

Quality of life
Is rural Europe being left behind?



SERIES European Quality of Life Survey 2016

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Introduction

Rural communities have distinctive patterns of economic development and social life. A defining trend in rural life all over Europe is declining population, as young people tend to move to big towns and cities for education and work. In 2016, less than one-fifth of Europe's population lived in rural areas. As a consequence, the rural population is ageing even faster than the population as a whole, which has knock-on effects on the quality of life of rural dwellers.

Previous research by Eurofound found substantial differences in living standards between rural and urban areas in poorer Member States; in richer countries, there were differences across the rural-urban divide in other aspects of quality of life. The impact of the economic crisis of 2008–2010 varied to some extent across this dichotomy – for instance, rural dwellers had more problems accessing healthcare services following cutbacks to public spending. It is important that rural communities are not left behind now that growth has been restored to the economy.

This policy brief aims to draw policymakers' attention to areas where rural dwellers are doing less well than the urban population, focusing on three topics of specific relevance to quality of life:

- financial security
- connectedness
- life satisfaction

The analysis describes these aspects of rural life in 2016, in the context of an EU economy that has recovered from the economic crash. It also compares the current situation to that of 2011, when people were feeling the repercussions of the crisis, and to 2007, prior to the start of the downturn.



Policy context

The quality of life of people living in rural areas of Europe is not only a politically relevant topic, but is also highly topical in light of the most recent attempts to modernise the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), of which rural development is an integral part. These endeavours constitute part of the planning for the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) for the period 2021–2027.

The rural population tends to be more exposed to poverty than the rest of the population, and poverty reduction is one of the main objectives of the Europe 2020 strategy. Even for the EU as a whole, the poverty rate¹ was high, at 23.8%, in 2015, but among people living in rural areas it was higher, at 25.5% (European Commission, 2017a, p. 38). While this difference is not large, the EU average masks substantial cross-country variation, especially between some central and eastern European Member States as well as some Mediterranean Member States, on the one hand, and the more affluent Member States, on the other.

Moreover, when the quality of life in rural Europe is considered, the diversity of rural

areas within countries becomes apparent. While this policy brief limits the definition of rural location to open countryside or small town or village, from a policy perspective, differentiation across rural areas needs to be taken into account. 'Rural' is not synonymous with 'backward'; nor is it equivalent to agricultural, as is increasingly recognised (see, for example, Eurofound, 2014a, p. 24; OECD, 2015). As far back as the 1980s, it was clear that the economic development of the countryside required measures to target sectors other than agriculture, such as tourism (Eurofound, 2006).

In order to improve quality of life in rural areas, a broad approach to rural development should be adopted, promoting territorial cohesion; in other words, reducing disparities across regions (Eurofound, 2006). In fact, the EU's cohesion policy for 2014–2020 not only aims to promote social and economic convergence between Member States, but also seeks to mitigate the inequalities within them that affect population groups and regions.

Not only do long-standing policies (including funding) target rural areas, but key objectives

¹ As measured by the 'at risk of poverty or social exclusion' (AROPE) indicator. The AROPE indicator is defined as the share of the population in at least one of the following conditions: at risk of poverty (below the poverty threshold); in a situation of severe material deprivation; or living in a household with very low work intensity.

in more recent policy documents are significant for these areas, especially underdeveloped rural regions. For example, one of the 20 principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights is the right of access to essential services, an issue relevant to all local areas (see Eurofound, 2018).

Rural development is the second of the two pillars of the CAP (the first pillar being direct payments, providing income support to farmers, and measures to address specific market issues). It has three objectives, one of which is achieving balanced territorial development of rural economies and communities. In addition, one of the priorities of the EU in achieving these objectives is to promote social inclusion, reduce poverty and enhance economic development in rural areas (European Parliament, 2018).

Rural development policy is implemented through multiannual programmes, designed and operated by the Member States. It is financed from the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) and regional, national or even local funds, and constitutes a quarter of the total CAP budget.

Currently, 118 rural development programmes are in place. According to experiences so far, one of the main difficulties in implementing these programmes has related to overly complicated administrative procedures – an aspect that the 2017 omnibus regulation, which simplified the CAP, took into account (European Council, 2017).

In order to involve local actors in the design and delivery of strategies and the allocation of resources, as well as to establish a network between the actors themselves, the Rural Development Regulation set out a bottom-up approach for rural development, called Leader, over 20 years ago.² In the current programming period, at least 5% of the EAFRD funds must be spent on this programme. Extensive experience has been accumulated with the approach, and

evaluations of Leader programmes show that they have been successful in meeting the EU's cohesion objectives, in particular in assisting the declining, poorest, and often small, rural areas (Eurofound, 2006, pp. 59–60). Thanks to its success, the Leader approach was extended for the 2014–2020 programming period under the broader term of Community-Led Local Development (CLLD). This covers not only rural communities, but also fisheries and urban areas. CLLD is funded from three additional funds from the European structural and investment funds, including the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and the European Social Fund (ESF) – this appears consistent with the recommendation of the Social Investment Package (European Commission, 2013, p. 16; Eurofound, 2014a, p. 4).

At the same time, a recent paper concluded that despite efforts, 'only the most dynamic rural areas are capable of leveraging on the bottom-up measures of the EU Rural Development Policy' (Crescenzi and Giua, 2014, p. 3). A similar conclusion about the impact of funding on deprived areas, relating to an earlier period, was drawn in another paper: although much funding appears to be allocated to poor, often rural, areas, it often ends up in richer, usually urban, pockets within them. In this way, even if cross-regional inequalities are addressed, inequalities within them are amplified (Dubois and Fattore, 2011).

Discussions on the future of rural development were launched in 2016 with the Cork 2.0 Declaration, entitled 'A better life in rural areas', and the Commission has committed to mainstream the objective of rural prosperity into other policies (European Commission, 2017b). Flexibility and better targeting are central to the most recent proposal for reforming the CAP, published in June 2018. The objectives include supporting generational renewal (attracting young farmers), ensuring fair income and developing 'vibrant rural areas'.

² Leader stands for 'Liaison Entre Actions de Développement de l'Économie Rurale' (Links between rural economy and development actions). See <https://enrd.ec.europa.eu>

Key findings

- A north–south, east–west EU divide in the quality of life of rural dwellers exists, particularly in relation to financial hardship and life satisfaction. On these two dimensions, people in rural areas in less prosperous Member States – which include most of the eastern European Member States as well as Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain – experience challenges of a much greater scale than their counterparts in northern and western Europe. In terms of financial situation and subjective well-being, therefore, it can be said that rural regions of these Member States are falling behind.
- In 15 Member States, a higher share of people in rural areas than in urban areas reported difficulty making ends meet in 2016. In several, financial hardship in rural areas is a real issue, with about 40% of rural residents in Bulgaria, Croatia and Romania reporting some level of difficulty making ends meet; in Greece, the figure is even higher, at 60%. In all these countries, the share of urban residents reporting this difficulty is significantly lower.
- However, a higher proportion of rural residents than urban residents strongly feel a sense of belonging in their community.
- Europe is deeply divided when it comes to the social exclusion of older rural dwellers. In the Member States where poverty is most prevalent, older rural residents feel much more socially excluded, scoring 2.6 (out of 5) on the Social Exclusion Index; the score in more affluent countries is 1.8.
- Access to health services for older people based in rural areas has not improved with the economic recovery. The proportion of older people for whom distance is an obstacle to visiting their doctor did not change between 2011 and 2016 and was substantially higher than in 2007.
- Rural residents of all ages rate the quality of public transport lower than their peers in urban areas, which may indicate poorer access to it. This impedes access to essential services, which are often more distant in rural areas.
- Data on internet usage underline the vulnerability of older people. The share of older rural residents who never use the internet is high (more than 70%), and the analysis shows that non-users feel more isolated than people who use the internet regularly. The share of non-users among younger age groups in the countryside is also higher than their peers in urban areas. Given the increasing importance of the internet in daily life, this finding reinforces concerns about social exclusion in rural communities.



Exploring the evidence

This policy brief examines quality of life in rural Europe based on an analysis of Eurofound's European Quality of Life Survey (EQLS). It focuses on those aspects related to social cohesion and looks at three key areas where the EQLS data could add value to the current body of knowledge on this subject:

- financial security
- connectedness
- life satisfaction

Analysis of quality of life in rural areas requires a definition of 'rural areas'. The challenge lies not only in their diversity but also in the categorisation required for measuring quality of life in them. Previous research shows that depending on how 'rural' is defined, research may yield different results (see, for example, OECD, 2018). The EQLS classifies respondents as rural or urban dwellers by asking them to choose which of the following four urbanisation categories describes the area where they live:

- city or city suburb
- medium to large town
- village/small town
- open countryside

Respondents who choose either of the first two are categorised as urban, while those who choose the third or fourth are categorised as rural. Analysis of these four groups at EU level is feasible because the sample size is sufficiently large. However, for analysis at Member State level, separating respondents into these four categories can be problematic due to the small sample size for each rural category. For that reason, in this type of analysis, respondents who chose 'village/small town' or 'open countryside' are merged into a single rural category and the other two, 'city or city suburb' and 'medium to large town', into a single urban category.

The current policy brief builds on the results of previous studies of social cohesion and local environment using EQLS data. It draws mainly from the 2016 survey but also includes comparisons with data from the 2007 and 2011 surveys. The analysis is supplemented by data from Eurostat and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) where relevant.

Some features of rural Europe

Previous research has found that rural areas have distinctive population trends, and as a result of long-term and ongoing developments, the demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of the rural population are different from those of the population in urban regions (Eurofound, 2006, 2014a).

Size

In the EU, as in other developed regions in the world, depopulation of rural areas and increasing urbanisation have been ongoing for decades. In 2016, out of the 510 million inhabitants of the EU, about 97.6 million people, or slightly more than 19% of the population, lived in rural areas. However, the proportion was much higher in the 13 countries that have joined the EU since 2004 (the EU13), standing at almost 34% (nearly 35.3 million). At the same time, between 2011 and 2016, this country group experienced a strong decline of 4% in areas with a predominantly rural population. The depopulation seemed to be particularly pronounced in Romania, at 10%, which nevertheless was still the Member State with the highest share of rural dwellers, at 53%, in 2016 (European Commission, 2017a; Eurostat, 2018). These data, however, should be treated with some caution due to methodological changes in defining rural territories during this period.

Age structure

Older people are overrepresented in the rural population, and Eurostat data indicate that ageing in rural areas has become more pronounced in recent years. The proportion of older people (aged 65 years and over) is increasing in both rural and urban regions, reflecting a generally ageing population in the EU. Nevertheless, over 2011–2016, growth was highest in predominantly rural regions, rising from 18.2% to 20.2%. In 2016, the share of rural dwellers aged 65 and over was highest in Spain (26.7%), Portugal (24.4%), Greece (23.9%) and Sweden (23.3%). Among the EU13, older people constitute a smaller share of rural

populations on average (at just 15.9%); the countries with the highest proportions are Bulgaria (21.8%) and the three Baltic states (Estonia: 20.2%; Latvia: 19.6%; and Lithuania: 19.4%).

Conversely, the working-age population is smaller in rural areas than in urban areas. EQLS data show that the prime working-age group (35–49-year-olds) constitutes 27% of the medium to large town category and 28% of the city or city suburb category, compared to 25% of the open countryside and 26% of the village/small town categories.

Educational attainment

Previous research has shown that people living in rural areas have tended to be less well educated than people in other types of regions (see, for example, Eurofound, 2006). The latest Eurostat and EQLS data confirm that this continues to be the case. For example, according to the 2016 EQLS data, 38% of people in rural areas have low educational attainment (lower secondary or below), whereas in urban areas the percentage is 29%. In addition, 22% of rural dwellers have a tertiary education, while in urban areas the figure is almost 10 percentage points higher, at 31%.

Household income

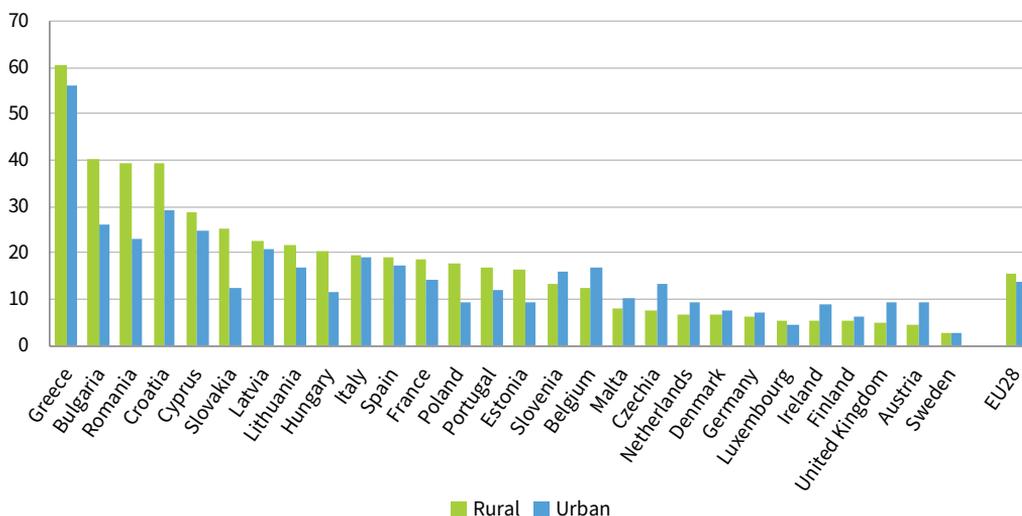
As regards household income, too, the rural population lags behind. In the open countryside category, for example, households in the lowest income quartile are overrepresented, making up 30% of this category. Meanwhile, 21% of households in the open countryside category are in the highest income quartile, the lowest of all four urbanisation categories. But the percentage is nearly as low for the village/small town category, at 23%.

Financial security

Difficulty making ends meet

There has been a reduction in financial hardship in the EU as a whole since 2011, when the consequences of the economic crisis were still being felt. In 2016, fewer people across all

Figure 1: Proportion of people indicating difficulty or great difficulty making ends meet (%), by rural and urban area, Member States, 2016



Source: EQLS 2016

income groups in both rural and urban areas indicated that they had difficulty making ends meet, with prevalence falling back to within 1 percentage point of the pre-crisis level of 2007. The reason that the proportion remained above the 2007 level was the higher share of rural residents who reported difficulty in the later survey: 38% in 2007, compared to 39% in 2016; for urban residents, the figure was 38% in both years.

The picture is more nuanced when different income groups are examined. Although for most income groups, both rural and urban, the trend is favourable compared even with 2007, more than half (52%) of rural residents in the second-lowest income quartile reported difficulty making ends meet in 2016, compared to 48% in 2007. In urban areas, by contrast, the share of people in this income group who reported difficulty decreased (Eurofound, 2017, p. 30).

There is wide variation across Member States in this indicator (and sometimes within them according to rural or urban location). Figure 1 shows the proportion of people who indicated having difficulty or great difficulty making ends meet in each Member State, broken down by rural and urban area; the figure ranges

between 3% in rural Sweden to 60% in rural Greece.

In the majority of countries, a higher share of people in rural areas reported difficulty making ends meet than in urban areas. Financial hardship in rural areas is a real issue in several Member States: as well as the very high level in Greece, around 40% of rural residents in Bulgaria, Croatia and Romania reported having difficulty or great difficulty making ends meet. In these three countries, the share of urban residents reporting having difficulty or great difficulty was lower by 10 percentage points or more. Eurostat data confirm that hardship in rural areas is especially severe in Bulgaria, Greece and Romania.

It is worthwhile taking a closer look at people living in the open countryside by age group at EU level. In this most rural environment, the age group that had the biggest problem making ends meet was the oldest age group (65 and over), with 7% indicating great difficulty. The second highest proportion was 5% in the 50–64 age group, while in the younger age groups it ranged between just 2% and 3%. Such material hardship among older people may have repercussions for their social connectedness, a topic explored further down.

Figure 2: Average number of items households cannot afford, by employment status and urbanisation category, EU, 2016



Note: In the EQLS sample, some countries seem to be overrepresented in the open countryside category, including Austria, Finland, Ireland and Portugal. Others are underrepresented, including Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czechia, Greece, Hungary, Lithuania, Poland, Romania and Slovakia. This caveat should be kept in mind when assessing the data.

Source: EQLS 2016

Deprivation among the jobless

A different measure of financial hardship, deprivation, presents some interesting results regarding the differences between rural and urban residents who are not in work. Deprivation is measured based on the number of six specified items that a household cannot afford.³ It is more prevalent among people who are not in work – people in short-term and long-term unemployment and those unable to work due to illness. But among the long-term unemployed, it is lower for those living in the open countryside than those living in other areas (Figure 2). On the other hand, for people with chronic illness or disability, deprivation is higher for those living in the open countryside than for their counterparts in the other three urbanisation categories.

It is true, though, that the long-term unemployed living in cities or city suburbs experience the highest level of deprivation.

Connectedness

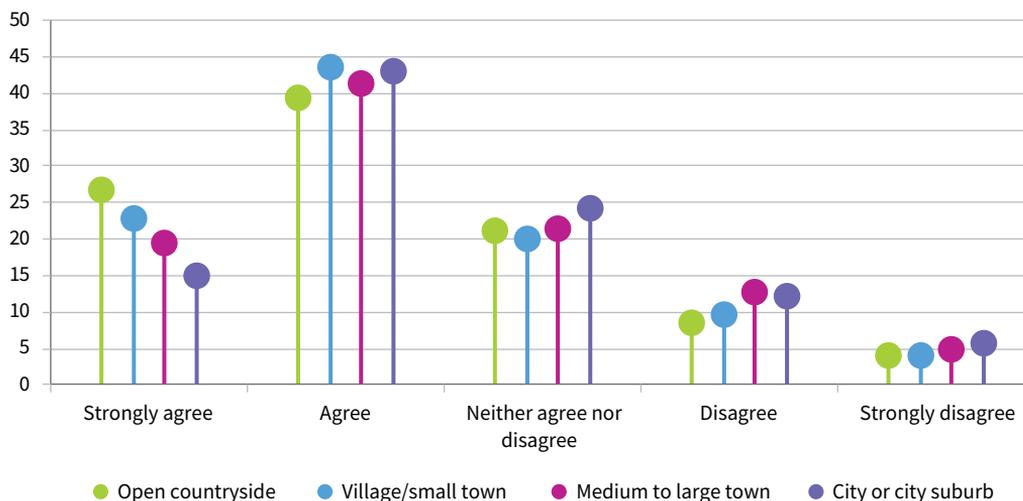
Staying connected can be more of a challenge for people in rural areas. Not only are their homes often remote from services, it generally takes extra effort to maintain social relationships, while cultural amenities are not usually close at hand. The term ‘connectedness’ is used here in a broad sense, and several factors that contribute to people’s connectedness are examined in this section: people’s sense of belonging, of social exclusion and of social tensions; the practical support of internet use; and their access to health services, a factor that can be decisive for quality of life in general.

Sense of belonging

To capture people’s sense of belonging, the EQLS asks respondents to what extent they agree with the statement ‘I feel close to other people in the area where I live’. Fewer people

³ 1. keeping the home adequately warm; 2. paying for a week’s annual holiday away from home (not staying with relatives); 3. replacing worn-out furniture; 4. a meal with meat, chicken, fish every second day if desired; 5. buying new, rather than second-hand, clothes; and 6. having friends or family for a drink or meal at least once a month.

Figure 3: Proportion of people who feel close to people in their area (%), by urbanisation category, EU, 2016



Source: EQLS 2016

agreed with this statement in 2016 (65.9%) than in 2011 (67.7%) in the EU as a whole; while the drop is small, it is statistically significant (Eurofound, 2018).

When responses are analysed according to the four urbanisation categories, it shows that a higher share of people in rural areas than in urban areas agree or strongly agree with the statement that they feel close to people in the area where they live (Figure 3).

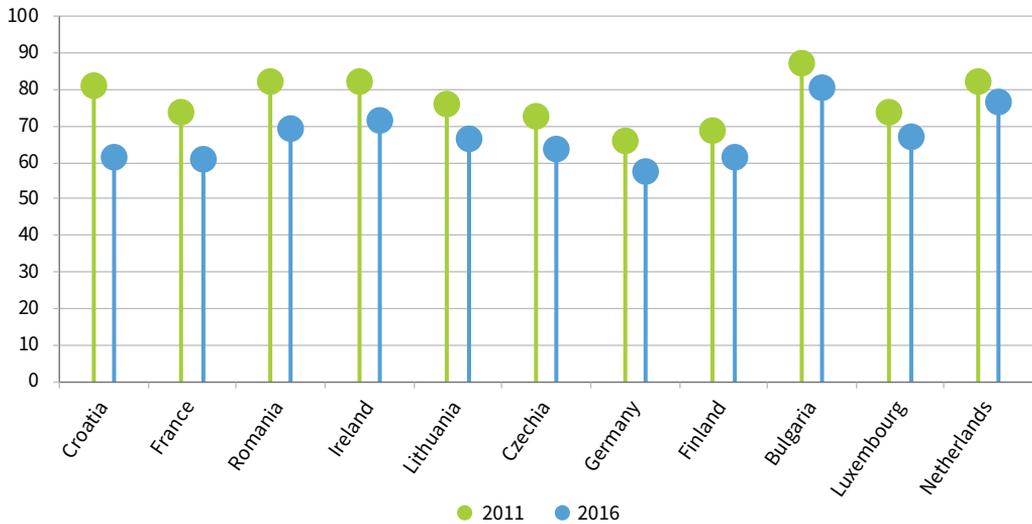
Nevertheless, there has been a significant drop in the share of people in the open countryside who strongly feel a sense of belonging, from 36% in 2011 to 27% in 2016. While this could be a concern, the drop was mostly compensated by an increase in the share of those who neither agree nor disagree, and not among those who disagree. In addition, between 2011 and 2016, people's sense of isolation, as measured by their Social Exclusion Index scores (see next section), practically did not change for any category of closeness, from those who strongly feel close to others to those who have no feeling of closeness.

The high proportion of rural dwellers who feel close to people is an important finding, since it might explain some other findings discussed later: the relatively low level of social exclusion and the better life satisfaction of long-term unemployed people in rural areas compared to their peers in urbanised regions.

Is there a particular group whose sense of belonging is lower than others? A previous EQLS analysis found that young people were less likely to express closeness to other people (Eurofound, 2018). The current study confirms that: the share of younger people who agreed with the statement decreased between 2011 and 2016 across all four urbanisation categories.

There have been significant drops in this indicator in rural areas in a number of Member States (as well as in urban areas of many). As Figure 4 shows, in 11 Member States, a significantly smaller proportion of rural residents felt close to people where they live in 2016 compared to 2011. The reduction was largest in Croatia, France and Romania (20, 13 and 13 percentage points, respectively), but it has to be noted that in both Croatia and Romania, the drop was even larger in urban areas.

Figure 4: Proportion of rural residents who feel close to people in their area (%): Countries with a significant decrease between 2011 and 2016



Note: Significance is at 0.05 level.
Source: EQLS 2011 and 2016

Looking at rural and urban areas together, a significant decline was found in both in 14 Member States (Eurofound, 2018). Out of those, the decrease was higher in rural than in urban areas in France and Czechia (13 and 8 percentage points, respectively).

Social exclusion of older people

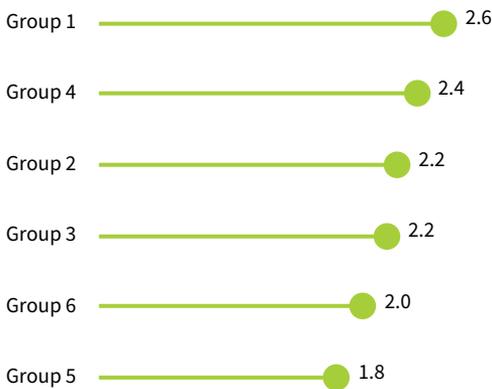
It was noted earlier that many older people living in the open countryside have difficulty making ends meet. How isolated do they feel? Can any country pattern be detected in this regard? To answer these questions, six country groups were constructed according to the share of rural residents who indicated they have difficulty or great difficulty making ends meet. These groups, from highest to lowest share, are as follows:

- Group 1: More than 30% – Bulgaria (40%), Croatia (39%), Greece (60%) and Romania (40%)

- Group 2: 22–29% – Latvia (23%), Lithuania (22%), Slovakia (25%) and Cyprus (29%)
- Group 3: 19–20% – France (19%), Hungary (20%), Italy (19%) and Spain (19%)
- Group 4: 12–18% – Belgium (12%), Estonia (16%), Poland (18%), Portugal (17%) and Slovenia (13%)
- Group 5: 6–8% – Czechia (8%), Denmark (7%), Germany (6%), Malta (8%) and the Netherlands (7%)
- Group 6: Less than 6% – Austria (4%), Finland (5%), Ireland (5%), Luxembourg (5%), Sweden (3%) and the United Kingdom (5%)

For each group, the average score of rural residents on the Social Inclusion Index was then calculated – Figure 5 shows the results.

Figure 5: Social Exclusion Index scores of older rural residents in six country groups, 2016



Note: The Social Exclusion Index ranges from 1 (low) to 5 (high).

Source: EQLS 2016

It is interesting that the ranking of the country groups by the index score does not correspond to the ranking by prevalence of difficulty making ends meet. Nevertheless, social exclusion is highest among older rural residents in the country group where the highest proportion of rural people reported difficulty making ends meet – Group 1. Their score is significantly higher than that of any

other country group. The score in Group 5 (the group with the second lowest prevalence of difficulty making ends meet) is significantly lower than in any other group.

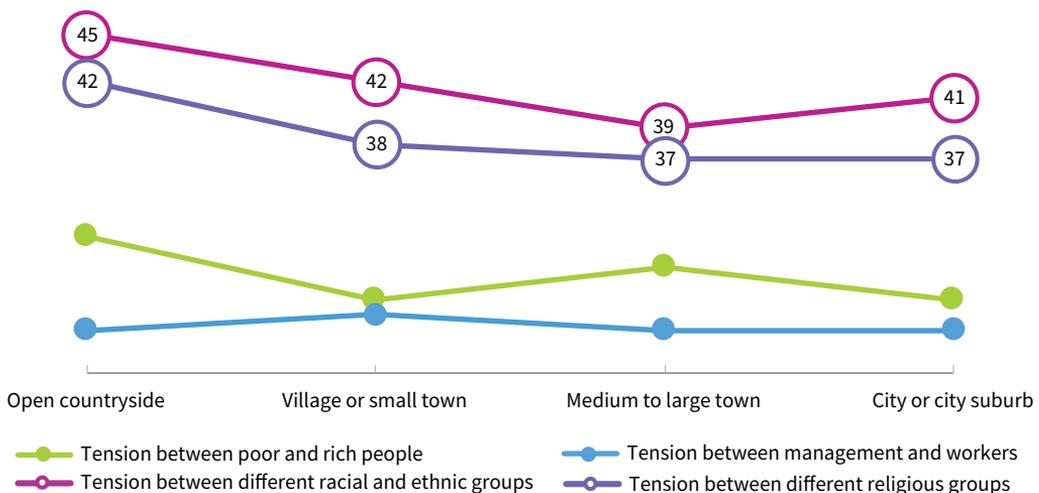
Moreover, the high level of social exclusion has characterised the first group across rounds of the EQLS: it stood at 2.6 in 2007 and 2.5 in 2011 (although the difference is not significant between the two years). Furthermore, in Group 1 countries, the level of social exclusion among elderly rural residents is significantly higher than among their urban peers (2.6 compared with 2.4).

Social tensions

Quality of life is influenced not only by the immediate local environment but also by broader social relationships, as these affect social cohesion. A recent Eurofound report has shown that people's perceptions of tensions between racial and ethnic groups and between religious groups have been rising in the EU since 2007 (Eurofound, 2018).

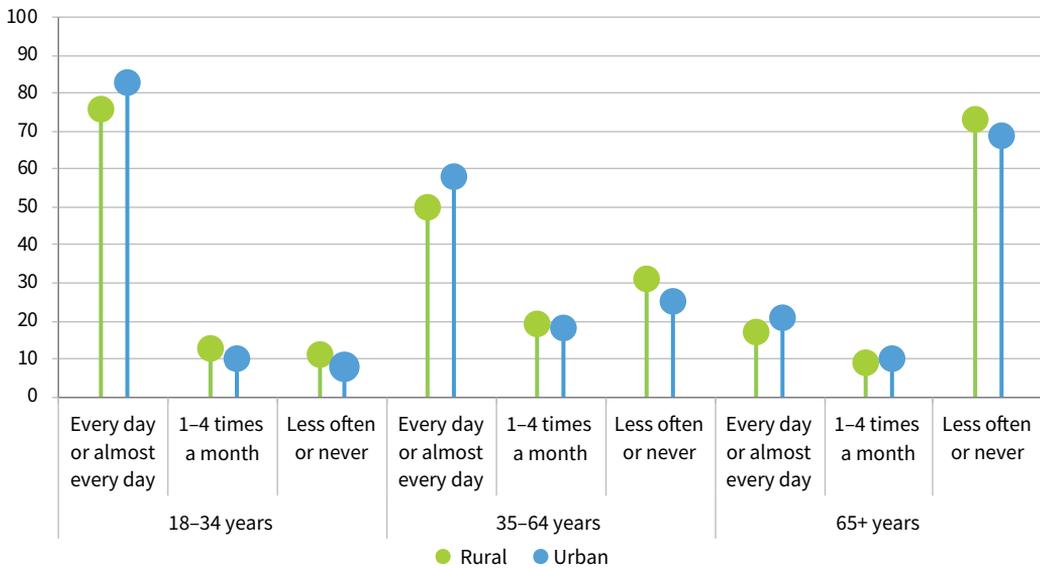
Figure 6 shows a rural–urban divide in these perceptions, with a higher percentage of rural residents perceiving tensions. The differences between the village/small town and the city or city suburb categories are relatively small, however.

Figure 6: Proportion who perceive tension between different social groups (%), by urbanisation category, EU, 2016



Source: EQLS 2016

Figure 7: Proportion who use the internet for purposes other than work (%), by frequency and age group, according to rural and urban area, EU, 2016



Source: EQLS 2016

Internet use

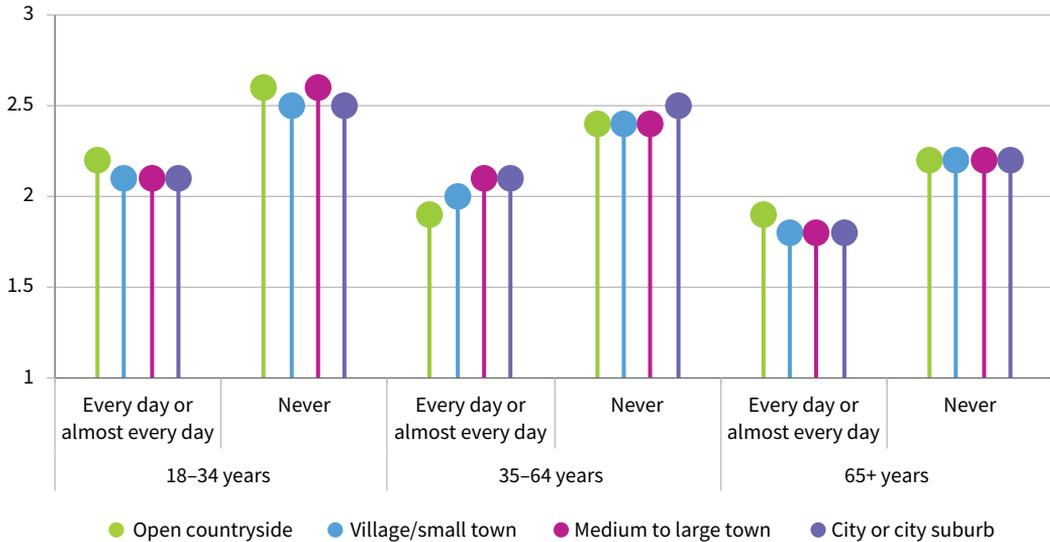
The internet has become a near-essential means of staying connected to the world around, providing a channel to friends and family, information and entertainment, and goods and services. Rural young people are heavy users of the internet for leisure purposes, although not to the same extent as their urban counterparts (Figure 7). By contrast, more than 70% of older people in rural areas never use the internet.

In all three age groups, fewer people in rural areas use the internet on a daily basis than in urban areas. This suggests problems with access to the internet in rural communities. In fact, Eurostat data support this assumption: data on individual daily use of the internet show that it is much lower in rural areas than in towns, suburbs and cities. This finding applies both to EU level and to the overwhelming majority of the Member States. An initiative to address this situation and to support broadband development in rural areas – the Broadband Competence Offices Network – is funded by the EAFRD and ERDF.

The EQLS data make it possible to explore whether social exclusion differs according to regularity of internet use. Figure 8 shows that those who never use the internet feel more excluded across all age groups and all urbanisation categories than regular users. Among non-internet-users, the Social Exclusion Index score of young people (18-34 years) in both rural and urban areas is particularly high, as is the score of middle-aged people (35-64 years) in the city or city suburb category. Among older people who never use the internet, there is no difference between rural and urban residents.

The elevated sense of social exclusion among those who never use the internet is understandable, given its increasing importance as a tool of communication in the 21st century and for access to services such as registration for health services, e-governance, and the purchase of tickets for cultural events.

Figure 8: Social Exclusion Index score, by age group and frequency of internet usage for purposes other than work, according to urbanisation category, EU, 2016



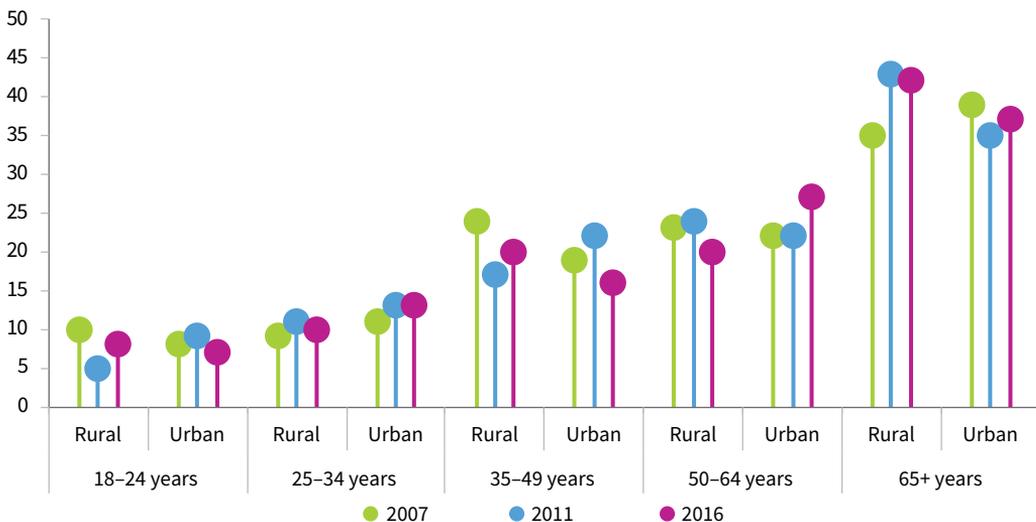
Note: The Social Exclusion Index ranges from 1 to 5.
Source: EQLS 2016

Distance from doctor

For quality of life in rural areas, ease of access to healthcare is especially important, but the distance to healthcare services can be substantial in places where population density

is low. The EQLS asks respondents how difficult distance has made it for them to visit a doctor. As Figure 9 illustrates, distance is an obstacle for older people especially, in both rural and urban areas. While this is not an unexpected

Figure 9: Proportion of people reporting that distance made access to a doctor difficult (%), by rural and urban area and age group, EU, 2007, 2011 and 2016



Source: EQLS 2007, 2011 and 2016

finding, the data highlight that older people in rural areas were hit especially hard by the crisis and the improvement in 2016 was marginal. Before the crisis, the proportion reporting distance as an obstacle stood at 35%, which increased to 43% by 2011, and this declined by just 1 percentage point, to 42%, in 2016. In contrast, the situation had improved in 2016 for the 50–64 years age group.

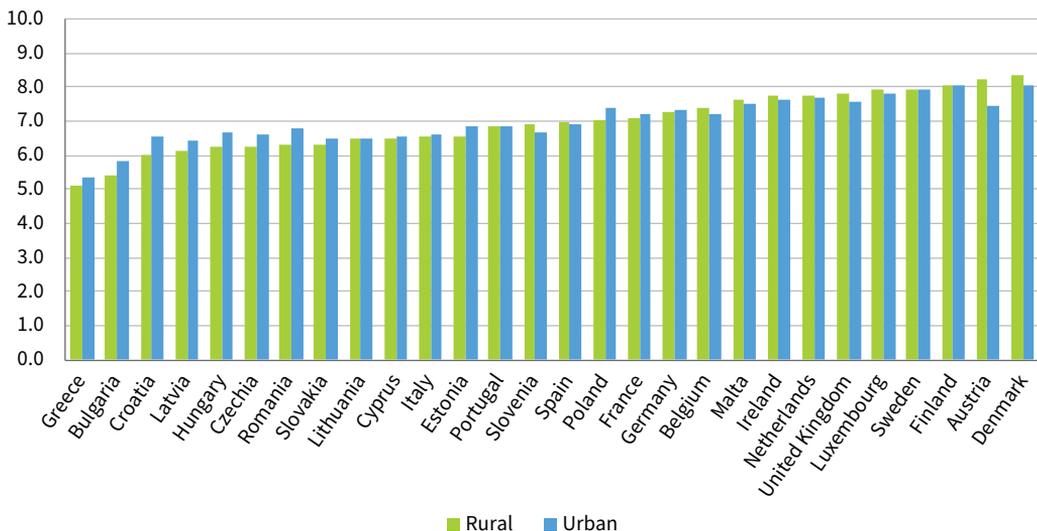
The reasons for older rural residents having more problems accessing doctors should be a subject of further research. A previous investigation by Eurofound (2014b) focusing on access to healthcare found that local healthcare services closed as a direct consequence of the crisis, and that rural areas may often have been affected by the reorganisation of healthcare services, causing small providers to be either shut down or merged with facilities in more distant places. The report illustrated the point using some examples of smaller public hospitals in mostly rural areas. In Romania, for instance, 67 public hospitals in rural areas (about 15% of the country’s public hospitals) were closed in April 2011 (Eurofound, 2014b, p. 13).

In principle, a good public transport service could ease the difficulties accessing essential services, such as healthcare, caused by distance. According to EQLS data, however, rural residents across all age categories rate the quality of public transport lower than their counterparts living in urban areas. In the oldest age group, the gap is greatest between the residents of the open countryside and city dwellers.

Life satisfaction

Life satisfaction is low predominantly in countries where a majority of people report having difficulty making ends meet, both in rural and urban areas (Figure 10). This is particularly true for Bulgaria and Greece. In fact, the country pattern for life satisfaction shows some similarity to that for difficulty making ends meet, illustrated in Figure 1. There are some exceptions, however. For example, difficulty making ends meet is less prevalent in Czechia than in many Member States, but its rural residents rate their life satisfaction at 6.3 out of 10, well below the EU average of 7.1.

Figure 10: Life satisfaction scores, by rural and urban area, Member States, 2016



Note: Life satisfaction is scored from 1 (very dissatisfied) to 10 (very satisfied).
Source: EQLS 2016

Figure 11: Life satisfaction scores, by age group and employment status, in each urbanisation category, EU, 2016



Note: Life satisfaction is scored from 1 (very dissatisfied) to 10 (very satisfied).

Source: EQLS 2016

At the same time, in Spain, where almost 20% of rural dwellers indicated having difficulty making ends meet, the respondents in rural areas seem to be more satisfied with their lives, their average score being 7.0.

When the data was analysed further, to discover rural-urban differences in life satisfaction in different population subgroups, some variation was found depending on employment status and age. As Figure 11 shows, the life satisfaction of the long-term unemployed is higher in rural areas than in urban areas.

The figure also shows that young people in rural areas tend to be less satisfied with life than their peers in urban areas compared to other age groups. Of course, this is a heterogeneous group. Therefore, further research might explore whether young people in rural areas see fewer opportunities than their contemporaries in other urbanisation categories; this is supported by additional analysis that showed that employed young people are less satisfied than their counterparts in other urbanisation categories. Other evidence suggests the lower level of opportunity in the open countryside: the short-term unemployed are less satisfied than their peers in other urbanisation categories.



Policy pointers

Tackling rural poverty

- The evidence of this policy brief clearly shows that poverty in rural areas remains a serious challenge in many Member States. EU cohesion policy and the associated funding certainly contribute to alleviating rural poverty, but policymakers must ensure that programmes are tailor-made for the specific needs of rural society. Initiatives need to be carefully targeted so that funding is channelled to the most deprived communities and does not end up in richer urban pockets within a larger rural area that is identified as poor. The analysis also found that older rural residents in poorer Member States feel more socially excluded than their counterparts in wealthier Member States. Tackling rural poverty may help to reduce this sense of isolation.

Developing comprehensive policy

- EU policy documents include ambitious plans and funding proposals for 'generational renewal', referring to the need to provide opportunities for young people in rural Europe. While this is indeed

important, there is a need, in light of the ageing of European societies, for more focus on quality of life of older people living in rural areas and the increasing need to make services more accessible for them. Similarly, policy seems to centre on making the countryside attractive for businesses, but equal emphasis should be given to investing in the social amenity of rural areas so that the quality of life of the people who live there is maintained.

- When building on the lessons learnt from previous experiences (for example, the allocation of EU funding), an even more targeted approach is needed, focusing on small deprived areas. Leader and CLLD are effective tools that should be used more efficiently and extended further if needed. There are promising plans in place, such as the Smart Villages initiative, which aims to support rural communities to develop opportunities. Well-designed and well-implemented initiatives have the potential to make a difference in rural areas not only to businesses, but also to the quality of life of people living there.

Improving access to services

- Access to essential services is a priority in EU social policy, as indicated by its inclusion in the European Pillar of Social Rights. The current study shows that distance from a doctor is a major obstacle preventing access to healthcare for older people in rural areas. The problem is compounded by poorer availability of public transport compared to cities or other more urbanised areas. This difficulty of access due to distance has not eased with the economic recovery. It seems that the measures taken during the crisis, such as the closure of services in small, mainly rural, areas, have had lasting effects. Therefore, attention needs to be given to providing adequate access to healthcare, and other services, especially in rural areas.

Addressing digital connectivity

- The digital transformation of society is one of the EU's key priorities, as identified recently in the MFF 2021–2027. As part of the MFF process, the European Commission has put forward a regulation for establishing the Digital Europe programme, which contains proposals that could be relevant for the development of rural areas (European Commission, 2018). For example, its aims include ensuring the wide use of digital technology across the economy and society. This policy brief highlighted that internet usage in rural areas in many countries is not as advanced as in urban areas, and that this is in part related to poor internet access. The findings also underlined the link between social exclusion and low internet usage. In addition, although employment is not a focus of this policy brief, it is known to be lower in rural areas in a number of countries, and in these same countries rural digital connectivity is low. Improving internet connectivity and developing digital skills in rural communities would clearly contribute to tackling several social ills that diminish quality of life in rural Europe.



Resources

All Eurofound publications are available at www.eurofound.europa.eu

EQLS results by country and the key breakdowns are available online at <http://eurofound.link/eqlsdata>

Crescenzi, R. and Giua, M. (2014), *The EU cohesion policy in context: Regional growth and the influence of agricultural and rural development policies*, LEQS Paper No. 85, London School of Economics and Political Science, London.

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Rural communities have distinctive patterns of economic development and social life. Previous research has highlighted a rural–urban divide across several dimensions of quality of life. For instance, living standards are lower on average in rural areas.

This policy brief aims to draw policymakers’ attention to aspects of quality of life where rural dwellers are doing less well than the urban population, focusing on three topics: financial security, connectedness and life satisfaction. The study finds that in terms of financial situation and subjective well-being, the rural regions of southern and eastern European Member States are indeed falling behind. Older rural residents of these countries, particularly, experience high levels of disadvantage.

The European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (Eurofound) is a tripartite European Union Agency established in 1975. Its role is to provide knowledge in the area of social, employment and work-related policies according to Regulation (EU) 2019/127.

