Elderly migration in France

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Résumé / Summary

Elderly migration has considerably developed over the last thirty years. In most countries, the elderly are escaping large metropolitan areas in order to congregate to rural counties with special climatic and natural amenities, while often there is an opposite net flow for younger adults who seem to flock into metropolitan conurbations.

The impacts of these migrations on real estate prices, economic activities and local public goods' provision are important both for the regions of departure and for the regions of arrival of the migrants. They often lead to the development of specific localized markets, known as Silver Economies, which represent a set of local economic activities that aim to respond to the final demand from elderly households. Nevertheless, sometimes, the top retirement destinations may also experience problems in managing dramatic demographic, economic and cultural changes over a relatively short period of time.

The aim of this paper is to study the dynamics of elderly migration in France by focusing on two different issues. First, it examines whether the migration decision relies upon personal attributes, by using an original dataset of 12.67 million French inhabitants of more than 18 years old, provided by the French Institute of Statistics (INSEE), with information about age, gender, educational skills, family situation, professional situation, geographical origins and migration behavior between 2003 and 2008. Second, it focuses on the spatial trends of the elderly migration and on the way the economic, social and environmental characteristics of the French territories determine ingoing and/or outgoing elderly flows. Our data concerns migration flows within and between the French "zones d'emploi", which represent a quite significant spatial level of analysis from an economic point of view, contrary to the larger institutionally defined spatial levels (Department or Region) used in previous studies. As far as we know, there is no other study on regional migration in France using such a thin level of spatial analysis and such a large database.

The database on the locational characteristics of the zones d'emploi has been built by the authors. It contains

original information about the economic development, the industrial specialization and the labor market conditions of each zone. It also features socioeconomic characteristics for each zone such as demographics, median imposable income level, income disparities (estimated by the index of Gini) and criminality rate. Finally, it gives information about the environmental characteristics of each zone, mainly concerning its climate.

This paper delivers three series of results.

First, when studying the way personal attributes affect the migration decision, it clearly shows that the wealthier and high-educated people who used to live, before retirement, in large agglomerations with high rates of economic activity are far more mobile after retiring than the low-educated ones. Nevertheless, this is less accurate for intra-zone movements, which feature an important low income and low human capital migration flow. The paper shows that the territories which meet the highest rate of intra-zone migration are different than the ones characterized by intensive inter-zone migration. This is an innovative issue, discussed in this paper, since short-distance migration has often been neglected in most regional migration theories.

Second, the location preferences of the elderly migrants mainly concern small-town areas that feature a high degree of cultural and environmental amenities and low crime rates. The elderly migration seems to be a path-dependent process, with newly retiring households often migrating towards the areas where previous retirees have chosen to locate. The paper shows the progressive appearance of a new type of area – the elderly migrants' dominated one, which is likely to cover a large part of the French territory during the 21st century, when considering the progressive changes in the French pyramid of ages.

Third, the distance of elderly migration is positively correlated with some of the zones d'emplois locational characteristics, but not all. Retirees are eager to relocate to a longer distance only in order to reach the sunniest and more environmentally and socially attractive areas. Heliotropism remains the basic engine of the French retirees' long-distance migration.

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