

**“Spots rather than great rashes”**

According to the Commission for Rural Communities (CRC) there are 900,000 households living below the poverty threshold in rural areas of England, accounting for 1 in 5 of the rural population. If they all lived in one place it would cover an area the size of Birmingham and would demand much attention. As it is, rural poverty is dispersed and often well-hidden, occurring in ‘spots rather than great rashes’ and therefore frequently goes unnoticed or is left ignored. Indeed, even amongst those living in rural communities, almost half are unlikely to recognise the existence of disadvantage in their area.

The dispersed nature of rural poverty presents particular challenges to those seeking to address it, including policy makers. Invariably anti-poverty measures tend to focus on densely populated towns and cities. Most of the policy instruments adopted, such as neighbourhood renewal funds or the Index of Multiple Deprivation, assume or respond to concentrations of disadvantaged people. These blunt instruments are ineffective in addressing the needs of those pockets of people living in poverty cheek by jowl with affluent people.

The hidden nature of rural poverty can be exacerbated by cultural attitudes which lead to people delaying seeking help, trying to cope by themselves or actively hiding their disadvantage. The fear of receiving criticism or being marginalised and the traditional values of pride and self-reliance contribute to the under reporting of the extent and nature of problems. The lack of anonymity in rural communities is a further discouragement to the issues being addressed.

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation has defined disadvantage as ‘a wide set of difficulties preventing people from participating fully in society, including poverty, but also, for example, limiting factors in one’s life situation, such as lack of skills, unequal levels of health and well-being associated with economic disadvantage and discrimination.’ The CRC, in its exploration of rural disadvantage, has also recognised that financial considerations are only one aspect of poverty. In addition to financial poverty it examines access poverty and network poverty, all of which influence both someone’s experience of, and ability to overcome, disadvantage in rural areas.

Of the 1 in 5 people living in poverty in rural areas nearly half are in working households. Under-employment and marked seasonal variations in employment are common and a high proportion of those wanting to work are prevented from doing so by a limiting long-term illness or through lack of childcare or transport. There is also a high concentration of financial poverty amongst older people, with around one-quarter of those in poverty in pensioner households.

Access poverty is most clearly displayed in issues of transport and ICT provision. Transport plays an essential role in allowing people to access employment, education, health services, shopping and leisure and poor public transport services are compounded

by the fact that a third of adults in rural areas do not have personal access to a car. Access to ICT, and broadband provision in particular, is growing in rural areas but still there are fewer public access points and low-income households in rural areas use digital TV and interactive services less than those on higher incomes.

Family, friends, social networks and local community support are critical in helping people to avoid or overcome disadvantage. Whilst the commonly perceived notion persists of a strong rural community spirit there is increasing evidence of social isolation and thus, network poverty. Social networks are being undermined by factors such as, demographic change, the lack of affordable housing, the growth of commuting, the forecast growth in mental health problems, the increase in lone person households and the growth of more remote methods of working.

In many ways, of course, poverty in rural areas is no different to that in urban ones. The ways in which it is addressed, however, need to be a little more sophisticated and focussed. Comparing average levels of rural and urban disadvantage, for example, will often present rural areas in a favourable light but this is too crude a measure and helps perpetuate the 'hiddenness' of rural poverty. Government and others need to 'rural-proof' their policies and activities, to address the 'spots rather than great rashes' and to tackle the poverty endured by 900,000 households in this country.

*Rural disadvantage: Priorities for action* (Commission for Rural Communities, June 2006 - [www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk](http://www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk))

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