

## **The Rural Idyll & the Nature of Rural Poverty**

in IMAgenda January/February 2009 (Industrial Mission Association)

The Commission for Rural Communities (CRC), the Government's rural adviser and watchdog, tends to use the term disadvantage as a way of explaining the complexity of issues facing those in our rural communities who are in poverty or other forms of need. Whilst the absence of financial resources can cripple a family, the impact of isolation and limited opportunity can have a significant impact too.

Rural areas are commonly perceived as being affluent and generally well off and indeed they are. Large numbers of people commute from villages and rural towns to well paid jobs in nearby towns and cities. Standards of living are high, there are high levels of car ownership (partly due to the absence of alternatives) and rural areas are still seen as a good and safe place to live. However, there are significant levels of poverty in rural areas, often exacerbated by the differential between neighbours, isolation and absence of alternatives. Poverty in rural areas is also hidden. In a place where you are well known, even if not by everyone these days, it is almost impossible to admit that there is a problem and that you might need help.

“A lot of the time you can be shut in, with four walls. It can be quite lonely. We enjoy going on trips and on holidays, memories are important. It can be expensive though. At the moment we've all been saving up for the Christmas dinner and Pantomime.”

First a few definitions. Since 2004 Defra has defined rural England by two main categories: less sparsely populated and sparsely populated. Most of rural England is less sparsely populated and is relatively accessible surrounding large towns and cities. Small areas of Somerset, Devon, Herefordshire, Shropshire, Cumbria, Yorkshire, Northumberland, Lincolnshire and Norfolk are sparsely populated. A settlement is considered to be rural if it has a population of less than 10,000 people.

The rural population of England is 9.6 million (or 19.3% of the population). 723,000 people (1.5%) live in the sparsely populated areas. Rural England has an aging population and there are many pensioners, 2.3 million people are aged over 60. Many of the oldest rural residents live in remote or sparsely populated areas and can be the most deprived of all rural residents.

“My house is said to be worth a fortune but I can't afford to heat it properly and it's really too big for me. My daughter is always on at me to sell it and move to a smaller place but I want to stay in the village and there's nothing suitable to buy.”

The continuing increase in the rural population has contributed to the large rises in house prices that has excluded many young people and young families from living in the area where they were brought up. All rural areas show very low numbers in the 15-35 age bracket when young people move away to find jobs, housing or education. Some rural areas experience the

phenomenon of reverse commuting, people from the local towns or city fringes commuting back to the village and rural business where they are employed. Net inward migration from urban to rural areas (excluding migrant workers) is around 80,000 people each year. The average price in 2007 for a house in a rural area was £257,600 compared to the urban average of £212,954. The CRC estimates that around three households per 1000 in all rural areas are either in temporary accommodation or homeless. This figure is almost certainly a underestimate and reflects the difficulty in obtaining accurate information on poverty issues in rural areas. It is not uncommon for three generations to be living together, or for young people to be sleeping on someone else's sofa, none of whom would be listed as homeless.

This hidden homelessness reflects the dispersed nature of poverty and disadvantage in rural areas. In large towns and cities poverty can be concentrated in easily identified deprived areas. In rural areas the dispersed nature can be reflected in those who are well off living next door to those living below the poverty line. The Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) is used to identify areas of poverty but it is not sensitive enough to pick up the individual deprived households in rural areas. For example only 2.4% of the 20% most deprived areas by IMD are rural, but 15% of all deprived people are rural residents.

The CRC has estimated that 906,101 households in rural areas [21.4%] are in income poverty, earning less than £16,800 per annum. This is probably accounts for around 2 million people dispersed across the whole of England and will include a large number of children and young people. The dispersed nature of this poses significant problems for policy makers where initiatives such as the Single Regeneration Budget and Neighbourhood Renewal can be used to target areas of deprivation, but do not apply to the generally better off rural areas and so deprived people miss out. Policies to target individuals are notoriously difficult to apply, especially in small towns and villages where people are reluctant to stand up to be counted.

Three critical factors have been identified for rural people, in both experiencing and escaping disadvantage:

- Financial poverty –income, employment (and benefits)
- Access poverty – accessing transport and other services
- Network poverty – contact and help from friends, neighbours and others.

Rural residents are less likely to claim the benefits to which they are entitled. In one local authority area a project with Citizen's Advice enabled older people living in sheltered housing to claim an additional £350,000 in benefits. When the programme was extended to the wider rural community, including farming, faith and traveller communities, an additional £275,000 in unclaimed benefits was secured. In the main market town for the area the GP's surgery now has regular CAB sessions to help more claimants. In another area a

newly opened post office in a church also has a benefits help desk once a month, provided by the local council.

“I think we will have to look again at public transport now that fuel prices are so high. I would use the bus (if there was one) to get to work in Oxford because of the price of petrol– it would be worth it. Free bus passes are great but why can't they be used on the trains? If I want to go into Oxford by public transport, I go by train to Didcot.”

It is not just the absence of public transport that causes problems but the absence training and skills and of well paid employment. Much rural employment is seasonal and based on minimum wage. People who work in the countryside tend to have lower wages than those working in urban areas but in the same occupation.

It has proved virtually impossible to gather case studies and individual stories of rural people who are in poverty. There is a fear of being identified and of your private business being known to others. Where communities have become fragmented or families have moved away to places where they can afford to live, those who are disadvantaged are likely to be isolated and have limited choices for even the most basic needs in life.

Rural disadvantage is a difficult issue to challenge and address, but it is one that needs innovative and creative thinking from all concerned if a solution is to be found.

I would like to acknowledge the help of Canon Glyn Evans, Rural Officer for the Diocese of Oxford.

Dr Jill Hopkinson  
National Rural Officer for the Church of England  
Arthur Rank Centre  
Stoneleigh Park, Warwickshire  
[jillh@rase.org.uk](mailto:jillh@rase.org.uk)

The Arthur Rank Centre, an ecumenical body, is the churches rural resources centre. Visit [www.arthurrankcentre.org.uk](http://www.arthurrankcentre.org.uk) for information and resources on rural churches and communities.