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Heterogeneous Predictive Power of Labor Market Structure for U.S. Interstate Migration: Evidence from Occupational Mobility and Economic Diversity Indicators

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Abstract: The rate of U.S. internal migration has been falling in recent years. Most studies have examined the wage gap, housing expenses and so on. Direct indicators of the labour market structure are less frequently used. The purpose of this paper is to determine whether the Occupational Mobility Index (OMI) and the State Economic Diversity Index (SEDI) can extend the predictive power of interregional migration beyond what can be achieved with the traditional demographic variables. Based on the pooled American Community Survey data from 2015 to 2019, the sample in this paper is composed of workers aged 25-55, and a move is defined as any change in the place of residence within a year. Because there are few interstate moves at the individual level, XGBoost was chosen for this paper, and it performed best in the test. Age is the most important factor influencing the prediction. The OMI and SEDI rank highly in terms of importance. The model-based relationship between SEDI and migration propensity is different in different provinces and among different educational groups. In short, the changes in the structure of the labour market have shown good prediction performance and more comprehensively reflect the diversity of US migration.

Keywords: interstate migration, occupational mobility index, state economic diversity index, XGBoost, labor market structure

1. Introduction

Interstate migration distributes labour across the country of the United States. It influences a person's life path and economic growth, and it is also related to regional disparities, changes in the labour market, and the use of resources. However, the rate of internal migration has been decreasing in recent years. It decreases in all parts of society, regardless of age, education or ability. A decrease in the migration rate is likely because different groups of people react to the unbalanced development of areas differently. It can also be seen that the usual variables are unable to fully explain the heterogeneity of migration behaviour. Therefore, it is necessary to better identify and predict the reasons for people leaving different areas in the US.

Most studies on US internal migration have focused on the difference in wages, rent, etc. Based on research, wages and housing prices jointly influence the willingness to migrate, and different

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groups of skilled people will choose to live in different places. The above factors are mostly due to different regions' opportunity levels and individual traits. There are few direct indicators of the labour market structure. According to the human capital theory, the portability of skills among different areas depends on the type of occupation; therefore, people in areas with a high concentration of certain occupations are relatively immobile. Similarly, the diversity of the state economy can be used to reduce the risks of concentrated shocks in the industry and provide workers with a wider range of off-campus job choices. In other words, occupational transferability and the opportunity structure at the level of the state may help predict migration behavior, but these two structural dimensions are often lacking in empirical research in the existing interstate migration studies.

In response to the above problems, the two structural indices put forward in this paper are the Occupational Mobility Index (OMI) and the State Economic Diversity Index (SEDI). OMI shows the spread of a particular occupation in different areas and measures how widely the related skills are distributed across the country. SEDI is the index for occupational distribution in a country, and thus shows how diverse and organised the employment structure of that country's labour market is. This paper focuses on whether OMI and SEDI can contribute to predict interstate migration behavior, without investigating the strict causal relationship between migration and these two indicators.

Based on the above, the three hypotheses in this paper are: adding OMI and SEDI into model can help to better predict migration behavior. These indicators should constitute a main part of the whole prediction model.

The paper offers three contributions. First of all, OMI and SEDI will be added to the old wage and housing index, as well as demographic factors, to extend the empirical system for studying interregional migration based on the transferability of occupational skills and the opportunity structure at the state level. Second, as this study is concentrating on low-frequency micro events of interstate migration, it is an imbalanced classification problem, and thus an estimation strategy that is more suitable for the characteristics of the current data will be put forward. Third, it shows that the prediction pattern is different in different circumstances, and therefore its predictive power varies greatly.

2. Literature review

Research on internal migration in the United States has shown that the rate of internal migration has been falling year by year over the past few decades. Molloy, Smith and Wozniak, in a systematic review of US internal migration since the 1980s, found that migration rates generally fell across all divisions by age, education level and distance from origin; thus, it cannot be assumed that this drop is due only to changes in the structure of the population [1]. Jia, Molloy, Smith and Wozniak have also pointed out that internal migration affects people's income and living standards, changes the local labour market structure, disturbs the stability of the housing market, etc., making it an issue for the economy [2]. Diamond believes that in the period from 1980 to 2000, there was an increase in the concentration of high-skilled workers in high-wage and high-rent cities; this spatial skill divergence is mainly due to changes in local labour demand and has been further exacerbated by endogenous improvements in the amenities of high-skill cities [3]. Bilateral Migration Data from the United States. Internal Revenue Service, Olney and Thompson found that an increase in the destination wage is correlated with an increase in migration; however, an increase in destination housing prices does not have this effect, and the reduced responsiveness to changes in origin housing prices is one of the reasons for a sustained decline in internal migration [4]. Therefore,

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Molloy, Nathanson and Paciorek found that restrictions on the supply of housing shift the spatial distribution of the population by changing rents, housing consumption and households' choice of location [5]. Howard and Liebersohn have also found that the widening of regional income inequality, population concentration in high-income areas, and a lack of elasticity in the housing supply of these cities are jointly responsible for the increase in housing prices and rents [6]. In general, the existing literature has already provided rich data on the significance of wages, housing and demographic factors; however, these studies mainly show the differences in "level" of regional opportunities and migration costs and have not directly measured the structure of the labour market.

Recently, it has been shown that the structural features of the labour market contain other significant information towards migration behaviors. Kleiner and Xu have shown that the occupational licensing system constrains people's movement in the labour market to a certain extent by restricting inter-occupational mobility [7]. In short, there is a large number of areas where the structure of occupations affects mobility; that is to say, geographical transferability of human capital. Therefore, the view that regional diversity can cushion the risk of labour market changes is in line with the idea of spatial portfolio diversification. With a more diverse economy, there are fewer job-matching frictions for workers, and they will be less affected by industry-specific shocks; therefore, the drivers of emigration and residence will be the main reasons for leaving. Evidence from the local labour market in Italy shows that the growth of employment in knowledge-intensive and tradable sectors has affected wage levels and working hours, as well as changed the probability of internal migration for workers in other sectors; thus, it can be concluded that the local employment structure influences labour mobility decisions through the effect of opportunity spillover [8]. According to research by Rivera-Padilla, the expected increase in lifetime wages will affect a person's decision to move; therefore, the reason for leaving is not only about differences in current salary but also relates to one's own long-term career development [9].

Amior also believes that the education-mobility link is based on the distribution of employment opportunities in different areas, and therefore, the spatial structure of opportunities will determine people's choices of residence [10]. Cucu found that the upgrade of transportation has altered the distribution of high-skilled labour and adjusted domestic mobility patterns in the United States [11]. The above results show that the structure of regional opportunities and the spatial distribution of occupations also contain information not included in traditional demographic indicators. The reason a worker moves out is not only a lower wage. It is also necessary that skills can be transferred smoothly between areas and that the receiving labour market offers better job matching and risk buffering. However, the existing literature rarely examines the relationship between these two indicators and migration behavior. Based on the above situation, this paper presents the Occupational Mobility Index (OMI) and the State Economic Diversity Index (SEDI). OMI is the spatial transferability of skills; SEDI is the state's employment opportunity structure. The main question is whether the above indices add new predictive power for interstate migration beyond traditional indicators. Interstate migration is a low-frequency phenomenon at the individual level, so empirical methods designed for imbalanced data will be used in this paper.

3. Data and variable description

The data from the pool of the American Community Survey (ACS) in 2015-2019 were used in this paper. The sample is the labour force population aged 25-55. Interstate migration is a change in the country of residence within one year. This paper excludes people who were previously living outside the US, so it will only study internal migration in the US and not international or return migration. The analysis of the above is based on complete information of the main variables.

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The sample is restricted to 2015–2019 mainly for reasons of sample comparability and the stability of empirical relationships. After 2020, the pandemic, lockdown policies, the rapid spread of remote work, and public health interventions generated substantial short-term shocks to migration patterns and local labor market conditions. These changes may have altered the empirical relationship between interstate migration and regional economic variables, causing migration behavior during the pandemic period to reflect temporary crisis-driven adjustments rather than more stable structural differences in labor markets. For this reason, the analysis focuses on the relatively stable pre-pandemic environment in order to more robustly assess the informational value of structural indicators such as occupational mobility and state economic diversity in predicting interstate migration.

The outcome variable is binary, and it is 1 if the person changed their place of residence in the previous year, and 0 otherwise. Covariates at the individual level are age, education, gender, marital status and occupation. State-level variables are the population density and labour market structure. The two main indicators are the Occupational Mobility Index (OMI) and the State Economic Diversity Index (SEDI). OMI is a distribution of occupations by state and shows cross-regional mobility in occupational skills; SEDI shows the distribution of occupations within a state and measures the diversity of the employment opportunity structure at the state level.

Interstate migration is an infrequent phenomenon at the level of individuals. Interstate migrants account for only 2.88 per cent of the total in the ACS sample used here. Therefore, it has been determined in this analysis that the binary variable is highly imbalanced, so suitable empirical methods for such data will be used to determine whether OMI and SEDI can improve the prediction of interstate migration compared with the original variable.

4. Methodology

4.1. Construction of OMI and SEDI

This part defines OMI and SEDI. OMI is the occupational mobility potential; SEDI is the state-level employment diversity.

The Occupational Mobility Index measures the geographic mobility of different occupations. Skills have different values in different areas based on the local demands. When the concentration of an occupation is concentrated in a few provinces, the market for that type of talent will be geographically restricted and moving across provinces will be more costly and risky. This view is in line with the results of many studies: the occupational licensing system serves as a source of spatial friction and limits the movement of labour [7], and differences in the distribution of suitable jobs at different places also form an educational mobility gradient [10]. A higher OMI indicates that job opportunities in this area are spread out across the country, and therefore, it is relatively easy for a person to move for a job.

SEDI reflects the scope of local job opportunities and the protective function of the labor market. More states offer different ways for the workers to work in all sorts of sectors. It will be easier to find a good job after moving and help cushion the impact of the industry's recession. However, the diversity-migration relationship is not the same everywhere. In areas with high diversity and a large number of people or many talents, the motivation to leave will be lower. Growth in employment in the knowledge-based and tradable industries generates cross-industry spillover effects, promoting the migration and mobility of people in other industries; thus, it can be seen that various economic environments may motivate people to move for better opportunities [8]. Thus, this paper hopes that

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SEDI can carry additional predictive information. This association will likely be different in various areas and among various groups of the population.

Based on the above theoretical basis, the construction of the two indicators will be introduced formally in this paper.

4.1.1. Occupational Mobility Index (OMI)

To obtain the geographic and industrial distribution characteristics of labour mobility, this paper constructs the Occupational Mobility Index (OMI) from the ACS. OMI is an entropy-based indicator of the geographical distribution of occupations in different areas.

For each occupation o, let

$$p_{os} = \frac{E_{os}}{\sum sE_{os}} \tag{1}$$

denote the share of workers in occupation o employed in state s , where E_{os} is total employment of occupation o in state s .

The Occupied Mobility Index is the normalised Shannon entropy.

$$\mathrm{OMI}_o = -\frac{1}{\log(S)} \sum_{s=1}^{S} p_{os}\log(p_{os}) \tag{2}$$

where S is the number of states.

The index is between 0 and 1. A larger value means that the distribution of occupations across various provinces is relatively even; there is a small concentration in a few areas, and more people have moved. Only a small number of employment clusters in some areas are resource-based and location-specific industries, which have small OMI values; that is to say, they have high moving costs and fewer external opportunities.

4.1.2. State Economic Diversity Index (SEDI)

OMI is about the mobility of workers in various parts of society; migration motivation is influenced by structural changes in the demand for labour. To address this problem, a State Economic Diversity Index (SEDI) has been built in this paper to quantify the distribution of occupational employment at the state level.

For each state s, let

$$q_{so} = \frac{E_{so}}{\sum_o E_{so}} \tag{3}$$

denote the share of employment in occupation o within state s .

The State Economic Diversity Index is as follows:

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$$SEDI_s = -\frac{1}{log(O)} \sum_{o=1}^{O} q_{so} log(q_{so}) \quad (4)$$

where O is the total number of occupations.

A high SEDI indicates that the diversified structure of the state economy is relatively broad and covers many types of employment. A relatively even distribution of occupations will reduce the damage caused by the economic downturn in one area and thus be more stable. It may help the workers have better protection against the impact of the labour market, and give the migrants more choices outside China.

4.2. Predictive framework for interstate migration

This article treats interstate migration as a binary outcome variable with a low occurrence rate. In the final sample, interstate migrants accounted for only 2.88% of all observations. Therefore, the standard binary classification model may be affected by the imbalance of categories, and is prone to overestimating the proportion of the majority category (i.e., non-migrants). To more robustly evaluate the predictive value of OMI and SEDI, this paper adopts empirical methods suitable for imbalanced data to describe the characteristics of interstate migration.

Specifically, four classes of models are compared: penalized logistic regression, decision trees, random forests, and XGBoost. To address class imbalance, two approaches are used. The first is cost-weighted estimation based on class weights. The second uses SMOTE as a robustness treatment. All models are estimated within a stratified five-fold cross-validation framework to ensure that the proportion of movers is broadly comparable across training and validation samples. Model performance is evaluated primarily by AUC, with F1 score and accuracy reported as supplementary metrics. Table 1 reports the performance of the alternative models in predicting interstate migration. The results show that nonlinear models generally outperform standard linear frameworks, with XGBoost performing best and achieving an AUC of 0.721. The AUC values for Ridge and Lasso Logistic under SMOTE are nearly identical to those obtained under cost-weighting, indicating that the main conclusions are robust to the choice of imbalance correction method. Based on this comparison, the subsequent analysis uses cost-weighted XGBoost as the main model for variable-importance analysis and for heterogeneous prediction analysis centered on SEDI.

Table 1. Comparative performance of interstate migration prediction models

Model	Imbalance Treatment	AUC	F1 Score	Accuracy
Ridge Logistic	Cost-weighted	0.680	0.089	0.619
Lasso Logistic	Cost-weighted	0.680	0.089	0.619
Decision Tree	Cost-weighted	0.667	0.092	0.683
Random Forest	Cost-weighted	0.690	0.096	0.678
XGBoost	Cost-weighted	0.721	0.105	0.697
Ridge Logistic	SMOTE	0.680	—	—
Lasso Logistic	SMOTE	0.680	—	—

Notes:AUC denotes Area Under the ROC Curve. F1 score emphasizes performance on the minority class (interstate movers). Accuracy is reported for completeness but is less informative in highly imbalanced settings. SMOTE-based models yield nearly identical AUCs to cost-weighted models, indicating robustness to imbalance correction methods.

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5. Results

5.1. Variable importance of OMI and SEDI

Because variable importance measures from random forests are easier to present and interpret, Figure 1 reports the top 20 most important variables from the random forest model as a supplement to illustrate the informational value of OMI and SEDI within the overall predictive framework. The results show that age is the single most important predictor, which is consistent with the widely documented life-cycle pattern in migration research whereby younger workers tend to exhibit stronger interstate mobility. In addition to age, the Occupational Mobility Index (OMI) and the State Economic Diversity Index (SEDI) also rank among the most important features, indicating that structural labor market characteristics provide valuable predictive information beyond traditional demographic variables. By contrast, gender, education, and marital status also contribute to prediction, but their relative importance is lower than that of age and the structural indicators emphasized in this paper. Overall, Figure 1 suggests that the prediction of interstate migration depends not only on individuals' demographic characteristics but also on the spatial portability of occupational skills and differences in state-level opportunity structures.

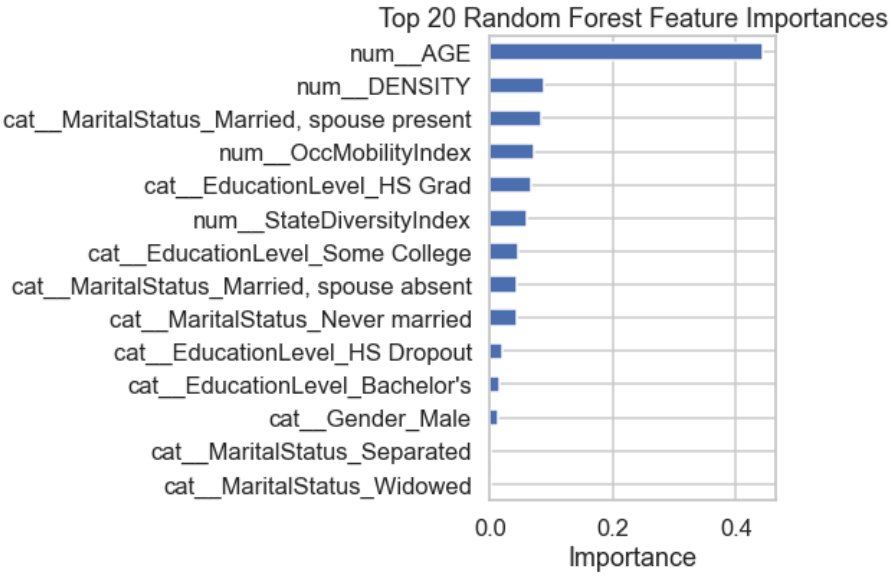

Figure 1. Top 20 most important variables in the interstate migration prediction model

5.2. State-level heterogeneity in the relationship between SEDI and interstate migration propensity

Tables 2 and 3 further illustrate the predicted changes in migration propensity when the state economic diversity index (SEDI) increases by 0.1 standard deviation for each state. These estimates reflect model-predicted shifts in migration propensity, not causal effects on actual moves. Table 2 lists the states with the largest predicted increase in migration propensity. The results show that California, Pennsylvania, New Hampshire, and Maine exhibit relatively large positive changes in this scenario, indicating that the higher the economic diversity of these states, the higher their predicted migration propensity. The average change in migration propensity in California is the largest, suggesting that the opportunity structure information reflected by SEDI has particularly strong predictive relevance in this state.

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Table 2. States with the largest increases in predicted migration propensity under a 0.1 standard deviation increase in SEDI

State	Sample Size (n)	Mean Baseline Propensity	Mean Δ Propensity	Implied Δ Movers
California	124,820	0.346	0.209	26,123
Pennsylvania	8,255	0.378	0.117	970
New Hampshire	17,513	0.305	0.111	1,937
Maine	29,138	0.331	0.095	2,775
Alabama	11,104	0.474	0.076	845
Louisiana	20,039	0.397	0.040	801
Utah	83,994	0.423	0.032	2,653
Virginia	12,832	0.407	0.021	264
Alaska	3,638	0.411	0.005	17
Kentucky	40,007	0.343	0.004	179

In contrast, Table 3 lists the states with the greatest decline in the predicted migration tendency. The results show that under the same conditions, Maryland, Oregon, Rhode Island, New Jersey, New York, and Texas all exhibited negative changes, meaning that the higher the SEDI value in these states, the lower the predicted migration tendency. This indicates that the relationship between SEDI and interstate migration is not consistent across all states but shows significant cross-state heterogeneity. In other words, the effect of state economic diversity is not the same in all regions; the related prediction patterns may depend simultaneously on the local employment structure, population composition, and the existing level of population mobility.

Table 3. States with the largest decreases in predicted migration propensity under a 0.1 standard deviation increase in SEDI

State	Sample Size (n)	Mean Baseline Propensity	Mean Δ Propensity	Implied Δ Movers
Maryland	35,614	0.372	−0.076	−2,706
Oregon	25,043	0.466	−0.080	−1,998
Rhode Island	31,363	0.463	−0.087	−2,717
New Jersey	18,349	0.418	−0.098	−1,796
South Dakota	9,893	0.436	−0.115	−1,134
North Carolina	19,763	0.474	−0.119	−2,353
Oklahoma	27,301	0.506	−0.136	−3,712
Tennessee	30,798	0.489	−0.154	−4,731
New York	20,009	0.523	−0.160	−3,203
Texas	19,393	0.546	−0.180	−3,490

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Notes:Predicted migration propensities are obtained from a cost-weighted XGBoost classifier and should be interpreted as relative mobility incentives rather than calibrated probabilities. The counterfactual increases each state's economic diversity index by 0.1 standard deviations while holding individual characteristics fixed. "Implied Δ movers" represents the sum of individual-level changes in predicted migration propensity within the sample and is not a causal estimate.

Overall, the results in Table 2 and Table 3 indicate that the predictive value of SEDI is highly dependent on specific circumstances. In some states, the higher the economic diversity, the stronger the predicted migration tendency; while in other states, the higher the economic diversity, the lower the predicted migration tendency. One interpretation: high diversity paired with strong labor demand and moderate costs works as a pull. Where diversity meets saturation or intense skill competition, its pull weakens or is overtaken by congestion-based push factors. This heterogeneity suggests that the state-level opportunity structure not only complements the description of migration behavior by traditional variables, but also reveals the systematic regional differences in migration tendencies.

5.3. Educational heterogeneity in the relationship between SEDI and interstate migration tendency

Table 4 further reveals the differences in the predictive correlations of SEDI among different educational groups. The research results indicate that the groups with lower educational levels have a more significant response to the changes in SEDI. Specifically, the average change in migration tendency for those who have not completed high school education is the largest, reaching 0.0275; high school graduates and those with some college education also show relatively obvious positive changes. In contrast, those with a bachelor's degree or above (especially the high-education group) have a significantly smaller change in migration tendency, with an average change of only 0.0001.

Table 4. Heterogeneous effects by educational attainment: a 0.1 standard deviation increase in state economic diversity

Education Level	Sample Size (n)	Mean Baseline Propensity	Mean Δ Propensity
HS Dropout	67,383	0.338	0.0275
HS Graduate	211,804	0.345	0.0055
Some College	291,167	0.383	0.0096
Bachelor's	258,497	0.472	0.0031
Advanced Degree	162,553	0.508	0.0001

These results suggest that the state-level opportunity-structure information captured by SEDI does not have the same predictive relevance for all skill groups.For low- and intermediate-educated workers, greater occupational diversity is expected to widen job options, producing larger predicted shifts in migration propensity. The underlying pattern: lower-educated workers hold general, substitutable skills, so low diversity intensifies competition while its expansion brings larger gains. Highly educated workers, whose expertise is specialized and less substitutable, are less responsive to state-level occupational diversity. Overall, Table 4 shows that SEDI not only has a relatively high importance in the overall model, but also can reveal the heterogeneity patterns of different educational groups in terms of interstate migration tendencies.

6. Conclusion

This study investigates whether OMI and SEDI can enhance predictive power for out-of-state migration in the United States. The basis of the above analysis is the pooled 2015-2019 American Community Survey data on labour force participants aged 25-55. Interstate migration is a change in

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the country of habitual residence over a period of one year. Since the proportion of inter-regional migration at the individual level is low and it has a significant imbalance in binary outcomes, empirical methods for rare-event data will be employed in this paper to examine the added predictive value of OMI and SEDI.

Traditional variables are still important to predict migration behaviors. Age is the most important factor. OMI and SEDI are also in the top-ranked variables of the list of variable importance, so the spatial transferability of occupational skills and the supply structure of opportunities at the state level may contain predictive information not included in traditional demographic indicators.

According to the analysis, there are many models of association among SEDI and the propensity for interstate migration. Different provinces have predicted different sizes and directions of migration responses to SEDI; thus, opportunity structures do not lead to uniform changes in people's migration. The groups of educational attainment show different levels of sensitivity to SEDI: the predictive response to SEDI is stronger among low-educated workers. Therefore, the level of economic diversity at the provincial level is included in the entire model, and different regions and groups of people will have different migration patterns.

This paper has three main contributions. First, it builds OMI and SEDI based on the entropy of occupational distribution. The above indicators are the basis for predicting interstate migration, and they have relatively high weights in the model. Second, this study conceptualizes interstate migration as a rare event and assesses the newly introduced variables within an imbalanced classification framework. This approach mitigates biases caused by the low frequency of individual migration flows, while offering a practical framework for examining incremental predictive value. Thirdly, the analysis shows that there are systematic differences in the SEDI-migration relationship among different provinces and different educational groups. The direction and strength of the predictive link differ greatly; thus, the effects of economic diversity are different under various circumstances.

There are some defects to this. This paper focuses on whether OMI and SEDI can contribute to predict interstate migration behavior, but lacks in-depth research on the strict causal relationship between migration and these two indicators. OMI and SEDI have provided a structure for the migration, but fail to incorporate all driving factors. Local public services, the housing system, fine industrial shocks, etc., have been omitted. The sample covers only the period before the pandemic; thus, it may not represent the remote-work period.

In the future, OMI and SEDI will be combined with many other regional policies, housing and industrial factors, etc., to add more features to the test of predictive performance, investigate the causal relationship between these effects, and expand the analysis to the post-pandemic period to determine whether remote work and changes in public health have affected their predictive power.

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