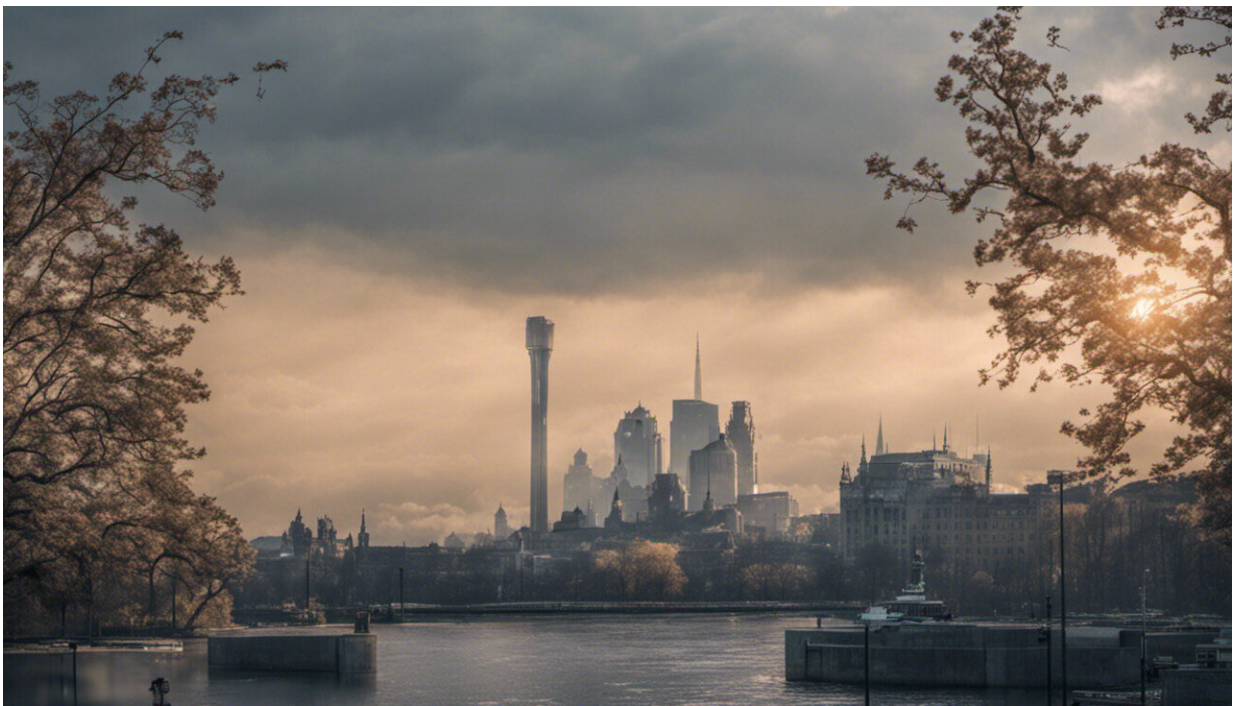


# Study: 9 in 10 major metropolitan areas in Europe lost population because of COVID-19 pandemic

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Some 93% of major metropolitan areas in Europe "shrank" or lost population as a result of the impact of COVID-19, with nearly two thirds of all European cities experiencing the same effect during the pandemic, according to new research published in *Cities*.

Oxford expert Dr. Vlad Mykhnenko and Dr. Manuel Wolff from Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin have studied the sudden and acute shock of the virus on the long term growth trajectories of European cities and have detected overarching patterns.

They found, recent urbanization trends in Europe were dramatically interrupted in the first year of the pandemic: with [population growth](#) in European cities going negative (-0.3 % per annum, compared to an average growth rate of +0.3 %) compared to pre-pandemic years.

This sudden shock was especially pronounced in Europe's largest 66 [metropolitan areas](#) (cities with 500,000 inhabitants and above). Almost all experienced a drop in population growth rates.

Dr. Wolff explains, "In the short run, it was the exceptional pandemic-induced drop in net migration that generated the largest sudden shock to urban Europe."

"But, in the long run, it is natural population decline that will become the main concern for most European cities, especially for smaller cities, which have been hit hardest by the death surplus—the excess of deaths over births—which accompanied COVID-19."

Dr. Mykhnenko maintains the findings were a major surprise, "Our study shows during the pandemic out-migration from European cities was as sudden as it was substantial, causing even the [largest cities](#) to shrink...It had seemed, general human inertia and [high costs](#) associated with moving would prevent a mass exodus from cities during the pandemic but 63% of all cities experienced shrinkage. I was not expecting that."

The research shows, almost of a third (28%) of all 915 European cities analyzed experienced a U-turn from population growth to loss. When

combined with already shrinking cities, the share of shrinking cities in Europe during COVID-19 reached 63%. This far exceeded the previous peak shrinkage, recorded in the late 1990s, when 55% of all European cities were losing population. By contrast, according to the earliest data on record, between 1960-1965, only 3% of European cities were losing [population](#).

There are two key factors behind the loss. According to the study, the [rapid decline](#) in net migration, which fell by as much as 137%, resulted from residents leaving cities in much higher numbers than the newcomers arriving to settle, especially in the largest urban areas. Plus, in the majority of European countries, death rates increased faster in cities than in the countryside—overall by 13.5%.

Dr. Wolff says further research should confirm if the detected changes were transient or herald a new area of downward demographic trajectories. He maintains, "The post-COVID-19 revival will benefit the upper layer of urban hierarchy in the first place, helping re-grow and expand the largest cities, the core metropolitan areas. Smaller cities will continue to suffer from death surplus and out-migration."

The study concludes that, while COVID-19 has been a leveler of urban fortunes, it will be the [pandemic](#) recovery that leads to an increasingly uneven demographic development of European cities.

**More information:** Manuel Wolff et al, COVID-19 as a game-changer? The impact of the pandemic on urban trajectories, *Cities* (2022). [DOI: 10.1016/j.cities.2022.104162](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2022.104162)

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