Poverty, Social Exclusion and Welfare in Rural Britain

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Poverty remains a hidden phenomenon in rural Britain. Its presence is obscured by small and scattered settlement structures, the arrival of ex-urban affluent groups and the limited provision of welfare facilities in these areas. In addition, dominant media discourses continue to construct rural areas as comfortable, middle-class spaces within which social problems such as poverty are viewed as out of place. The significance of rural forms of poverty is further downplayed by statistical constructions of disadvantage. While sophisticated indices of multiple deprivation have been developed over recent years, most of these are based on concentrations of problems in particular places. This means that they tend to direct attention towards metropolitan spaces (where such spatial concentrations are evident) and away from rural areas (where the poor and non-poor are less strongly segregated).

Other forms of statistical information that have emerged over the last few years, however, highlight the significance of poverty and social exclusion in rural areas. Since the early 1990s, a number of academic and policy studies have generated a large volume of evidence on the scale and nature of poverty and exclusion in rural Britain. The aim of this chapter is to provide a critical review of this evidence. The chapter draws on a broad range of findings from different studies, undertaken from the 1980s to date, to paint a comprehensive picture of poverty and social exclusion in rural areas. The chapter also considers policy responses to rural forms of poverty and exclusion through a discussion of the effects of New Labour’s welfare programmes on rural areas and of the development of rural anti-poverty initiatives.

The chapter is divided into four sections. In the first, attention is focused on how poverty and social exclusion are defined. The second section then sets out evidence on the scale, geographies and profile of poverty in rural areas, as well as on the connections between rural poverty and social exclusion. Section three moves the focus of the chapter on to welfare assistance, by providing a discussion of policy responses to poverty and exclusion in rural areas. Particular attention is given to the development of national and local welfare policies in Britain, and the recent emergence of evidence of the rural impacts of welfare restructuring in the United States. The chapter ends with a critical review of the state of knowledge on poverty, social exclusion and welfare in rural areas.

Defining poverty and social exclusion

Before highlighting evidence on rural poverty and social exclusion in Britain, it is necessary to discuss the definitions of these terms. In relation to poverty, two types of definition can be identified within the academic and policy literatures. The first is an ‘absolute’ one, based on an objective definition of the minimum standard of living required to sustain life – in terms of food, clothing and shelter – and is concerned with biological and physical needs. It was this notion of poverty that was used within the early poverty studies in England (see Booth 1889, Rowntree 1901). However, improvements in standards of living over the twentieth century, together with the establishment of national systems of welfare provision in the 1940s, led researchers to question the usefulness of absolute notions of poverty.

In the early 1980s a ‘relative’ definition of poverty, linked to the pioneering work of Townsend (1979), began to be discussed by researchers. Townsend proposed that households could be classified as poor ‘when they lack the resources to obtain the types of diet, participate in the activities and have the living conditions and amenities which are customary, or at least widely encouraged or approved, in the societies to which they belong’ (1979: 31). Furthermore, his research indicated that a poverty threshold could be identified at 140 per cent of a household’s state benefit entitlement. A later study by Mack and Lansley (1985), using a more sophisticated version of Townsend’s methodology, indicated a similar poverty threshold of 135 per cent of benefit entitlement. More recently, poverty thresholds have been defined in relation to official statistics on national income levels. Adopted by the New Labour governments, the European Commission and a range of UK anti-poverty organisations, poor households have been defined as those with incomes of less than 60 per cent of the national median income level.

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By the mid 1990s, the UK social welfare agenda began to be reconfigured around the concept of social inclusion/exclusion. With its origins in European solidarity discourses of society and welfare, social exclusion can be taken to indicate a rupture of the social bond between the individual and society (Silver 1994). In the early 1990s, the European Commission shifted its welfare policy programmes from anti-poverty to social inclusion. In 1997, the UK Government formally accepted social exclusion as its key...
welfare policy tool and established the Social Exclusion Unit to ensure the development of social inclusion policies across government. The Social Exclusion Unit adopted what can be termed a ‘poverty-plus’ definition of social exclusion, which focuses on the broader range of disadvantages that are experienced by poor groups in particular local contexts.

Academic researchers have sought to provide more comprehensive definitions of social exclusion. Room was one of the first authors to do this. He proposed that social exclusion represents a ‘process of becoming detached from the organisations and communities of which society is composed and from the rights and obligations that they embody’ (1995: 243). A couple of years later, Walker and Walker set out a similar definition of exclusion as a ‘dynamic process of being shut out, fully or partially, from any of the social, economic, political or cultural systems which determine the social integration of a person in society’ (1997: 8).

More recently, researchers have tried to develop operational definitions of social exclusion by unpacking its constituent parts. Three of these definitions are worthy of mention here. First, Burchardt et al (1999) identified five key dimensions of social exclusion: consumption, savings, production, political activities and social activities. A second attempt to provide a working definition of social exclusion was made by Percy-Smith (2000) who set out seven main components of exclusion: economic, social, political, neighbourhood, individual, spatial and group. The third, and perhaps most useful, working definition of social exclusion developed to date is that provided by Gordon et al (2000), who propose four main dimensions: impoverishment or exclusion from adequate income or resources; labour market exclusion; exclusion from housing and key services; and exclusion from social and community relations.

Poverty and social exclusion in rural Britain: an overview of research evidence

It is now 20 years since the first research findings on rural poverty in Britain were published (McLaughlin 1986). Since then, a number of academic and policy studies have examined the extent, social profile and geographies of poverty in rural areas. Various methodological tools have been used to investigate rural poverty, including large household surveys, national spatial analyses of Census and other government survey data, and local qualitative studies. Over the last few years, attempts have also been made to explore the nature of social exclusion in rural areas. This section provides a critical overview of key findings from these various studies.

The scale of rural poverty

The evidence that emerges from studies undertaken over the last two decades points to the presence of a significant minority of households living in poverty in many areas of the British countryside. Five major household surveys undertaken over this period indicate broadly similar levels of poverty in rural areas. A survey of 750 households in five areas of rural England in 1980–81 conducted by McLaughlin (1986) showed that an average of 25 per cent of households were living in, or on the margins of, poverty (based on Townsend’s 1979 poverty indicator).

A repeat survey by Cloke et al (1994) in 1990–91 in these five areas and in another seven study areas in rural England, covering 3,000 households, revealed 23 per cent of households in the 12 areas living in, or on the margins of, poverty and an identical rate of poverty in the five areas included within the previous study. A third survey of 1,000 households in four areas of rural Wales in 1991–92, by Cloke et al (1997), indicated that 27 per cent were living in, or on the margins of, poverty. Fourth, a survey of households in four areas of rural Scotland in the mid 1990s by Shucksmith et al (1996) indicated that 65 per cent of heads of household had incomes below the Low Pay Unit’s low pay threshold. Most recently, a survey of 4,000 households in rural Wales, undertaken in 2004, revealed 25 per cent of households living below the poverty line (defined as 60 per cent of the median income level) (Milbourne and Hughes 2005).

Analyses of low income

Efforts have also been made by rural researchers to analyse income data contained within national government databases. Utilising data from the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) for the first half of the 1990s, Chapman et al (1998) calculated that 18 per cent of households in rural Britain had gross incomes of less than half the national mean income in 1995 and that 34 per cent of rural households had experienced a period of low income between 1991 and 1995. However, both these figures were lower than those
recorded for ‘non-rural’ areas (24 per cent and 41 per cent respectively). Four years later, Harrop and Palmer (2002) used the same government survey data to reveal an identical level of low income in rural England (18 per cent) in 2000–01. The analysis also pointed to the persistence of low income in rural areas, with 36 per cent of those households that had experienced low income between 1997 and 1999 living on low incomes in all three years. This figure compares with 33 per cent of low-income households in urban areas.

A more recent analysis of local income data for Wales indicates similar proportions of households on low income in rural areas. In 2003, one fifth of working households in rural Wales were on low income (below 60 per cent of the national median income), a rate identical to that in ‘urban’ areas and only marginally below the level of low income in the ‘Valleys’ (Milbourne and Hughes 2005). In addition, seven of the nine rural local authority areas in Wales had at least one fifth of working households on low income.

The geographies of rural poverty

Evidence from the household surveys and the analyses of income data highlights some interesting geographies of poverty in rural Britain. Differences in the scale of low income and poverty are apparent between so-called remote and accessible rural areas, with the remoter rural areas – those located away from the main population centres – recording higher levels of low income and poverty. Cloke et al.’s (1994) survey of households in 12 areas of rural England, for example, revealed Northumberland and North Yorkshire as having the highest levels of low income, and Warwickshire, West Sussex and Cheshire the lowest in the early 1990s. In addition, Harrop and Palmer’s (2002) analysis of the BHPS indicates that 21 per cent of the population were living in low-income households in remote rural areas in England in 2000–01, compared with 17 per cent in accessible areas. A similar geographical distribution was apparent in relation to persistent forms of rural poverty, with 43 per cent of low-income households in remote areas remaining on low incomes between 1997 and 1999, compared with 29 per cent in accessible rural areas.

More recent analysis of income and state benefit data in rural Wales (Milbourne and Hughes 2005) reinforces this spatial pattern of low income in rural areas, with the remoter north-western areas of rural Wales recording the highest levels of unemployment, benefit receipt and low income. Figure 5.1 shows the spatial distribution of low-income households at ward level within Wales for 2003. It is clear from this map that highest proportions of low-income households are found mainly in the western areas of Gwynedd and the Isle of Anglesey, southern Ceredigion, Carmarthenshire and Pembrokeshire, as well as the North Wales coastal belt. It is also apparent from this figure that levels of low income in these areas of rural Wales are similar to those recorded in the southern ex-industrial Valleys.
The profile of rural poverty

As well as highlighting the scale and geographies of poverty in rural Britain, recent studies have provided important information on the profile of the rural poor.

Age profile

Rural poverty is mostly associated with older-person households. Evidence from the Cloke et al (1994, 1997) household surveys in the early 1990s indicates that people aged over 60 years accounted for almost seven out of ten households in poverty and that 42 per cent of all poor households comprised single-elderly-person households. The more recent survey of households in rural Wales (Milbourne and Hughes 2005) reinforces this older profile of the rural poor, with 36 per cent of respondents in poor households aged 65 years or over and 28 per cent aged 55–64 years (compared with 21 per cent and 23 per cent of all households respectively). Furthermore, Harrop and Palmer’s analysis of BHPS income data reveals that the proportion of the low-income population comprising elderly households in rural areas is higher than in urban areas.

Economic activity – or inactivity

What follows from this age profile is that a significant proportion of the rural poor are economically inactive – 54 per cent of low-income households in rural England in 2002 (Harrop and Palmer 2002) and 71 per cent of poor households in rural Wales in 2004 (Milbourne and Hughes 2005) were not working – and that the vast majority of economically inactive households are retired. In fact, the unemployed comprise only a small proportion of the non-working rural poor population. For example, just 10 per cent of the economically inactive in rural Wales were unemployed in 2004 (Milbourne and Hughes 2005), and just seven per cent of all low-income households in rural England included people who were unemployed and seeking work in 2002 (Harrop and Palmer, 2002).

Approximately one half of people in work in poor households in rural Wales in 2004 were in full-time paid employment, with 29 per cent in part-time jobs and 20 per cent self-employed (Milbourne and Hughes 2005). In addition, low-income workers were more likely to be employed in smaller private-sector firms, with almost half of working respondents in low-income households based in private companies employing fewer than 25 people (compared with 33 per cent for the total sample). Conversely, low-income workers were under-represented in large private-sector firms and in public-sector organisations. Seven categories of employment accounted for around three quarters of all low-income workers in rural Wales: hotels and catering (15 per cent), health and social work (14 per cent), manufacturing (12 per cent), public administration and defence (nine per cent), education (eight per cent), agriculture, hunting and forestry (seven per cent), construction (six per cent) and transport, storage and communications (five per cent).

Housing

Rural poverty is also associated with a mix of housing tenures, four out of ten poor households in rural areas in the early 1990s owning their properties (Milbourne 1997) and the significance of home ownership among the rural poor population appears to have increased over recent years. Evidence from the 2004 rural Wales survey (Milbourne and Hughes 2005), for example, reveals that 65 per cent of poor households were owner-occupiers, with most owning their property outright, and that only 21 per cent of poor households were living in social rented housing.

Recognition of poverty

It is also clear from the various studies that the presence of poverty in rural areas is denied by most residents and that the poor are more likely to deny local poverty than the non-poor. Only 27 per cent of respondents in poor households in the Cloke et al (1994, 1997) surveys recognised the presence of deprivation in their areas, compared with 36 per cent of all households. Similarly, the 2004 household survey in rural Wales reveals that while 41 per cent of respondents in low-income (less than £10,000 per year) households recognised local poverty, the figure for high-income respondents (with household incomes above £31,000 per year) was 45 per cent (Milbourne and Hughes 2005).
Rural poverty and social exclusion

The relationship between poverty and other dimensions of disadvantage in rural areas has been the subject of critical discussion for almost 30 years (see Shaw 1979, Walker 1978, McLaughlin 1986, Cloke et al 1994). Attention has been given to both structures and processes of disadvantage that affect rural residents, and the multiple forms of disadvantage experienced by poor groups in rural areas. The growing significance of the concept of social exclusion within social welfare research and policy over the last ten years has led to further work on exclusion in rural Britain. Within this section, attention is given to two recent studies that have sought to examine the relationship between poverty and social exclusion in rural areas.

Dimensions of disadvantage

A re-analysis of data from the early 1990s rural household surveys in England and Wales has explored five key dimensions of disadvantage in rural areas: consumption, employment, income, savings and social relations (Cloke and Milbourne 2001). Several key findings can be identified from this work. First, significant minorities of the rural poor lacked ‘taken-for-granted’ household items. For example, 33 per cent were without central heating, there was no telephone in 23 per cent of poor households, and 21 per cent did not have washing machine. In addition, 65 per cent of poor households had not taken a holiday away from home in the year before the survey. Second, the working poor were engaged in local jobs characterised by low wage and skill levels, and unprotected by trade unions. Third, while a high proportion of respondents in poor households expressed a sense of belonging to the local community, the poor were much less likely to be involved in the organisation of local community activities than the non-poor.

More recently, Gordon et al’s (2000) dimensions of social exclusion – labour market exclusion, exclusion from key services, and exclusion from social networks – have been examined within rural Wales (Milbourne and Hughes 2005).

Employment

The survey of 4,000 households highlighted that one quarter of all respondents had experienced difficulties in securing employment, with such difficulties mentioned by a higher proportion of low-income respondents (32 per cent). The most commonly reported employment difficulties were the limited availability of employment in the area (mentioned by 38 per cent of all respondents), suitability of local jobs (38 per cent), difficulties getting to places of employment (eight per cent) and wage levels (six per cent).

Access to services

This research also examined people’s abilities to access key services and facilities. Just under one quarter of all respondents (23 per cent) reported limited mobility resulting from a long-term illness, with this figure rising to 38 per cent among those in poor households. In addition, 11 per cent of all households and 32 per cent of poor households did not have access to a private vehicle. This difference between poor and non-poor households was also similar for internet access, with 41 per cent of all households not owning a personal computer with an internet connection, compared to 66 per cent of poor households.

Access to health, education, retail and leisure facilities appeared to be unproblematic for the vast majority of respondents, even when some of these facilities were absent in the local area. Only a dental surgery (18 per cent), cinema (18 per cent), general hospital (13 per cent) and police station (11 per cent) were reported as being problematic to access by more than one in ten respondents, and there were no noticeable differences between poor and non-poor groups in terms of accessing services. However, other research in rural Wales (White and Hughes 2005) indicates that, in 2004, more than nine out of ten communities had no local support services for the unemployed, homeless groups, people with drug problems or women suffering domestic violence. In addition, three quarters of communities lacked any provision for vulnerable young people and more than half were without any support services for vulnerable elderly groups.

Social and community capital

Turning to the final dimension of social exclusion identified by Gordon et al (2000), most (poor and non-poor) respondents in rural Wales identified high levels of social and community capital (see Milbourne and Hughes 2005). For example, two thirds of respondents reported that they spoke with neighbours ‘several times a week’, with the proportion of respondents from poor households reporting this degree of contact with neighbours higher – at 74 per cent. The vast majority of poor and non-poor respondents also
expressed general satisfaction with local living and felt that they belonged to their local community. More than nine out of ten respondents in both groups agreed with the statement, ‘I definitely enjoy living in my community’ and about 80 per cent agreed that, ‘I consider myself to be a member of the local community’. However, 12 per cent of respondents said that they felt excluded from their local community and 19 per cent agreed with the statement that, ‘It can feel isolating living in your area’.

Tackling poverty and social exclusion in rural areas

British rural welfare researchers have paid relatively little attention to the policy responses to poverty and exclusion in rural areas. This section focuses on these policy responses. It discusses welfare interventions at three spatial scales: national welfare programmes developed by New Labour governments; national rural welfare initiatives; and local anti-poverty policies in rural areas. Given the similarities to the welfare-to-work programmes developed under the Clinton administrations, this section also draws on recent research evidence on the rural impacts of welfare restructuring in the United States.

New Labour and welfare restructuring

There has been a great deal of recent discussion about the underpinnings, nature and impacts of welfare restructuring implemented by the three post-1997 Labour governments. An early critique by Lister (1999) identified three main features of national welfare policy under New Labour. First, she suggests that there has been a switch from notions of equality to those of equality of opportunity, involving an increased emphasis on education, training and paid employment at the expense of income redistribution. Second, she points to a policy transition from poverty/anti-poverty to social exclusion/inclusion, through which education and paid employment are viewed as the main mechanisms for achieving social inclusion. Third, Lister identifies a move away from universal rights to welfare support, to individual responsibilities and obligations associated with welfare assistance.

Central to Labour’s approach to welfare has been a programme of welfare-to-work that bears strong similarities to those developed in the United States by the Clinton administrations. New Labour’s welfare-to-work programme is composed of a range of policies designed to reduce “welfare dependency” through paid work, usually combined with in-work social security benefits (Lister 1999: 220). This welfare programme has been implemented through a number of ‘New Deals’ focused on different groups, including long-term unemployed young people, lone parents and long-term unemployed adults.

The Labour governments have also introduced other broader policies containing anti-poverty components. Burden suggests that two types of policy can be identified. The first is concerned with tackling poverty in work and consists of policies ‘designed to compensate for the failure of the labour market and the benefit system to provide all workers with incomes adequate for meeting their needs’ (2000: 48). Most notable here are the minimum wage and the working-family tax-credit schemes. The second type that he identifies consists of a series of policies aimed at certain groups of the poor population, such as women, lone parents, children and families, the disabled and older people.

The impacts remain unclear

While these schemes are likely to have had positive impacts on the rural poor, there has been little robust evaluation of Labour’s welfare policies in rural areas. A Cabinet Office (2000) report on rural areas, for example, was able to draw on very little empirical evidence on the impact of government welfare policy on rural areas. It points to data that show that the New Deal for unemployed young people had been marginally more successful in rural than urban areas, with 45 per cent of rural participants finding employment, compared with 43 per cent of those in urban areas. However, there is no reliable research evidence on the impacts of this and other welfare policies. In order to find such evidence, we need to travel across the Atlantic to the United States.

The rural impacts of national welfare restructuring: evidence from the United States

Much of Labour’s restructuring of the British welfare state has its roots in recent welfare shifts in the United States, and particularly those initiated by the Clinton administrations. Of particular interest to American (rural) welfare researchers has been the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity
Reconciliation Act (PRWORA). This Act represented a new approach to welfare, placing a stronger emphasis on dealing with the barriers to work faced by the long-term unemployed and removing universal rights to certain types of welfare support. According to Tickamyer (2006: 418), the 1996 Act ‘ended the 60 year history of New Deal and War on Poverty entitlements, eliminating the primary programme of cash assistance, and put new limits on the eligibility for and receipt of assistance’.

Several researchers have examined the impacts of this programme of welfare structuring in rural America. Early discussions of PRWORA indicated that its likely impacts in rural areas would be different from those in the cities (Findeis et al 2001). It was also claimed that welfare restructuring could create new problems for dealing with poverty in rural areas. The Rural Poverty Research Institute suggested that ‘given differences such as higher levels of underemployment, lower wages, greater distances to employment and program sites, and fewer community resources, it is likely that rural areas face unique challenges in meeting the requirements of welfare reform’ (1999: 28).

A mixed set of impacts

Since its implementation in 1996, a growing body of research evidence has emerged on the impacts of PRWORA in rural areas. This indicates that the overall number of welfare recipients has fallen dramatically in rural and urban areas since the mid 1990s (Housing Assistance Council 2002). While some of this reduction in the welfare caseload has been associated with national economic growth, it is generally accepted that the 1996 Act has played an important role in lowering the number of caseloads (Joint Center for Poverty Research 2000). However, other research indicates that the level of poverty among working households in rural areas has not declined since 1996 and that child poverty rates in rural areas have declined at a lower rate than in urban and suburban areas (Rural Poverty Research Institute 1999).

A major study of the implementation of welfare reform in rural communities across four states (Pindus 2001) highlights positive impacts of the welfare-to-work reforms among welfare managers as well as increased living standards among those who have made the transition from welfare to work. However, Pindus warns that the longer-term impacts of welfare restructuring will be dependent on more structural responses to rural problems:

‘In rural areas, there are few opportunities for individuals to advance beyond the income and benefits available in the entry-level jobs they have obtained. Longer-term systemic solutions, including economic development and transportation to more distant employment centers, will be required’ (Pindus 2001: 20).

Another important feature of PRWORA is the flexibility that it awarded to individual states to develop anti-poverty programmes. This devolution of welfare has been viewed by some as opening up new opportunities for the development of policies that are better able to deal with the specificities of problems in particular rural places (Findeis et al 2001). For example, the Rural Poverty Research Institute (1999) points to increased levels of community collaboration in rural areas, with training programmes moulded around the specificities of local economies and local employment opportunities.

Others have been more critical, highlighting the dangers of placing too much emphasis on bottom-up approaches to tackling poverty in rural areas. Using findings from three case studies in the rural US, Duncan argues for the need to retain ‘federal oversight’ of welfare provision to ensure that those ‘local and state elites who benefit from the status quo’ (1999: 204) are not able to use new local welfare powers to serve their own interests. In addition, the Joint Center for Poverty Research (2000) suggests that welfare policy – whether focused at national or local level – needs to be more sensitive to the distinctive features of poverty in rural areas, recognising the structure of labour markets, transport needs, welfare service delivery, childcare provision, and the specific needs of persistently poor areas.

National responses to poverty and social exclusion in rural England

In the first ever English Rural White Paper, produced by the Conservative Government in 1995 (DoE/MAFF 1995), there was no reference to the existence of rural poverty, let alone policies to deal with poverty in rural areas. This is despite the fact that the Department of the Environment and the Rural Development Commission had published research the previous year that revealed that an average of 23 per cent of households in 12 study areas were living in poverty (Cloke et al 1994). Similarly, the Rural White Paper for Wales published the following year (Welsh Office 1996) also lacked any discussion of poverty or
disadvantage, despite government-commissioned research having highlighted the significant presence of poverty in rural Wales (Cloke et al 1997).

The election of the New Labour Government in 1997 brought with it a more progressive anti-poverty agenda, although its initial efforts were focused on the most concentrated and visible occurrences of poverty and exclusion in metropolitan areas. Two factors can be identified that began to shift attention to rural welfare issues: the Countryside Alliance’s campaigns to protect hunting with dogs, which highlighted a diverse set of problems faced by people in rural areas, and the (unexpectedly) large number of newly elected Labour MPs with rural or semi-rural constituencies.

Increasing attention to poverty and disadvantage

In one of its first major statements on rural areas, the Cabinet Office highlighted how the Government’s national policies were tackling poverty and disadvantage in rural and urban areas, and stressed that the Government was sensitive to the particular manifestations of disadvantage in rural areas. To quote from the Cabinet Office report, ‘an important aspect of [national] policy development and monitoring is checking that these mainstream programmes take proper account of the needs of those living and working in the countryside’ (2000: 77). The Labour Government’s first Rural White Paper was also published in 2000 (DETR/MAFF). While there was little explicit reference to tackling poverty within this document, attention was given to the increased provision of quality public services in rural areas, including affordable housing, transport, health and education, and the retention of key retail facilities, such as post offices. In addition, the White Paper committed the Government to consider the impacts of all domestic policy on rural areas. Termed ‘rural proofing’, this form of rural impact assessment included consideration of the likely impacts of government policy on low-income groups and other disadvantaged groups in rural areas.

Under the 1998 Comprehensive Spending Review, the Countryside Agency was awarded almost £1 million to fund a programme of work to tackle social exclusion in rural England from 1999–2002 (subsequently extended to 2005). The Rural Social Exclusion Programme comprised two main phases of work: the first, running from 1999–2002, sought to establish measures that could identify and tackle social exclusion in rural areas. Attention was given to raising the profile of rural forms of social exclusion and highlighting good practice in relation to social inclusion initiatives in rural areas. The second phase (2002–2005) focused on three main themes: encouraging community and social enterprise, with a particular emphasis on the links between rural regeneration and social inclusion projects; supporting socially excluded young people; and identifying and targeting rural deprivation.

An evaluation of the first phase of this programme highlights ‘the wide range of work it has supported and the number of partnerships that have been brought together across public, private and voluntary sectors to test innovative solutions to rural social exclusion’ (John Morris and Associates 2002: 1). Individual projects were shown to have covered a series of themes, including the rural impacts of the New Deal, access to skills and training, health and community services and community finance, as well as the needs of various disadvantaged groups in rural areas, such as the elderly and young people. In providing an overall evaluation of the Rural Social Exclusion Programme, John Morris and Associates stress the importance of understanding the particular elements of rural forms of social exclusion: ‘tackling rural social exclusion requires policies and programmes which reflect the unique nature of rural circumstance and build on different approaches to delivery’ (2002: 3).

The Commission for Rural Communities is continuing to provide research and advocacy on social exclusion in rural areas. It has embarked on a major programme of research to discover the extent, nature and experiences of different forms of disadvantage in rural England. In Wales, the Welsh Assembly Government has established the Wales Rural Observatory to provide evidence on a broad range of socio-economic problems in rural areas.

Local anti-poverty initiatives in rural areas

Alongside these national programmes of welfare assistance, there has been a great deal of local action in recent years to tackle poverty and social exclusion in rural areas. Frustrated by central government’s lack of recognition of rural forms of poverty in the early 1990s, individual local agencies began to develop innovative packages of welfare assistance for disadvantaged groups within their areas. What was significant here was the development of anti-poverty strategies by rural local authorities from the mid to late 1990s. At the core of these strategies was an attempt to ‘join up’ anti-poverty policy across departments.
of local government, and between local government and other welfare agencies, in an attempt to deal more effectively with local poverty.

This anti-poverty work has generally involved the profiling of poverty within the local authority area and the development of new policies aimed at dealing with poverty at a local level. Examples of schemes implemented include concession schemes, childcare programmes, debt-prevention projects, affordable housing schemes, the increased provision of welfare rights advice services, and benefit take-up projects.

Three themes have run through many of these initiatives. First, attempts had been made to decentralise anti-poverty services to make them more accessible to client groups. This had been achieved by establishing area-based community workers and a number of one-stop advice shops, through which local people can get information about a range of council services. A second crosscutting theme is the emphasis placed on increased and improved intra- and inter-departmental communication and collaboration. Local authorities have attempted to co-ordinate the actions of different departments to provide more effective anti-poverty services. This has involved the development of closer working relations between benefits, revenue, leisure and trading standards departments in dealing with poverty. Third, efforts have been made to improve partnership working with other agencies drawn from the public and voluntary sectors, such as local health authorities, the Benefits Agency and rural community councils.

While there has not been any national assessment of anti-poverty strategies in rural areas, research in south west England (Milbourne and Cursons 1997) showed that these strategies had gone a considerable way in raising the local profile of rural poverty and providing more co-ordinated, inclusionary and flexible approaches to tackling poverty in rural areas (see also Local Government Association 2003).

Conclusions

It is clear from the evidence presented in this chapter that poverty affects the lives of a significant minority of households in rural Britain. It is also the case that poverty has been a persistent feature of life in the British countryside, with surveys highlighting approximately one quarter of rural households living in poverty in the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s. Moving beyond these headline statistics, the research evidence indicates that poverty levels have been, and remain, higher in the more remote rural areas – those places located away from the main population centres – than in the peri-urban countryside, although pockets of high poverty levels do exist in accessible rural areas.

A different profile of poverty

The profile of rural poverty would appear to cut against popular and policy discourses of poverty in contemporary Britain. The vast majority of the rural poor are elderly; most are property owners and own cars, although many may have been pushed into private ownership through a lack of public housing and transport in rural areas. Those in work significantly outnumber the unemployed among the non-elderly poor population. In addition, the rural poor tend to express general satisfaction with their local areas and to feel included within the social fabric of their local communities.

Gaps in the evidence about rural poverty

While researchers and policymakers can now draw on a broad range of evidence on the shifting scales, social profiles and geographies of poverty in rural Britain, there remain some important omissions in our understandings of rural poverty and social exclusion. Three particular gaps can be identified. First, relatively little is known about the experiences of poverty among different groups in rural areas. While some work has been undertaken on the homeless poor (see Cloke et al 2002) and children and young people (Davis and Ridge 1997), further studies are required on the experiences of other poor groups in the countryside, including older people, lone parents, the unemployed, and working households. Second, the local contexts of rural poverty have been largely ignored. There remains a need to examine the influences of local social, economic, cultural and political compositions on the nature and experiences of poverty in particular rural places. Third, little critical attention has been given to the relationship between poverty and social exclusion in rural contexts. While a small number of studies have pointed to strong connections between material poverty and broader dimensions of disadvantage or social exclusion, further research is needed to examine the nature of these connections among different social groups and in different rural places.
Devolved systems of welfare

Turning to policy, it is likely that New Labour’s national programme of welfare restructuring will have had positive effects on rural areas. However, there is little evidence to confirm such an assertion. Recent studies of similar welfare initiatives in the United States provide some evidence on their rural impacts, revealing a sharp decline in the number of welfare recipients in rural areas but also a rise in the working poor population. Furthermore, while the devolution of welfare in the United States has encouraged the development of more flexible local policies that can meet the needs of particular rural places, these devolved systems of welfare may be unable to deal with the deeper structural causes of poverty and remain at risk of being undermined by local elites.

Defra and the Commission for Rural Communities are beginning to address some of these evidence gaps in relation to welfare policy impacts in rural areas, but it is clear that further work is needed on the vertical and horizontal dimensions of welfare provision in rural areas – the former being concerned with national–local welfare linkages, the latter with the delivery of welfare assistance by state and non-state agencies in particular rural places. If focused on a range of rural localities and disadvantaged groups, such work should provide a robust evidence-based assessment of the state of welfare in rural areas.

References

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