

DISADVANTAGE AND POVERTY IN RURAL SCOTLAND

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IN BRIEF

A recent (1993) study in rural Scotland showed that poverty and disadvantage are widespread. Rural residents view of themselves, their standard of living, was not consistent with standard objective definitions. This mismatch has significant policy implications.

The following article, extracted from the below-listed references, reports on the findings of the study and should prove useful to a wide range of professionals, policy makers, and administrators for whom an understanding of rural areas is important and necessary.

THE STUDY

"Rural Forum" of Scotland commissioned the study which was funded by the Scottish Consumer Council, the Royal Scottish Agricultural Benevolent Institution, Scottish Homes, and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. Aberdeen University undertook the project which was led by Professor Mark Shucksmith, Polyanna Chapman, and Gill M Clark with Stuart Black and Eddie Conway.

The study area included Harris, Wester Ross, Angus, and North Ayrshire which represents the four major rural settings in Scotland. Five hundred households were surveyed by questionnaire during 1993. This was followed by 120 interviews. In early 1994 members of the community and respondents were involved in "feedback meetings" during which preliminary findings "were given strong approval".

MAJOR FINDINGS

Poverty was widespread. 65% of heads of households surveyed had incomes below two hundred pounds (AUD\$400) / week [two thirds of the median Scottish wage], compared with 55/0 for Britain as a whole. Moreover, 49% had incomes below half the median Scottish wage (one hundred and fifty pounds / week). Yet the cost of living is higher in rural areas.

People's subjective assessment of their poverty tended to contradict objective definitions. They compared their situation with the harsher conditions of the past rather than with the current lifestyles of the majority. Low income households saw themselves as 'rich in spirit, poor in means'.

Take-up of benefits was low. Less than half of the respondents received any state benefits. Access to advice in urban centres was problematic, and respondents were often confused about the benefits available and their entitlement.

Housing was perceived to be a pervasive problem. A shortage of affordable rented housing, and especially council housing, was seen to limit the options for low-income people wishing to stay in rural areas, and especially affected newly-formed households. Respondents in all areas felt that there was an overemphasis in policy on owner-occupation.

Employment opportunities were very limited despite low levels of registered unemployment and this was viewed as a fact of rural life. The lack of opportunities for youth employment was perceived to be the most serious problem. The absence of child care provision was another important problem.

Services were a matter of concern. The crucial transport disadvantage was not solely access to public transport but especially the cost of maintaining a car, where car ownership was seen as essential. Other issues of service provision were the perceived under funding of education, difficulties of accessing family planning services and chemists and the lack of leisure and recreation facilities for teenagers.

Source: Shucksmith, et al., 1994a, p.1.

VIEWS ON RURAL LIVING

Although the questionnaire data positioned a large percentage of the respondents within the standard definitions of poverty, the great majority of people felt they benefitted rather than lost from living in rural areas. Many did not accept the objective assessment of their being "poor and disadvantaged". Generally, respondents believed there was minimal "real" poverty or disadvantage in their rural communities.

The majority of rural residents held similar views on rural life including "a better moral social and crime-free environment; good communities; a willingness to share resources; an atmosphere of self-sufficiency and self-reliance; space and freedom from the problems of urban life, and freedom from the restrictions of close neighbours; a better quality of life; good support networks, and neighbourliness in time of crisis; and child safety." (Shucksmith et al., 1994a, p.2.) As well, respondents saw rural communities as egalitarian, more desirable than urban living with an opportunity for a better (than urban) lifestyle. It was recognised, however, that rural areas were not free of general social problems including income, housing and employment.

The most valued attributes of rural living were reported to be "peace and quiet, pleasant surroundings, beauty of the landscape, the rural environment, and space". Most dissatisfaction was expressed with the lack of transport.

While many residents recorded appreciation and satisfaction with rural living there was a feeling that the close-knit character of rural areas was also restrictive. Some felt they needed to "escape" the local community from time-to-time by regularly visiting urban areas. "In the scattered communities, rural people enjoyed 'freedom from' the pressures of urban life, whilst forfeiting their 'freedom to' behave in ways of which the wider community would not approve" (p.2). Lowland residents claimed to enjoy an optimum lifestyle by living in small rural communities near urban areas.

Access to support services in rural communities was seen to be much less than in urban areas. Conversely, support in rural communities was reported to be much higher. This was so because of the absence of services available in rural areas and the fewer the services the stronger the community support.

SERVICES

Despite generally low expectations of service availability, almost three-quarters of respondents mentioned the need to improve service provision. Key services such as health and education were felt to be good, and that shortcomings in other services could be overcome. Nevertheless, service provision was identified as a problem and the services to be very vulnerable.

Most concern was expressed with transport, especially in meeting the needs of the elderly, teenagers and families with no car. Rural living and car ownership were seen to go together; the need to have a car to get a job, and to access services and social activities. The cost of maintaining a vehicle was also identified as an issue.

Concerning schools, the study reported, "There was general pride in the quality of schools and a recognition of their social and cultural value. There was great resistance, therefore, to school closure proposals, and in all areas it was felt that schools were under-resourced. The lack of nursery education was also an issue" (p.3).

CHANGING COMMUNITIES

"Change was a dominant theme ... and the key theme was loss" (p.3). For many residents their communities had changed beyond recognition. They felt that "outside influences" were to blame, others thought change part of a natural cycle and some saw change as destructive of their distinctive rural culture including the Gaelic language, rural dialects and many other rural characteristics. Many people thought that their communities were "the last repositories of folk memory of an 'authentic' rural past" (p.3).

Scattered communities felt they had no control over change and the pace at which it occurred. Communities had not been strong enough to resist the external forces and the "new" material values were seen to be "alien to their idealisations of the past" (p.3). Lowland communities felt less threatened by both the pace and nature of change and had more confidence in their ability to deal with the future.

Widely held responsible for these dramatic social changes were the "new rural residents". These are the people who move into the rural communities and have differing ethnic, cultural, behavioural, and geographic characteristics. "All the ills of a changing rural society were, at some point, blamed on the new rural residents ..." (p.3). However, the link between indigenous population leaving, and the basic causes (affordable housing and/or jobs) and the perceived negative social impact of the new residents was not often made by respondents.

Respondents from rural communities recognised a strong pressure for young people to leave if they were to be successful. Attached to this outward movement of the young was a strong sense of loss. Interestingly, respondents who had returned to their communities having spent years in urban areas said that the rural life had appeal only when they had reached middle-age. While young people felt they could only "achieve" by leaving, others, who wanted to stay (or return) often were unable to because of the unavailability of jobs and affordable housing.

Inasmuch as change and development are linked, there were different perceptions held by highlanders and lowlanders. In the latter, there was much more awareness of development initiatives, availability of funding, and ability to influence development. On the other hand, the highlanders and islanders displayed a general sense of powerlessness to initiate change and affect development.

EMPLOYMENT

The most important problem facing rural communities was seen to be the lack of youth employment. School leavers were unable, because of the absence of adequate public transport, to access employment beyond their local area. As well, the aspirations of youth are changing and the type of work available and the limiting social environment seem to be influencing movement as much as the lack of jobs. In some areas employment for graduates was not seen to exist, thus educating children virtually guaranteed their "export" to urban areas. People viewed this situation with both pride and regret.

In all rural areas limited work options were a recognised fact of life. Not only were jobs scarce, they were low-paid with no long-term security. Incoming residents usually drew economic resources from urban areas by commuting or tele-working. Of the mainland study area, 47% of heads-of-household were in full-time employment, 12% self-employed, 30% retired, and 2.5% unemployed. Despite the low unemployment rate, 65% of these respondents saw no opportunity for work (p.2).

Women's role in society was seen to have changed significantly in recent years. Most women accepted that their ambitions took second place to men's because they received higher pay and greater security. Lack of child care facilities further inhibited the opportunity for women to join the workforce. This was most frequently reported in places where women lived near urban areas and had the opportunity to take up work.

POVERTY

"65% of heads-of-households had incomes below two hundred pounds [\$400 AUD] per week (two thirds of the median Scottish wage) ..." (p.2). This was as high as 83% in the islands and down to 46% in portions of the mainland. This 65% figure is 10% higher than for Britain as a whole. As well, 49% of the respondents received incomes below half the median Scottish wage of seven thousand eight hundred pounds [\$ 15600 AUD].

The proportion of respondents (less than 50%) in receipt of state benefits was low, and lower than would be expected. People were confused about the availability of benefits and found the government offices in urban areas to be "highly intimidating".

Low income and high costs have widespread consequences; choice of goods, travel, communication, access to leisure and entertainment are all affected, as is participation in higher education. The elderly felt socially isolated because of costs and distances involved in travelling to family and friends.

HOUSING

Rural residents identified the lack of rental housing (private and public) as a major problem, especially for young people and recently formed households. This was seen as something which limited the choice of young people to stay in (or return to) the area. Pressure on housing stock was created by incoming new groups including retirees, holidaymakers, and commuters, all relatively affluent and able to out-bid low-income households for available vacancies.

Real concern over the high cost of rental and purchase housing was expressed. Other sources of dissatisfaction included the condition of private rental properties, lack of security of tenure, and length of waiting lists for public housing. Young families and single people faced most difficulty in securing accommodation. Many respondents indicated that planning regulations prevented scattered house-building, which would have helped smaller communities and sustained local services.

CONCLUSION

The importance of this work resides in its focus on rural/remote areas. As Shucksmith, Clark, and Black (1994, p.354) say " ...studies based on urban indicators of deprivation (such as overcrowding, lack of a car, and multi-storey dwelling) have concealed the existence of large numbers of disadvantaged householders in rural locations. Rural disadvantage tends not to be concentrated, in the manner of urban disadvantage, but dispersed. Indeed, one of its dimensions is frequently that of social isolation. This makes rural disadvantage less visible and less obviously tractable."

Concerning the causes and incidence of rural poverty, Shucksmith et al. (1994, p.354) note the following, poverty arises from: i) unemployment, especially where job opportunities are low for a long time, ii) low wages characteristic of rural areas, where low family income in agriculture sets the measure for the wages locally, and iii) an inadequate income in old age. The rural elderly are "... far and away the most vulnerable to poverty".

REFERENCES

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