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School-to-work transitions in rural North Sweden: staying on in a reviving local labor market

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ABSTRACT

This article addresses young people's school-to-work transitions. The analysis draws on data from a Swedish ongoing qualitative longitudinal project spanning over 10 years. In this article, we focus on eight young people who grew up and still live in a small rural inland town in North Sweden where the regional labor market is going through a process of rapid reindustrialization after decades of industrial decline and welfare state retrenchment. The aim of the study is to explore the young rural 'stayers' transitions in a region characterized by strong economic growth, yet with long-standing challenges in terms of social reproduction, focusing on what kind of work they end up with and their speed of establishment on the labor market. At the time of the latest interview all but one of the 8 participants in this study had employment in local or regional industries, however, how fast they had managed to establish themselves on the labor market varied between them. Further, their staying on locally depended largely on regional mobility. We discuss their transitions in relation to the ongoing re-industrialization process in North Sweden but also what implications young stayers' school-to-work transitions might have in relation to the wider social reproduction in the region.

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Introduction

Deepening social inequalities, increased job insecurity, flexible forms of employment and demands for mobility are general trends in the contemporary era of significant economic and social changes, that strongly affect youths' school-to-work transitions (e.g. McDowell 2020; Nielsen, Dyreborg, and Lipscomb 2019; Irwin and Nilsen 2018). However, the ways these changes work themselves out in specific places and how they affect youth transitions locally need to be examined empirically (Massey 1984). This paper draws on longitudinal qualitative interviews with eight young people in rural North Sweden to explore the spatially structured nature of their school-to-work transitions. After decades of

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industrial decline, the labor market in North Sweden is going through a process of rapid, but uneven, reindustrialization. New massive industrial investments in energy intensive lines of businesses are taking place in the coastal areas of Norrland (Eriksson and Tollefsen 2018; Lundmark, Carson, and Eimermann 2023), but with spillover effects also in local labor markets in the Inland regions. This regional job growth indicates that young people's vulnerable position on the local labor market in North Sweden's inland potentially is improving. Yet, historical patterns of resource exploitation, rounds of investments and disinvestments and state-led centralization policies have resulted in a long-term demographic decline in Norrland's inland regions with wider implications for social reproduction (Eriksson and Tollefsen 2018). This manifests itself in closures of educational and health care institutions, in decreasing range of transport services and leisure activities and an askew age structure with an increasing proportion of old people. Both the ongoing reindustrialization process and the challenges of social reproduction affect young people's school-to-work transitions in the region.

Empirically, we draw on repeated interviews (n23) during the 2015–2022 period with eight young people (four girls, four boys) who grew up in a town we refer to as 'Inland town' and currently live in the Inland region of North Sweden. The research questions are: (I) What characterizes the young stayers' transitions from school to work in terms of speed of establishment on the labor market, type of work and mobility pattern? (II) How can their transitions be understood in relation to the ongoing reindustrialization process in Norrland? (III) What implications do their transitions have in relation to the wider social reproduction in the region?

The study emphasizes youth's school-to-work transitions as spatialized phenomena. As the research questions indicate, we are interested in how inland young stayers' transitions relate to the wider changes in North Sweden – to the ongoing reindustrialization process and to the parallel crisis of social reproduction (Bakker and Gill 2019; Katz, Marston, and Mitchell 2015; Winders and Smith 2019). The latter means contextualizing not only young stayers' transitions to wage work, but also paying attention to the broader sphere of life in their local communities, or what Mitchell, Marston, and Katz (2012) term 'life's work', e.g. in terms of how everyday life of young stayers can be sustained and prosper. A question we bring into the discussion is whether young people undergo educational and labor market transitions that strengthen or counter the deepening tension between the 'demands' of the production sphere of the economy and the less prioritized sphere of social reproduction. Following Katz et al. (2015) our understanding is that there is a 'codependence but simultaneous distinctiveness of social reproduction and production' (174) which underlines the importance of our study area's context of severe rollbacks in social welfare, in parallel with booming industrial production and infrastructure investments.

The study contributes to research on youth transitions in which place, space and mobility are given a central role (e.g. Corbett 2013; Evans 2016; Farrugia 2014). We consider place and space in relational terms and give specific attention to the character and development of local and regional labor markets. Labor markets are classed, gendered and racialized in different ways depending on the context, they also change in character over time which might influence youth transitions (Valestrand 2018; Acker 2006; McDowell 2012; Brah and Phoenix 2004). The character of the labor market influences what job opportunities exist, but also what types of jobs young people imagine and strive for (Andres et al. 1999; Rönnlund, Rosvall, and Johansson 2018; White and Green 2015).

Young people develop agency when navigating transitions (Kogler, Vogl, and Astleithner 2022) and they use family and social networks to look for a job – strong social networks can open but also limit the job search and thus contribute to the reproduction of a marginalized position (MacDonald et al. 2005). Weak or ‘wrong’ social networks can jeopardize the chances of getting a job.

Further, the study contributes to youth research on ‘stayers’, i.e. on young people who continue to reside in their rural home regions (e.g. Stockdale, Theunissen, and Haartsen 2018). Whereas some studies have analyzed staying (or leaving) in relation to e.g. ‘belonging’, ‘place attachment’ or ‘identification with place’ (Cuervo and Wyn 2017; Jamieson 2000; Rönnlund 2020) and in relation to e.g. dominant discourses on geographical and social mobility (Johansson 2017; Uddbäck 2021), our contribution is the study’s emphasis on the spatial dimensions of staying (cf. Forsberg 2018).

Youth transitions in the context of socio-economic change in north Sweden

Since the 1970s, and accelerating from early 1990s, national and global competitive economic pressures together with welfare state retrenchment have had effects on Swedish rural municipalities, such as restructuring of jobs and businesses, and closures of services and schools. While Swedish cities have generally grown during this period, many rural areas, in particular rural inland regions in Norrland (i.e. North Sweden), have experienced economic decline, deindustrialization, depopulation and ageing populations. Disinvestment in social reproductive capacity has made groups of people living Norrland’s inland specifically vulnerable, among them many young people in transition from school to work.

Since the mid-2010 coastal and mining regions of Norrland experience an industrial boom. Renewed demand for minerals, forests, wind and hydropower and other natural resources have led to huge investments in Norrland (Lundmark, Carson, and Eimmermann 2023). The investments have brought with them job growth, scarcity of labor, lack of housing and chronic difficulties to recruit people to expand industries. It is unclear how the industrial boom will affect youth transitions in places like Inland Town in the long run, their possibilities to e.g. study, achieve employments and housing and make a life. Large investments in peripheral areas tend to be contained locally with limited effects on surrounding areas (Lindgren 1997). Nevertheless, in 2022 a Swedish government representative estimated that the investments will require an added 100,000 persons to the counties of Västerbotten and Norrbotten over a 10-to-15-year period (DagensNyheter 2022). There will be demand for industrial subcontractors, which can benefit small inland industries. Also, the need for personnel in the welfare sector will increase.

Thus, the previous job decline described above no longer corresponds to the situation in the Swedish North. The long-term geographical shrinkage (Syssner 2023) has nevertheless cemented a dominant peripheralizing discourse (Willett 2020) about northern rural areas that is difficult to challenge. Due to historical representations (Eriksson 2010) and contemporary practices and statements by institutions, organizations and media, spatial imaginaries of a lacking northern periphery prevail (Eriksson 2017). Willett (2020) sees it central to understand how regions are perceived by persons living there, to challenge the ‘truths’ and ‘knowledges’ about a region. Young stayers’ practices are

in this regard of particular interest. New industrial investments raise questions about how school-to-work transitions among inland youth turn out in practice. How young people see their place, make educational choices and enter labor markets is important knowledge to understand and foresee the potentials and future of rural places and regions in Norrland.

Theoretical framework

Inspired by previous work by feminist theorists on space and place (e.g. Massey 1984; 2005; McDowell 1999; Katz, Marston, and Mitchell 2015), we emphasize youth transitions as spatialized phenomena. Youth transitions take place in 'stretched out' social relational spaces that include close and far relations, connections and resources of different character. Social relational spaces during transitions include not only waged work possibilities but all other aspects of life as well – life's work (Katz, Marston, and Mitchell 2015). We understand social reproduction both in individual and collective terms and as a framework that extends analysis beyond both wage labor and spaces of production (Bhattacharya and Vogel 2017), thus including spheres central for young people such as education, healthcare, transport services and leisure activities.

To be able to pay close attention to what we see as understudied aspects of youth transitions – their detailed spatial dimensions and dependence on unevenly distributed localized resources in relational space – we draw specifically on the concept 'spatial capital'. The concept, developed from Bourdieu by the geographer Lévy, was introduced in Sweden by Forsberg (2018) as a subcategory of cultural capital, but also related to economic, social and symbolic capital. Spatial dimensions are always embedded in symbolic, economic, social and cultural capital, but Forsberg argues that using 'spatial capital' helps to specifically highlight their spatial dimensions. We see 'spatial capital' primarily as a tool to distinguish relevant relational spaces in the individual biographies. Gender will necessarily be a central dimension in relational space, but also the shared working-class background of the young people in our sample. The growth in working-class jobs from new industrial investments in North Sweden is of significance for many inland young people, both boys and girls. We understand both class and gender as part of inequality regimes (Acker 2006) and look more specifically on how their common class backgrounds are gendered and connected to spatial capital.

Spatial capital has two sub-concepts, 'situation capital' and 'position capital' (Forsberg 2018). Situation capital refers to capitals such as education and language competences that are viable in many regions and globally. It also refers to resources in terms of wider social relationships and mobility experience. Situation capital can thus be summarized as capital towards mobility. It addresses 'young people's different abilities to "overcome distances" and reach a variety of distance markets and educational institutions' (Forsberg 2018, 45).

The other sub-concept, position capital, refers to local social relationships and resources which function within a restricted space and facilitate transitions locally (Forsberg 2018). Position capital 'might result in a job, authority and honor' in the local place but is not accumulative in the same way as situation capital (Forsberg 2018, 45). Knowing 'the right people' thus constitutes important social knowledge for young people living in rural places (cf. Corbett 2007) and works as a resource for access to associations and the

local labor market. In the literature kindred concepts flourish, e.g. 'location-specific capital' (Moilanen 2012) and 'localized capital' (Corbett 2007). The advantage of 'position capital' is, as we see it, that it is combined and contrasted with situation capital and thus provides a more detailed approach to the spatial dimensions of transitions.

We employ the concepts of position capital and situation capital to understand young people's dispositions in relation to school-to-work transitions in the specific spatial context of Inland Town. Inspired by Forsberg, we nevertheless apply them a bit differently from her, as we use them for operationalizing what Massey (2005) theorizes as relational space and try them out as an analytical tool for engaging in youth transitions as spatialized phenomena. In doing so, we look closely on the individual biographies of young stayers, while at the same time unpacking their differences and similarities in relation to spatial preconditions for both 'getting a job' and 'sustaining everyday life' in Inland town during socio-economic change in North Sweden.

Methods, data and research site

The analysis draws on data from an ongoing qualitative longitudinal project on school-to-work transition among youths in three rural regions in North Sweden, each of them specific in terms of size of the population, labor market tradition, geographical location, etc.¹ The project is multidisciplinary (education and geography), and the longitudinal data-set, which to this date (autumn 2022) consists of in total 153 interviews, is processed with the case-profile method (Thomson 2007, 572). The interviews (conducted in 5 waves 2015-2022) are condensed into a document/file for each individual, creating cumulative case profiles and a comprehensive LQR data set. The cumulative case profiles provide condensed accounts of changes/continuities and summarize the ways the individuals' transitions develop over time with focus on specific 'biographical fields', among them education and paid work. The cumulative case-profiles represent what Thomson calls 'case histories' (Thomson 2007, 573).

For this specific analysis we selected case histories from young 'stayers' in 'Inland Town' which is a rural town located at largest distance from any major city and with the smallest and oldest population. Eight young people (four boys, four girls) (out of 18 in the larger sample) were still living in Inland Town or nearby at the time of the latest interview (2021/2022). They were 14–15 years old (attending lower secondary school at grade 8) when interviewed for the first time in 2015, and at the latest interview, they were 21–22 years old. The selected dataset consists in total of 23 interviews. The data were coded and analyzed with a focus on main characteristics (RQ1). The findings are presented in two sections, the first introduces the identified characteristics and the second presents cases that illustrate the various ways the characteristics were expressed in individual biographies. The findings are followed by a concluding discussion in which the youth's transitions are discussed in relation to the wider changes in Norrland (RQ2) and the parallel crisis of social reproduction (RQ3). The youths in the sample are referred to as G1-4 (girls) and B1-4 (boys).

All eight young persons were born in Sweden and grew up in 'Inland town', in a municipality with less than 5,000 inhabitants. It is located more than 150 km from the nearest city with more than 100,000 inhabitants. The population has decreased over time and so has services. Most residents live in single-family homes, fewer in apartments. There is no

upper secondary education in the municipality so young people commute long distances during school weeks or move to another town to attend school. Local transport works well for daily commuting to upper secondary school for those who live in Inland Town, but is less convenient for those who live outside the local town. Many young people leave the local place after upper secondary education for nearby (larger) places/cities with a more varied labor market and tertiary education. Those who stay can find vacant apartments, some young people also buy houses as prices are low. All eight in our sample have working-class backgrounds, as most of the inhabitants in Inland Town. The municipality has a limited, classed and gendered labor market, where women traditionally work in service, health and care institutions, and men in forestry, transport industry and local manufacturing. The parents of the youth in our sample work in service, care and industry jobs, some are self-employed and some have economic resources linked to forestry or agriculture. For leisure activities, Inland Town is in a vast forest landscape, with varied natural surroundings, areas for hunting, fishing, scooter driving, horse riding and outdoor tracking. The town has sport arenas, a horse stable and one sport club which provides a limited selection of youth sports.

The stayers' school-to-work-transitions – main characteristics

From vocational education to industry jobs

Personal interests, job prospects and thoughts about where to stay were actualized when the eight 'stayers' in the early interviews reflected on what upper secondary education to take on. In subsequent interviews, it turned out that all of them chose vocational programmes.² The four boys attended strongly boy-dominated programmes, Vehicle and Transportation (B1, B2) and Building and Construction (B3, B4), and three of the girls the strongly girl-dominated Sales and Service programme (G2, G3, G4).³ One girl, G1, did a 'gender-crossing' choice and attended the Vehicle and Transportation programme. None of the eight youths chose, or even considered to choose, the Health Care programme, even though some had parents working in that sector. There was a striking 'silence/disinterest' in health and care, and when asked they did not see health care as an attractive professional career, but rather as a job one can count on if absolutely needed.

Due to the lack of upper secondary institutions in Inland Town they enrolled in schools in nearby municipalities – six commuted daily to the school site (B1, B2, G1, G2, G3, G4) and two rented accommodation in the school sites during school weeks (B3, B4). The last part of their education was affected by the Covid 19 pandemic. The Sales and Service programme used distance teaching to a large extent during the pandemic, so the students commuted less for schooling during that period. In the Vehicle and Transportation programme teaching and training were carried out as usual during the pandemic.

At the time of our latest interviews, all had graduated from their vocational programmes and lived in, or close to, Inland Town. Seven had permanent employments in industry jobs. The two boys who had studied the Vehicle and Transportation programme (B1, B2) worked with transport jobs in the forestry industry, driving long-distance timber trucks, and the two boys who had studied the Building and Construction programme (B3, B4) had jobs in the mine industry, in one large mine and a smaller expanding one. The girl

who had studied the Vehicle and Transportation programme (G1) had at this point a transport job for a local company transporting goods between Inland Town and a coastal city in Norrland. Two of the girls who had studied the Sales and Service programme (G2, G3) worked in local manufacturing and recycling industries. Finally, one girl (G4) was unemployed. She had studied the Sales and Service programme and looked for jobs in Inland Town but failed. At the time of the latest interview she lived with her parents, looked for jobs in the region and occasionally worked in the local supermarket.

Differences in speed

As outlined above, all but one of the eight 'stayers' had employments in local or regional industries at the time of the latest interview. However, there were differences in how fast they established themselves in the labor market. The fastest transitions to work were by the two boys who had studied the Vehicle and Transport programme (B1, B2). Both got employments directly after graduation, in Inland Town where they lived. B3 and B4 who had studied Building and Construction also performed fast transitions to employment, although slightly slower than the first two. To get a license as a construction worker they needed apprenticeship hours after graduation, which was difficult to obtain due to the limited construction sector during the Covid 19 pandemic. Both abandoned the plan to get apprenticeship hours in construction and looked for work elsewhere, and soon they were hired in the expanding regional mining industry. To get and keep their mine industry jobs they started to commute weekly.

The girls performed generally slower transitions to permanent employment than the boys.

They had after graduation, to various extent, different short term service jobs while looking for a permanent position, e.g. at the local gas station, in the local supermarket etc. The girl who had studied the Vehicle and Transportation programme (G1) had various temporary local service jobs before getting a permanent position in the local transport business. In that respect, she differed from the boys with the same education (B1, B2), who both got employments in transport directly after graduation. G1 struggled to get a permanent job and performed a slower transition compared to the two boys, a gendered difference that coincides with national statistics: male students graduating from male-dominated VET programmes perform faster transitions to employment than female students graduating from the same programmes (Skolverket 2018). The two Sale and Service girls (G2 and G3) were also occupied with short-term service jobs until they got permanent industry jobs (in manufacturing and recycling). G4, who also had studied Sales and Service, was still looking for a permanent position at the time of the latest interview. In comparison with the others, she performed a protracted school-to-work transition. (See Table 1).

Regional mobility

To get a permanent job, mobility was required for several of the young people. However, being mobile was not new to them, regional mobility was integrated as normal in their everyday life. For example, all eight young people already knew from an early age that

Table 1. Gendered differences in transition speed.

	B1	B2	B3	B4	G1	G2	G3	G4
Programme	Vehicle, Transport	Vehicle, Transport	Building, Construction	Building, Construction	Vehicle, Transport	Sales and Service	Sales and Service	Sales and Service
Transition duration	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓
Work	Transport industry	Transport industry	Mine industry	Mine industry	Transport industry	Manufact. industry	Recycling industry	Unemployment

regional mobility would be necessary if they wanted to transit from lower to upper secondary school. They were familiar with the spatially dispersed educational system, the localization of different programs and institutions, the bus lines and distances for commuting, and the general characteristics of nearby towns. They dealt with this spatial reality in different ways, either moving to the site of study, or staying in Inland Town. Each option required degrees of mobility – either commuting home during weekends or commuting daily from home to school.

Thus, the youths' transitions depended ultimately, but to varying degrees, on mobility – all the boys and girls commuted shorter or longer distances during their school years, they managed family and social relations over distances. However, there were somewhat various rationalities behind their choices of mobility. For example, B1, B2, G1, G2, G3 and G4's daily commuting was strongly related to their family bonds and to leisure time activities, they chose to live at home to be tight with their families and friends, and to keep up local activities also during weekdays. G3's commuting was also related to work as she commuted not only weekdays but also Saturdays and Sundays to her weekend job. B3 and B4 did not live in Inland Town during upper secondary weekdays, but commuted home weekends to keep contact with family and friends and ended up with weekly commuting also after upper secondary for work-related reasons.

The young 'stayers' were thus used to the necessity of being mobile and they were prepared to be mobile during different phases of their transitions. They mobilized situation capital in a regional sense over time. Those who did not depend on long-distance commuting at the time of the last interview still talked about mobility as something necessary for staying in the region also in the future, but also as something they valued and wanted in their lives. Being mobile, in various forms, was on their minds when talking about themselves as staying in the region.

Three case-histories

The short-distance commuting transport industry girl

G1 wanted to attend a vocational programme for upper secondary but was 'pressured' against her will by school staff to enroll in an academic program. After two weeks in the Natural Science programme, she decided to change to the Vehicle and Transportation programme, a change of program she did not regret afterwards. She lived a few kilometres outside Inland Town and commuted to Inland Town during comprehensive school. She also commuted several hours daily for three years when attending upper secondary school. One important reason why she lived at home during upper secondary school was her leisure activities. She was strongly engaged in the local community through horse riding, running the local stable and working as a riding instructor, and commuting didn't seem to bother her: 'I thought it went quite well to commute, so I lived at home'.

At the time of the latest round of interviews G1 had finally secured a permanent job in transportation. She lived at home with her parents and commuted to work and leisure time activities. She had also at that time been offered another job in timber driving, a job she applied for already when graduating, but which she now turned down. So, after the prolonged period of insecurity, her options were much improved. At this later stage she referred to the job situation in Inland Town as 'opening up a lot' – 'there is more, they recruit more'.

As described earlier, G1 performed a significantly slower transition to a permanent position than B1 and B2 who attended the same vocational program. Our interpretation is that her position capital was different than theirs, not as instrumental as theirs for getting a job in the transport business. She had limited access to material resources in the transport sector in comparison with B1 and B2, who, via their parents, knew people working with transports and had access to commercial vehicles and trucks. Also, in the case of B1, his father worked with transporting in periods. G1, B1 and B2 were all strong on position capital, but the local social relations they had developed existed within different social spaces with different positions in the local social status hierarchy. Whereas B1 and B2 had strong social relations with men in the transport business via family and relatives, G1 had invested in social relations in the local stable, she had strong social relations with younger girls, girls of her own age and with older women working in services, the preschool and elderly care sector, but few relations with persons (men) in the transport business. Thus, G1's mobilizing of position capital related to the social reproduction sphere, 'life's work' (Mitchell, Marston, and Katz 2012) – being engaged as youth leader, taking care of local stable, responsible instructor for young girls – which disadvantaged her in relation to her peers who could draw on position capital linked to the production sphere (industrial logging, commercial trucking).

G1's position capital did not help her get a job in the transport business, but her insistence and stubbornness in applying for transport jobs finally bore fruit and she got a job she was educated for. But this was not until the local labor market 'opened up a lot' and she got not only one but two job offers in transportation. 'I think it is getting better' she said, 'there are young people who now buy houses and stay here'. These newly emerging employment opportunities were crucial for her gender-crossing transition to finally take place at all, since rather than moving far away to find a job in transport, she had considered a job locally in elderly care, as a last option to be able to stay in Inland Town. As she noted 'they are in crisis and need people very often'.

G1 got a permanent job in her chosen field of education, just like B1 and B2. All three had access to affordable housing, and strong social relations in Inland Town. Importantly, at the same time, when asked about the future, they also expressed confidence in an ability to mobilize situation capital in a regional sense, in Norrland: they foresaw offers to take on other employments in transportation, and also a future possibility, if preferred, to take distance education and work regionally in other job sectors (e.g. crane operator, police officer). All three expressed unequivocally a strong regional consciousness (Häkli and Paasi 2003) – they enjoyed and wanted to live in the inland town, but they could also imagine living in other places in Norrland, preferably in the close region, as G1 put it:

Most of all I have felt that I don't want to move very far [...]. They look for people everywhere, but it is a lot in the South, and in the mines. But that means one either must move far or take weekly shifts [...]. I feel good, since I live at home, I have people nearby I can hang out with.

The non-commuting yet mobile manufacturing industry girl

G2 came from rally car family, her older brothers and sisters were doing rally and she planned to do that as well. The application process for upper secondary education caused her worries but despite her interest in motoring she never considered the

Vehicle and Transportation programme. She finally applied to a programme in a coastal city which included professional football training, as she was a talented football player. At the time for the first interview she said she was ready to move to attend the football programme, but she opted out once she was accepted and took her second choice instead, the Sales and Service programme which her girlfriends had applied for:

I actually first applied to a football high school in [city] and was accepted, but I had also applied for Sales and Service in [small town in the neighboring municipality] which I finally chose, because a large part of my friends were going there, so, well, it is nice to hang out.

G2 was, like G1 above, strongly engaged in the local community, in her case in the women's football team and in activities related to motor and driving. She had access to material resources and social relations in motor sporting, she liked and was interested in studies, which earned her good grades. Throughout her upper secondary school in the Sales and Service programme, she took available service jobs during school breaks.

G2 was thus able to mobilize strong position capital, she could find several local service jobs and had strong ties to friends and family in Inland Town. She also had opportunities in mobilizing situation capital, she did an internship abroad during her vocational training and took a course for an international service job after graduation. She expressed an interest in international jobs, while at the same time she was ambivalent about it. In fact, she talked a lot about leaving Inland town in the interviews, expressing an 'inner stress to move'. In that case, she seemed affected by dominant discourses on social and geographical mobility (e.g. Uddbäck 2021) who call on young people, in particular from rural areas, to leave to become 'urban' and 'global' and avoid being regarded as stuck-in-the-mud and behind-the-times (e.g. Bloksgaard, Thidemann Faber, and Hansen 2015; Paulgaard 2017). She experienced herself as a mobile person.

From jobs as an experienced service worker, in line with her education, she shifted to an industrial vehicle assembly firm. She found it well-paid, and she appreciated the working hours, working during the day made it possible to spend time with friends in the evenings and weekends. At the latest wave of interviews, she had been granted leave of absence by the industrial employer to take a course in a major European city to become an international travel guide. During the course she got two different job offers as a travel guide in Europe, but while abroad she wanted to return home: 'I longed for home and chickened out, so I said no to them'.

She returned to her permanent position in the local industry after the course. She remained open for international jobs but was pleased with her current situation.

What is good with my job is I got it without education [...] and still one can work oneself up to the highest salary within three years and get a permanent position within 6 months [...]. That gives you a considerable security.

She had moved to an apartment in Inland Town, close to her best friends. All of them had permanent job positions in Inland Town, reflecting the 'opening up' of the local/regional job market: 'All of my closest friends have remained here, we are a big gang of about ten persons who hang out all the time. We are so tight. This makes it difficult to get out of here'.

In the latest interview, she still felt the expectation and pressure to leave Inland Town 'but I don't really know where that comes from'. She said she had everything in place

(permanent job, own car to visit family and friends, own apartment, boyfriend) but still had 'that feeling of that I promised myself to sort of try it out'. A puzzling inner dissatisfaction in that 'one has everything one really wants, but still there is something ... one feels that one has to do something'. This inner ambivalence remained despite, or perhaps because of, the security she had established after having shifted to a permanent and well-paid industrial job with possibilities for advancement.

Like G1, she was optimistic about the future of Inland Town, saying 'people are moving here, for instance some new people who have started at my job [...] people move her, buy and renovate houses, starts businesses, they dare to go for it'. When asked if she worried about the downgrading of health services, schools and other welfare services she said 'No, you know, I guess one is used to it'.

In summary, G2 could mobilize situation capital quite strongly, with international job offers, possibility to enroll in higher education, access to jobs in her field of studies, but that didn't match the competing strength of position capital through her access to industrial, well paid, permanent job in her hometown where all her best friends also lived, all with permanent jobs. The better-paid job permitted her to have a car and a comfortable own apartment.

The long-distance commuting mine industry boy

B3 felt socially included in Inland town. He had strong family ties and close social relations with friends he grew up with, and this made him feel safe but also 'free' in Inland town: '[...] it's like freer here than if you were to live in a city'. He was devoted to fishing, an interest he shared with his father and friends. He was also interested in computer programming. In the first interview, when he was still in lower secondary, he wanted to apply to an upper secondary programme where he could learn more about computer programming, but because he would have to move to the coastal region, or even to the south of Sweden, he was hesitant. He decided to study the Building and Construction programme in a small town in the region. Most youths from Inland Town who studied upper secondary in that town moved there as the distance made daily commuting challenging. He shared a small apartment with his father who had started a new job there. They both commuted back to Inland Town for weekends and holidays.

He enjoyed the education. He didn't know the content of the programme before he started, and wasn't particularly interested in construction beforehand, but the teaching and the internship periods at workplaces had definitely made him interested in the construction industry. He longed for getting a job and starting work 'for real'. When the pandemic broke out, he realized that it might be difficult to find the required apprenticeship hours for a construction work license. The building and construction sector was heavily affected and many companies downsized their workforce. B3 tried but failed to get a building job. Via his social networks, he got access to other manual jobs in the regional labor market and from a friend's recommendation he applied for a job in a small mine-industrial town in the region. He got a job as 'mine-constructor', a work partly related to his upper secondary education. Through contacts, he thus mobilized position capital related to the wider production sphere and got an employment in mining. With the transition from construction to mining, he accessed situation capital in a regional sense which made it possible for him to work, earn money but still 'staying on' in Inland

Town. He continued to mobilize situation capital – capital towards mobility – in a regional sense.

Once employed in the mine, he performed another form of mobility than during upper secondary, namely living with his family in Inland Town and commuting to work where he worked shifts and had a sleep-over apartment of his own. The commuting distance to/from Inland Town was almost the double compared to during upper secondary, and the work hours made him dependent on a car of his own. The employment, the small apartment and the car made him feel self-confident and independent. He appreciated the salary which he thought was high: ‘I can handle myself, it’s perfect to continue working here and earn some money’.

B3 thus performed various regional mobilities for attending education and getting employment, but also to keep in contact with hometown, family, friends, etc. In contrast with e.g. G4 who had no ambitions or plans for longer-distance mobility, B3 also envisioned wider mobility, like living in Stockholm for a while, and/or do military service abroad. In this case, he resembled G2, wanting to ‘try out’ to live elsewhere, yet he did not express the inner ambivalence that she did. He said he liked Inland Town ‘very much’ and that he would ‘probably stay there’, but ‘I also like to travel, I would like to travel, I don’t mean moving away forever, but maybe live for a while in Stockholm or somewhere, just to see things, look around’.

Concluding discussion – sustaining local lives: work, regional mobility and challenges of social reproduction

The young people in our study performed school-to-work transitions in a place and in a time characterized by significant economic and social changes. All but one had employment at the time of the last interview, indicating a relatively favorable local and regional labor market after their graduation. We note that all employed worked in industries of various kinds. This may be related to the Covid-19 pandemic, which coincided with their graduation and affected workplaces differently – while some employers, e.g. in the service sector, reduced the workforce, there was great demand for labor in the forest transport industry in the region. But it is important to keep in mind that the low number of service jobs was not solely linked to the pandemic. Due to depopulation and drained critical welfare functions, service jobs had declined in Inland Town for a long time. Yet, new large energy, infrastructure and industrial establishments had emerged in certain places in Norrland, with, as it seems, varying impacts also for smaller manufacturing industries and related working-class jobs in Norrland’s inland like in Inland Town. Even those young people who had no initial intention to work in industrial jobs ended up with such jobs – in Inland Town or in large expanding industries in the region.

The bust and boom cycles of industrial jobs, closing of services and demographic trends have drained critical welfare functions such as elderly care, health and service in many of the municipalities where re-industrialization is under way, so also in Inland Town. In her study of re-industrialization in a rural northern Norwegian municipality, Valestrand (2018) found how re-industrialization led to devaluation and downgrading of women’s persistent work in welfare sectors. In the studied re-industrialization processes equality in labor market meant ‘getting more women into male-dominated jobs’

(Valestrand 2018, 1132). Valestrand's work exemplifies how rounds of investments and disinvestments can lead to structural changes in local and regional labor markets, not only in how they are gendered, but also how they are classed and racialized in different sectors and times (Bair and Werner 2011; Acker 2006), an economic restructuring also going on in the Swedish North (Eriksson and Tollefsen 2018; Hedberg and Olofsson 2022).

School-to-work transitions where young people 'end up' in industry regardless of vocational training risk severing the tension between the priorities given to the production sphere of the economy (dominated by large industrial investors) and the neglected and underfinanced sphere of social reproduction, and in that way undermine life's work (Katz, Marston, and Mitchell 2015). Renewed industrial growth in a marginalized shrinking geography (Syssner 2023) does not automatically mediate the social reproduction crisis, to the contrary, it may aggravate it. The production sphere absorbs young people who want to stay on by offering 'considerable security' as one of the girls expressed it in our interview, with higher wages and full-time jobs. As in many other places, there are struggles around social reproduction in Inland Town, with chronic difficulties in recruiting personnel to the care and welfare sectors. It is easier for industry to recruit labor than it is for the care and welfare sectors. In the long run, this may undercut young people's possibilities to keep together whole lives in Inland places, for themselves and for their future families (cf. Woodman and Bennett 2015). Shifts from certain existing jobs in the welfare sector to working-class industrial jobs go smoother than the other way around, as many welfare jobs require formal degrees (nurses, educators, caregivers). These kinds of losses of competences in the welfare sector are more difficult to replace and will risk to further draining vital societal functions (Hane-Weijman, Eriksson, and Rigby 2022).

All young persons in our sample are 'stayers' in Inland Town, but as the findings indicate, their school-to-work transitions and local living depended largely on local and/or regional mobility of different kinds and on car ownership – all of those who had an employment at the time for the latest interview had a car of their own. They mobilized situation capital in a regional sense over time – all of them navigated several locations locally and regionally, for work, family, friend networks and leisure time activities. They developed strong regional consciousness and connectivity, manifested in the ease with which they 'moved around' at quite large commuting distances from Inland Town. Valestrand (2018) noted in her Norwegian study how in the process of reindustrialization, 'different mobilities were attributed different values' (1133) and that women's mobile practices related to work for instance in health and public sectors were largely made invisible. Our analysis reveals a regional consciousness and an axiomatic regional mobility among young persons, ingrained through the educational system and embedded in a gendered and classed local and regional labor market. In that sense and related to their spatialized school-to-work transitions our findings partly contradict what Carson, Carson, and Lundström (2021) term 'internal disconnectedness' in the northern region, which they argue result from large distances and lack of functional ties within the region.

The fast but uneven economic restructuring undoubtedly affects people and places differently and requires a variety of mobilities, not least of young people in the rural inland. The 'opening up' of Inland town, as expressed by one of the girls, changed access to working-class jobs in the local and regional labor market for both boys and girls. It speeded up the gendered, prolonged transition for the girl in the transport

sector, and opened for the shift from service to industrial jobs for others. The striking 'silence/disinterest' in health and care sector jobs only deepened, despite the fact of both girls and boys having strong position capital linked to the social sector, via their mothers' employments. We found how this 'devalued' position capital both prolonged a gender-crossing transition and eased the shift to industrial employments. Nevertheless, as emphasized throughout the text, their transitions and local living depended largely on regional mobility – they mobilized regional situation capital and by doing so could 'stay on' in Inland Town.

The findings speak to research on youth transitions and to research on peripheries undergoing shifting economic cycles, in our case from decline to uneven reindustrialization. Analyses of longitudinal data permit us to capture durations and character of young people's school to work transitions, beyond what from a distance looks like 'linear' transitions, and also to contribute with a youth perspective on regional economic reconstruction.

Notes

1. The project is funded by the Swedish Research Council (VR 2020-03101) and is approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (2020-04518). It uses data from two previous projects together with newly produced data. Youths participating in the previous projects were contacted for participation in this new longitudinal project and data linked to those who wanted to participate are re-used and re-analyzed together with new data. All participants have received information about the project's purpose and implementation and given their informed consent before each interview.
2. In Sweden, comprehensive school lasts until the age of 15–16. Upper secondary school is voluntary, but in principle all students continue to upper secondary, where they can choose between vocational and academic programmes, all of them three years long with possibility to choose courses that give you eligibility to apply for higher education. Students who failed in comprehensive school can attend the Introduction programme to complement their grades from comprehensive school.
3. Sales and service is the programmes's current name. During the years the girls attended the programme it was called the Business and Administration programme.

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Ethical approval

The study is approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (2020-04518).

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