

U.S. Rural Demographic Trends in International
Perspective : An Issue Brief.

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The purpose of this 'issue brief' is to identify some of the major priority issues for research on rural population change that are emerging outside the United States, particularly in Europe, and that may be relevant to deepening understanding of recent U.S. rural demographic trends and their socio-economic consequences. One important research issue in its own right concerns the extent to which American experience is distinctive or is now part of a world-wide process of population redistribution. The increasing globalization of the U.S. economy suggests that the U.S. will be less insulated than in the past from external pressures and thus may be increasingly subject to the forces affecting rural areas elsewhere. Trends elsewhere, therefore, especially in those world regions with similar levels of economic development, should be of increasing interest to students of U.S. rural demographic change.

I have identified in the recent literature eight 'issue areas' in which research is under way but in which progress could be made in the 1990s. The order in which the issue areas are presented reflects a tentative ranking of their theoretical and policy significance largely in terms of generality versus specificity.

1).The 'city - country' debate.

A persisting theme in the literature is discussion of the meaningfulness of the terms 'rural' and 'urban' in the late twentieth century. In particular, there is a powerful critique of the idea of rural 'society' as a separable entity. Consequently, in much social science the 'rural' appears either as a residual category, equivalent to the 'non-urban', or as areas of low population density in which at least some of the population is engaged in agriculture. Increasingly, rural demographic trends are not treated separately from population trends in general but as part of more holistic studies of population redistribution. In addition, rural areas are increasingly viewed in terms of their functional links rather than their formal or area-wide characteristics. This reinforces a focus on the changing and dynamic rather than static nature of rurality. However, there are major methodological problems involved in measuring functional links, not the least of which is the availability of suitable data. Moreover, in many countries the 'rural' is still an important term in political discourse where it is closely associated with 'family farming' and long - established images of peasant virtue, whatever the sociological reality. In this political context it is difficult to redefine rural areas in functional terms (see, e.g. Bodiguel, 1986).

2).The 'counterurbanization' debate.

The major intellectual framework for situating rural population change in a wider context has been the so-called counterurbanization debate. This has involved attempts at finding evidence for the revival of rural population growth and then providing some explanation for its presence or absence. Initially noted for the U.S. by Calvin Beale, the rural population turnaround was identified in the 1970s in a number of economically developed countries. The reversal of population movement and growth was explained largely in terms of the emergence of a 'post-industrial' society in which there were fewer economic returns to population agglomeration. For reasons of amenity and avoidance of congestion people could now live and work away from large urban areas. Urbanization and suburbanization were being replaced by counterurbanization.

Since the 1970s, however, population deconcentration of the type associated with the term counterurbanization has slowed in some countries and reversed in others. As with the initial discovery of the rural population turnaround the first reports of a new reversal came from the United States (Engels and Healey, 1979; Richter, 1985). But they were followed quickly by similar reports from elsewhere (e.g. Britain, Champion, 1981; comparative studies, Cochrane and Vining, 1986; Illeris, 1988). The picture today is an exceedingly complex one. Recent U.S. census (1990) data suggest that rural counties

bordering metropolitan areas grew relatively faster than other units in the 1980s but much faster (x2) than more distant rural counties. This is more like 'sub-suburbanization' than counterurbanization. European studies of the 1980s suggest that counterurbanization, in the sense of a strong negative correlation between size of settlement and population growth, is only one form of a much more spatially complex population dispersal taking place since the 1970s.

There remain a number of persisting conceptual and methodological problems within the counterurbanization debate. First, results vary in terms of the scale of analysis. In Italy, for example, there are profound and continuing differences at the regional scale between North and South (Dematteis and Petsimeris, 1989). Second, there are differences between countries in the extent and timing of both counterurbanization and its reversal that are as yet unexplained. Third, the counterurbanization process, as argued by Champion (1989), needs to be placed in a theoretical framework that emphasizes both cyclical and structural change rather than one or the other. Fourth, the debate on population redistribution is now extending beyond the confines of counterurbanization as such and stands in need of renaming. Fifth, the spatial units adopted to define the areas used in research vary widely across countries and thus limit the possibility of making valid comparisons.

3).Rural industrialization.

However problematic in other respects, the counterurbanization debate has provided considerable evidence that population deconcentration in general ,if not of a specific form,is a trend characteristic of many industrialized countries.In some countries ,such as Italy and France, this trend is highly correlated with the growth of manufacturing industry in 'rural' areas and the creation of what is called an 'urbanized countryside' in Italy (a good example is along the main highway from Florence to the Tyrrhenian Sea).A new settlement system seems to be under construction in some countries.Specialized industrial districts based upon small firms and small units of production at low density are tied functionally to 'traditional' urban centers in which marketing and major service activities are located.What is not clear as yet is how physically divided from existing population concentrations these areas will remain and whether this pattern of rural industrialization is specific to certain 'social worlds'(in Italy, there is, for example, a high association with certain types of family structure and local government policy;Becattini,1987)and not likely to develop readily elsewhere.In France the decentralization of industry has been most marked within the Paris Basin rather than in more peripheral rural areas and the main actors have been large rather than small firms(Winchester and

Ogden, 1989). Rural industrialization, therefore, is not the same phenomenon everywhere and its impact on rural areas is consequently likely to differ.

4). The reemergence of regional divergence.

At one time it was an assumption of students of regional development that regional differences in economic structure and growth would lessen over time as economic activities were reallocated from more to less 'expensive' regions. However, in many industrialized countries regional differences have increased rather than decreased (Krebs, 1982). Rural areas in lagging regions can be expected to show different economic and demographic characteristics from those in leading regions. In the United States these differences are well documented (e.g. Fuguitt, Brown and Beale, 1989), as they are in Britain (Champion et al., 1987). But as yet little research has attempted to tie these differences to causes of regional diversity such as investment in infrastructure, patterns of urbanization, and relations to the world economy (but on the 'two ruralities' of, respectively, Northern and Southern Italy see Barberis and Dell'Angelo, 1988).

5). Rural depopulation.

Even as some rural areas were experiencing counterurbanization others were faced by large - scale depopulation as younger people left but were not replaced by new in - migrants. In large parts of 'interior' Spain, for example, rural population has been declining for the past twenty years (Sauvy, 1987). Likewise, in many of the more

mountainous regions of Western Europe rural populations have been aging at much faster rates than national averages (e.g. Estienne, 1988). It remains to be seen how widespread and permanent these trends will remain. In particular, the tremendous growth in second - home ownership and the politicization of populations in many peripheral areas (such as Wales and Scotland) may presage the beginning of population stabilization in areas of previous depopulation.

6). 'New' rural populations available for migration.

The recent political changes in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, the growth of the European Community, and the rapid increase in the rural populations of poor countries adjacent to the United States and Western Europe, are all likely to increase the number of potential rural to urban migrants in the 1990s for Western Europe and the United States. In this scenario there are three rural peripheries for Europe (the EC periphery, E. Europe, and N. Africa) and at least one (Latin America) for the U.S. The removal of old barriers to movement and the creation of new ones will produce in the 1990s new patterns of migration that will at the very least put into question established assumptions about origins and destinations. But migration "is not simply someone picking up and moving elsewhere, but a complex convection flow of departures, visits, and returns; of communities sustained over space and time; of networks of family and experiences. For this reason, not only will the

cities of the center undergo change from the mixed blessings of hosting migrants from the periphery, but the periphery itself will be changed because of its closer contacts with the center" (Alonso, 1991:9).

7). Rural population versus farming population.

In many circles, not the least in political ones, there is a strong association often made between the rural and the agricultural. Yet, in the contemporary United States the non-agricultural part of the rural population is over 90 percent. In some other countries, however, the farming population is a much higher relative proportion of the total rural population. In France, for example, farmers constituted over 21 percent of the rural population in 1982 (Bodiguel, 1986:148). There is some suggestion that this type of difference can be traced to the survival of the family farm versus the penetration of agribusiness but there has been little or no systematic international comparison on which to base appropriate inferences. In some European countries farming also survives as an important part-time activity for many people who are also engaged in manufacturing and service employment.

8). Government policies with rural impacts.

The fear, for economic and political reasons, of losing farming populations, the relatively high levels of economic 'deprivation' in rural areas, and the higher costs associated with providing services in rural areas, have led to government policies in many countries designed to 'help'

rural populations. There are, perhaps, four major policy areas: (1) farm price and agricultural extension policies; (2) infrastructure policies; (3) individual welfare policies; and (4) regional development policies. Many of these are now under pressure because of the fiscal problems of governments, GATT negotiations, the popularity of privatization of services, and the connection between some of these policies and political clientelism. A major research agenda should include attention to the consequences for rural populations of changes in these policy areas. Many of the most important European studies are now seriously out of date (e.g. Yuill et al., 1983; Pinder, 1983; Bowler, 1985). However, it seems clear that the empirical basis to the European writing about the 'new rurality' and the decline in the association between rurality and underdevelopment owes much to the success of various government policies over the past twenty years (e.g. Barberis and Dell'Angelo, 1988). What is less clear is the extent to which the progress and problems of American rural areas can be tied to government policies of one kind or another.

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