



**Children's  
Neighbourhoods  
Scotland**

**Understanding rural poverty,  
childcare and education**  
**Briefing Paper**  
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## Introduction

It has been estimated that rural<sup>1</sup> poverty accounts for 16% of all poverty in Scotland, affecting approximately 160,000 people<sup>2</sup>. Although many more people live in poverty in urban Scotland, the 'rurality' of poverty presents unique challenges that are not necessarily experienced by urban households. For example, rural households face additional overall living costs when compared with their urban counterparts. Transport makes up the most significant part of these additional costs, followed by domestic fuel bills, food, household goods and social participation.

There are a myriad of definitions associated with rural poverty, disadvantage and social exclusion. Therefore, creating a shared understanding of the key concepts associated can be a challenge. This said, poverty usually refers to an individual's income or financial situation, often related to low wages, casualisation of the workforce or unemployment. In Europe, people are regarded as relatively poor if their household income is less than 60% of the national median household income. Multi-dimensional terms linked to sophisticated indicators of multiple deprivation<sup>3</sup> relate to access to resources/opportunities, including income/employment. They also include living standards and an area's resources, such as: access to services, transport, appropriate housing, shops, libraries, leisure facilities, etc. These proxy indicators are contested and their suitability for capturing the dimensions of rural poverty continue to be hotly debated. Social exclusion refers to power relations and processes of change. Looking beyond the labour market to consider other processes that affect the allocation of resources and how people integrate into society (e.g. housing, community, friends and family, agency, capacity).

This paper summarises some key international evidence<sup>4</sup> relating to rural poverty, childcare and education settings and in conclusion offers some further reflections on childcare, education, disadvantage and social exclusion. Taking childcare and education in turn:

### Childcare in rural settings

It is well-documented that a lack of access to affordable, high quality and flexible childcare in rural areas can be a driver of child poverty and a major barrier to exiting poverty. Without access to the support provided to families by high quality childcare, parental employment options can become limited and children do not have access to safe and developmentally appropriate places to play, grow and learn.

Although access to rural childcare has improved in Scotland, particularly through recent increases to funded childcare provision<sup>5</sup> and innovative arrangements at new local authority centres, there may still be local capacity issues. For example, capacity of childcare services in rural Scotland and rural Wales (and also in the most deprived SIMD areas) have been found to be lower than in urban areas, due to limited provision by other services such as crèches, holiday play schemes, children and family centres and out-of-school care. These shortcomings can affect how well-prepared children are for school: in the north east and rural areas of the west of England, for example, the development of under-fives has been

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<sup>1</sup> The vast majority of Scotland's land mass is defined as 'rural' (98%), yet rural areas are inhabited by only 17% of the population. See [Rural Scotland: key facts 2018](#) (Scottish Government) for an overview of population and other indicators.

<sup>2</sup> McKendrick, J. H., McHardy, F. and Kelly, P. (2018) *Tackling Child Poverty in Aberdeenshire: lessons from local voices*. Available at: [www.ouraberdeenshire.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Report-Child-Poverty-in-Aberdeenshire\\_Final.pdf](http://www.ouraberdeenshire.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Report-Child-Poverty-in-Aberdeenshire_Final.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> Including the [Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation](#) and the [English indices of deprivation](#).

<sup>4</sup> For a detailed review of the evidence see: Glass, J., Bynner, C. and Chapman, C. (2020) *Children and Young People and Rural Poverty and Social Exclusion: A review of evidence*, University of Glasgow: Children's Neighbourhoods Scotland

<sup>5</sup> See [www.mygov.scot/childcare-costs-help/funded-early-learning-and-childcare/](http://www.mygov.scot/childcare-costs-help/funded-early-learning-and-childcare/)

a particular concern. The impacts of a lack of suitable childcare in rural areas have also been highlighted in international research (see Box 1).

**Box 1: International insights – impacts of reduced childcare capacity in rural areas<sup>6</sup>**

Poverty among school students in several rural school districts in the USA has been linked to the capacity of communities to provide formal childcare opportunities for infants and toddlers from birth to three years. Children whose families experience poverty during the first two years of their life have been found to be much more likely to have lower cognitive, language and social skills by the age of three, although these gaps can stabilise during the pre-school period, if the child engages with education provision.

Early education and childcare remain scarce or inaccessible in some rural communities, creating “childcare deserts”. This has a negative impact on parents’ ability to enter the workforce, and knock-on effects include children in rural communities beginning kindergarten with less advanced reading and maths skills than those children from small urban and suburban communities.

In many communities, there is a reliance on the private sector to provide childcare and those communities with greater financial demand/wealthier populations are more likely to experience market demand, regardless of any government subsidies.

Childcare provision can also be affected by public provision of pre-kindergarten care (from age four). Although there is evidence that this public provision is improving children’s academic skills, about half of rural children may not have access to it. Also, if children leave private childcare to attend a free programme in rural areas, this may lead to lost revenue and potential closure of a childcare business caring for younger children. In rural communities, where the loss of enrolment of only one or two children could affect a provider’s ability to be financially viable, tailored and place-based subsidies/support may be required.

In rural areas of the US, children who do not take part in early learning opportunities are less likely to have high literacy scores at school, even when poverty-related variables, the home environment, and the quality of instruction are considered. These findings emphasise the need to ensure that pre-school learning opportunities are available to rural children. This is particularly pertinent when there is less willingness than in urban areas to make use of childcare subsidies and other welfare benefits.

Moving on to consider education and poverty in rural settings:

### **Education in Rural Settings**

Early literacy skills are important determinants of children’s success at school. Poorly educated and poorly qualified young people have been found to be particularly exposed to exclusion and marginalisation in rural Britain, with disparities in educational attainment a key concern. There is consensus that access to education is more limited in rural areas across Europe than in cities and that higher per capita costs of education provision in rural areas can be an important limiting factor.

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<sup>6</sup> For sources see: Glass, J., Bynner, C. and Chapman, C. (2020) Children and Young People and Rural Poverty and Social Exclusion: A review of evidence, University of Glasgow: Children’s Neighbourhoods Scotland.

Despite this challenging narrative about attainment in rural schools, other studies have shown a high degree of satisfaction with the Scottish education system in rural areas. It is also clear that family engagement with schools in rural settings is very important to address challenges related to children's academic and social outcomes (see Box 2). Nevertheless, several sources note that educational experiences influence the types of employment that rural young people seek, as well as whether they opt to work in the national or local labour market, and how they feel about their community and rural life. Concerns have been raised in some communities that there is a lack of vocational courses and that educational provision is not demand-led.

**Box 2: The importance of connections between families and rural schools<sup>7</sup>**

Research from the UK, Europe and further afield notes the need for more research about family engagement in rural settings and how good relationships between rural families and schools can have positive outcomes for rural youth, despite community poverty.

In rural areas in the US, for example, the distance between home and school, the prevalence of low-wage and non-standard jobs, high teacher turnover and/or a lack of very experienced teachers can contribute to low levels of engagement between families and schools.

However, rural schools have been found to have more intergenerational connections than urban schools (for example, parents and teachers who grew up together), as well as community cohesion outside of the school that allows teachers and families to interact informally. One example in Norway noted the way in which a rural school imports and transfers knowledge across the community, reproducing local community cultures.

In the event of threatened school closures, these inter-generational connections, cultural links and extended school activities that involve local communities have been found to be particularly important when contesting state-led changes to rural school provision.

As children grow up, the argument has been made that young people need a flexible system that fits around their changing needs, rather than expecting rural young people to follow a standard, linear transition into employment. This may help to avoid the situation documented in other European countries, where the national educational system can be a source of demotivation for young people in rural areas.

In general, rural young people in Scotland often have to leave their home/community to attend higher education, not having the option to stay with their parents while studying due to the long commute required. Online, distance learning provision for both further education and higher education has increased in recent years, via institutions like the University of the Highlands and Islands and Scotland's Rural College which have facilities across rural Scotland. However, transport and the physical location of colleges/universities remains an important aspect in the mobility decisions of rural-residing students across the UK, particularly if a private car is required to travel to classes. The difficulties related to accessing further and higher education may also contribute to the higher rate of school leavers going

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<sup>7</sup> For sources see: Glass, J., Bynner, C. and Chapman, C. (2020) Children and Young People and Rural Poverty and Social Exclusion: A review of evidence, University of Glasgow: Children's Neighbourhoods Scotland.

into work following secondary school in remote rural areas (36%) than in accessible rural areas (31%) and the rest of Scotland (27%)<sup>8</sup>.

### **Further Reflections on childcare, education, disadvantage, social exclusion and rural poverty**

**Identity and belonging-** While there has been a tendency in the research literature to present children and young people as 'static' actors within a rural community, improved understandings of how young people make their own identity and sense of belonging in rural areas emphasise the importance of accumulating experiences and complex social interactions in the place they are based. Strengthening place identity and local culture appear to be highly important to those negotiating the children and youth transitions. This requires issues related to marginalisation to be addressed, particularly in creating more positive relationships and equal power relations between young people and adults in rural places. There is an important role here for rural childcare settings and schools. Strengthening parental engagement and place-based identities rooted in local culture can have a positive impact on relationships and power imbalances.

**Connectedness and digital inclusion-** The importance of enabling children and young people in rural areas to interact more with others in order to strengthen their personal support and opportunity network, as well as ensure their voice is heard in broader decision-making processes. Creating more opportunities for children and young people to engage in local activities, sports, clubs, etc. will help to broaden their networks. Again, childcare settings and schools are important resources for extra-curricular activities and community learning. Equally important is that children and young people are well-connected to communities beyond their own, via good digital infrastructure and access to electronic devices. This is important not only for their learning and personal development but also to interact with their local and wider peers. For those who may wish to transition into the local labour market, good digital connectivity can be crucial for many small business start-ups etc. Creating local workspaces/hubs within communities may also be important.

**Spaces to meet-** Recognising that social isolation presents a real challenge for rural children and young people, the research highlights the importance of community venues/spaces for young people to socialise in a manner that is seen as 'legitimate' by the wider community. This is particularly important for reducing the likelihood of mental health issues related to social isolation among young people. Having 'safe spaces' to socialise is likely to have additional benefits in the winter months when rural children and young people may have fewer opportunities to socialise/exercise indoors than their urban counterparts.

**Flexible learning-** It is important to recognise that rural children and young people have a wide range of expectations and realities, which may not map easily onto the standard educational system and which may change over time. Understanding young people's aspirations in more detail, as well as the pressures that might lead to leaving their local community, may help education and other support providers to develop bespoke training and development opportunities for rural children and young people. Public policy that supports the development of intellectual capacities, and therefore the 'intellectual mobility'<sup>9</sup> of rural youth through education and training, is also likely to yield positive results.

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<sup>8</sup> See [Rural Scotland Key Facts](#) (2018).

<sup>9</sup> See Auclair, E. and Vanoni, D. (2004) 'The attractiveness of rural areas for young people', in Jentsch, B. and Shucksmith, M. (eds) *Young People in Rural Areas of Europe*. Aldershot, England: Ashgate Publishing, pp. 74–104.

**Skills and experience-** There are a range of challenges related to transition from childhood to adulthood in rural areas. These include transitions from childcare/pre-school education into school, and from school into the workplace or further/higher education. Crucially, youth transitions in rural areas can often be 'non-linear' (e.g. involving unexpected events, being limited by lack of access to transport and/or being limited to the training/skills development available in the local area). Ensuring access to (and uptake of) high-quality childcare provision and pre-school education, as well as engagement in school activities (within and outside the curriculum) is important to ensure rural children and young people have the opportunity to engage in a range of skills development and learning experiences as they grow up.

**Access to support-** Delivering specialist healthcare services and other forms of youth support has been found to be challenging in research conducted in many of the countries. The key concern is that this creates social inequalities and marginalises rural young people because so many of the services that they need are distant from their homes. A strong message from the literature is that co-ordinating initiatives that deliver different types of support is likely to yield positive results. Having a single point of contact for issues that rural children and young people experience may lead to more co-ordinated and timely responses.

**Transport options-** Rural young people without access to a private vehicle can be very constrained in relation to their participation in education, the labour market and social activities. Young people from households on low incomes are less likely than their urban counterparts to be able to travel long distances to take part in clubs, activities or social events. There is scope to consider place-based solutions to expand/subsidise transport options for young people so that they can take part in activities that urban children might take for granted.

In summary, this paper draws on the research evidence to highlight the complex relationship between rural poverty, childcare and education. The paper has also offered a number of reflections associated with the issues experienced by children and young people growing up in these communities. Put simply, the paper brings into focus the challenge of tackling the poverty-related issues in rural settings in Scotland.

Professor Christopher Chapman & Dr Jayne Glass



# Children's Neighbourhoods Scotland

This report is published by Children's Neighbourhoods Scotland.

## About us

A children's neighbourhood is an initiative that brings together people, resources and organisations in a neighbourhood area, so that all of those things can work together towards better lives for the children living there.

Children's Neighbourhoods Scotland is a collaborative centre, developed by Glasgow Centre for Population Health, Policy Scotland and Robert Owen Centre at the University of Glasgow.



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## Get in touch

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