

Disadvantage in rural Scotland

A new study reveals that poverty and disadvantage in rural Scotland is widespread. It also shows that people's own assessment of their standard of living may not match up with standard objective definitions; this resulting 'policy gap' has important implications. The main findings of the research, which was carried out by a team at Aberdeen University, show that:

- f** Poverty was widespread. 65% of heads of households surveyed had incomes below £200/week, compared with 55% for Britain as a whole. Moreover, 49% had incomes below half the median Scottish wage (£150/week). Yet the cost of living is higher in rural areas.
- f** 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'.
- f** Take-up of benefits was low. Less than half 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.
- f** 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 the rural area, and especially affected newly-formed households. Respondents in all areas felt that there was an overemphasis in policy on owner-occupation.
- f** 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 childcare provision was another important problem.
- f** 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 underfunding of education, the difficulties of accessing family planning services and chemists, and the lack of leisure and recreation facilities for teenagers.

Advantage or disadvantage?

Despite the survey evidence placing a high proportion of people within standard definitions of poverty, the vast majority of respondents asserted that they gained rather than lost from their rural lifestyle, and many households rejected the objective assessment of their position as poor and disadvantaged. Moreover, people generally felt there was little 'real' poverty or disadvantage in their communities.

Most respondents presented remarkably similar representations of 'rural life': 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. In addition, most saw rural society as egalitarian, preferable to urban living and offering a better lifestyle.

Many respondents were nevertheless at pains to point out that rural communities were not immune to the social problems afflicting wider society and were well aware of the disadvantages, notably in relation to income, housing and employment.

Asked what they considered to be the main advantages and disadvantages of living in their local area, peace and quiet was mentioned by 55% and pleasant surroundings by 35%. The beauty of the landscape and the rural environment was very important to respondents. For many, the feeling of having space around them was a fundamental attraction. Lack of transport was the most commonly cited disadvantage (35%).

Many respondents felt they had a freedom they did not think would be available elsewhere, a freedom from material values, from crime, from the pace of urban life and from urban environments. It was apparent, though, that in some parts the very close-knit nature of rural communities restricted behaviour: many respondents felt it necessary to make regular visits to towns or cities to 'escape' from the sometimes claustrophobic atmosphere. 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. Conversely respondents in lowland areas felt they had discovered 'the best of both worlds', enjoying a rural lifestyle within easy reach of urban areas.

Respondents felt that the support available in rural communities was far greater than in urban areas, and that this increased the quality of rural life. However, support networks in rural communities were equally seen as a *necessary* response to the lack of certain services. Respondents suggested that the greater the difficulty in accessing services, the stronger and more comprehensive were the networks of support.

Housing

Respondents spoke about an overemphasis on owner-occupation and the concomitant lack of housing to rent, especially social housing. It was widely perceived that this limited the options for people wishing to stay in the area, especially young people and newly-formed households. New groups - commuters, retirement buyers or holidaymakers - added further pressure on the housing market; low-income households were not in a position to compete with wealthier incomers.

Respondents expressed great concern over high levels of housing costs, both for house purchase and for assured tenancies. The condition of privately rented properties and insecurity of tenure also caused dissatisfaction. Waiting lists for council housing were perceived to be prohibitively long. It was very common for respondents' first independent home (often on their marriage) to be a caravan or winter let. Remaining with parents was the other option, and tended to be the only option if relationships broke down.

Young families and single people were frequently seen as having the most restricted housing choice. Respondents were anxious that young families should be able to remain in their area and most felt that elderly people should not have to leave their own community. More council housing, particularly for young households, was seen as the top priority, with greater assistance for low-cost home-ownership, perhaps through self-build. Respondents wanted more housing built locally, on a small scale and targeted at local people. Many were critical of planning departments for preventing scattered house-building which they felt would have boosted smaller communities and sustained local services.

Employment

In the mainland study areas, 47% of heads of household were in full-time employment, 12% were self-employed and only 2.5% were registered as unemployed. 30% of heads of household were retired. Notwithstanding the low rate of unemployment, respondents felt employment opportunities were very limited: 65% felt that there was *no* opportunity for work.

Options were severely constrained in scattered communities, whereas access to urban centres in the lowland areas provided a broader range of employment opportunities. In both areas, there was a recognition that very limited work options were now a fact of rural life. Individuals choosing to stay in rural areas knew they would be facing low-paid, insecure jobs, and those who chose to move there generally had strategies to enable them to survive economically - such as tele-working or commuting.

Lack of youth employment was perceived to be the most serious problem facing rural communities. Limited public transport prevented school-leavers journeying to workplaces outwith their home areas. However, the aspirations of young people are changing and the socially limiting rural environment and the *type* of jobs may be affecting their movement

away from rural areas as much as the lack of jobs. Graduate employment options were seen as non-existent in Wester Ross and Harris, for example; parents accepted that by encouraging their children in school and University they were educating their children 'out' of the area; this was viewed with a mixture of pride and regret.

Women respondents felt that their role in rural society had changed considerably in recent years. However, the majority accepted that women's aspirations had to take second place to male employment, given the better pay and greater security accorded to men. Even these aspirations were limited by woefully inadequate childcare provision. This constraint was less binding in the scattered communities where jobs were lacking anyway; but in lowland areas women felt lack of childcare provision affected their ability to take up jobs in nearby urban areas.

Income

65% of heads of households had incomes below £200/week (two-thirds of the median Scottish wage), ranging from 46% in Angus to 83% in Harris. This compares with a figure of 55% for Britain as a whole. Moreover, 49% of the sample had incomes below half the median Scottish wage (below £7,800). Often incomes were intermittent. In a few, very remote areas, such as Harris, almost the whole population can be considered a low income group.

The uptake of state benefits was very low in all areas, and lower than would be expected. Overall, less than half the respondents were in receipt of any benefits and, discounting family allowance, less than 30% received benefits. Respondents were often confused about the availability of benefits. Furthermore, DSS offices in urban areas were seen as highly intimidating.

The combination of a low income with a high cost of living has pervasive consequences. Travel becomes problematic, restricting choice of goods and limiting access to leisure and entertainment facilities. Access to training or further and higher education may also be precluded. Many respondents, especially the elderly, felt socially isolated because of the distances and costs involved in travelling to family and friends. Some could not afford a telephone.

Service provision

72% of respondents saw room for improvement in service provision and in all areas expectations of services were very low. Respondents generally felt that key services (health and education) were good, and that problems with other services could usually be circumvented. Despite this, many areas of service provision were problematic and services were perceived as very vulnerable.

Transport was the main concern. Few respondents made regular use of public transport but most felt it was essential, notably to meet the needs of elderly people, teenagers and households without a car. Private car ownership was considered to be a pre-condition of employment and access to social

activities, although maintenance costs could be a problem.

There was a 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.

Other difficulties included accessing family planning services and chemists for non-prescription purposes and maintaining rural hospitals. Respondents made considerable comment about seeking more effective policing to prevent petty crime. Most respondents felt it essential to keep local shops and post offices open, but did the bulk of their shopping in urban centres because of the greater range and choice. Leisure and recreation were particularly important issues for young and elderly people.

Social change

Change was a dominant theme. Many felt their communities had changed beyond recognition. The majority thought that material and social changes were due to outside influences. Some considered social change part of a natural cycle, others viewed it as essentially destructive. Many suggested that their communities were now the last repositories of folk memory of an 'authentic' rural past. The key theme was loss: of a distinctive rural culture; of the Gaelic language and rural dialects; and of a myriad of other intangible 'rural' qualities.

In Harris, people felt on the edge of dramatic social change over which they had no control. In Wester Ross, respondents felt that fundamental social changes had occurred in a short space of time: too much had changed too quickly, and the community had not been strong enough to resist the external forces and material values that were perceived as alien to their idealisations of the past. In the lowland communities, social change was considered a more gradual, if insidious, process; lowland communities felt culturally less threatened and with a more secure future.

The movement of people into these areas was viewed as a serious issue by most respondents. New rural residents were seen as a powerful force, but most respondents were reluctant to discuss the issue in terms of class, power or economics. Respondents categorised new rural residents by use of ethnic, cultural, behavioural, or geographical labels. All the ills of a changing rural society were, at some point, blamed on new rural residents, but respondents rarely linked what they often perceived to be their negative *social* impact with the underlying causes of the indigenous population moving out, notably lack of affordable housing or jobs.

Respondents in scattered communities identified a strong pressure for young people "to get on and get out". Many presented an image of young people forced to emigrate from rural areas and carrying forever a sense of loss. Respondents who had returned from urban areas, however, indicated that

rural life only appealed when they had children or in middle age. It was clear that rural young people frequently feel that they can *only* achieve their potential in the urban areas. Nevertheless, the minority that wanted to stay or to return often could not because of the lack of affordable housing and employment.

Interviewees spoke consistently about a huge gap between people and policy-makers. In the lowland communities policy issues were less to do with the powerlessness of whole communities but rather attached to social divisions.

Development

Rural development was perceived quite differently in the lowland areas from the scattered communities where there was more awareness of initiatives and of EU funding. On the other hand, respondents in Harris and Wester Ross exhibited a pervasive sense of powerlessness to effect change or to modify development, whereas in the lowland areas most people felt that they could influence local development. The key priorities for Local Enterprise Companies were widely felt to be grants for low-income entrepreneurs; small-scale, endogenous rural development projects; and promotion of youth employment. In the lowlands the main focus of respondents' concern was preventing inappropriate development.

About the study

This study was commissioned by Rural Forum (Scotland) and supported by The Scottish Consumer Council, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, Scottish Homes, and the Royal Scottish Agricultural Benevolent Institution. The work was carried out at Aberdeen University by Professor Mark Shucksmith, Pollyanna Chapman and Gill M. Clark, with the help of Stuart Black and Eddie Conway.

Research was conducted in Harris, Wester Ross, Angus and North Ayrshire (representing the four main types of rural area in Scotland). A questionnaire survey of 500 households in 1993, was followed by in-depth interviews with 120 respondents. In spring 1994, respondents and members of the public were invited to 'feedback meetings' presenting preliminary findings from the research; in all areas these were given strong approval.

Further information

A separate paper suggesting policy options is also available from the Foundation. The full report will be published by HMSO (Scotland) as **Rural Scotland Today: The best of both worlds?** in April 1995. Meantime, a summary report **Disadvantage in Rural Scotland** is available from Rural Forum (Scotland), Highland House, 46 St Catherine's Road, Perth PH1 5RY for £5. For further information on the research, contact Mark Shucksmith, Pollyanna Chapman or Gill M. Clark at the Department of Land Economy, Aberdeen University on (0224) 273772.

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- 56 Increasing polarisation between better-off and poorer neighbourhoods in Oldham and in Oxford (Sep 94)
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