



Rural Depopulation – still a current issue

Introduction

Many students remain convinced that virtually all rural areas in Europe and other MEDCs are experiencing depopulation. This was certainly true until the 1950s – essentially people left rural areas, especially more remote ones, for towns and cities, because of the employment opportunities and services provided. The reversal of this rural to urban flow, whereby people move to the countryside from towns and cities, is known as **counterurbanisation** and was first noted in North America in the early 1970s but soon spread to Western Europe and other areas such as SE Australia. Thus began the process of rural population **turnaround**. Counterurbanisation was driven by 7 key factors as *Table 1* shows.

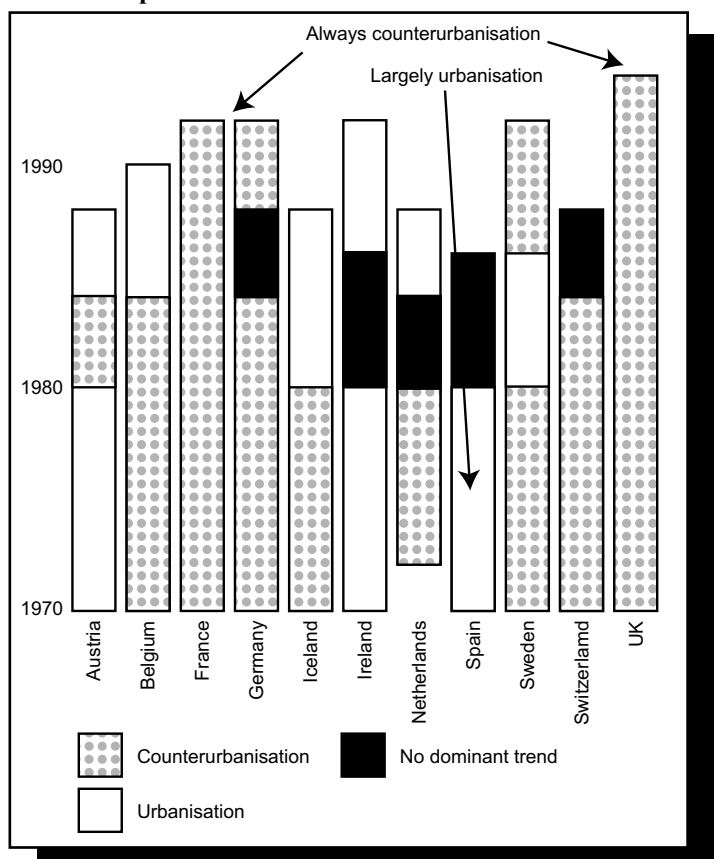
Table 1 Key factors in counterurbanisation.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Economic cyclical factors which encourage periods of rural investment and enterprise development.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Economic structural factors leading to the decentralisation of jobs to rural areas leading to better rural employment opportunities.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spatial and environmental factors such as issues of congestion, pollution and crime in urban areas, housing availability and costs, and quality of rural environmental amenities.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Socio-economic/socio-cultural factors including changing demographic composition (e.g. ageing society seeking retirement in the countryside).
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Government policies including explicit initiatives to promote rural development such as innovative schemes to improve rural services, or schemes to attract migrants.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Technological innovations including improved transport links for commuting, telecommunications (broadband revolution).
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aspirational migration the perception of a rural idyll and a place in the country to provide a better lifestyle. Note how the circumstances can change – for example city centre regeneration, declining rural services and the economic and social costs of commuting are driving many people back to city living (reurbanisation).

By the 1990s counterurbanisation had spread to more remote areas with the advent of **teleworking** and retirement influences. Therefore whilst it is clear that the era of persistent mass rural depopulation has come to an end, and that the **overall** movement in many MEDCs is a strong current of counterurbanisation that is contributing to a steady increase in population in many accessible remote and rural areas, the reality is complex and depopulation does still exist. Rural depopulation is defined as 'population decline in a country, region or small scale area, resulting from either net migration loss, or natural decrease of population, or both'.

(1) As *Fig. 1* shows counterurbanisation rates vary from country to country. Note how in the UK it is a much larger lasting phenomena, and there are only a few remote islands that are still depopulating.

Fig. 1 Predominance of counterurbanisation and urbanisation for 11 European countries.



- (2) **Regional factors** intervene so that different areas have different rates, overall growth or decline. In Canada the remote Yukon, NWT and Newfoundland have all suffered a 6-7% loss of population. In the US there has been growth in the Mountain West, but massive losses in the Prairies and Plains (up to 50%). Equally in Australia inland drylands areas lost up to 33% of people's in last 10 years (hence new immigration incentives to go to 'the back of Bourke'). In conclusion prevailing trends of counterurbanisation mask problems of severe depopulation in certain remote or impoverished areas e.g. Auvergne and Pyrenees in France, or much of rural formerly East Germany.
- (3) Even in areas of rural population growth, pockets of local depopulation occur, for example in South Oxfordshire where strict planning regulations have curtailed the supply of housing and the situation is self reproducing as the few residents living there promote exclusiveness and nimbysism.
- (4) Counterurbanisation can disguise different migration patterns for different age groups and social groups. Fig. 2 summarises this situation.

Fig. 2

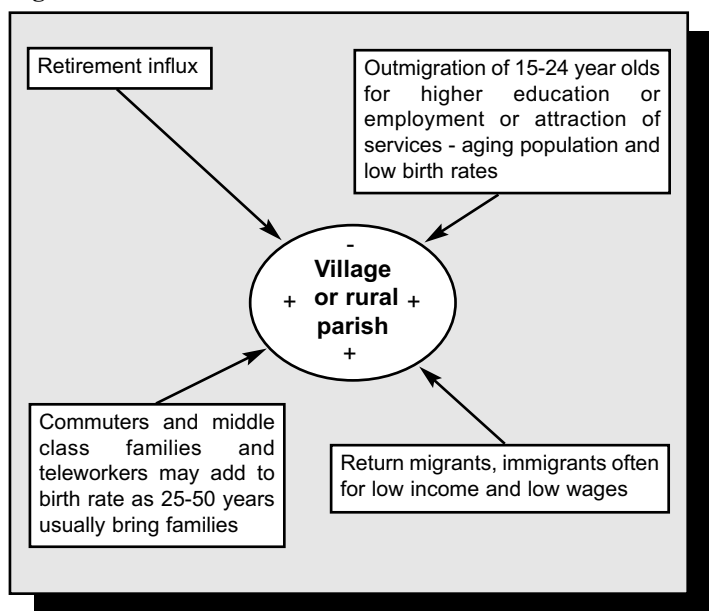
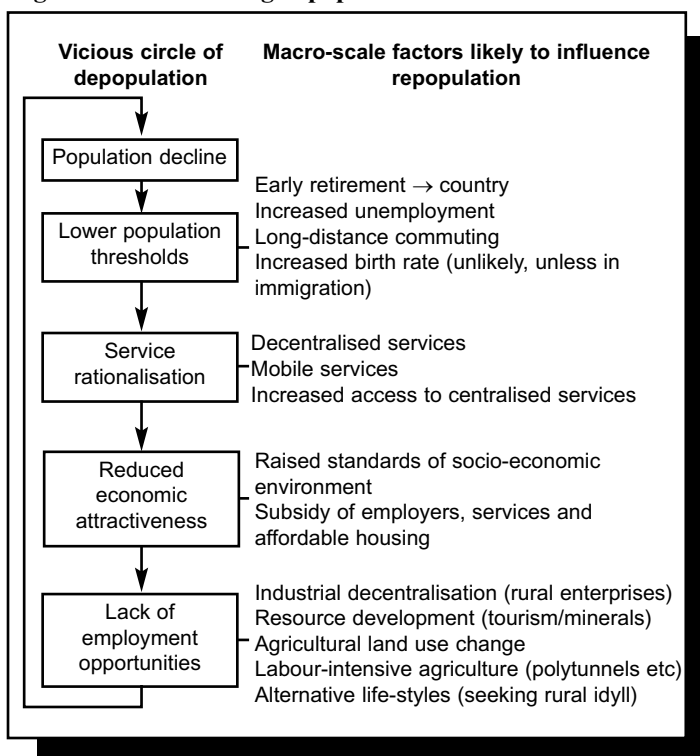


Fig. 3 summarises the vicious cycle of depopulation. **Absolute** depopulation is likely to occur if people leave and are not replaced. Examples include deserted villages in the Apennines or the Spanish Meseta and the mountainous communities in Japan (see Case Study 3). A **threshold of unviability** is reached whereby it becomes uneconomic to provide private and public services. **Relative** depopulation occurs where young people leave but are replaced by retired people, so whilst population numbers are similar, the ageing society will ultimately contribute to a state of natural decrease. Moreover second homers also purchase much of the property contributing to depopulation (example villages such as Beadnell in Northumberland or Chapel Stile in Lake District). Fig. 3 also shows all the possible factors which could stem depopulation, or even encourage **repopulation**.

Fig. 3 Factors affecting depopulation.



The following **three** case studies illustrate some of the key features of rural depopulation today. Inequality is the fundamental driving force of outmigration, but the degree of impact is linked to demographics.

Case Study 1: A declining island community in Fogo, Cape Verde Islands

In spite of a comparatively high birth rate from a young fertile population, which means that overall the total population remains static at around 38,000, the island registered a net loss over the last 10 years of over 6600 people, i.e. around 16% of the total.

The outmigration is largely to Praia in Santiago Island especially by the younger people to seek training. In the 1940s population of Fogo actively decreased as there was so much outmigration to the Boston area of USA and Fortaleza in Brazil. Other push factors included a lack of infrastructure (only 44% of households had electricity and only 30% had running water, 71% dump trash outside house) and also a lack of employment with a diminishing tourist industry and fluctuating agriculture, and limited manufacturing – in 2000 unemployment rates were over 30%.

42% of Fogo's population were registered as poor, with many families relying on remittances from abroad to survive. Housing surveys suggested that only 56% had a bathroom with toilet, and only 7% owned a truck/car. Furthermore 36% of families were receiving insufficient food. All these facts suggest that poverty is at the root of outmigration.

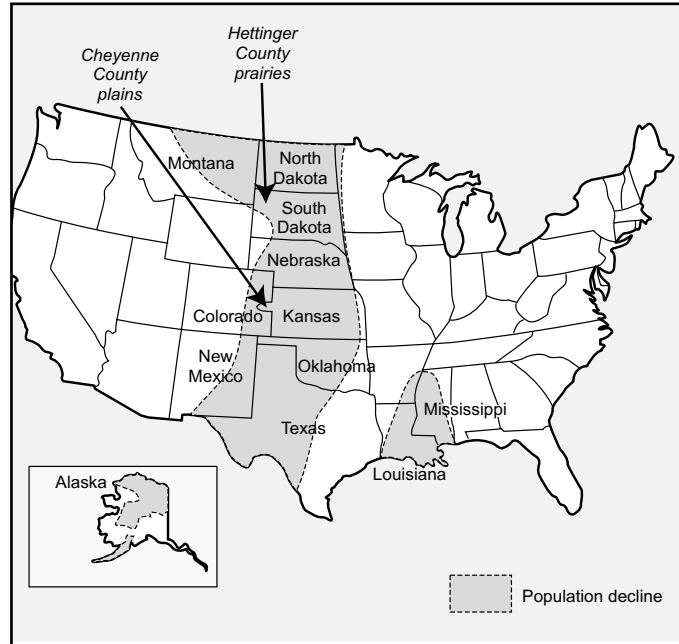
The only reason there is currently not an actual decline in the Island of Fogo's population is the consistently high rate of natural increase. Whilst Cape Verde is considered to be Africa's 4th wealthiest state it is inequality of opportunity and wealth between the islands that drives the outmigration.

Case Study 2 shows how in spite of persistent outmigration a high natural birth rate and a young fertile population can maintain the numbers (but only just).

Case Study 2: The emptying prairies and the plains drain in the USA

Fig. 4 locates the key areas of rural depopulation in the USA – note the huge swathe of country stretching through Middle America. Eleven states cover around 15% of the US land area and are all facing depopulation in many counties, and rural decline.

Fig. 4 Rural depopulation in the USA.



North Dakota is one of the most sparsely populated states in the USA (average population density 3.6 per km²). Overall the state has a static population fluctuating around the 650,000 mark, but some of the most rural counties in it, e.g. Hettinger, have experienced depopulation up to 50% in the last twenty years. Most outmigrants are young adults 20-35 years and they migrate to the only two towns Bismark (100,000 – capital) and Fargo (200,000 – main town) and the large cities such as Minneapolis. This leaves behind a greater proportion of older people leading to an ageing population and the potential for natural population decrease, see Fig. 5 a population pyramid for Hettinger county.

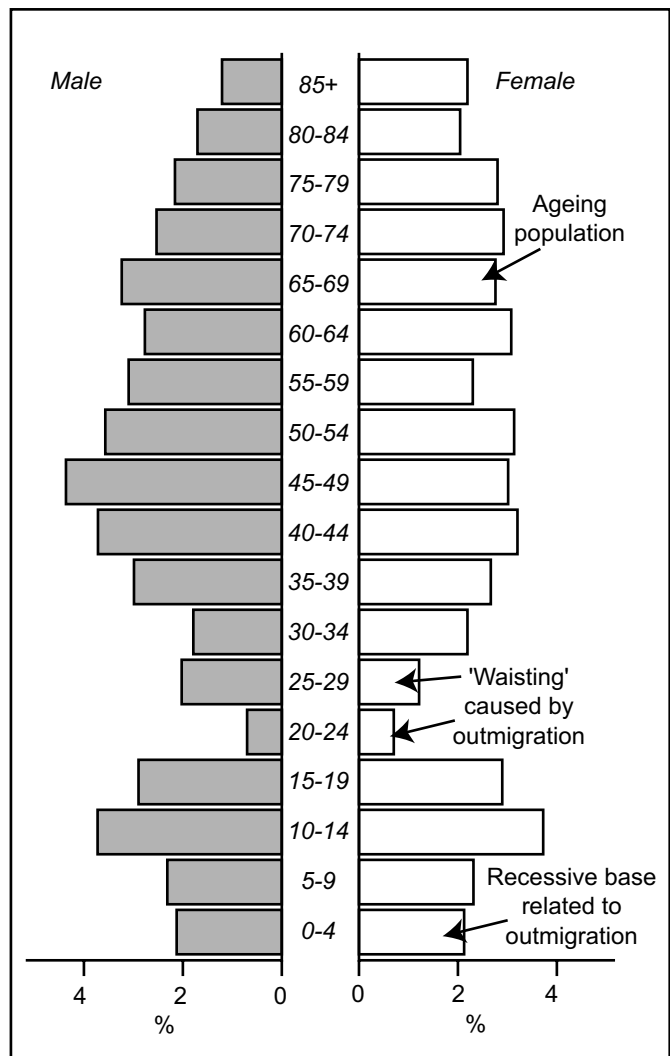
A plethora of factors including shortage of jobs, a harsh climate especially in winter, and isolation from comforts and services combine as push factors. As population declines this impacts on businesses and services which are forced to close, leading to a spiral of decline. Declining population also means a declining local tax base and an inability to provide public services (schools etc) and infrastructure. The population of Mott, the principal urban centre of Hettinger, has declined from a high of 1600 in 1950 to 800 in 2000. In 1950 there were over 80 businesses and now only a handful remain and the high school, even after a merger with a school in a neighbouring county, only has under 70 students today. With the recent subprime mortgage crisis, many homes remain empty.

In **Cheyenne** county in Eastern Colorado circumstances are a little different – it is not as such especially poor with the current record prices for wheat and the growth of corn for biofuels. The root problem is a shrinking agricultural employment base.

Improvements in technology favour huge highly mechanised farms and as older farmers retire or quit their land is brought by huge agro businesses. In 2006 this small county lost 300 people in just one year, so depopulation is again an accelerating process as services close. Three hopes for survival include wind farms, super-fast internet and a super highway from Mexico to Canada which could pass through Cheyenne county.

The challenge for the future in the Prairies and the Plains is not to stem the tide (deemed impossible) but to keep life as pleasant as possible for those who remain. To young people in particular these areas seem very unequal spaces, with major issues of opportunity deprivation and mobility deprivation exacerbated by rising fuel costs.

Fig. 5 Population pyramid for Hettinger County in 2002.



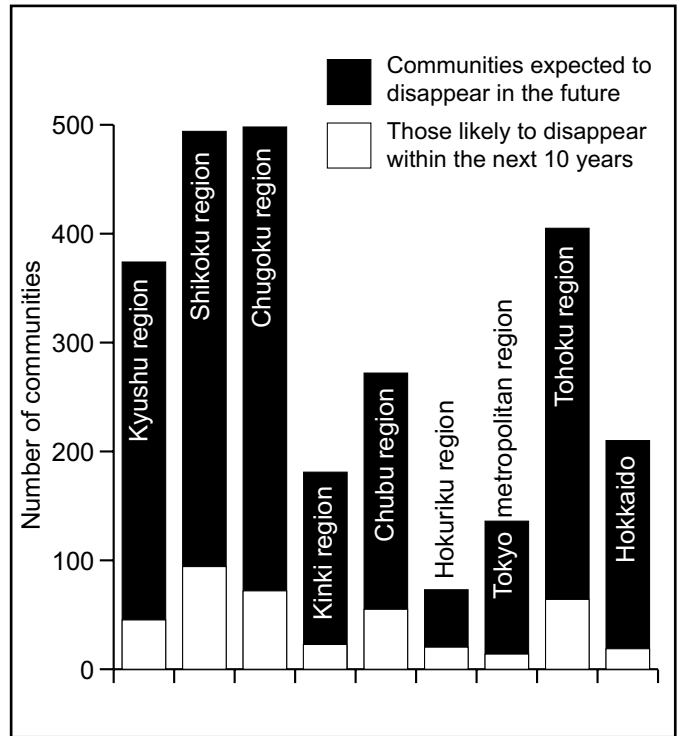
Case Study 3: The Endangered communities of Japan

As a result of Japan's rapidly ageing and overall decreasing population (Japan has never had strong pro-natalist strategies, or encouraged widespread immigration) communities deep within the mountainous areas are finding it increasingly difficult to survive. 2643 communities are likely to disappear in the future and 423 are in danger of disappearing within a decade. Since the last survey in 1999, 191 communities have completely vanished (see Fig. 6).

Residents of these ageing and rapidly shrinking communities face numerous difficulties. Bus services are being abandoned due to lack of users, community events are being discontinued due to lack of participants and elderly residents spend thousands of yen getting to hospital appointments – these communities are endangered because all their social functions disintegrate. Diminishing communities also adversely affect the surrounding ecosystems and other communities downstream from the mountains because of the lack of people. Abandoned rice paddies impact on the firefly and frog population, and woods not managed and appropriately thinned lose their capability to retain water.

The biggest issue is whether local governments can support these shrinking sparsely populated communities and how. One suggestion is to relocate the few remaining elderly people to more convenient areas, to cut administrative costs, so abandoning these marginal areas. Some local governments have launched schemes to attract migrants from urban areas by subsidies, or to develop innovative ways of providing services and also to support farmers who are farming the steep slopes in the endangered communities, but the future is very gloomy for remote rural Japan.

Fig. 6 The number of communities on the brink of disappearing (April 2006) in Japan.



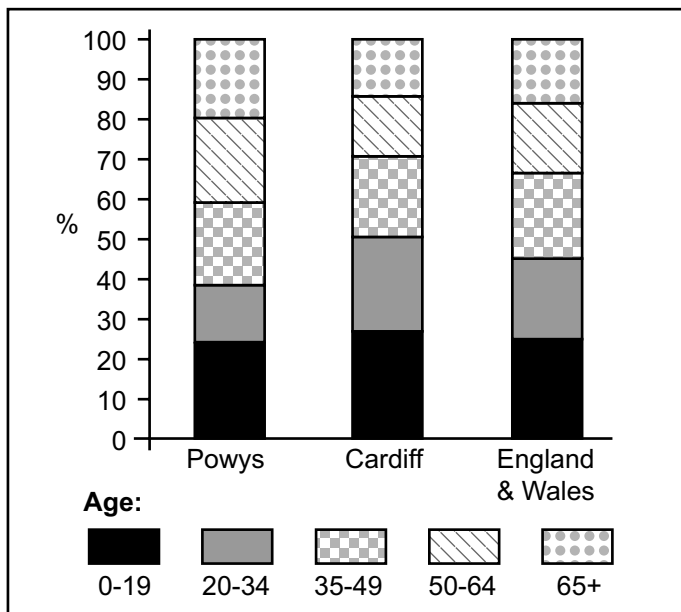
Conclusion

Overall therefore in spite of a general tide of counterurbanisation pockets of rural depopulation do exist in many areas of MEDCs (usually poor peripheral areas). The precise nature and rate of the depopulation is driven by demographics. Rural depopulation proves very complex to manage, as the benefit cost ratio of solutions is financially very unfavourable.

Question

Study Fig. 7. Describe and suggest reasons for the contrasting population structure of Powys and Cardiff.

Fig. 7 Age profiles for Powys and Cardiff.



Answer guidelines

Always use precise percentages in your description. You should attempt to explain the lack of children and young population in Powys (outmigration and the corresponding birth dearth) and the ageing society and compare this with Cardiff, an area of in migration for employment and better services.

Further Research

- Woods, M. (2006) *Rural Geography* Sage Publications
- Journal of Rural Studies
- www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk

Acknowledgements

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