Scotland: 'enjoying' the rural life in the Highlands of Scotland

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Scotland: Highland Preschool Services

This article shares the perceptions of an academic and researcher, who is concerned to ensure that adequate and appropriate services are available to poor rural children and their families. It sets out the realities of the rural world of Highland Scotland, highlighting the challenges that young children and their families face and focusing especially on the particular ways in which rural poverty impacts on everyday life. The project that he goes on to discuss, includes training parent volunteers to work with vulnerable families and support them through home visits, listening, helping with transport, shopping, childcare, running group work activities and helping families to use other services. The project generally aims to counter both rural poverty itself, and its effects on young children, partly through alliances of service providers. This approach demands the whole-hearted support and collaboration of the service providers, a strategy that is linked to 'Sure Start', a Scottish national programme with which the project is associated. A key feature of Sure Start is its insistence on generating maximum effectiveness through inter-agency cooperation.

The very term 'rural' may conjure up idyllic images, social cohesion and a good family life style but is better understood as a term which can hide diversity – in size, remoteness, economy, services, demographics and so on – while also obscuring the deprivation that exists within rural areas.

In the picturesque Highland Region of Scotland, the total land area is 26,484 square kilometres, a third of the landmass of the whole of Scotland; and it is inhabited by about 200,000 of Scotland's population of just over 6 million. Of these, a little over half live in very remote areas; and there's a population density of 8 persons per square kilometre in the Highland Region, compared to the Scottish average of around 70 per square kilometre.

All rural areas of Scotland have seen a gradual erosion of their social distinctiveness through changes in patterns of consumption, complex migration patterns, tourism, transport, mass media, employment and education. One major example is the dramatic shift in demographic trends and the growing age of the population. The most satisfactory dimensions of life quality in rural Scotland can be seen as access to scenic areas, the safety of the environment for bringing up children, and the health care facilities. By contrast dissatisfaction with rural living was strongest in terms of features of the rural economy. These factors confirm that the rural environment is strongest on the very features which the elderly have identified as essential to their quality of life, but weakest on the economic features that are more critical to families with young children and to younger people. Logically, these quality of life variables mean that rural areas could lose younger people and gain older residents. But the cold figures can be surprising. While the population continues to get older, there are still just under 50,000 children living at home with their parent(s) in the Highlands.

Needs and services

In the context of provision of services for families and strategies for combating the impact of poverty and disadvantage in rural areas, we need to accept that families who live in rural areas face many of the same problems and difficulties faced by individuals, households and communities in urban Scotland. However, nearly 17 percent of rural families are dependent on income support from the Government and unemployment figures in the winter months are the highest in Scotland. Homelessness represents the most acute form of housing need with families headed by lone parents forming a bigger proportion of households applying as homeless or potentially homeless than the Scottish average. Against this, they have problems in accessing the range of services that they want and need, and that urban families have within easy reach.

In general, poverty and disadvantage within remote areas of Scotland is widespread: over half the families live on incomes below the Scottish average; and this is exacerbated when one remembers that the costs of living in rural areas are higher. However, families accept this and find ways of adjusting. Mauthner, McKee and Strell's study (1999) of families living in rural Scotland reported that:

- parents accept the limitations on family life: lack of activities, limited transport, low employment opportunities, fewer professional services;
- parents felt that children were free and safe, had access to natural surroundings; communities where everyone knew one another;
- parents placed a high value on parenthood, men and women could work flexible hours in order to care for their children; and
- parents (male) worked away from home most often and their employment was limited.

In this context, is the decline of patterns of social service provision a reflection of how rural residents choose to use those services that are available to them? In the local economy, the discussion of shopping is often conducted in terms of the growth of urban supermarkets which have forced village shops to close. In a discussion of service quality we need to ask whether, given the choice are 'rural services' are those that are sited in rural areas or those that rural residents use? And we also need to define quality. For the purposes of this short article I will define quality in rural service provision for families with young children as a level and standard of service which meets the needs, expectations or aspirations of the parents who use that service.

Family disadvantage in rural areas

A typology of family disadvantage.
In rural areas, this is very similar to the typology of family disadvantage in urban areas: alcohol abuse; child abuse; mental health problems; isolation; drug abuse; special needs; unemployment; stress etc.
But in rural areas, there are three main factors that contribute to family disadvantage. First, families are deprived of resources because of low income levels and lack of access to good housing stock; second, there is a lack of health, education and social services; and third, families face high transport costs and the inaccessibility of jobs, services and facilities.

A fourth major and emerging factor is the retention of professional staff within rural areas and the problem of recruiting enough professionals to operate essential services.

The meaning of rural poverty.
While we can establish how many households in rural areas in Scotland are suffering from poverty, there is lack of clarity about what it actually means to be poor. Importantly, there is evidence that those who experience different kinds of deprivation, conceal their condition because of the lack of anonymity. In this way, serious social problems within families can be denied, attributed to a point in the past or constructed as a failure of the individual. And there is a similar reluctance to seek assistance. The 'Disadvantage in Rural Scotland' report (Shucksmith, 2000), for example, reported low usage of the welfare and benefits advisory service, and suggested that rural people were not well-informed and were reluctant to take up welfare benefits because of what has been termed a dominant rural ideology of self-reliance. In some cases, even calling the doctor is viewed as a last resort.

Understanding rural deprivation

Similar problems occur when trying to research deprivation in rural areas. Essentially, the 'normal' indicators of deprivation have different meanings in the urban and rural context. For example, there are indications that the reason there are so few young families claiming housing benefit within the rural area is the shortage of affordable, accessible private sector housing. This shortage has been described as the 'principal engine of social change in rural Britain' (Shucksmith, 2000), with house prices inflated by urban people buying rural properties as second homes. The condition of properties in the private rented sector is also on average relatively poor and, if measurable, would be a better indicator of rural disadvantage than overcrowding. At the same time, the quality of life experienced within rural areas can depend on conditions at a very local level and, while linked to other areas, its impact may be felt by few families.

Overall, the picture is hardly neat and tidy, something that is also partly due to the fact that rural deprivation and poverty in Scotland tends to be the consequence of low paid, and self-employed, part-time and seasonal work rather than long-term unemployment. Those working in the countryside therefore 'survive economically in more diverse ways than city-based wage earners could ever understand' (Stern and Turbin, 1986). An example of this is overcoming the problem of the cost of a typical family food basket. Local shops are more expensive: the Scottish Poverty Information Unit (1999) reported rural food prices to be eight percent higher; and given that the cost of basic items consume a disproportionate share of household income, such price differentials also have a greater significance. One answer is using public transport (which is 13 percent more expensive than in urban areas) to reach the big supermarkets; another is to run a private car, an indicator of wealth in an urban area but often a necessity in rural terms.

Isolation, social exclusion or the lack of access to networks which could offer support and advice are also problems: Hooper (1996), working with rural lone-parents, for example, found social networks to be fairly limited and somewhat fragile.

From the perspective of health, there are widely, and officially acknowledged, variations in mortality and morbidity rates within the rural population. Research tends to reveal a complex picture which in some cases points to a 'healthier' rural environment and in other cases does not. Young male suicide rates, for example, have been consistently higher in the Highlands over the last twenty years compared to Scotland as a whole, with farmers the single largest occupational group at risk (Stark *et al.*, 2000). Poor diets have also been identified as a particular problem for remote communities such as those in the Western Isles (McKee, 2000). The opportunity to improve diets is hampered by high food prices, low income and (ironically) the limited availability of fresh fruit and vegetables.

The complexities of rural deprivation derive from a mix of factors that include: low income levels; lack of access to good affordable housing; lack of available health, education and social services provision; higher transport costs; inaccessibility of jobs, services and facilities; and the non-retention of professional staff within rural areas. But the combinations in which they are found, and the importance of each of these elements in each of the combinations that are found, suggests that differing approaches to families with young children need to be considered if we are to provide high quality services in remote local areas to vulnerable families.

Programmes

Due to recent policy initiatives in Scotland, there have been some expansion in early years education and childcare facilities. In general, however, the inhabitants of rural areas still have little access to affordable

childcare facilities, just as they are typically expected to travel further to access education and further education.

To meet the need, the Highland Preschool Service (HPS) is committed to the development of quality care and education in a wide range of early years groups, each of which respect the rights, responsibilities and needs of all children and their parents and carers. HPS aims to develop, support and improve early years provision, promote high standards of development and learning through play, and encourage the personal development of staff and the parents working within their groups. HPS currently runs over 150 groups throughout the Highlands of Scotland, working in partnership with local authorities and other agencies. It has also developed a variety of approaches to delivering direct support to families, and elaborated an accredited training programme for staff and volunteers.

One example of its approach is the Family First programme. This was created to develop a high quality, flexible and responsive model of family support to families with young children, who were experiencing stress and difficulties at home. It's mission statement is clear:

> *Family First exists to provide a support service to young families in rural Highland, valuing the uniqueness of each individual family and helping to build on its capacity to become independent and confident contributors to their local community.*

Family First recruits local parents to work directly with local families. These parent volunteers are trained by HPS and Family First staff to work with vulnerable families and support them through home visits, listening, helping with transport, shopping, childcare, running group work activities and helping families to use other services. In this way the root causes of disadvantage, while not being eradicated, are being tackled through family empowerment.

The Family First programme is part of the Scottish Government's push to increase services to vulnerable young families under a policy programme entitled Sure Start. Sure Start is aimed at stimulating service provision for families with children 0-3 years of age and has four broad objectives:

- the improvement of children's social and emotional development;
- the improvement of children's health;
- the improvement of children's abilities to learn; and
- the reinforcement of families and communities.

In addition to the broad aims outlined in the Government's guidance to Local Authorities, service providers were encouraged to:

- provide stimulating environments for children 0-3;
- provide parents with opportunities to assist in their children's development;
- provide direct support for parents;
- promote self-esteem among families in greatest need; and
- increase parental involvement.

Conclusion

The word 'rural' will continue to conjure up idyllic images of a good family life style. But it is apparent that there are numerous instances of families living in disadvantage in rural areas. While programmes like HPS and Family First cannot possibly tackle the complicated roots of disadvantage in rural areas, they may be able to help alleviate the stresses and pressures on young families that deprivation has caused. □

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