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Where the Grass Is Greener: Deconcentration Mobility and Activity Space Changes Among Remote-Worker Families

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Abstract

Digital change—most notably advances in digital tools, infrastructure, and the widespread adoption of remote work—has increasingly shaped residential mobility decisions. Alongside shifting attitudes toward remote work and the expansion of e-services, these developments have reduced the importance of workplace proximity in residential choice. This changing context has opened new decentralised residential pathways from urban cores to suburban, peri-urban, and rural areas, as residential decisions are increasingly shaped by digitally mediated connections to activities and places. Drawing on a qualitative study of remote workers relocating from Tallinn to its hinterland and beyond, this article examines how digital transition influences residential decision-making, daily activity spaces, and subsequent lifestyle changes following relocation. The analysis is framed within a life course approach, which conceptualises residential relocation as an event embedded within interconnected dimensions: the individual (situated within an individual's lifeworld), the relational (shaped by linked lives and social ties, especially among the household members), and the structural (conditioned by institutional, technological, and economic contexts). The findings show that the ability to work remotely enables greater freedom in choosing where to live while maintaining employment, particularly where considerations of housing affordability, environmental quality, and family-oriented lifestyles intersect. However, traditional life course factors remain important, and the ability to work from home primarily acts as an enabler for realising existing residential preferences rather than fundamentally altering them.

Keywords

activity space; digital change; linked lives; remote work; residential mobility

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1. Introduction

The development of digital technologies over recent decades—particularly the expansion of remote working opportunities—has generated a growing body of scholarship examining the implications of digital change for residential mobility and spatial settlement patterns (e.g., Gallent et al., 2022; Tammaru et al., 2023; Zālīte et al., 2025). A critical acceleration of digital transition from the perspective of residential mobility occurred during the global Covid-19 pandemic, when remote work became widely normalised, allowing housing preferences and residential mobility behaviour to reflect lifestyle considerations and wellbeing aspirations (Goodwin-Hawkins et al., 2023; Incaltarau et al., 2024; Maclaren et al., 2024). Most importantly, the digitally mediated opportunities to work from home have reduced long-standing place-bound constraints associated with the need to live close to the workplace. Residential considerations can take diverse forms, ranging from traditional urbanisation, suburbanisation, and counter-urbanisation, to emerging patterns of multi-local living (Di Marino, 2022), as well as transnational lifestyles and digital nomadism (Henkens, 2025; Mancinelli, 2020). By decoupling home and workspaces, the boundary between urban and rural spaces has become increasingly blurred as well, with cities, their hinterlands, as well as remote areas growing functionally intertwined. The combination of expanded remote work opportunities with persistent housing shortages and affordability pressures in attractive urban areas—partly driven by the digital transition and the related commodification of housing—encourages households to consider moving away from major cities and towards lower levels of the urban hierarchy through a complex set of push and pull factors shaped by both housing-related preferences and constraints. Families with young children in particular reconsider the advantages of suburbs and smaller settlements, due to more space, greenery, and a safer living environment, coupled with better affordability of larger homes (Jansen, 2020).

Despite growing evidence of digitally induced opportunity structures for residential mobility, we still know little of what the effects of these new residential locations are—for activity spaces and other daily practices as well as well-being. Also, the question of how these migration processes are embedded in individual life course dynamics and personal aspirations remains insufficiently explored. Furthermore, existing research on the role of remote work opportunities yields mixed findings (Hook et al., 2025; Vilhelmson et al., 2026). In this context, the aim of this study is to shed new light on how remote work shapes the residential decision-making and activity spaces of families with children and at least one adult working from home. The study moves beyond traditional explanations of residential mobility to capture the household-level interplay between work and family life, housing conditions, and location-based factors, including how family members' activities are anchored to the home location.

The study builds on the traditional life course framework, which conceptualises residential relocation as an event embedded within broader life trajectories (e.g., Bernard, 2022; McCollum et al., 2020) but reconceptualises residential mobility for families in the context of digitally transforming societies. First, it offers qualitative insights into the motivations, within-household negotiations, and lived experiences of families relocating from a major metropolitan centre. Second, it seeks to better understand how new opportunity structures for residential decision-making, driven by digital change, are emerging. Third, it adds new nuances to the life course framework of residential mobility by showing how digitally mediated work and social arrangements complicate residential decisions. While links between home and other activity locations—such as work, schools, services, and leisure—have become more flexible, this flexibility varies across family members and continues to shape residential decision-making.

Empirically, the article draws on 35 qualitative in-depth interviews conducted between 2024 and 2025 with households with children, who relocated from Estonia's capital city, Tallinn, to sparsely populated suburban, small-town, and rural areas while continuing to work remotely, either part-time or full-time. The qualitative approach enables an in-depth understanding of how residential decisions are made and negotiated within households, how destination locations are selected, and how residential relocations reshape everyday practices, including changes in activity spaces and community engagement.

2. A Life Course Perspective on Remote Workers' Residential Mobility

The traditional life course perspective, building on Elder's (1998) seminal work, provides the theoretical point of departure for this study. This approach emphasises that individual lives unfold through interconnected trajectories shaped by structural and socio-spatial contexts, social relationships ("linked lives"), and individual agency, while also acknowledging the biographical embeddedness of residential decisions (Giele & Elder, 1998; Shanahan et al., 2016). This traditional life course approach has long offered insights into the relationship between life stages, residential trajectories, and housing (Clark & Onaka, 1983; Rossi, 1955). It assumes a relatively linear progression from renting small apartments in urban cores after leaving the parental home to owning single-family homes in suburban areas in family-forming ages, followed by a return to smaller dwellings later in life after children leave the household. For households with children, access to family-friendly housing and residential environments, while remaining close to workplaces, has been of key importance in residential decision-making. While analytically useful, this model cannot capture the new opportunities that stem from the new digitally-mediated work arrangements that allow the decoupling of home and work locations.

To build the theoretical foundation of this study, we move beyond the traditional life course perspective and adopt a relational approach that allows for the diversity and complexity of human experiences (Berg, 2020; Steinführer et al., 2024) and is better suited to digitally transforming societies. In such contexts, the spatial fixity of activities is reduced, enabling diverse work arrangements, new place-based conditions, and the reconfiguration of activity spaces among different household members who share a home. Therefore, this perspective better captures the increased flexibility and fluidity of residential decisions that characterise less place-bound and more digitally mediated work and social arrangements (Bernard, 2022; Maclaren et al., 2024; McCollum et al., 2020). It also links residential choice strongly to the daily activity spaces of all family members, who undertake their activities across both physical and digital spaces, highlighting how increasingly diversified opportunities create a complex context for residential decision-making. More specifically, our approach is based on four analytical pillars: (a) the intersection of residential mobility and immobility with other life course trajectories in time and space, (b) residential agency within existing social and spatial structures shaped by digital transition, (c) the temporal embeddedness of residential decision-making, and (d) linked lives within households.

First, the principle of *the intersection of residential mobility and immobility with other life course trajectories in time and space* conceptualises residential mobility and immobility as a process unfolding in the life course (Figure 1). Individuals and households make simultaneous decisions in related life domains, including family events, work life, school-related considerations of children, accompanied by place-related considerations both regarding home location and other activities (Tammaru et al., 2021). Digitally mediated work and social relations shape how these decisions are made, extending the distance between places of work and residence (Coskun et al., 2026). For example, in families with sustained remote work arrangements, a family-related life event—such

as the birth of a child—may increase the need for a larger dwelling and thereby trigger a residential move. Moreover, the ability to work remotely may allow for a geographically wider residential choice set. At the same time, this shift from on-site to remote work can increase demand for spacious housing due to the need for a dedicated home office space, thereby simultaneously enabling and motivating residential mobility.
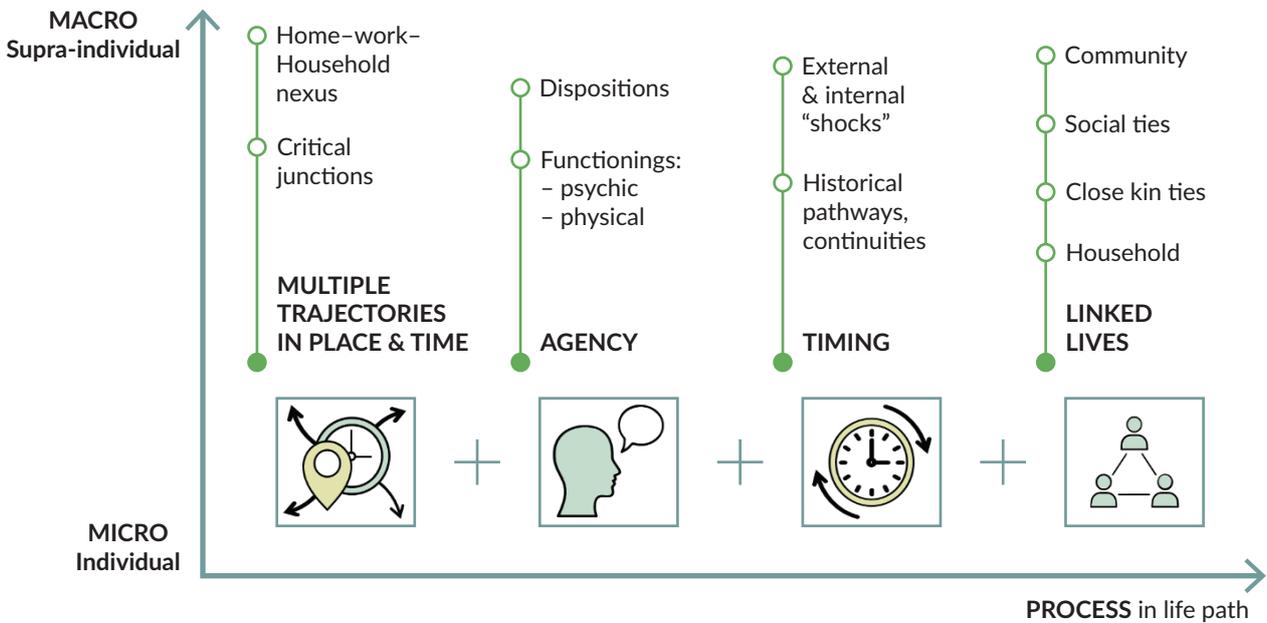

Figure 1. Adopted framework of the life course perspective.

Second, the principle of *residential agency within existing social and spatial structures* highlights how individuals and households exercise choice while navigating contextual constraints and opportunities. The shift from place-bound to digitally mediated work and social relations has reshaped these opportunities and constraints associated with residential decision-making. For example, remote work technologies may function as structural enablers that expand residential options, allowing the distance between places of work and residence to increase (Coskun et al., 2026). However, the ability to take advantage of these opportunities varies across households depending on many factors such as occupational position, skills, income, health, and household composition (Asmussen et al., 2024; Siegert et al., 2025). These micro-level factors are further shaped by organisational cultures including openness to remote work arrangements at the intermediate level (organisations) and by digital infrastructure availability at the macro level (landscape of opportunities). The parallel rise in house prices, partly driven by the digital transition, introduces new constraints on residential decision-making, too.

Third, the principle of *the temporal embeddedness of residential decision-making* emphasises that residential decisions are shaped by concrete historical moments, biographical precedents, and place-specific considerations. The Covid-19 pandemic represents a critical temporal juncture that normalised remote work and expanded flexibility in residential choice. Yet, little is known about the continuities and discontinuities the pandemic introduced into residential mobility. Findings from quantitative studies range from strong (Hook et al., 2025) to modest effects (Vilhelmson et al., 2026) of remote work opportunities on residential decision-making.

Fourth, the principle of *linked lives within households* emphasises that household members may live in the same home but have individual activity needs and patterns influencing residential decision-making (Moen & Hernandez, 2009; Settersten, 2015; Tammaru et al., 2021). In the context of remote work and the expanded flexibility of home search, mobility decisions are best understood as part of wider household and family strategies shaped by partners' work requirements, children's educational needs, caregiving responsibilities, the maintenance or reconfiguration of social ties, and related activity spaces (Vilhelmson et al., 2026). The concept of "social convoys" (Kahn, 1980) is particularly useful for capturing how individuals and households carry existing social networks across residential moves while simultaneously developing new local attachments.

3. Digital Transformation and Changing Social and Spatial Activity Patterns Among City Leavers

The expansion of remote and hybrid work, alongside the growth of online services and e-commerce, has reduced the necessity of living close to employment centres and service hubs (Coskun et al., 2026; Rowe et al., 2022). As the spatial link between home and workplace loosens and distance increases, individual agency is reshaped by new socio-environmental conditions, while individual decisions may simultaneously contribute to reconfiguring settlement patterns (Halfacree, 2008; McManus, 2022). The pandemic also reshaped housing aspirations by increasing time spent at home and redefining the dwelling as a multifunctional space for living and working, thereby intensifying demand for larger homes and higher-quality residential environments beyond cities (Cuerdo-Vilches et al., 2021; Gallent et al., 2022; Vogiazides & Kawalerowicz, 2022). At the same time, rising housing prices in large cities—particularly for family-sized dwellings—act as a push factor, increasing the attraction of suburban and counter-urban areas (Delventhal et al., 2022; Denham, 2020; Gallent & Madeddu, 2021).

The Covid-19-driven "panic exodus" from cities observed in 2021 has since subsided, and urban out-migration is shaped by traditional lifestyle and environmental preferences, including air quality, noise, access to green space, and perceived safety (Rowe et al., 2022; Stawarz et al., 2022). Facilitated by digital opportunities and work arrangements, people can better realise their preferences and leave cities for less densely populated areas (McManus, 2022). Families with children have been particularly prominent among city leavers, seeking calmer, greener, and more affordable living environments (Colomb & Gallent, 2022; Gallent et al., 2022). New life arrangements may emerge as the distance between work and home increases (Coskun et al., 2026), while other activity places become strongly anchored around home (Vilhelmson et al., 2026). Suburban locations may thus be preferred over distant rural areas to avoid a complete disconnect from urban amenities and workplaces—especially in cases of hybrid work (Asadieh & Neisch, 2025; Korczyński & Kajdanek, 2025; Tan et al., 2023). Such suburban development has also been conceptualised through the "donut effect" metaphor that depicts areas surrounding large cities as the most attractive destination for remote workers, while distant rural areas receive a much smaller number of out-migrants from cities (Ramani et al., 2024).

These relocations to more distant locations, beyond the suburban ring, are conceptualised as counter-urbanisation, often associated with aspirations for a quieter lifestyle, closer contact with nature, the pursuit of gardening and growing one's own food, and community-oriented living (Herrero-Jáuregui & Concepción, 2023; Nofsinger, 2012). The environment in these destinations is usually perceived as greener,

safer, and child-friendlier (Jansen, 2020; Vogiazides & Kawalerowicz, 2022), as well as retirement-friendlier (Ubarevičienė et al., 2024). Furthermore, people tend to be inspired by the sense of community that is created in smaller villages, which contrasts with the sense of individualism and anonymous way of living in the cities. Evidence suggests that counter-urbanisation has intensified alongside the digital transition, with the composition of movers shifting towards families with children and knowledge workers in response to remote work opportunities and urban housing pressures (Eliasson, 2025; Karsten, 2020; Tammaru et al., 2023). According to Thulin et al. (2023), counter-urbanising remote workers tend to lead mono-local lives anchored around home, in contrast to suburban movers, who are more likely to retain multilocal ties. Today, remote work enables households attracted to counter-urban residential environments to act upon these preferences at earlier life stages than prior to the acceleration of the digital transition (Correa, 2025). Return migration of educated families to their home regions outside large cities has also been identified as an important component of this trend (Sandow & Lundholm, 2023). These emerging residential mobility patterns suggest that digitally enabled mobility intersects with life course transitions in ways that warrant systematic investigation.

4. Socio-Spatial Context of the Study

We draw our empirical evidence from Tallinn, Estonia's capital and the country's primary economic and employment centre, with approximately 461,000 residents in 2025 (Tammaru et al., 2025). Estonia is well known for its digital advancements (Aasa et al., 2026). Widespread high-speed internet coverage, extensive public and private e-services, and strong support for digital entrepreneurship have positioned Estonia as a leading digital society. Central to this transformation is the concept of the "digital citizen," which is structured around the national data infrastructure X-Road and a compulsory national digital ID (Kattel & Mergel, 2019). This infrastructure provided a strong platform for the acceleration of digital change following the outbreak of the global Covid-19 pandemic, including the rapid uptake of remote work (Piirsalu-Kivihall et al., 2023). By 2024, the total share of remote workers—defined as those with the opportunity to work remotely (for methodology see the description of Figure 2)—increased to around 25% in Estonia and 30% in the Tallinn urban region. Nevertheless, access to remote work remains highly uneven, varying strongly by education, occupation, field of activity, and other individual characteristics. For instance, while 42% of the managers and professionals can work remotely, this is true for only 14% of the middle occupations, with numbers sinking even further (to 8%) for those within the blue-collar workers' category.

Tallinn also has the highest housing prices in Estonia (Kährik et al., 2025), and the ability to work remotely provides the opportunity to seek homes outside the city. Register-based analysis of remote workers' residential choices reveals that suburbanisation has strengthened alongside the digital transition (Figure 2). Suburbanisation is dominated by young and family-aged households (up to their 50s), who account for around four-fifths of such relocations, typically moving from urban apartments to detached houses in suburban areas (Kährik et al., 2025). Remote and non-remote workers moving to the suburbs have similar age profiles (averaging 40 and 41.3 years, respectively). A portion of city-leavers relocate beyond the urban region to regional towns or attractive natural areas (e.g., coasts or islands). Counter-urban movers are slightly older than suburbanisers, averaging 45 years for remote workers and 46.3 years for non-remote workers. Remote workers are more likely to move out of Tallinn (15.9%) than non-remote workers (12.3%).
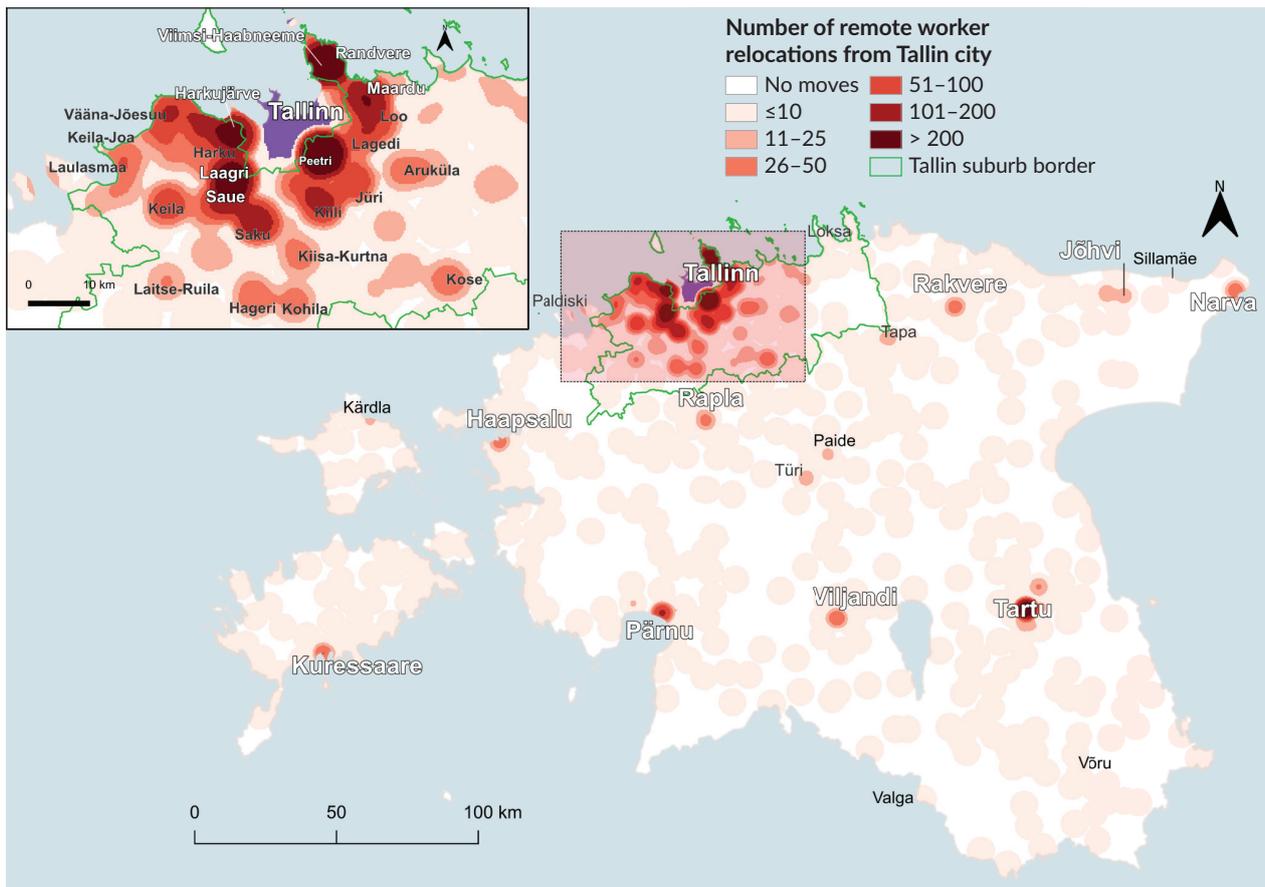
Figure 2. Residential out-migration of remote workers from Tallinn between 2019 and 2024. Notes: Remote work has been calculated as a binary synthetic variable by Statistics Estonia, linking individual-level data from the population registry to the most similar—in terms of demographic characteristics—respondent of the 2022 Labour Force Survey (Nagelkerke $R^2 = 0.45$); the map has been produced by the authors using the heatmap tool in QGIS on settlement centroid data containing the total number of relocations to each settlement. Sources: Eesti Statistika (2026a, 2026b); Maa- ja Ruumiamet (2026).

5. Methods

Between October 2024 and March 2025, 35 semi-structured, in-depth interviews with remote workers were conducted. All interviewees had relocated from Tallinn to suburban areas or more distant locations after 2019, while continuing to work in Tallinn, either fully remotely or in hybrid digitally enabled work arrangements. The qualitative approach was chosen to gain deeper insight into the motivations behind the residential moves. The interviews focused on two main themes: remote work intersecting with the life course considerations shaping the decision to relocate, and changes in the daily practices and activity patterns of the household members resulting from the move.

Drawing on earlier research on the "geographically extended donut" pattern of remote workers' residential choices and Estonian register data, we selected participants from suburban and counter-urban areas in Northern, Western, and Central Estonia (Figure 3). This also aligns with the job-related commuting field of Tallinn, which has expanded significantly, covering almost half of Estonia (Tammaru et al., 2025). These regions feature attractive natural environments, good access to Tallinn, adequate infrastructure, and more

affordable housing. Most interviewees could reach their workplaces within an hour by car, except for the Western islands (Hiiumaa and Saaremaa), where commuting can take up to four hours. Participants were recruited through Norstat's digital panel: A short questionnaire was sent to the panel, and respondents who matched the pre-set criteria were invited to an interview after providing informed consent.
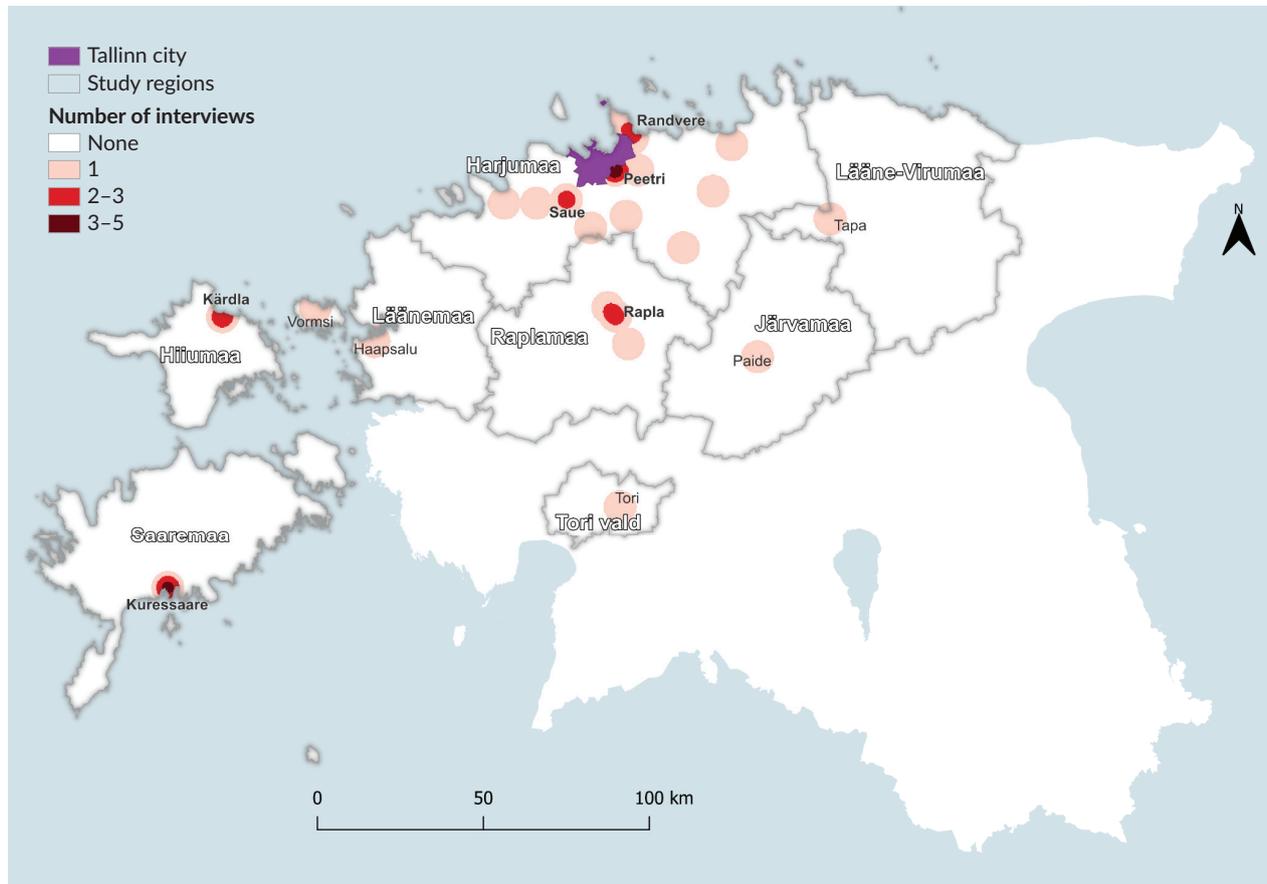

Figure 3. Home locations of interviewees (using heatmaps from settlement centroids). Data sources: Maa- ja Ruumiamet (2026).

Interviews followed a biographical life course-approach and semi-structured guide but focused on the most recent move from Tallinn to the interviewees' current place of residence (see Supplementary File 1). We focused on household negotiations around relocation and shared considerations across work, lifestyle, and daily mobility needs tied to schools, services, and leisure. In a few cases, two adults from the same household participated in a single interview, whereas most interviews were conducted with one household member at a time, either face-to-face or online, depending on interviewee preference. Nevertheless, the analytical focus remained on household-level decision-making.

Interviews were conducted in Estonian or Russian, recorded with participants' consent, and transcribed using the WebTrans tool. Analysis employed a hybrid deductive–inductive coding strategy, combining directed and conventional content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The research questions and the life course framework (Figure 1) guided the development of theoretical themes (Table 2), while observation codes were iteratively refined through conventional content analysis. Following abduction, predefined themes were adjusted and new themes introduced when warranted by unexpected evidence (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). To enhance

validity, single-coder analysis was supplemented by peer debriefing and decision logs (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020). Interviewee confidentiality is maintained, with only group-level characteristics provided in Supplementary File 2; quotes and variables cannot identify individuals, thus complying with GDPR regulations.

In line with the register-based remote worker profile, most interviewees are aged 35–54, highly educated, economically resilient, and in stable employment (Table 1). The sample deliberately includes families with underage children to capture household-level decision-making. Most relocated from apartments in Tallinn to owner-occupied, typically newly built, detached houses in suburban or remote locations.

Table 1. Background characteristics of the interviewees.

Variable	% (N = 35)
Age	
<34	15%
35–54	70%
55+	15%
Gender	
Male	54%
Female	46%
Home language	
Estonian	86%
Russian	14%
Digital skills	
Very good/good	89%
Average	11%
Bad/very bad	0%
Type of housing	
Single-family/terraced	83%
Multi-family	17%
Type of occupancy	
Homeowner	91%
Renter	9%
Education	
High	97%
Other	3%
Economic coping	
With difficulties	20%
Well	80%
Profession (ISCO)	
1–2	60%
3–4	40%
5–9	0%

Table 1. (Cont.) Background characteristics of the interviewees.

Variable	% (N = 35)
Practising remote work	
Fully	47%
Hybrid	53%
Type of mobility	
Suburbanisation	54%
Counter-urbanisation	46%
Type of settlement	
Town	34%
New suburban settlement	11%
Village/small settlement	49%
Rural	6%

Notes: ISCO = International standard classification of occupations; as a determinant of socio-economic status, the ISCO division of occupational groups was used, where ISCO 1–2 describes high occupational groups (managers and professionals), ISCO 3–4 describes middle occupational groups (technicians, associate professionals, and clerical support workers), and ISCO 5–9 describes low occupational groups (service and sale workers, skilled agricultural, forestry, and fishery workers, craft workers, machine operators, assemblers, and elementary occupations).

Digitally mediated work and social relations are central for the interviewees. Over half work in hybrid arrangements, and the remainder fully from home. Digital tools are integral to everyday life: used for work, services, communication, news, and social media, and to maintain ties with colleagues, friends, and relatives—many of whom remain in Tallinn. Digital platforms also facilitate local community engagement through neighbourhood groups and forums, illustrating how digital connectivity sustains city ties while fostering new connections after relocation.

6. Results

The in-depth analysis is structured and presented below, following the conceptual framework. Under the main pillars, multiple single or intersecting factors were indicated, resulting from inductive analysis (Table 2).

Table 2. Themes and subthemes identified in the analysis (based on the interview data).

1. Multiple trajectories	Critical junctures and migration timing Digital enablers for remote work at home setting Intersect between the location and daily commuting patterns Remote work enabling holistic lifestyle
2. Agency within structure	Values, identity, and life-stage priorities Structural access to remote work availability Socio-economic position in relation to housing affordability
3. Linked lives	Within-household negotiations Family networks Community networks Other social networks
4. Temporal embeddedness	Covid-19 pandemic influence Historical pathways and biographical continuities

6.1. Alignment of Multiple Trajectories

Residential mobility occurs at critical junctures when family formation, work life considerations, and housing needs intersect in ways that make relocation both possible and desirable. For family-aged remote workers, most moves are still driven by traditional family-related reasons and shifts in residential aspirations, typically under conditions of relatively high occupational stability and sufficient financial resources to realise these aspirations. The alignment of these considerations thus reflects critical junctures in the timing of residential mobility. In particular, the birth of a child frequently triggers a reassessment of both dwelling size and residential setting. The need for more space, combined with a desire for a safer and greener living environment, is repeatedly identified as a key motivation for moving:

> The main reason was probably that our first child was on the way, so it was clear that we had to move. The previous one was a large two-room apartment, about 60 square meters, but clearly it wasn't a good living environment for a child, and it wasn't very comfortable for us either. (N2)

At this family stage, households search for a specific kind of environment described as clean, safe, walkable, with the presence of social and other services, and specific types of housing—typically an owner-occupied single-family house. Compared to renting, homeownership is often seen as providing greater "security," living space, and opportunities to spend time outdoors. Physical access to places of main daily activities is also considered critically important for all family members. As one interviewee noted: "The mobility infrastructure is well developed in every direction, so we are not living deep in the woods, but it still feels private enough" (N19). At the same time, digital infrastructure emerged both as a key enabling condition for leaving the city and as a critical factor in selecting the relocation destination. Reliable internet access is viewed as essential not only for work, but also for education, services, and social integration: "Thanks to the internet cable, there is a connection to the rest of the world so that you don't completely disappear" (N34). However, depending on professional status and position, the transition to working from a home office is sometimes perceived as challenging. In these cases, the availability of well-functioning digital tools, combined with good communication skills, enables a successful shift to new work practices:

> Of course, for me it was a big deal, being the head of the unit, in a leadership position, to be distant from the team….The tools are all available—everything is in the cloud, software is on the computers, chats, meetings, everything can be done on Teams. We do go to the office occasionally, but it's flexible. (N20)

Distance from Tallinn clearly differentiates daily work-related commuting patterns and the physical use of services, capturing what we refer to as the *intersection between location and daily commuting patterns*. Remaining connected to the capital city's infrastructure, workplaces, services, and leisure opportunities is a particularly important consideration for those relocating to suburban areas closer to Tallinn. For example, interviewees living nearer to the city commute to work more frequently, while those located farther away tend to rely more on remote work arrangements. At the same time, the widespread use of hybrid work enables greater flexibility in everyday life. It allows interviewees to become strongly anchored in local life, make greater use of local services, rely on nearby facilities, and better combine work and family life. Remote work is widely perceived as making daily routines easier and more flexible by reducing the need for physical presence at the workplace and increasing individual autonomy.

Even if the remote work option is available, it is not always applied in daily practice:

> I absolutely do not like working remotely. What I really like is that you get up in the morning, go through a phase of commuting to work, get the work done, then get in the car and close the door. (N6)

Hybrid work arrangements also translate into hybrid service use or shopping patterns. While it is important for many interviewees that their children can attend school independently close to home, larger shopping trips, cultural activities, and entertainment events continue to be concentrated in Tallinn. This illustrates how residential relocation expands the spatial reach of remote workers' activity spaces, as they do not fully detach from the city but instead reconfigure daily mobility and service use across multiple locations. Such arrangements help to "save time" and align work and family life to a greater degree: "Staying and working from home enabled me to navigate better between the household-related obligations and allowed more time to spend with family" (N22). This shift also increased the quality of time spent together, strengthening relationships within the family: "Now, since we're home…we interact enough with each other. There's no need to set aside separate time just for communication" (N22).

Yet, remote work is also perceived as blurring the boundaries between working time and personal life, making conscious boundary-setting necessary:

> Work-related matters are also on my phone, and the boundary tends to blur a bit. To avoid personal time merging with work time, I usually keep work notifications turned off, or only turn them on when I know I'm on the move and something important might come in. (N2)

For movers to remote destinations from Tallinn, the home location is typically detached from the workplace, substantially reducing commuting as people switch to full-time remote work. As one interviewee noted, "The possibility of doing remote work was one of the arguments behind that decision" (N30). By contrast, families who remain strongly engaged in regular daily commuting tend to live closer to the city and express mixed feelings. While some are dissatisfied with this time-consuming commuting pattern, others regard frequent commuting as an inevitable part of their living arrangements.

6.2. Agency Within Structure

The remote workers studied framed their residential decisions as efforts to align living environments with personal values, identities, and life-stage priorities. Again, traditional factors shaping families' decisions to move away from cities—such as environmental quality, safety, sustainability, and family well-being—emerge as central themes in these narratives. Personal values, identities, and life-stage priorities evolve over the life course, often reflecting a growing emphasis on social and mental stability and well-being. These shifts are also closely tied to biographical continuities and earlier life experiences such as being born outside the city. As one interviewee explained:

> I would consider myself a rural person. It comes naturally—I grew up in the countryside. I've lived in the city for a long time and considered myself a city dweller, but also a rural person. In that sense, now that I've come to the countryside, my identity aligns more closely with my real nature. (N22)

Values and beliefs highlight the importance of environmental quality and sustainability for remote workers, similarly to families generally. Our interviewees frequently emphasise living close to nature, valuing clean air, walkability, and a sense of safety in the neighbourhood, as well as consuming services and amenities locally whenever possible. These considerations typically become especially salient at family life stages, either at specific moments (such as when children reach school age) or generally through a desire to provide children with a high-quality living environment. As several interviewees noted, "For us, the central focus right now is the environment—environmental sustainability or a kind of eco-friendly lifestyle. Peaceful living. Overall, providing a high-quality upbringing environment for our child. Those are our core values" (N32), or "We can go for walks, there's the school park right nearby, everything is within easy reach" (N20).

Value judgements also reveal a broader set of priorities. Interviewees emphasise a preference for a peaceful and private lifestyle, alongside the importance of physical activity and maintaining good health. Everyday practices such as children walking to school instead of being driven by car, regular time spent in nature, and the preparation of healthy meals are frequently mentioned. Family values and traditions likewise play a central role in shaping residential preferences. As one interviewee explained, "We have introduced a rule here that we always eat together….Freedom, quiet, peace, nature—the opportunity to grow something yourself in the garden, it's really about the living environment" (N26).

These values sometimes evolve over the life course, signalling a transition toward greater stability, social embeddedness, and family well-being. Over time, such priorities increasingly take precedence over earlier values centred on mobility, independence, and professional advancement: "Well, I guess it comes somewhat with age, when the fast-paced and social life isn't as important anymore. Longer walks become more significant than quick club nights" (N32). Recurrently, "mental well-being" and "inner peace" are mentioned by the interviewees: "And I'm very happy. I feel that it has brought a lot of peace to my mental well-being" (N30).

Three key structural constraints continue to shape the residential choices of remote workers. First, the availability of high-speed internet is critical in conditioning residential selection. Second, housing affordability plays a decisive role. Third, physical access to other important activity locations remains essential. Within these constraints, remote work still enables relocation to places that embody valued environmental qualities, with remote work functioning as a key enabling factor for such relocation. Interviewees typically viewed their socio-economic position as strong and had accumulated significant financial resources; remote work enabled relocations that would otherwise have been infeasible. As interviewees explained, "Financially, too, it worked out. We basically traded an apartment for a house, and living in a house has its own values: having a sauna, your own garden, your own space. That is valuable for daily life" (N32); and "The resources were available to buy something larger for ourselves" (N3). In other words, for people who can work remotely, high housing prices in large cities do not necessarily act as a push-out force, especially when they are homeowners. Instead, high prices can function as enablers, allowing households to leverage accumulated housing wealth to secure better-quality housing outside the city.

6.3. Linked Lives

Residential mobility is shaped by household negotiations and family strategies, becoming feasible only when partners' work arrangements align and children's needs, caregiving, and kin proximity are considered. For remote workers, many place-bound concerns are digitally mediated, leading to varied combinations of

physical and digital arrangements in work and social life. Some households maintain strong ties to Tallinn, while others reconfigure their networks after moving. Local community integration—physical, digital, or hybrid—varies from active engagement to deliberate distance, reflecting different preferences for privacy, social interaction, and belonging. Relocating to distant areas requires particularly careful planning. As one interviewee explained, "My partner had always wanted to move back to Saaremaa, but at some point, when I stayed home with our child, I also started thinking that work is only one thing—and hopefully there would always be some options" (N18). Negotiation between adult partners is also central when considering children's needs, especially in relation to how the choice of residential location aligns with the overall organisation of daily mobility of all family members.

Despite digitally enabling factors, the physical characteristics of destinations and the possibilities for organising daily mobility routines between the key activity locations of all household members remain highly relevant. As one participant noted, "In general, we try to coordinate and adjust our plans so that trips can be combined and we don't have to make multiple separate journeys" (N25). Residential mobility is often motivated by the desire to restore or strengthen networks of care and intergenerational support, but the availability of wider social ties and face-to-face interactions in the neighbourhood are also important. Spatially proximate kin relationships become particularly salient in relocation decisions and in the organisation of everyday life for many families with young children, irrespective of the flexibility that remote work may otherwise provide. As one interviewee noted, "We were also looking for a place close to my mother, so that we would have someone to take care of the child" (N10). However, some families are accustomed to spatially detached social ties, considering spatial proximity to kin less relevant: "Changes already have brought close people far from each other" (N30).

Nevertheless, maintaining previous social networks remains important. For some interviewees, social life continues to be closely linked to Tallinn, with regular visits to the city helping to sustain established relationships and keep long-standing networks alive: "With my spouse, we still go to Tallinn, when possible, if we can find a babysitter. We go to parties—we're fans of electronic music—a few times a year" (N32). For some, strengthening previous social ties after the move is the case. As one interviewee noted, "Those [true] friends are farther away…but with some of them our connection may have even become closer. You can invite them over to the sauna now…So, in a way, our social interaction might have become livelier" (N22). For those for whom leaving Tallinn represents a return to a familiar place of residence, relocation helps to re-establish social connections in the new locality. As one interviewee explained, "All the people closest to us live in Saaremaa, so here they're much closer and more accessible" (N18).

Remote work practices affect interaction among colleagues, leading to a sense of distancing, while the office remains an important node for social capital building and keeping social ties alive: "I feel that the office still serves as an important anchor point for information exchange. Sure, various communication platforms can be set up, but face-to-face interaction clearly adds something that cannot be fully replaced" (N9), or "There has been clearly less contact with colleagues, which I would definitely consider a negative effect" (N11).

New face-to-face social interactions in the residential environment—particularly through community networks—tend to develop slowly, most often emerging through children's social interactions and their parents, or through relationships with immediate neighbours. These interactions help build trust, provide mutual support, and create opportunities for exchange and everyday chatting:

> We communicate with them [with the old couple who are neighbours] over the fence, and it's really nice. We don't exactly visit each other, but from time to time they might bring us a bunch of cucumbers, or we toss a tool over the fence, or just lean on the fence and chat. (N32)

Some individuals and families consciously choose to avoid physical face-to-face interaction to preserve privacy and autonomy as part of their preferred lifestyle: "We haven't really blended in here, because, well, we tend to keep more to ourselves" (N26); "It suits us very well this way—my spouse and I are both introverts, so we don't really need much social interaction" (N13). For others, local digital platforms—such as community-based social media groups, including those that promote sustainable and community-oriented exchanges of goods and consumption—provide opportunities for digitally mediated interaction that foster everyday social contact, build trust among neighbours, and support anchoring newcomers in local life.

6.4. (Dis)Continuity and Temporal Embeddedness

Historical pathways and biographical continuities shape both destination choices and settlement experiences among remote workers leaving Tallinn. The Covid-19 pandemic functioned as a critical catalyst, normalising remote work and enabling a closer alignment between housing/lifestyle preferences and actual residential locations. At the same time, it allowed for continuity with earlier residential experiences shaped by place attachment and prior connections to specific locations, often rooted in childhood or family histories—which turned out to be the reason for location choice especially for movers to remote areas (e.g., islands). For some, relocation represents a return to places where they lived earlier in life, to inherited properties and second homes. As one participant explained:

> Then the opportunity to build our own house arose. The plot already existed—it was my wife's grandmother's summer house, and they decided not to go there anymore. So, we got the plot, and then the decision was made to build a house there. (N6)

Another interviewee added, "This is now our home for both summer and winter—both our countryside and village home. Everything is here" (N22). Environmentally attractive areas—such as the West Coast and the islands—are particularly conducive to such moves, and many of these relocations take the form of return migration to former home regions. Remote work and digital connectivity directly enable this "back-to-the-roots" form of residential mobility, supported by existing social networks, identities, and values that reinforce the decision to return.

The Covid-19 era represented a discontinuity, a critical timing that both reshaped and allowed residential preferences to be realised due to the factors triggered by health considerations and enabled by the reorganisation of work arrangements: "Before that [Covid], the company didn't really have remote work. Covid forced everyone to work from home, and that's when we realized—oh, this can work!" (N20). The Covid-19 pandemic thus became a "catalyst" for leaving Tallinn:

> During the Covid lock-down period, we thought, "Why stay in the city when there's nothing to do? Let's go to the countryside!" This was in March 2020, a wonderfully sunny month. No planes were flying, the sun was shining, the grass was turning green—it was beautiful! We stayed there for three months, and as summer approached, we realised we could manage just fine, and we no longer wanted to return to the city. (N28)

For some, however, remote work was already a common practice before Covid-19: "During Covid, it turns out that I had already been living in a kind of quarantine even before the pandemic. Yes, it was a very familiar lifestyle, something I was used to" (N32). Covid-19 was thus a trigger, and remote work became widely accepted by society, a new "normality" for many. As one participant explained:

> In later job choices and searches I started to prefer—or rather, consider it important—that I wouldn't have to go to Tallinn to work on-site. Covid affected everyone's life and lifestyle anyway, and we started trying to work from home as much as possible. (N22)

7. Discussion and Conclusion

This study examines how remote work shapes the residential decisions and activity spaces of families with children, applying a life course framework to refine the conventional understandings of residential mobility in the context of digitally transforming societies. The framework is organised around four pillars: (a) the intersection of residential mobility and immobility with other life course trajectories in time and space, (b) residential agency within existing social and spatial structures shaped by digital transition, (c) the temporal embeddedness of residential decision-making, and (d) linked lives within households.

Overall, the findings confirm earlier research showing that remote workers' housing searches are less constrained by workplace location than before. Consistent with Delventhal et al. (2022), remote work partially decouples work and residence, allowing greater distance between home and workplace (Coskun et al., 2026). Rather than fundamentally reshaping mobility behaviour, it expands the geographic scope of housing searches and activity spaces by enabling households to align employment opportunities with preferred residential locations. At the same time, remote work is associated with reduced daily mobility and more hybridised activity spaces: Workplaces remain largely in Tallinn and are visited occasionally, while everyday services and activities—such as schools and kindergartens—are increasingly accessed locally. Residential decisions consider the linked lives within households, and therefore, the spatial flexibility of some members is often constrained by others' place-bound activities. Housing availability and affordability remain decisive, as does physical access to key activity locations and mobility infrastructure. Proximity to kin continues to shape relocation decisions and everyday practices, particularly for families with children. In addition, access to high-quality digital infrastructure has emerged as a critical new condition of residential choice.

As highly paid professionals continue to concentrate in cities, where housing affordability is under growing pressure (Lee et al., 2022), remote work broadens families' access to larger and affordable housing beyond urban cores. These expanded spatial opportunities, however, largely follow established life course patterns of residential mobility (Mulder & Hooimeijer, 1999). The age profiles and life course trajectories of remote-worker families leaving cities closely resemble those of other families, supporting an interpretation of remote work as an enabling rather than a transformative force. Nonetheless, increased work–life flexibility reshapes the context for agency, enabling families to better align housing and lifestyle preferences. Furthermore, digital enablers lead to reducing daily mobility, in most cases improving work–family balance, and engaging residents in outdoor activities close to the home environment. Increased residential choice and better alignment between values, daily practices, and preferences supports mental well-being (see also Fan & Moen, 2023). Yet, remote work is also perceived as having negative consequences for some, such as

distancing from social ties with colleagues and blurring the boundaries between working time and personal life (cf. Hook et al., 2025). Remote work has also raised expectations regarding the home, making people value the size of their homes and the opportunity to spend time outdoors.

Our results reflect that residential decision-making remains strongly anchored in life course-related and place-based factors (Müürisepp et al., 2022). Despite increased residential choice, several place-based constraints remain salient, rendering the residential behaviour of remote-worker families broadly like that of other families (cf. Kährik et al., 2012). Physical access to workplaces and services continues to matter even for remote-working families. Nevertheless, hybrid work extends spatial flexibility, enabling relocation somewhat farther from cities, to amenity-rich locations with adequate digital and mobility infrastructure. However, consistent with the "limits of telecommuting" (Denham, 2021), such mobility largely remains within metropolitan orbits, fostering spatially extended suburbanisation and contributing to the emergence of an "extended donut" pattern around cities (Ramani et al., 2024; Vilhelmson et al., 2026).

Although activity spaces have become geographically extended, digitally mediated work and social relations have also reshaped daily and weekly life arrangements within them. Such dynamics support 15-minute-city-like patterns of space use (Moreno et al., 2021), emerging beyond rather than within major urban centres. The study further highlights diverse social strategies among remote-worker families. Face-to-face local ties typically develop through children's networks, parental interactions, or neighbour relations, mirroring patterns observed among other families leaving cities (Špačková & Ouředníček, 2012). Local digital platforms also facilitate local community involvement for some households, supporting everyday interaction, trust-building, and local anchoring.

The study demonstrates that remote work primarily functions as an enabler of leaving cities rather than as a force that fundamentally transforms families' residential mobility. By expanding the scope for aligning residential choices with values and preferences, remote work supports a better work–life balance. It further supports life course continuity, such as returning to inherited or childhood homes, and allows fluid transitions between primary and secondary residences. Although access to remote work remains occupationally stratified (Asmussen et al., 2024), the out-migration of remote-worker families may ease urban housing pressures for those unable to work remotely.

Conflict of Interests

In this article, editorial decisions were undertaken by Ulf R. Hedetoft (University of Copenhagen).

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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