

1a RURAL DEFINITIONS: GENERAL SURVEY

Distinguishing Village & Town or Rural & Urban

FOR REFLECTION OR DISCUSSION

What do most people think of as 'rural'?
Do you agree? What reasons have you for agreeing or disagreeing?

The first classification made when considering settlements is into two apparently totally contrasted types: urban & rural. This is also the immediate contrast used in everyday life when people refer to towns & villages. The implication is that there is a fundamental & easily defined distinction to be made between them. Along the scale of size it is implied that there is a point at which a significant change in the fundamental nature of the settlement occurs. Can this idea be supported?

In simple descriptive & functional terms, a valid distinction might be made on the basis that the village contains a population primarily engaged in agriculture. Nucleation came about for agricultural reasons (e.g. availability of water supply). By contrast, the town has a population characterised by non-agricultural occupations, especially the provision of centrally located or accessible facilities (e.g. professional services, banks). However this simple distinction is untenable, largely for two reasons:

- A village may well have central & accessible services
- Any given village may well have a substantial sub-population of those not employed in agriculture
- In contemporary Britain, only a minority of rural inhabitants in general are employed in areas related to agriculture

Any clear break that may have once existed, *on these criteria*, between village & town (or rural & urban) is therefore lost and any distinction becomes one of degree rather than kind.

Different countries have reached widely varying ways of distinguishing between urban & rural populations. There is no uniform or standard method employed, and the boundary line between urban & rural must - of necessity - be arbitrary. Five types of definition are employed, often in combination with each other:

- (1) Minimum Population. This is the simplest & most direct method, but suffers from the lack of any standard definition of "minimum" or the area to be considered.
- (2) Administrative Designation. In numerous cases, urban is simply defined by law (whether national or local). But again this is complicated by lack of standard definition and the actual size of "administrative area" under consideration.
- (3) Population Density. Seldom used on its own, this is often combined with one of the earlier two factors - to designate areas that fall outside an urban definition.
- (4) Employment in Agriculture. This depends on the necessary occupational statistics being available, and is intended to include suburban & commuter communities within urban definitions. However, in many western cultures, where agriculture employs fewer & fewer people, this criterion is increasingly meaningless.

- (5) Urban Function. Here the difficulty lies with the definition of the "functions" that characterise urban settlements. Often these are entirely arbitrary.

Two further problems exist for those wishing to identify some formal distinction between urban & rural:

- Even where census data is available, many of the figures are questionable because the underlying census information is unreliable (looking more broadly than the UK).
- Even where censuses are reliable, the data refer to administratively defined areas whose boundaries may not coincide with the physical extent of a settlement (e.g. electoral constituency boundaries in UK). The area included may be far larger than the settlement (*overbounded*) or it may leave much of a settlement outside the limit taken (*underbounded*). These anomalies often result from a lag in the adjustment of defined areas to settlement growth or decline.

The result of all this is that there are three fundamental reasons why statements about the proportions of urban & rural population need to be treated with caution:

1. Definitions Vary. Certainly from country to country, but even within a single country different definitions may be employed by different agencies or government departments (e.g. DEFRA, the Countryside Agency & the Church of England in England).
2. Census Data may be Unreliable. Although this is less likely to be the case in western countries like UK. Nevertheless, even the 2001 census results needed adjustments in some areas (and supplements to the official publication have been produced later).
3. Settlement Boundaries may be Unhelpful. This depends on how well local or national administration keeps up with changes in settlement sizes & patterns, and on the choice of administrative divisions employed when collecting & analysing data.

FOR REFLECTION OR DISCUSSION

What do *you* think is meant by 'rural'?
Try writing a 'definition' in 50 words or less.

As we shall see, efforts are being made within the UK to rationalise these difficulties and introduce a standardised & widely-applicable definition of urban & rural areas.

FOR ACTION

Take a survey of people (a representative 5) in your own church on what they think is meant by 'rural'. Do a similar survey with 10 representative people in your neighbouring community.

Are there striking differences between the two groups? If so, why might this be?

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"The Development of Rural Definitions in UK"

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