

TILL WORK DO US PART - THE SOCIAL FALLACY OF LONG-DISTANCE COMMUTING

Erika Sandow

Department of Social and Economic Geography, Umeå University

SE- 901 87 Umeå, Sweden

erika.sandow@geography.umu.se

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ABSTRACT

A growing number of people in Europe are long-distance commuters. For some people and households long-distance commuting may be a temporary lifestyle, offering financial and career benefits, whereas for others commuting lifestyle becomes permanent. Commuting can mean increased salary, a better job, the only possibility to keep a job for the individual, but also increased stress, long travel times, and in some cases household break-up. However, despite the growing number of long-distance commuters, the long-term social implications of long-distance commuting on households are not well understood. This paper focuses on social implications of long-distance commuting on commuters and their households. In a nationwide study the extent to which long-distance commuting increase the risk for household break-up (divorce/separation) is investigated. Discrete-time regression models were employed to register data on Swedish couples in 2000 to explore the risk of separation following long-distance commuting during 1995 to 2005. The results show that among couples where one or both spouses long-distance commute separation rates are higher compared to non-commuting couples. For men the odds of separating are highest if commuting is on a temporary basis, whereas women decrease the odds when continuing commuting for a longer time-period.

Keywords: *long-distance commuting, social sustainability, household breakup, longitudinal study, Sweden*

INTRODUCTION

For many commuting is an important aspect of our daily life. The majority of the workforce travel to and from work on a daily basis. Presently, there is a trend in Europe that long-distance commuting increases, both daily and weekly (Green et al., 1999; Lyons and Chatterjee, 2008; Renkow and Hower 2000).

For many long-distance commuting can be a strategic mobility choice (Sandow and Westin, 2010). From an individual's labour market perspective long-distance commuting offers increased career opportunities often connected with higher income. As commuting can offer an alternative to migration (Green et al, 1999; Lundholm, 2008) it also offers a possibility to maintain the social security and place attachment accumulated over the years (Lundholm et al., 2001). Longer commuting distances and durations can also be chosen as part of preferred housing and neighborhood characteristics (Plaut, 2006). For dual career households the increased regionalization and specialization of the labour market can make the geography of working and life more complicated. Longer commutes, for one or both partner, can then be a mobility strategy.

Regardless of the motives cause for long-distance commuting has an impact on people's family and interpersonal relationships (Cassidy, 1992; Green et al., 1999). Commuters must be willing to spend less time socialising with family and friends. Commuting can also lead to changing family roles. For example, in a dual-income household where one partner is a long-distance commuter it is common that the spouse, often the woman, take a less qualified work closer to home and work part time to be able to take on more household responsibilities, such as taking care of children and grocery shopping (Hanson and Hanson, 1993; Hjorthol, 2000; Turner and Niemeier, 1997).

Aim

It is very clear that while a commuting lifestyle can bring numerous benefits it also imposes significant costs on people and their social environment. The picture on (long-term) social implications of long-distance commuting on commuters and their households' is however relatively unclear. The main reason for this is that many studies

have mainly focused on either personal wellbeing of the commuter himself (e.g. health, stress), or economic aspects regarding commuting, often in terms of income and career achievement or when commuting is an alternative to migration. While there are several studies focusing on the growth of commuter marriages there are few, if any, longitudinal studies conducted to assess the long-term effects of commuting on family relationships in terms of divorces/separations. This article, therefore, focuses on the behaviour of households when one spouse is a long-distance commuter (30 km or more). The aim is to analyse how long-distance commuting affect the probability of separation among Swedish couples.

Discrete-time logistic regression models are employed to register data on Swedish couples (two grown-ups, with or without children) in 2000 and their commuting behaviour over a 10 year period (1995-2005) to analyse if long-distance commuting appear to affect the duration of marriages ending in divorce.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK - HOW DOES COMMUTING AFFECT COMMUTERS AND THEIR HOUSEHOLDS?

This section gives a brief overview of literature regarding social implications of long-distance commuting on people and households .

While commuting in one sense is a demand derived so as to get to and from work the journey itself can be utilised to something positive for the commuter. For the conventional commuting worker, the commute can offer a natural transition between being at work and at home. Time spend in the car, bus, train or bike, or otherwise making the way from work to home can serve as a decompression period for commuters (Mokhtarian and Salomon, 2001).

While some people may value their commute time as a positive utility commuting for many people is a stressful experience, causing different health problems (Evans et al., 2002; Kluger, 1998). Several studies indicate that commuters generally experience a stressful lifestyle impacting on their own psychological and physical wellbeing. A study

by Costa et al. (1988) show increased psychological and physical health problems among commuters, especially among those using public transportation. Kluger (1998) found that car commuters with lengthy journeys are likely to be in a negative mood in the evening. There are studies showing that commuters on average are less satisfied with their lives than noncommuters. Stutzer and Frey (2007) found that a commuter who travels one hour each way would have to make forty per cent more in salary to be as “satisfied” with life as a noncommuter. They, therefore, conclude that commuters are not compensated for the stress they pay - a so called commuting paradox. These findings support the notion that having a long commute is a short-time resolution. However, as showed by Sandow and Westin (2010) long-distance commuters in Sweden rather seem to be a long-term mobility choice rather than a short term choice. The majority of long-distance commuters in Sweden commute for five years or more and a large part even commute for more than ten years.

Commuting can be a mobility strategy to keep social relationships. Commuting can give the opportunity to maintain a social network built up during years of living at the same place, which would be lost in case of moving (Fisher and Malmberg, 2001). In post-modern society shifting labour market structures, with an increased specialisation, make it more difficult for both partners in a dual-career household to accommodate both spouse’s careers close to home. Commuting for one or both spouses in a household can therefore make it possible for both spouses to make a career without moving. For some household these complexities of the changing geographical labour mobility result in ‘commuter partnership’ in which both pursue their careers while living apart during the weeks (Green et al., 1999; Van der Klis and Karsten, 2009; Van der Klis and Mulder, 2008).

While commuter partnership is a more extreme example of how family structures can change due to commuting there are also other impacts of commuting on family and interpersonal relationships. Lengthy commuting implies less time to interact with and socialize with family, friends and neighbours (Cassidy, 1992; Flood and Barbato, 2005; Green et al., 1999; Costa et al., 1988). This has a direct negative impact on people’s

involvement in community affairs and informal social interaction (Pocock, 2003 cited in Flood and Barbato, 2005 p. 7). Putnam (2000) estimated that for every ten minutes of commuting time a person's social connection is cut by ten percent.

Commuting is generally a more difficult lifestyle when there are children living at home (Rotter, Barnett, & Fawcett, 1998). When a parent is away from home longer times during the day or several days if weekly commuting they can feel quilt for missing vital daily parts of their children's development (Rotter et al., 1998). There is also a mental distance to consider when long-distance commuting. Even if access to fast modes of transportation makes it possible to choose to work further away from ones home without having to increase travel time there is a mental distance. If something happens in school or a child get sick it is important for parents of small children to know that one parent quick can manage to get home (Friberg et al., 2004).

DATA AND METHOD

Empirically, the study is based on geo-referenced longitudinal individual register data for the entire Swedish population. The data base ASTRID contains annually updated information on some individual demographic and socioeconomic attributes including family situation and members, earnings, work, employment and unemployment, support income and coordinates for place of living and work with 100 meters resolution. Information on travel time and travel modes is unfortunately not available. The definition of what constitutes a long-distance commute is therefore based on travel distance as a proxy for travel time. A one-way distance (Euclidean distance) of 30 kilometres or more is defined as a long-distance commute (see Sandow and Westin, 2010, for a more detailed definition of what constitutes a long-distance commute). As the data is on an annually basis it is not possible to make a distinction between daily or weekly long-distance commuting, both groups are therefore included in the analysis.

In total, the data consisted of all individuals in employment aged 20-60 years in 2000. Persons not living with a partner in the year 2000 are excluded. The focus in this study is

on nuclear household relationships and therefore only couples living together¹ (married or registered as cohabiting²) are accounted for in the analyses. So called 'commuter partnerships' in which couples live apart during the weeks are therefore not included in the analyses. This gives a total of 2,143,256 persons of which 186,156 (9%) were long-distance commuters at the time of sample (year 2000). Information on a number of demographic and socioeconomic characteristics for all these individuals in the sample was extracted from the database back to year 1995 and up to 2005.

In this nationwide register-based study the extent to which long-distance commuting increases the risk for separation is investigated. Discrete-time logistic regressions for separation were estimated. Discrete-time logistic regression models the probability that an event occurs within a given period as a function of one or more covariates. The outcome (event) of the study was divorce for married persons and a change in cohabiting status to living alone for persons registered as cohabiting. The demographic covariates (Table 1) include age, gender and children living at home each year. The socioeconomic covariates included highest attained education level, employment sector and income each year deflated according to the 2000 value of the Swedish crown. Employment is defined as having an annual income of at least 50 000 SEK.

All persons were followed from the year 2000 until divorce, death of spouse or year 2005. Only the recorded marriage/cohabitation in 2000 was considered. This may be a second- or higher order marriage if persons were separated or widowed before 2000. Because information on family status only goes back to 1995, we do not know the duration of those marriages/cohabitations. It is arbitrarily set to 1 year. It was tested with an indicator (dummy) of whether the marriage/partnership was already started in 1995 or not, but the commuting effects were always the same (not shown). Models were also estimated separately for those marrying/cohabiting before and after 1995 but since they gave very similar results they are not shown.

¹They must have the same residential coordinates.

² Only spouses with common children are registered as cohabiting in the data.

Several specifications of the long-distance commuting variable were used. In one model, a distinction was made between not commuting and commuting during 1995-2005 to explore the overall effect. In another model, distinction were made whether the person have been involved in long-distance commuting five years or more, less than five years or not commuting during the studied time-period.

RESULTS

In this section, the empirical results are presented and interpreted.

Descriptive

In total, 9 % among the couples were long-distance commuting in 2000 (12 % men, 6 % women). About half (49%) of these people were commuting five years later. Overall it was relatively common to commute for a longer time-period; 34% of those long-distance commuting at least one year in the period 1995 and 2005 had a duration of at least 5 years.

Table 1 shows socio-economic characteristics for long-distance commuters and non commuters divided by gender. The share of highly educated and high income earners are larger among commuters compared to the general population. There are although large gender differences between the commuters. The share of highly educated female commuters is larger than the male commuters. Despite these educational differences between commuting women and men the majority of these women are low income earners. In line with another study of long-distance commuters in Sweden (Sandow and Westin, 2010) this reflect that men benefit economically more than women from long-distance commuting.

While the average age indicates that many couples are middle-aged it is more common to have children, especially pre-school children, among commuters than the non-commuting couples. This may reflect that children increases place-attachments and that long-distance commuting is part of a strategic mobility choice or solution to avoid migration.

Table 1. Descriptive characteristics of couples, Sweden, 2000 (n=2,143,256). Source: Data from ASTRID database, Umeå University.

Characteristics	Women		Men	
	Long-distance Commuter (n=188,306)	Non commuter (n=868,545)	Long-distance Commuter (n=312,301)	Non commuter (n=774,104)
Gender	6 %	92 %	12 %	88 %
Average age	43	44	44	44
<i>Family situation</i>				
Children aged 0-6 years ^a	32 %	27 %	33 %	33 %
Children aged 7-17 years ^a	40 %	44 %	45 %	45 %
No children	41 %	41 %	36 %	36 %
<i>Education level</i>				
Junior high school (low)	11 %	15 %	16 %	21 %
High school (medium)	63 %	67 %	64 %	63 %
University education (high)	26 %	18 %	21 %	17 %
<i>Income level^b</i>				
Low	48 %	59 %	16 %	24 %
Medium	32 %	28 %	39 %	45 %
High	21 %	13 %	45 %	31 %
<i>Employment sector</i>				
Primary or secondary sector	15 %	14 %	40 %	48 %
Private service sector	29 %	21 %	38 %	31 %
Public service	51 %	60 %	19 %	17 %
Other	6 %	5 %	4 %	4 %

^a They can have children in both age groups.

^b Income level: Low 50 000 – 200 000 SEK; Middle 200 000 – 300 000 SEK, High 300 000 + SEK. A high income corresponds to approximately 31 300 €.

Separation rates

The total number of separations was 255 267 persons (12%), of which 123 115 were women and 132 152 men³, during the five year follow-up. On average long-distance commuter couples have higher separation rates (14%) than non-commuting couples (11%). As can be seen in Figure 1 long-distance commuters separation rates are annually higher than non-commuters.

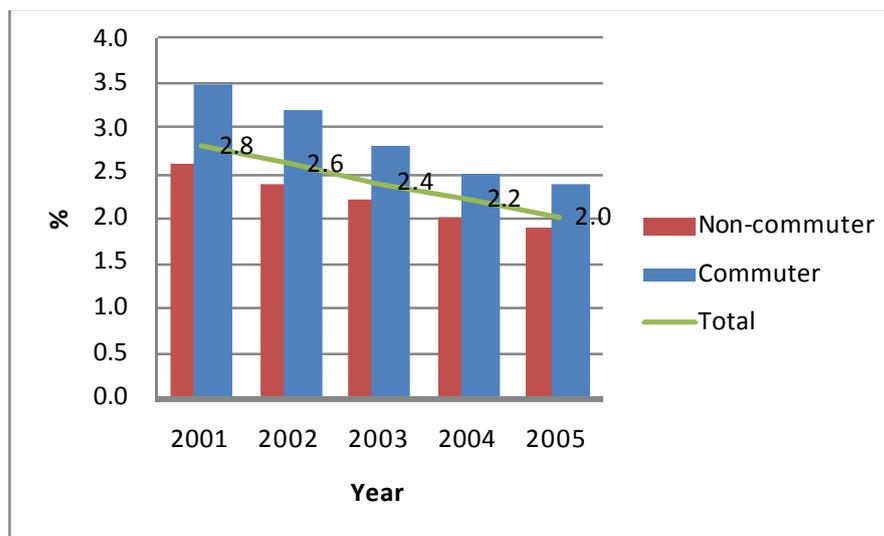


Figure 1. Separation rates, percentage of separations each year among studied couples.

Source: data from ASTRID database, Umeå University.

As shown in an earlier study by Sandow and Westin (2010) a relatively high share of long-distance commuters in Sweden have a duration of commuting five years or more. It was therefore tested if the separation rates differ between couples where one, or both partners, have a long duration of long-distance commuting compared to other couples. It was found (Table 2) that among couples where the commuter/commuters have a long duration (≥ 5 years) of long-distance commuting fewer couples separated compared to those having a short commuting duration. Separation rates were the same for non

³ The number of individuals and separations are not equal among women and men because some individuals are married to/cohabiting with and separated from either non-residential Swedes or non-Swedish persons. These individuals are not included in the analyses.

commuting couples and couples having a long commuting duration. This may reflect that after five years of long-distance commuting the commute has become part of one's lifestyle, in were the experiences of the social and economical costs and benefits of commuting is learned to live with in everyday life. The gained experiences of what it means to long-distance commute may then be seen worthwhile.

Overall, these differences in separation rates between the two groups of commuter are the same for each year (Figure 2). No gender differences were found regarding who the commuter was in a couple. For those couples not separating it did not matter if it is was the man or woman who was the long-distance commuter.

Table 2. Separation rates divided by commuting years.

	Commuting <5 years	Commuting ≥5 years	Not commuting
Separations, 2000-2005	16%	11%	11%

Source: data fom ASTRID database, Umeå University.

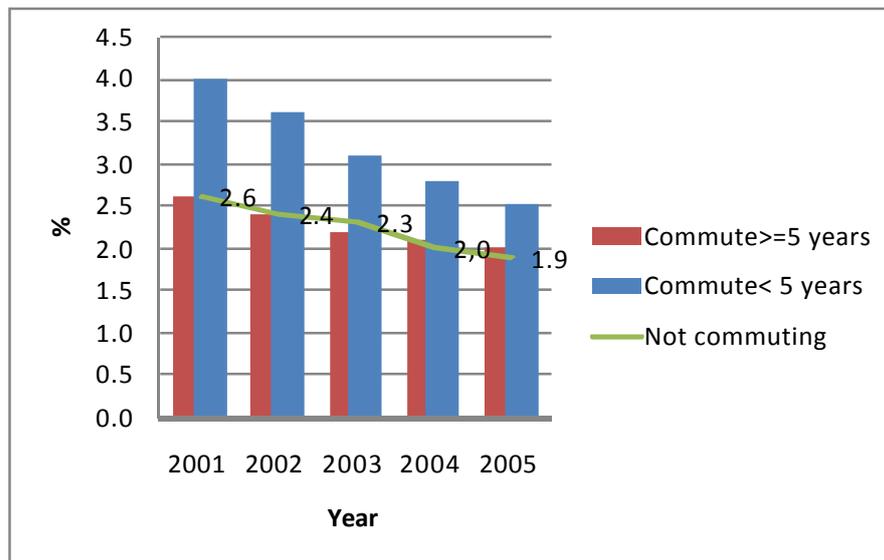


Figure 2. Separation rates divided by years in long-distance commuting, percentage of separations each year among studied couples. Source: data from ASTRID database, Umeå University.

Previous experiences of commuting

About one third of the long-distance commuters were already commuting when they married or moved together. For these people commuting with its pros and cons was probably already part of their everyday life. When controlling for the effect of previous experiences of long-distance commuting before moving in together/getting married on separation a positive relationship was found (Figure 3)⁴. Among commuting couples it is less common to separate if at least one spouse had previous experience of long-distance commuting before marriage/cohabitating (12 % compared to 16 %). Whether it is the female or male spouse who has been long-distance commuting prior to relationship do not seem to have an effect on separation rates.

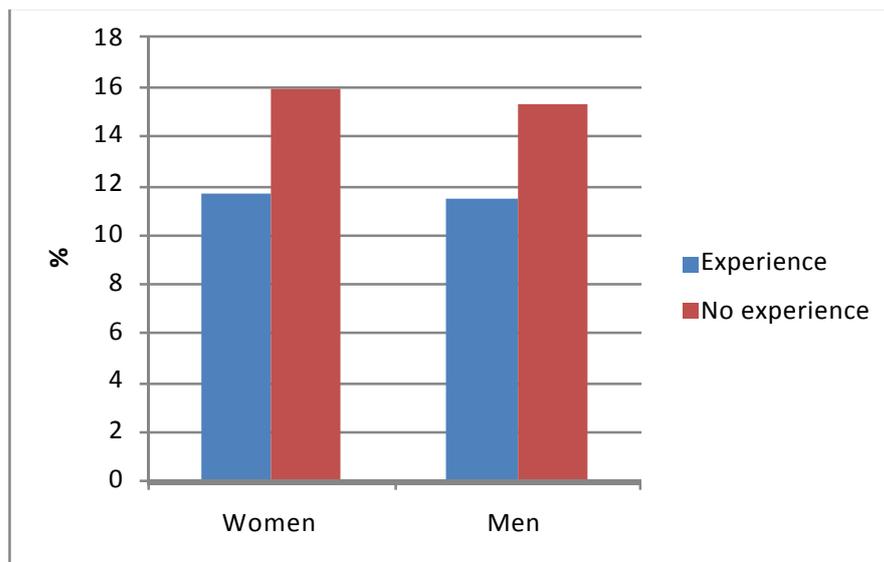


Figure 3. Divorces by experience of long-distance commuting before marriage/cohabitation, %. Source: data from ASTRID database, Umeå University.

⁴ Only couples with known duration of marriage/cohabitation are accounted for here, n=412,730.

Regression results

Being a male long-distance commuter clearly gives higher odds⁵ of separating compared to non-commuting men for whom all the other observed variables were the same (Table 3). But when controlling for the effect of the duration of long-distance commuting on separation (Table 4) the results shows higher separation rates only for a commuting duration of less than five years. Men long-distance commuting over a longer time-period do not separate to a higher extent than non-commuting men.

For women the overall long-distance commuter effect on separation is the opposite. Fewer female long-distance commuters separate than non commuting women (Table 3). From Table 4 it is clear that it is women long-distance commuting a longer time-period who have lower odds of separating compared to non-commuting women.

While long-distance commuting affects the odds of separation other factors as well have a significant effect on the probability of separating. For example, controlled for other factors the longer duration of marriage/cohabitation the lower are the odds for separating for both women and men. Also those living in a family with small children at home, controlled for other factors, separate to a lower extent than couples having no pre-school children at home.

⁵ Values >1 show increased odds.

Table 3. Effects of long-distance commuting, education, income, children, age, duration of partnership, and family status in 1995 on separation probability.

	Women	Men
	OR ^a (95 % CI ^b)	OR ^a (95 % CI ^b)
<i>Age*</i>		
20-24	0.12 (0.11-0.13)	0.27 (0.24-0.30)
25-29	0.27 (0.26-0.28)	0.49 (0.47-0.51)
30-34	0.52 (0.50-0.53)	0.88 (0.86-0.91)
35-39	0.93 (0.91-0.96)	1.69 (1.65-1.73)
40-44 (ref. ^c)	1 (ref.)*	1 (ref.)*
45-49	1.12 (1.09-1.15)	2.28 (2.22-2.34)
50-54	1.08 (1.05-1.11)	2.10 (2.05-2.16)
55 +	0.87 (0.85-0.90)	1.38 (1.35-1.42)
<i>Children 0-6 years living at home*</i>		
Yes	0.30 (0.29-0.30)	0.06 (0.05-0.06)
No	1 (ref.)*	1 (ref.)*
<i>Children 7-17 years living at home*</i>		
Yes	1.10 (1.08-1.12)	0.39 (0.38-0.39)
No	1 (ref.)*	1 (ref.)*
<i>Education level*</i>		
Low	1.32 (1.28-1.36)	1.44 (1.40-1.48)
Middle	1.36 (1.33-1.39)	1.47 (1.44-1.50)
High (ref.)	1 (ref.)*	1 (ref.)*
<i>Employment sector*</i>		
Primary and secondary sector	1 (ref.)*	1 (ref.)*
Private service sector	1.08 (1.06-1.12)	1.01 (0.99-1.03)
Public service sector	1.10 (1.08-1.13)	1.11 (1.09-1.13)
Other services	1.05 (1.01-1.09)	1.00 (0.97-1.04)
<i>Long-distance commuter*</i>		
Yes	0.97 (0.95-0.99)	1.03 (1.01-1.04)
No	1 (ref.)*	1 (ref.)*
Duration partnership (per year)	0.46 (0.46-0.46)	0.48 (0.48-0.48)
	Log likelihood = 664955,193; pseudo R ² Nagelkerke= 0.310	Log likelihood = 652270,618; pseudo R ² Nagelkerke= 0.365

^a Odds ratio, significant values ($p \leq 0.01$) are marked with bold text. ^b 95 % confidence interval.

^c Ref is the reference category. The asterisk * indicates that the whole variable is significant at $p \leq 0.01$, i.e. it shows if the model as a whole becomes better or not when the variable is included in the model

Table 4. Effects of long-distance commuting duration on separation probability^a.

	Women	Men
	OR ^b (95 % CI ^c)	OR ^b (95 % CI ^c)
<i>Long-distance commuter</i>		
No	1 (ref.)*1	1 (ref.)^{d*}
1-4 years	0.99 (0.97-1.01)	1.03 (1.01-1.05)
5 + years	0.92 (0.89-0.95)	1.02 (1.00-1.05)
	Log likelihood = 664938,235; pseudo R ² Nagelkerke= 0.310	Log likelihood = 652270,618; pseudo R ² Nagelkerke= 0.365

^a Only the effects of the commuting variable is displayed in this table, but all the variables shown in table 3 were included in the models and the estimates for these variables were the same in both models.

^b Odds ratio, significant values ($p \leq 0.05$) are marked with bold text. ^c 95 % confidence interval.

^d Ref is the reference category. The asterisk * indicates that the whole variable is significant at $p \leq 0.01$, i.e. it shows if the model as a whole becomes better or not when the variable is included in the model.

CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

Commuting is salient in the everyday life of many people. Although there are advantages, numerous disadvantages can make the long-distance commuting lifestyle difficult. As the numbers of long-distance commuters are growing, it stands to reason that more couples will face the pros and cons of commuting in their daily routines. While some couples have to handle the consequences of long-distance commuting temporary for only some years others will face and even adapt to a more long-term commuting lifestyle.

There are several reasons why long-distance commuting might be expected to affect the separation rates, in either directions, and it appears that the separation effect is ambiguous. It seems as if the first years of long-distance commuting may be the most destructive for a relationship. First, for those couples where long-distance commuting has been part of their lives for more than a few years separation rates are lower. This offers support to the idea that for many the presumed costs (both social and economic) of long commutes in the long run is a price worth paying. It may be so that for many the mobility choice of long-distance commuting is strategic and more socially sustainable than other alternatives, such as migrating and losing social networks or/and as a result of migrating and keeping the old job etc. On the other hand, when controlling for other factors the results also reflect gender differences. Male long-distance commuters can expect to separate to a higher extent than non-commuting men when commuting five years or more. For women long-distance commuting over time even implies that they run a lower chance of seeing their relationship broken. It may be so that these women better manage to adjust to the commuting lifestyle than men do.

To summarize, a temporary duration of less than five years in long-distance commuting is found to be trying and destructive for relationships. One might expect social costs of long-distance commuting to reduce the quality of marital relationship in many ways, but for female long-distance commuters other factors apparently tend to counterbalance such effects. They seem to manage to create a sustainable work-life balance although being a long-distance commuter.

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