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Issue Brief for Work Group 6

U.S. RURAL DEMOGRAPHIC TRENDS AND ISSUES IN INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE.

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Introduction

The primary focus of this issue brief is on changing spatial patterns of population distribution. Trends in population composition and the components of population changes (in their broader socio-economic sense as well as the purely demographic components) are treated in a subsidiary (essentially explanatory) role. This course of action has been adopted for several reasons:

- \* a focus on overall population change is often the best way of raising questions for more detailed investigation;
- \* in the run-up to the appearance of results from the 1990/91 round of national Censuses, estimates of overall population change provide the main method for monitoring rural demographic trends;
- \* at any time, international comparisons of spatial population trends pose more than enough research challenges.

The brief takes, as its starting point, the recent observations of Beale, Fugitt, Forstall, Frey and others that the 1980s were not like the 1970s and may indeed turn out to have been quite like the 1960s, which raises the question: has the worm turned? The rural demographic scene seems to have been passing through a period of great flux, consistently managing to confound the forecasters. Questions which spring immediately to mind are:

- \* has rural America begun to pass out of this period of flux into quieter and more easily charted waters?
- \* is it really true that the pre-1970s rural scene traced pretty consistent rates of population change, with only minor temporal fluctuations in migration rates?
- \* to what extent can the experience of the last 25 years be interpreted as a cyclic pattern superimposed on an identifiable longer-term trend (which itself may not be unidirectional)?

The specific aim of this brief is to try and shed light on this broad subject by reference to international experience. Justification for this approach can be found in the fact that the 'rural population turnaround' of the 1970s was by no means confined to the USA, but has been identified in

most of the more developed capitalist world, admittedly in a variety of guises and a confusing range of terminologies (e.g. the metropolitan migration turnaround, counterurbanization). Moreover, Western Europe, other parts of the New World and even Japan appear to have shared other trends in socio-demographic composition, economic restructuring and political ideology, suggesting the likelihood of some degree of communality in current developments.

A traditional stumbling-block is that the USA has tended to be the pioneer of new trends, so that it is easier to use the US's 1980s experience to anticipate the events of the 1990s elsewhere than the other way round. This could be considered particularly the case in relation to Western Europe, where the introduction of the Single European Market ('1992'), the reform of agricultural policy and the removal of the Iron Curtain would appear to be making Europe look increasingly like the USA. But this, in itself, suggests that the benefits to be gained from comparative international research for insights into rural America may grow substantially over the next few years.

The goal of the rest of this brief, therefore, is to consider the possibilities of using an international research perspective (either by synthesizing the results of foreign research or by setting up cross-national research programmes) to provide a better understanding of demographic trends in rural America and where they are headed. There are four objectives:

- \* to provide a short state-of-the-art review of the research literature which attempts to explain these trends.
- \* to identify information gaps and unresolved and/or methodological issues
- \* to propose a list of priority issues for research during the 1990s - perhaps one that will be contentious enough to provoke some fundamental discussion and hopefully reveal a good degree of consensus!
- \* to summarize the results of recent research which has monitored rural population trends in other countries.

#### Urbanization and counterurbanization in the 1970s and 1980s

The following review of international trends indicates that the US's experience of slower non-metropolitan and rural growth in the 1980s is by no means unique.

The US experience is assumed to be along the following lines:

- \* the 1970s was characterised by a turnaround in net migration flows at the metropolitan/non-metropolitan scale in favour of the latter, so that deconcentration was observed at all three basic spatial scales - regional, intermediate, and local (city - suburb).

- \* the 1980s saw a deceleration of the deconcentration tendency, whereby the metropolitan areas resumed above-average growth and the regional shift from North East to South and West slowed.
- \* the 'turnbackaround' appears to have deepened in the latter half of the 1980s and, as far as the rural scene is concerned, seems to have been caused by trends relating to agriculture, mining and manufacturing - but not recreation and retirement.

Few other countries use officially defined metropolitan areas for monitoring population trends, but from the available evidence it would appear that most of the other countries in the more developed capitalist world have paralleled the US experience of the last two decades:

- \* according to Cochrane and Vining (1986, 1988) most of these countries have followed one of three models of core-periphery population development since the 1950s, but these models are distinguishable principally on the basis of their initial rates of core-periphery change rather than their more recent trends. The "Northwest Europe" and "Periphery of West Europe, and Japan" models both share the same recent trends as the "North America" model, with upward shift in periphery growth rate in the late 1960s and 1970s and with a downward shift setting in towards the end of the 1970s (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Generalised trends in net internal migration for three groups of countries. Source: after Cochrane and Vining, 1986.

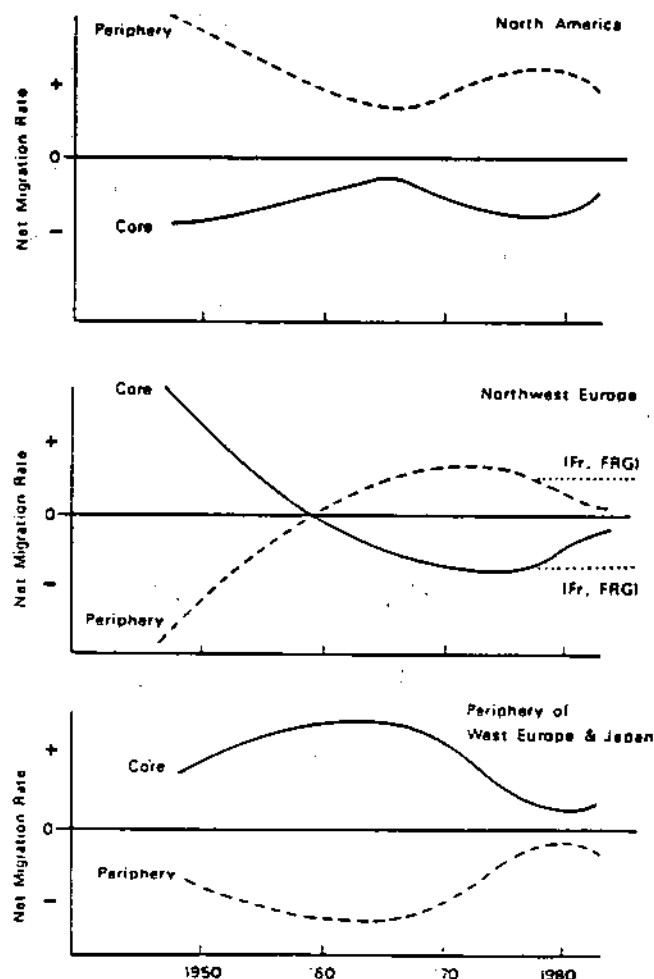


Table 1 National trends in urbanization and counterurbanization in the 1970s and 1980s for selected European countries

Country (number of regions)	1970s	1980s	Shift	1980-84	1984-	Shift
Austria (16,8)	+0.38	+0.01	-	-0.25	+0.47	+
Belgium (9)	-0.36	-0.44	-	-0.49	+0.33	+
Denmark (11)	-0.79	-0.01	+	-0.04	-0.16	-
Finland (12)		+0.69	?	+0.51	+0.80	+
France (22)	-0.26	-0.36	-	-0.33	-0.31	nc
FRG (30,12)	-0.29		?	-0.63	-0.08	+
Ireland (9)	+0.43	-0.35	-			
Italy (13,20)	+0.12	-0.21	-	-0.16	-0.33	-
Netherlands (11)	-0.83	+0.12	+	-0.24	+0.46	+
Norway (8)	+0.21	+0.69	+			
Portugal (17)	+0.36	+0.52	+	+0.39	+0.53	+
Sweden (12,24)	-0.26	+0.35	+	+0.14	+0.53	+
Switzerland (11)	-0.49*		?	-0.51	-0.06	+

Notes: Data are correlation coefficients of relationship between net migration rate and population density; "Shift": + = shift towards 'urbanization'; - = shift towards 'counterurbanization'; \* data for population change (not migration). Also note that the correlation coefficients should be interpreted with care because their significance level depends on the number of regions.

Source: compiled from Fielding 1982, 1986, 1989, and calculations from data supplied to the author by national statistical agencies.

\* updating the work of Fielding (1982) which revealed a widespread shift towards counterurbanization in Western Europe between the 1960s and 1970, Table 1 shows that more countries were experiencing 'urbanization' (signified by '+' coefficients) in the 1980s than the 1970s, even more countries saw a shift in trend in that direction between the two decades ('+' in the first 'shift' column) and that these changes accelerated during the 1980s (last three columns).

Nevertheless, there are signs of considerable variation between national experiences in Table 1. The collection of case studies in Champion (1989) provides further evidence of this, for instance:

\* in Norway the most peripheral region (North) resumed large net migration losses at the beginning of the 1980s, while the core region (East) saw a parallel acceleration in net in-migration.

- \* in the Federal Republic of Germany the counterurbanization trend was running more strongly in the first half of the 1980s than the 1970s for most age groups.
- \* in the United Kingdom the rate of population growth in less urbanized areas slowed after 1974, but began to recover by the mid 1980s, with particularly strong growth in the 'resort/retirement' and 'remoter rural' districts in the southern half of the country.
- \* in Japan the share of inter-prefectural migration moving from metropolitan to non-metropolitan areas peaked in the mid 1970s, but the proportion moving within the non-metropolitan regions continued to grow into the 1980s.
- \* in Australia the number of non-metropolitan Local Government Areas which declined in 1981-86 after growing in 1976-81 (82) was almost identical to the number which recorded decline, then growth (80); while amongst LGAs which grew in both periods, rather more recorded a growth slowdown than an acceleration (222, 170).

Clearly, diversity of 1980s experience is found not only between countries but also within them, as is also the case for the USA. This contrasts with the rather general swing towards faster non-metro growth in the 1970s, but - along with the temporal changes of the past 20 years - it raises not only a greater challenge for forecasters but also offers greater opportunities for explanation.

#### The search for a better understanding of rural population trends

Less than ten years ago, it was being suggested confidently in many quarters that the early 1970s rural population turnaround heralded a new era in settlement patterns associated with the transformation from an industrial to some form of 'post-industrial society'. Now, at the beginning of the 1990s, the situation appears much less straightforward. In these circumstances, it is instructive to examine the international debate over the nature and significance of the recent developments, because this has at least begun to clarify the alternative hypotheses - ready for further research to test them and measure their relative importance.

By way of context, it is instructive to itemize the individual arguments which were put forward to account for the rural population turnaround in the first place. A review of 9 national case studies (Champion, 1989) identified no less than 17 separate lines of explanation, as follows:

- \* the expansion of commuting fields round employment centres.
- \* the emergence of scale diseconomies and social problems in large cities.
- \* the concentration of rural population into local urban centres.
- \* the reduction in the stock of potential out-migrants living in rural areas.
- \* the availability of government subsidies for rural activities.
- \* the growth of employment in particular localized industries like

mining, defence and tourism.

- \* the restructuring of manufacturing industry and the associated growth of branch plants.
- \* improvements in transport and communications technology.
- \* the improvement of education, health and other infrastructure in rural areas.
- \* the growth of employment in the public sector and personal services.
- \* the success of explicitly spatial government policies.
- \* the growth of state welfare payments, private pensions and other benefits.
- \* the acceleration of retirement migration.
- \* the change in residential preferences of working-age people and entrepreneurs.
- \* changes in age structure and household size and composition.
- \* the effect of economic recession on rural-urban and return migration.
- \* the first round in a new cyclic pattern of capital investment in property and business.

It would now appear necessary to check whether all these are the powerful forces for population deconcentration that their various proponents have maintained, and to discover whether any of these have changed in their nature between the 1970s and the 1980s in such a dramatic way as to offset the overall balance towards deconcentration.

One approach to understanding the trends of the last two decades is to view the counterurbanisation of the 1970s as a temporary anomaly arising from a chance combination of factors which is unlikely to recur - the 'period explanation' in Frey's (1987) terminology. Possible candidates from the above list of separate explanations could perhaps include a once-and-for-all extension of commuting fields due to a major programme of highway construction, the reduction of urban-rural contrasts in service provision (e.g. colleges, hospitals), a particular phase of strong demand for agricultural products, minerals and energy resources, the last fling of the Fordist era in the manufacturing sector, and the shift to a new higher proportion of mobile elderly people as a result of greater health and wealth.

A more sophisticated version of this approach suggests that, rather than constituting a once-and-for-all development or being essentially random in timing, the period effects are cyclic in their behaviour (Berry, 1988). Examples of possible factors under this heading include:

- \* economic conditions and associated building cycles, related to income growth and the availability and cost of house-mortgage credit.
- \* changes in age-group sizes resulting from past fluctuations in birthrate, with larger numbers of family-building age and engaged in suburbanization/counterurbanization more at certain times than at others.
- \* longer-term (Kondratieff) cycles of innovation, economic development and industrial restructuring, leading to new patterns of economic activity and population responses through internal and/or international migration.

At the same time, neither of these approaches is incompatible with the concept of a secular transition from urbanization towards counterurbanization over the longer term. The cyclic pattern, just mentioned, could be superimposed on a general tendency towards deconcentration just as much as on a centripetal trend. In relation to the pure 'period explanation', it could be suggested that, rather than the 1970s constituting the anomaly, it might be that the 1980s 'turnbackaround' is no more than a short-term downward flexure in the new general pattern of deconcentration.

Two frameworks have been provided by the international literature to provide a more coherent interpretation. One is that developed by Frey, who - besides the 'period explanation' - puts forward two fundamental explanations for population change:

- \* population deconcentration involving a shift from larger cities and more heavily urbanized regions to less densely populated areas and down the metropolitan/urban hierarchy.
- \* regional restructuring referring to shifts in the space-economy as it adjusts to the new spatial requirements of production.

The other framework, put forward by Champion and Illeris (1990), recognises the existence of three distinct sets of factors:

- \* forces operating over the longer term in favour of deconcentration, such as the improvement of transport and communications, the more dispersed distribution of educational and other facilities, and the growth of tourism and outdoor recreation.
- \* forces pulling towards greater concentration, such as the growth of business services, corporate headquarters and other activities requiring a high level of national and international accessibility and a large supply of highly qualified manpower.
- \* forces which may have different geographical effects at different times, depending on the prevailing circumstances; for instance, an increase in public-service provision at one time followed by a contraction, or demographic changes involving a large bulge in school-leavers at one time and a boom in family rearing somewhat later.

With the centrifugal and centripetal forces likely to fluctuate in strength, these three groups of factors can be expected to produce considerable variations in rates of non-metropolitan growth over time.

#### Information gaps and methodological issues

The above review of recent trends, and the alternative explanations of them, raises a wide range of research questions which need to be addressed in order to obtain a better understanding of the factors affecting rural population trends in the more advanced Western World. Before going into

more detail, three general observations seem to arise from this review and should perhaps guide our approach in future research:

- \* the changing fortunes of rural areas do not take place in isolation, but to a considerable extent are linked to developments elsewhere, whether in terms of national or global economies or reflecting changes in metropolitan areas and the urban settlement system.
- \* the events of the 1980s provide a significant contrast to the 1970s trends and, whether they form part of some cyclic processes or not, could well provide a clearer idea of the real nature and significance of the earlier experience as well as of the 1980s.
- \* many countries appear to have shared a similar experience over the last two decades, but there may be even more to gain from comparative research on countries which have followed significantly different trends.

In looking towards the specific information gaps, one major priority is going to be the better documentation of the actual trends of the past decade. So far, the best data in most countries comprise local-level (municipality) estimates of total population, usually with breakdowns by sex and broad age group. The 1990/91 round of Censuses will provide an accurate check on these estimates - at least, hopefully, once problems of under-enumeration are resolved - as well as providing more detail about the changes in population characteristics over the previous decades. Alongside vital-event registration data, net migration calculations by the residual method, and direct Census counts of migrants, this work should lead to a much-needed demographic accounting of recent changes and provide a valuable data bank to be drawn upon for hypothesis-testing.

This descriptive work, however, is not as straightforward as it sounds and contains a variety of pitfalls for the unwary:

- \* problems over interpreting official definitions and measurements of 'population' in an increasingly mobile society - beyond the traditional day-time/night-time distinction to the challenge posed by second homes, seasonal migration, etc., which can be highly significant phenomena in certain types of rural area.
- \* the illusion of 'distinctive decades' which results from Census-based analyses - requiring more effort at interpolating annual trends (e.g. through backward projection and through prediction of local characteristics from national sample surveys).
- \* the confusion over definitions and terminology, which plagues international comparisons but is equally challenging for studies of individual countries - rural/urbanized zones, non-metro/metro areas, core/periphery regions (and not only the boundary within each dichotomy but the relationship between the pairs of definitions).

At the same time, it is important to recognise that these procedural problems are not purely methodological, but are ultimately conceptual. They cannot be resolved fully until the nature of the phenomenon under



study is properly known, or at least until it is set explicitly into a hypothetical statement.

As regards substantive research questions, the foregoing review provides both a long list of individual explanations of rural growth rates and a series of alternative perspectives on population redistribution trends. All these constitute valid topics for further investigation, but perhaps some are more crucial in relation to anticipating developments over the next few years:

- \* the role of 'pure demographics' e.g. the effect of trends in births, deaths and international migration in producing non-metro/metro differences in population change rate; the effect of changes in population structure (e.g. by age, income, ethnicity, household size and composition) on internal migration patterns (i.e. holding constant the migration behaviour of each specific sub-group). Is there a significant role? Does this provide a starting point for projecting trends through the 1990s?
- \* the question of 'residential preferences'. This factor was given particular attention in the early counterurbanization literature, albeit in the context of winning the war against the 'tyranny of distance' through improved communications, etc. If the migration behaviour of individual population sub-groups has altered over time, how far does this reflect change in preferences as opposed to changes in people's ability to realize them?
- \* the part played by change in the strength of forces influencing the extent to which people can realize their residential preferences - a range of possible factors including the buoyancy of the housing market (e.g. affecting the ability of retired people to sell up and move), the general economic prospects (e.g. affecting people's confidence in buying new homes and shifting jobs), the labour market situation (e.g. whether a sellers' market in jobs forces employers to 'follow' labour).
- \* the role of new technology in loosening the constraints of location for both residents and employers - again, a range of aspects including the effect of gadgetry and supporting services on increasing household self-sufficiency (freezers, washers, TV/video, the 'University of the Air', mail-order) and the take-up of teleworking, but also note the high infrastructural costs of fibre-optic links and the general concentration of organizational power permitted by improved communications.
- \* the evolution of more dispersed, multi-nodal settlement networks, which can serve to extend the range of metropolitan-type services deeper into rural areas or assist the welding of formerly separate and rather isolated rural settlements into more coherent communities which are thereby more attractive for both residents and business.
- \* the whole area of economic development and restructuring, including the changes taking place in the main production sectors represented in rural areas, the indirect ('multiplier') effects of these and of

other population changes (e.g. retirement, recreation) that are captured by rural areas, and the extent to which the restructuring of 'export-orientated' manufacturing and services is affecting rural areas. How far can these effects be quantified for the past? How accurately can they be predicted for the future under particular assumptions of demand? How confident can we be in those assumptions? Is there some underlying mechanism (e.g. cyclic behaviour)?

- \* last but probably not least, the role played by the public sector - considered highly significant in the 1970s (e.g. highway construction, rural colleges, defence projects, welfare schemes) and no doubt equally important in terms of the contraction of publicly financed programmes in the 1980s. Also the geographical side-effects of non-spatial policies. And the achievements of the various economic developments initiatives adopted by state/local government and/or private enterprise.

#### Priorities for demographic research

The above list of information needs is not exhaustive, but is large enough to demonstrate that the successful understanding of recent population changes in rural America and the anticipation of their future trajectory requires a wider remit than 'demography' and 'rural areas'. Nevertheless, it is also clear that population studies have a vital contribution to make.

In order to initiate discussion, the following priorities for population-orientated research are proposed:

- \* the better documentation of the 'pure demographics' of the 1980s, drawing comparisons with the 1970s but making a conscious attempt to escape from the decade-based frame of Census analysis.
- \* the detailed analysis of trends in the migration behaviour of population sub-groups, primarily using Census-based comparison of area-to-area flows for 1965-70, 1975-80 and 1985-90 but supplemented by survey-based evidence of broader trends in migration propensities.
- \* the use of general survey and/or special studies to probe the more qualitative aspects of migration behaviour, especially in relation to residential preferences and movement aspirations and the factors affecting the way in which their realization varies between sub-groups and according to the conditions prevailing at particular periods/locations.
- \* the fuller investigation of the linkages between population changes (especially migration) and employment change, including the way in which the nature of labour demand is altering and the extent to which employers are forced to seek out labour rather than rely on supply responses through migration, etc.
- \* the closer examination of the way in which both metropolitan peripheries and rural settlement systems are evolving, including the

extent to which intra-urban employment decentralization widens metropolitan commutersheds, and the way in which increased 'home self-containment' and easier local travel affects quality of life and the effective 'mass' within essentially rural territory.

- \* an extended historical perspective on recent trends, incorporating an explanatory approach that investigates the role of 'long wave' economic cycles in order to isolate any secular trend of an even longer-term nature that could be associated with a settlement pattern transition from industrial to post-industrial eras.

These suggestions are made by an outside observer who would like to know more about recent developments in rural America and their implications for the future - for the primary purpose of understanding better what is happening in the United Kingdom and the rest of Western Europe. Based on a review of the international scene, answers to these questions would seem to be needed urgently, if the governmental response to the current, very real rural problems is going to adopt the most cost-effective approach. In relating the above list to the American scene, however, it is recognized that studies may already have progressed further here than in other countries, requiring a change of emphasis in terms of future research priorities.

By way of conclusion, it is important to stress that the US experience of the last two decades has been paralleled in many other countries. This being so, research on the changing situation in rural America will play a crucial role in achieving a better understanding of recent developments and future prospects in Europe and elsewhere, particularly if attention is focuses on the underlying processes at work. Equally, comparative international research should also be able to inform studies of rural America, not only by comparisons with countries with similar trends but possibly even more usefully by reference to countries which deviate from these trends and which may have other distinctive features which can account for these deviations.

Select bibliography (to be supplied later)