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between rural and urban areas**

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Attitudes Towards Asylum Seekers: Understanding Differences Between Rural and Urban Areas

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines spatial differences in the attitudes of the public towards asylum seekers using data from the British Social Attitudes Survey. Initial analysis reveals some statistically significant variations across geographical areas, with people living in London, the South East of England and Scotland displaying the most tolerant views. The spatial variations are then further investigated by considering differences between rural and different types of urban areas. The estimation of regression models enables a range of socio-demographic influences on attitudes to be examined including whether an individual is a foreign national, belongs to ethnic minority group and possesses a higher education qualification. Members of each of these groups are more concentrated in urban areas, especially London, thus accounting for part of the observed differentials. However, even after controlling for these and other factors, some significant differences remain between rural and some urban areas, especially large cities. We discuss potential explanations and conclude that having opportunities for meaningful social contact with asylum seekers and other immigrants is a key factor underlying some of the unexplained rural-urban differences in attitudes. Given increasing diversity in rural areas, it is recommended that policy makers and civil society organisations concerned about the impacts of negative attitudes on social and community cohesion should invest resources in creating opportunities for meaningful social contact between different groups.

Keywords: Asylum Seekers, Public Attitudes, Diversity, Spatial Differences, Rural and Urban Areas.

1. Introduction

The impacts of migration for receiving countries and the attitudes with which increased inward migration are associated have become the focus of intense political and academic debate. Whilst arguments that the ‘general public’ are not in favour of immigration have been used to justify more restrictive migration policies, the overall picture is far more complicated (Dempster and Hargrave, 2017). The largest study of attitudes, based on interviews conducted by Gallup with over 183,000 adults across over 140 countries between 2012 and 2014 (IOM, 2015), shows that people are not as opposed to immigration as is commonly assumed: some 43% favour increasing or keeping stable the numbers of immigrants in their countries, while only 34% want lower levels of immigration.

These data also highlight significant differences in attitudes towards immigration and immigrants between different regions and countries of the world. It is notable, for example, that attitudes toward immigration are more negative in Europe than any other region (see also Transatlantic Trends, 2014). This reflects, in part, the increased arrival of people for purposes of work, education and protection but also the growing politicisation of migration around which a whole range of views about the content and direction of EU politics have come to be articulated (Crawley and McMahon, 2016). Refugees have often been at the forefront of public hostility: a Pew Research Center poll conducted in April to May 2016 in 10 European Union nations found that a median of 59% of respondents believed that refugees increase the likelihood of terrorism in their country and a median of 50% believed that refugees were a burden on the country because they take jobs and social benefits (Wike *et al.*, 2016).

Within Europe, attitudes towards immigration appear to be most negative in the UK (Transatlantic Trends, 2014; IOM, 2015; Dempster and Hargrave, 2017). Yet even here the

picture is more complex than the headline figures suggest. Whilst more than three-quarters of the public want to see a reduction in immigration into the UK, public attitudes have remained broadly consistent over the past decade. Indeed, over the period from 2002 to 2014 the public became, on balance, *more positive* about the benefits of immigration (Ford and Lymeropoulou, 2017). Attitudes towards immigration are, however, becoming increasingly divided and polarised. As noted by Ford (2017), this polarisation is not symmetrical in its political effects, largely because migration is a far more salient issue for opponents than for supporters. In contrast, voters hostile to migration tend to blame it for a range of social problems, and will support political parties who focus on reducing immigration, supporters of migration tend to regard it as a lesser issue, and focus on other matters.

In this context, our article contributes to a better and more nuanced understanding of public attitude formation between groups and places by exploring how attitudes towards asylum seekers vary across rural-urban areas in Britain using data taken from the British Social Attitudes Survey (BSAS).¹ The focus on (1) asylum seekers and (2) rural-urban differences in attitudes is salient and timely for three main reasons. First, the issue of asylum has a particular and specific place in the evolution of attitudes towards immigration in the British context. As far back as 2000, the Prime Minister Tony Blair identified asylum as one of the two ‘touchstone issues’ on which the government was seen as being too ‘soft’.² The focus on asylum in political, policy and media debates since the turn of the 21st century means that this issue, perhaps more than any other, has become a ‘touchstone issue’ for a much broader range of concerns including the implications of globalisation (for both economies and societies) and security issues more generally (Crawley, 2009). This is reflected in the fact that the number of asylum seekers in the UK, who represent a small and decreasing proportion of all arrivals, is often vastly overestimated when people are asked

about their attitudes. For example, the Migration Observatory found that when asked to consider immigrants, respondents were most likely to think of asylum seekers (62%) and least likely to think of students (29%). At the time of the research, 2009, asylum seekers were the smallest group (4%) whilst students represented 37% of all arrivals (Migration Observatory, 2011a).

A second, related, reason why this paper focuses on attitudes towards asylum seekers rather than refugees or other groups of migrants lies in evidence that attitudes towards this group are more negative than those towards other groups of immigrants (Schuster and Solomos, 2004; Crawley, 2009; Mulvey, 2010). For example, research by the Migration Observatory (2011a) found that attitudes toward asylum seekers together with low-skilled labour migrants and extended family members were significantly more negative than attitudes towards high-skilled migrants, students, and close family members. Moreover asylum seekers are particularly stigmatised even relative to refugees: an opinion poll commissioned by Sky News in October 2015, commissioned in response to the UK announcement that 20,000 Syrian refugees were to be resettled in the UK over a 5 year period, found that whilst 47% of British people wanted the UK to take in fewer refugees, this figure rose by 10 percentage points when the same question was asked using the term ‘asylum seeker’.³

The extent of public hostility towards asylum seekers is perhaps not surprising given that New Labour’s asylum policy-making, and the symbols and rhetoric that accompanied it, constructed asylum seekers as a threat (Mulvey, 2010). This construction has been reflected in media coverage, with a disproportionate focus on the threats that refugees pose to members of host societies (Esses *et al.*, 2013; Crawley *et al.*, 2016; Crawley and McMahon, 2016; Georgiou and Zaborowski, 2017). For these reasons, a more detailed analysis of public

opinion related specifically to asylum seekers has the potential to provide insights into the factors shaping attitudes to immigration (and immigrants) more generally.

Finally, whilst there is a growing literature which focuses on differences in attitudes to immigration between countries (see, for example, Mayda, 2006; Rustenbach, 2010) and between groups - discussed below - there is very little consideration of differences between rural and urban areas in virtually all countries except the US (see, for example, Fennelly and Federico, 2008; Ceballos *et al.*, 2014). Our focus on differences in attitudes between those living in rural and urban areas⁴ provides an opportunity to better understand how negative political and media discourses are received and understood in areas with very different migration histories and experiences of ethnic (and other forms of) diversity. In this context, our paper describes differences in attitudes towards asylum seekers among people living in rural compared with urban areas, examines the possible reasons for the differences and similarities between these areas and considers the implications for policy and ongoing efforts to inform and influence political narratives in relation to migration and diversity. This is particularly important given the changing composition of many rural areas, both in the UK and elsewhere, an issue to which we return in our conclusions.

2. Socio-Demography, Place and Space as Factors Shaping the Formation of Attitudes

Existing empirical studies have typically examined differences in attitudes between groups and the factors shaping attitudes to immigration (as a topic) and immigrants (as a group of people). Although there is no unified theory underpinning the formation of attitudes towards migration, the literature highlights a number of factors potentially driving anti-immigrant sentiments (Rustenbach, 2010). Economic theories, for instance, have explained opposition to migrants in terms of fears about labour market competition (Mayda, 2006). Non-economic explanations emphasize socio-cultural factors, mainly reflecting nativist mindsets and a high

degree of national identification associated with a strong desire for ethnically homogeneous societies (Mayda, 2006). The relationship between these two sets of factors remains unclear: although research has consistently concluded that attitudes toward migration and migrants are strongly influenced by ‘cultural concerns’ these concerns are weakly connected to evidence of migration’s economic impact (Hainmuller and Hopkins, 2014). Whilst these ‘grand narratives’ clearly form the backdrop within which individual attitudes are formed, it is also important to consider the specific role of place and space in shaping attitudes to migration. This is necessary because there are significant variations in the socio-demographic characteristics of populations living in different areas, for example between different urban locations (towns and cities of different sizes) and between urban and rural areas. Understanding the implications of these spatial variations on attitude formation provides new insights into the types of policies necessary to address public anxiety about migration and mitigate its worst impacts, often manifested as racism and discrimination, on migrant and Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) communities.

Socio-Demographic Characteristics

There is a consensus within the existing literature that socio-demographic characteristics play an important role in shaping individual and group attitudes towards migration, or at the very least are strongly correlated. Age and education have been found to be particularly significant (Hainmueller and Hiscox, 2007; Rustenbach, 2010). This is due, in part, to the relationship between socio-demographic and economic factors (i.e. those with higher levels of education are often in a stronger position vis-à-vis the labour market and feel less threatened economically), but also because age and education reflect different formative influences and different world views within which knowledge about, and attitudes towards, the movement of people are situated. In the British context, there is strong evidence that the

most economically secure and higher status sections of society - the professional middle classes and graduates - are typically positive about both the economic and cultural impacts of migration (Ford and Heath, 2014). By contrast, groups in less privileged positions within the social hierarchy, who often have lower levels of educational attainment, are less positive about migration whilst those in the most precarious positions - unskilled manual workers and those with no educational qualifications - are the most negative (Ford and Heath, 2014; Ford and Lympelopoulou, 2017). The most intensely negative views are found among the oldest voters and those with no meaningful social contact with migrants, a point to which we return below. There is also some evidence of differences in attitudes by gender and family type, with for example, the socio-political literature indicating that women's views are more liberal on social compassionate issues (Eagly *et al.*, 2004).

Ethnic diversity

There is limited research on the relationship between attitudes towards asylum seekers and ethnic diversity (Steele and Abdelaaty, 2019). There is however a body of literature which considers the extent to which ethnic diversity influences attitudes to migration more generally. This literature is generally divided between two competing schools of thought which reach very different conclusions (Schlueter and Wagner, 2008; Schlueter and Scheepers, 2010). On the one hand, it has been argued that higher proportions of people from diverse backgrounds can result in an increase in the perceived group threat leading to more negative attitudes (Card *et al.*, 2005). Reflecting this, Steele and Abdelaaty (2019) conclude that greater ethnic diversity is also associated with decreased support for refugees, although they acknowledge that this relationship is not consistent across all measures of diversity. Proponents of the contact hypothesis, by contrast, argue that increased interaction between in-group and out-group members encourages individuals to overcome prejudice (Allport,

1954). Specifically, areas which are more ethnically diverse and have a longer histories of migration generally have higher levels of meaningful intergroup contact between existing communities and those from migrant backgrounds (e.g. through workplace relationships and friendships) which can serve to mediate the negative influences of dominant political and media discourse backgrounds (e.g. leading to more tolerant attitudes through a reduction of perceived threat (Fetzer, 2000; Valentine and McDonald, 2004; Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006; Green *et al.*, 2010).

However, some of the anticipated consequences of increased contact between different groups associated with migration can be undermined by *perceptions* regarding the scale of immigration. For example, evidence from Belgium shows that individuals who perceive more migrants to be present in their communities are more hostile even after controlling for reported contact with members of migrant groups, leading Hooghe and de Vroome (2013) to conclude that the perceived size of the migrant group has a stronger impact on anti-immigrant sentiments than increased diversity *per se*. Moreover, recent evidence suggests that increased diversity itself does not, in and of itself, *create* attitudes but rather *cements* those that already exist. For example, Laurence and Bentley (2018) find that living in more diverse communities increases the frequency of both positive *and* negative intergroup contact leading to a polarisation in attitudes: while the net-effect of diversity on attitudes via contact is positive, attitudes amongst those experiencing more frequent negative contact become progressively worse. Related research concludes that the perceived threat associated with migration emerges not from increased diversity *per se* but from other wider societal processes, such as socio-economic precariousness, with which migration and increased diversity has come to be associated (Laurence *et al.*, 2019).

Spatial Differences and the Rural Dimension

In 2011, 81.5% (45.7 million) of the usually resident population of England and Wales lived in urban areas and 18.5% (10.3 million) lived in rural areas (ONS, 2013). Moreover, the composition of some rural areas has changed significantly with migrants from Central and Eastern Europe moving into rural parts of the UK to fill mainly low-skilled and low-wage employment opportunities following the 2004 enlargement of the EU (Milbourne, 2007). Given what we know about the factors shaping attitudes toward migration, including the roles of demography and ethnic diversity noted above, we might expect attitudes between rural and urban areas to differ: rural populations are generally older and significantly less ethnically diverse than urban areas providing significantly fewer opportunities for meaningful intergroup contact. However, whilst there is some research exploring spatial differences in attitudes towards migration (Lewis, 2005, 2006; Migration Observatory, 2011b), there is very little evidence specifically regarding rural-urban differences in attitude formation and change in the UK or Europe more generally. Indeed, with the exception of research by Hubbard (2005), there is virtually nothing specifically on attitudes towards asylum seekers in rural areas of the UK. This represents a significant gap in our understanding of spatial differences in attitudes formation and the rural dimension.

Part of this gap can be attributed to a more deep-rooted neglect of issues of race and racism in rural studies. As noted by Chakraborti and Garland (2004), popular constructions of rural England have perpetuated images of idyllic, problem-free environments and have largely masked the process of ‘othering’ that works to marginalize particular groups within rural society. Indeed, the presumed dominance of whiteness in rural areas has been used to dismiss the relevance for rural studies despite the existence of rural-based minority ethnic communities and despite high levels of rural racism (Neal, 2002). The existing, if limited, literature on the experiences of ethnic minorities living in rural areas suggests that racism

may be more prevalent and/or socially acceptable in these areas due to the fact that rural populations have less exposure to diversity (Chakraborti and Garland, 2004; Neal and Agyeman, 2006; Ware, 2015).

We have, nonetheless, identified a number of studies in the European context, focusing specifically on rural areas, which attempt to provide more precise explanations for underlying differences in attitudes compared to more urbanised areas. This literature suggests that the arrival of new migrant groups from different cultural, linguistic and ethnic backgrounds can undermine feelings of community solidarity and self-identity. This appears to be more prominent in rural than urban areas due, in part, to the lack of pre-existing diversity and pace of change (Crowley and Litcher, 2009; Woods 2018). Within the context of rural parts of England, Andrews (2011) examines the role of religion and suggests that such communities are important sources for bridging and bonding with regards to social cohesion and the social integration of immigrants. He concludes that the social integration of immigrants is more likely to occur in rural areas that have strong Protestant and Catholic communities.

In the United States, by contrast, there is a large and growing body of literature on differences in attitudes towards migrants in rural as compared with urban areas confirming that, in general terms, people living in urban areas have more positive attitudes toward immigration than those in rural locations (Fennelly and Federico, 2008; Garcia and Davidson, 2013). As in urban areas, attitudes in rural areas vary along a number of important dimensions including socio-economic status, family longevity in the community, and employment in agriculture as well as by the percentage of migrants settled in a neighbourhood and the percentage of the local population employed in farming (Gimpel and Lay, 2008; Garcia and Davidson, 2013). Whilst those living in rural areas often have different reasons for their opposition to migration than those living in urban areas, this opposition is

not wholly determined by residence but rather reflects a number of the underlying variables discussed above including ethnicity, age and educational attainment levels. Threat perceptions, experiences of contact and a cosmopolitan outlook also play a significant role in shaping attitudes toward immigrants, in both favourable and unfavourable directions (Ceballos *et al.*, 2014). These characteristics are more likely contribute to the higher level of opposition to migration than the mere fact of living in a rural area.

Given the lack of equivalent evidence in the British and European contexts and the extent to which attitudes towards asylum seekers in particular are often a ‘touchstone’ for wider concerns (Crawley, 2009), the remainder of this paper focuses on differences between rural and urban areas in attitudes towards asylum seekers in Great Britain. We focus, in particular, on the following research questions:

- To what extent do spatial variations in attitudes towards asylum seekers exist between rural areas and other parts of Great Britain?
- How does the socio-demographic composition of these areas affect differences in attitudes?
- Is the influence of socio-demographic characteristics in rural areas similar to that observed in other parts of Britain?

3. Data and Research Methods

The BSAS is a representative survey that asks a sample of adults aged 18 and over living in private households in Great Britain about their views about different social and economic issues⁵. Although the BSAS has asked standard questions on immigration since it began in the early 1980s, these questions do not differentiate between different categories of migrant (asylum seeker, refugee, work permit holder, international student etc). There has been a reluctance to change the questions because this would result in a continuity break, making it

more difficult to assess changes in attitudes to immigration over time. However in response to concerns among researchers about the tendency of the British public to conflate migration categories (noted above), together with evidence of differences in attitudes towards different groups (Migration Observatory, 2011a), the BSAS included an additional question on attitudes towards allowing asylum seekers to remain in Britain in 2011 and 2013. Responses to this question form the basis of the statistical analysis in this paper. The precise wording of the question was:

“Asylum seekers who have suffered persecution in their own country should be able to stay in Britain”.

Respondents were asked to indicate how much they agreed or disagreed with the statement on a 5-point scale covering the following responses: agree strongly, agree, neither agree or disagree, disagree and strongly disagree. They were also given the option of “don't know” and could refuse to answer. All respondents taking part in the BSAS in these two years (3,111 in 2011 and 3,244 in 2013) were asked this question. Very few respondents (1.3% across the two years) stated that they did not know and even less (0.1%) refused to answer. Table 1 reports the mean response, in which the variable has been (re)coded so that respondents who strongly agreed with the statement were assigned a value of 5 and those who strongly disagreed were assigned a value of 1. As such, a higher mean value indicates a more tolerant view towards letting asylum seekers stay in Britain. Table 1 shows that attitudes towards asylum seekers were slightly more tolerant in 2013 compared to 2011, with mean responses being 0.11 (out of 5) higher in 2013. This was the outcome of falls of more than 3 and 1 points respectively in the percentage of respondents who disagreed and strongly disagreed with the statement. Over the two years, 9.4% strongly agreed and 38.2% agreed with the statement, compared to 20.1% and 8.2% who disagreed and strongly disagreed with it.

[Table 1 near here]

The empirical analysis begins with an examination of the descriptive statistics on the main variable of interest for a range of spatial areas. This section is followed by one containing regression analysis. Given that the dependent variable has been measured on an ordered scale, ordered logit models have been estimated. These models have been applied widely in a range of contexts across the social sciences, including from rural-urban and spatial perspectives (Gilbert *et al.*, 2016; Belso-Martinez, 2010).⁶ The estimates produced by ordered logit models are very similar to those obtained from ordinary least squares models with regards to the sign and significance of the coefficients. In particular, the signs indicate whether a particular characteristic has a positive or negative impact on attitudes towards letting asylum seekers stay in Britain. The magnitude of the coefficient indicates of the size of the effect, with higher coefficients implying that a particular variable exerts a larger influence.⁷ The statistical significance of the estimates can be determined by inspecting the p-values, with values of less than 0.01 and 0.05 indicating significance at the 1% and 5% levels respectively.⁸

Four different specifications of ordered logit models have been estimated because of the differential impact of the socio-demographic variables and the relative importance of these influences. The first specification contains dummy variables for the rural-urban indicators, standard personal characteristics (gender, age, marital status and economic position) and year of interview. Other spatial variables (regions and population density quartiles) have been added in the second specification. Further demographic variables (capturing ethnic group, whether a UK national⁹ and religion) have been included in the third specification. The final specification adds dummy variables that control for highest educational qualification. Each of these specifications has also been estimated with the

inclusion of a single rural/non-rural dummy variable included rather than comparing the three urban indicators to rural areas.

4. Descriptive Statistics

Spatial variations in attitudes towards asylum seekers are shown in Table 2. The table contains information at three spatial levels: region, population density quartile and rural-urban location type. The latter variable was created from the respondent's own description of the place where they live, with the options being: big city, suburbs of a big city, small city or town, country village and a farm or home in the country.¹⁰ A small percentage of respondents (0.8% across the two years) did not answer this question.

With regards to differences by region, attitudes towards asylum seekers were by far the most positive in Inner London (mean value of 3.82), followed by Outer London, Scotland and the South East (all with means in the range 3.33-3.38).¹¹ The high mean observed in Inner London was the result of almost a third of respondents who strongly agreed with the statement and a further 38.6% who agreed with it. Only 5.4% of Inner London residents reported that they strongly disagreed with the statement, which was lower than any other region apart from the South East. The region with the highest percentage of respondents in this category was the East Midlands (12.6%), followed by the West Midlands (12.0%) and it was also in excess of 10% in the North West and South West. Overall, the mean values indicate that the least tolerant attitudes towards asylum seekers could be found in the West Midlands (mean of just under 3), followed by the East Midlands, Wales, South West and North East (means of under 3.1).

[Table 2 near here]

People living in areas in the highest population density quartile displayed the most tolerant attitudes towards asylum seekers, with a mean of 3.36 compared to less than 3.2 in the other three quartiles. This was largely the outcome of a relatively high percentage (14.9%) of respondents in this category who strongly agreed with the statement. There were larger differences by rural-urban location types. For example, the mean responses of residents from 'suburbs of big cities' were over 0.3 points lower than those living in big cities but more than 0.1 point higher than in the other three categories. Moreover, 23.1% of 'big city' residents strongly agreed with the statement, compared with 7.5% in 'small cities/towns', 7.3% in 'villages' and 6.3% in 'farms/homes in the country'.

Given the patterns reported in Table 2, some of the spatial variables have been combined so that rural-urban variations in different parts of Britain can be examined in further detail. Firstly, the 'country village' and 'farm/home in country' categories have been aggregated into a single rural indicator because of the small number of observations in the latter. Secondly, Table 3 presents details on the distribution and mean levels of attitudes across 14 areas after combining the rural-urban indicators with the population density quartiles. It can be seen from the table that attitudes towards asylum seekers were most tolerant in the most concentrated parts of big cities (mean of 3.66). This was again the result of the high percentage of respondents in such areas who strongly agreed with the statement: 26.7%, compared with 14.7% living in population density quartile and 11.4% of respondents in the lowest two population density quartiles. The mean level reported by respondents living in Quartile 3 in the big cities was slightly lower than in suburban areas in the highest population density category. Residents in suburban areas with lower population density levels were less tolerant towards asylum seekers (means of around 3.2), and fairly similar to respondents from small cities/towns and rural areas. In some rural areas, a fairly low percentage of respondents strongly disagreed with the statement, especially in some of the

more concentrated parts of such areas. However, the lowest mean was observed in population density quartile 2 in rural areas, where over a third of residents either disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement.

[Table 3 near here]

5. Regression Analysis

This section undertakes regression analysis in order to further investigate the differences in attitudes towards asylum seekers that were identified in the previous section. The main objective here is to examine rural-urban differences after controlling for socio-demographic influences that can potentially affect attitudes towards immigration. Table 4 presents estimates for the rural-urban area indicators in relation to attitudes towards asylum seekers in each of the four specifications. The influence of the three urban indicators has been measured relative to the rural category. Table A1 in the Appendix contains the results for the other explanatory variables by reporting the full set of estimates based on the fourth and final specification.¹²

The estimates shown in Table 4 indicate that rural-urban differences in attitudes towards asylum seekers decreased as more socio-demographic factors were added to the empirical specifications but that some significant differences continue to be observed, even in the final specification. The first specification shows that attitudes towards asylum seekers were more tolerant in the big city and suburbs of big cities categories relative to rural areas. These differences were statistically significant at the 1% level for big cities and at the 5% level in the suburbs respectively. There was no significant difference between people living in rural areas and in the least urbanised areas, with a small negative coefficient found for the small city/town category. The difference between the big cities and rural categories remained significant after controls for region and population density were included in the second

specification, although the magnitude of the coefficient was reduced from 0.634 to 0.410. In contrast, the difference between people living in the suburbs and in rural areas is only significant at the 10% in the second specification. In particular, the table indicates the important impact of region, over and above the rural-urban categories, with a large positive effect observed for Inner London, and Outer London and the South East to a lesser degree, relative to the West Midlands. This highlights the important association that exists between locational factors and attitudes – especially in those areas that have the most diverse immigrant populations (Vertovec, 2007). In contrast, the coefficients on the population density quartiles are negative and sometimes significant relative to the lowest density quartile when regions have been included.

In the third specification, which adds controls for ethnic, nationality and religion, the size of the (positive) coefficients are further reduced for the big cities and suburbs categories relative to rural areas. Despite this, the difference between the most urbanised and rural areas remained significant at the 1% level but the effect observed in the suburbs was no longer significant. This was also the case in the final specification, in which highest educational qualifications were added. Therefore, our results indicate that people who lived in the most urbanised parts of the UK reported significantly more tolerant attitudes towards asylum seekers in comparison to rural areas, even after controlling for a wide range of socio-demographic and locational factors. However, the differences compared to less urbanised areas were smaller, especially after a range of controls had been included.

Table 4 also contains estimates for a single non-rural dummy variable, when these have been included in each of four specifications instead of the three (urban) dummy variables. The non-rural dummy is (marginally) significant in the first specification but this only occurs at the 10% level. The impact of adding more controls in the second and third specifications is consistent with that reported for earlier estimates in that the magnitude of the

coefficients for the non-rural dummy declines and is not significantly different from zero in either of the specifications. Although the size of the coefficient increases in the final specification, after adding highest educational qualification, it does not reach significance at the 10% level.

[Table 5 near here]

Estimates from splitting the sample according to whether respondents lived in rural or non-rural areas are displayed in Table 5. The table indicates that the impact of many of the significant socio-demographic variables in the full sample is similar for people living in rural and non-rural areas. These include gender, highest qualifications, nationality and ethnic minority. However, the significance levels vary because of the larger number of observations in non-rural areas. There are also some differences in signs on the estimates for some of the explanatory variables between the two areas, including age (quadratic), some of the controls for marital status and religious group. However, apart from for the result for Christians, the differences are not significant between rural and non-rural areas when statistical tests were applied, as indicated in the final column. The statistically important effect of Christians in rural areas is also consistent with the findings reported by Andrews (2011). The only other significant differences are observed for some of the regional dummies. Therefore, the impact of the key determinants of attitudes towards asylum seekers is largely similar in rural and non-rural areas.

6. Conclusions

It is clear from the evidence presented in this paper that there are significant spatial variations in attitudes towards asylum seekers in the UK. In particular, people living in London, the South East of England and Scotland were most likely to agree that asylum seekers who have suffered persecution in their own countries should be allowed to stay. Moreover, the

empirical analysis also reveals several differences by types of rural-urban areas. Specifically, people living in the most urbanised parts of London and the South East and Scotland were far more likely to report more positive views towards asylum seekers. These differentials were reduced, to varying extents, after controlling for socio-demographic variables. However, fairly large differences remained even after a wide range of controls (capturing ethnicity, nationality and religion) were included. As a result, it is clear that respondents in major cities - especially London - displayed significantly more tolerant attitudes towards asylum seekers. These findings imply that although the differences can be partially explained by socio-demographic characteristics, other factors are also important.

It is therefore also important to situate these findings within a broader consideration of public debates in relation to migration in general and asylum in particular. Although attitudes towards asylum seekers have typically been more negative than those for other migrant groups, we found evidence of slightly increased levels of tolerance towards asylum seekers between 2011 and 2013, with a small rise in the proportion of people stating that asylum seekers fleeing persecution in their own countries should be allowed to stay. Evidence of increased tolerance towards migration in all its forms has also been found by others (Ford and Lymeropoulou 2017; Hjern and Bohman, 2014). This can be attributed, in part at least, to an increase in meaningful social contact between host communities and those from minority backgrounds which can act as a counter to prevailing political and media discourses. Whilst surveys and opinion polls on attitudes are often used to reinforce or amplify anti-migration political narratives (Esses *et al.*, 2013), subtle but important differences in attitudes provide opportunities to engage communities in a more positive narrative of migration and diversity (Crawley and McMahon, 2016). This remains the case despite the changes in attitudes towards asylum seekers that may have taken place in the period since the surveys were carried out, which may be associated with the arrival of large

numbers of refugees to Europe from countries such as Syria and the rise of anti-immigrant political parties.

Moreover, our findings particularly have implications for efforts to engage communities in the changes associated with increased migration in different parts of Great Britain. Rural areas are becoming increasingly diverse with predominately rural counties, such as Cambridgeshire and Cumbria, seeing a significant increase in their minority populations in the past 15 years, albeit from a very low base. Whilst increasing diversity in such rural areas has typically been associated with the arrival of migrants from Europe rather than asylum seekers (Flynn and Kay, 2017), it was previously noted that the issue of asylum is a ‘touchstone’ around which attitudes to migration, as well broader social, economic and political change, have come to be articulated. Understanding these attitudes and rural-urban differences in their formation is therefore becoming increasingly important.

Perhaps the clearest policy implication from our findings relates to the need to create opportunities for intergroup contact, which is known to be one of the most significant factors shaping immigration attitudes (Fetzer, 2000; Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006). Whilst there is some evidence that increased diversity can be associated with anxiety and negative interactions which increase, rather than reduce, hostility and prejudice (Green *et al.*, 2010; Schlueter and Scheepers, 2010), contact between members of different groups can, under the right conditions, lead to more positive intergroup relations. This is also consistent with evidence presented by Ghosn *et al.* (2019), whose results provide strong support for contact being associated with more positive views towards hosting Syrian refugees based on a large survey of Lebanese residents. Although they note that this might not be a causal link, their comprehensive empirical analysis indicates that more contact between refugees and local communities should be encouraged. The problem is that increased migration does not automatically lead to more contact between groups, even in diverse urban areas: when groups

are highly segregated, geographically or socially, or when there is little motivation to engage in contact, the benefits of contact may remain unrealized. In rural areas, however, particular issues arise due to the relative lack of diversity and the added difficulties of bringing together people who may be distributed across a wider geographical area. In this context, Crisp and Turner (2009) explore ways of producing the positive effects of contact without there being actual contact, a process they describe as ‘imagined contact’.

According to Crispin and Turner (2009, 234) “[i]magined intergroup contact is the mental simulation of a social interaction with a member or members of an outgroup category. The basic idea is that mentally simulating a positive contact experience activates concepts normally associated with successful interactions with members of other groups. These can include feeling more comfortable and less apprehensive about the prospect of future contact with the group, and this reduced anxiety should reduce negative outgroup attitudes”. The authors discuss empirical research supporting the imagined contact proposition and conclude that this is an approach that is both deceptively simple and remarkably effective. Encouraging people to mentally simulate a positive intergroup encounter leads to improved outgroup attitudes and reduced stereotyping, curtailing intergroup anxiety and extending the attribution of perceivers’ positive traits to others. Whilst imagined contact is not intended as a replacement for interventions which bring people together, it provides an interesting, and largely unexplored, mechanism for removing inhibitions associated with existing prejudices and could be invaluable for policymakers and educators in rural areas experiencing increased diversity (Crisp and Turner, 2009). Providing such opportunities and then monitoring the impact on the attitudes of those living in rural areas towards asylum seekers and other immigrants would provide an interesting focus for future research.

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Endnotes

¹ We use the term Great Britain to mean England, Wales and Scotland but not Northern Ireland. This reflects the coverage of the BSAS on which the analysis in this paper is based. Where we refer to the UK this is because we are referring to aspects of evidence, policy or practice which includes Northern Ireland.

² See <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2000/jul/17/labour.politicalnews1>.

³ Based on a sample of 1,002 Sky customers with a split sample for these questions. See <http://news.sky.com/story/uk-deeply-divided-over-letting-in-refugees-10344437> and http://interactive.news.sky.com/PX_REF_011015.pdf for data tables.

⁴ Urban areas are defined as built-up areas with a population in excess of 10,000. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) classifies three levels of rural: town and fringe, village, and hamlets and isolated rural dwellings, which are then further classified into those settlements that are in sparse settings (ONS, 2013). The variable used to identify rural and urban areas in the BSAS is obtained from respondents' own description of the area where they live.

⁵ Areas north of the Caledonian canal are excluded because of their dispersed population, whilst Northern Ireland has a separate survey. The survey also contains population weights, which have been used in the descriptive analysis.

⁶ For example, Gilbert *et al.* (2016) estimate ordered logit models to examine how subjective well-being varies between rural and urban areas within Scotland. Belso-Martinez (2010)

outlines the technical considerations associated with estimating such models, in an analysis of the use of international outsourcing by firms in the Spanish footwear industry.

⁷ Most of the explanatory variables are binary/dummy variables and so the influence of such socio-demographic characteristics are measured relative to a base category. As a result, the coefficient shows the impact of each influence on attitudes towards asylum seekers relative to the base category, after controlling for the other explanatory variables that have been included in that particular empirical specification.

⁸ The p-values have been calculated using (heteroscedasticity) robust standard errors.

⁹ This has been derived from a question asking respondents to best describe their nationality.

¹⁰ See footnote 4 for a comparison with the ONS definition.

¹¹ Crawley *et al.* (2013) also find that respondents living in Scotland reported more tolerant views towards refugees using the same dataset over a longer time period. Also see Lewis (2006) for a discussion on attitudes towards asylum seekers in Scotland.

¹² The other socio-demographic factors generally have the expected effects and accord with other empirical studies on attitudes towards immigrants. These include the significant and positive effect of being female, an overseas national and having higher levels of qualifications. Table A1 also contains some other interesting effects such as the significantly more tolerant views towards asylum seekers displayed by people with a black ethnic background. The table also reports estimates based on weighted data, which as can be seen are very similar to those using unweighted data.

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Table 1

Attitudes Towards Letting Asylum Seekers Stay in Britain

	2011	2013	Combined
% Agree strongly	8.7	10.1	9.4
% Agree	37.7	38.8	38.2
% Neither agree nor disagree	22.0	23.4	22.7
% Disagree	21.8	18.4	20.1
% Disagree strongly	8.9	7.6	8.2
% Don't know	0.9	1.7	1.3
% Refusal	0.1	0.1	0.1
Mean	3.15	3.26	3.21
Total observations	3,311	3,244	6,555

Notes: Table reports the percentage of respondents in each category based on weighted data. Totals may not sum to 100 due to rounding. The mean excludes respondents who did not answer the question, with a higher value indicating more tolerant attitudes towards asylum seekers. The total in the final row refers to the unweighted number of observations.

Table 2: Spatial Differences in Attitudes Towards Letting Asylum Seekers Stay in Britain

	% Agree Strongly	% Agree	% Neither Agree or Disagree	% Disagree	% Disagree Strongly	% Not Answered	Mean	N
North East	7.9	32.4	24.8	26.0	6.8	2.1	3.09	332
North West	7.4	40.2	24.4	17.0	10.6	0.5	3.17	801
Yorkshire & Humberside	10.0	38.2	20.6	19.4	8.7	3.1	3.22	559
East Midlands	5.2	34.9	27.0	19.3	12.6	1.0	3.01	564
West Midlands	4.8	35.4	24.9	21.9	12.0	1.1	2.99	632
South West	6.1	35.8	24.2	21.9	10.6	1.3	3.05	548
Eastern	6.4	36.5	25.0	24.0	6.3	1.8	3.13	661
Inner London	31.8	38.6	12.2	10.6	5.4	1.4	3.82	252
Outer London	12.9	43.3	18.8	16.2	7.8	1.1	3.38	416
South East	10.1	40.9	23.5	20.6	4.0	1.0	3.33	893
Wales	7.6	33.1	22.9	25.9	9.1	1.4	3.04	352
Scotland	11.0	42.4	19.6	19.8	5.9	1.4	3.33	545
Pop. Density Quartile 1	7.4	38.9	22.2	23.4	6.8	1.3	3.17	1,455
Pop. Density Quartile 2	6.5	36.3	25.5	21.4	8.5	1.7	3.11	1,827
Pop. Density Quartile 3	8.3	40.1	21.6	19.2	9.9	1.0	3.18	1,686
Pop. Density Quartile 4	14.9	37.8	21.2	17.1	7.5	1.4	3.36	1,587
Great Britain	9.4	38.2	22.7	20.1	8.2	1.4	3.21	6,555
Big city	23.1	36.6	19.5	13.2	6.0	1.6	3.58	625
Suburbs of big city	8.6	41.6	23.0	17.7	7.9	1.2	3.26	1,563
Small city/town	7.5	37.4	23.2	21.4	9.3	1.1	3.12	2,976
Country village	7.3	36.7	23.1	24.7	7.0	1.2	3.13	1,192
Farm or home in the country	6.3	40.0	20.9	20.9	8.8	3.1	3.13	148
All Location Types	9.5	38.3	22.6	20.1	8.2	1.3	3.21	6,504

Notes: There were a small number of respondents who did not answer the location-type question. Also see notes to Table 1.

Table 3

Attitudes Towards Letting Asylum Seekers Stay in Britain by Rural-Urban Population Density Category

	% Strongly Agree	% Agree	% Neither Agree or Disagree	% Disagree	% Strongly Disagree	% Not Answered/ Don't Know	Mean	N	% of Area Type
Big city: Q4	26.7	35.6	17.7	12.8	5.6	1.7	3.66	421	68.6
Big city: Q3	14.7	36.9	21.6	17.2	8.3	1.3	3.33	149	24.3
Big city: Q1-Q2	11.4	46.2	31.4	5.1	3.5	2.4	3.58	44	7.2
Suburbs: Q4	10.2	43.0	23.5	15.4	6.7	1.2	3.35	567	36.7
Suburbs: Q3	7.8	41.8	20.9	18.6	10.1	0.8	3.19	549	35.6
Suburbs: Q2	7.3	40.2	23.8	18.9	7.6	2.1	3.21	370	24.0
Suburbs: Q1	6.4	32.7	32.5	26.1	2.4	0.0	3.14	57	3.7
Small city/town: Q4	9.5	34.3	21.6	23.3	10.2	1.1	3.10	565	19.2
Small city/town: Q3	7.2	40.1	21.7	19.9	10.1	0.9	3.14	916	31.2
Small city/town: Q2	5.8	36.6	26.2	20.0	9.9	1.4	3.09	981	33.4
Small city/town: Q1	8.8	37.9	21.8	25.0	5.4	1.1	3.20	476	16.2
Rural: Q3-Q4	14.8	32.1	29.2	20.5	3.5	0.0	3.34	48	3.6
Rural: Q2	7.2	30.7	25.4	28.9	6.3	1.5	3.04	385	29.1
Rural: Q1	6.8	40.2	21.4	22.4	7.7	1.5	3.16	891	67.3
All Areas	9.5	38.3	22.6	20.1	8.2	1.3	3.21	6,	100.0

Table 4**Ordered Logit Estimates of Attitudes Towards Asylum Seekers with Rural-Urban Indicators**

	Specification 1		Specification 2		Specification 3		Specification 4	
	Coef.	p-value	Coef.	p-value	Coef.	p-value	Coef.	p-value
Big city	0.634	0.000	0.410	0.001	0.338	0.006	0.353	0.006
Suburbs of big city	0.159	0.017	0.146	0.088	0.134	0.121	0.132	0.152
Small city/town	-0.021	0.723	0.030	0.664	0.031	0.661	0.102	0.173
Population Density Quartile 2	–	–	-0.140	0.047	-0.154	0.031	-0.102	0.175
Population Density Quartile 3	–	–	-0.113	0.161	-0.146	0.074	-0.085	0.327
Population Density Quartile 4	–	–	-0.131	0.138	-0.189	0.035	-0.128	0.178
North East	–	–	0.229	0.061	0.258	0.036	0.227	0.090
North West	–	–	0.391	0.000	0.399	0.000	0.422	0.000
Yorkshire & Humberside	–	–	0.333	0.003	0.338	0.002	0.436	0.000
East Midlands	–	–	0.189	0.066	0.216	0.038	0.217	0.050
South West	–	–	0.205	0.056	0.192	0.077	0.166	0.157
Eastern	–	–	0.269	0.007	0.243	0.016	0.218	0.039
Inner London	–	–	1.360	0.000	1.126	0.000	1.081	0.000
Outer London	–	–	0.692	0.000	0.613	0.000	0.556	0.000
South East	–	–	0.576	0.000	0.569	0.000	0.525	0.000
Wales	–	–	0.282	0.021	0.314	0.011	0.379	0.004
Scotland	–	–	0.499	0.000	0.511	0.000	0.446	0.000
Pseudo R-squared	0.012		0.018		0.022		0.048	
Non-rural	0.100	0.069	0.053	0.434	0.051	0.459	0.109	0.138
N	6411		6411		6352		5822	

Notes: Estimates are based on unweighted data. Reference categories are Rural, Population Density Quartile 1 and West Midlands.

Table 5

Ordered Logit Estimates of Attitudes Towards Asylum Seekers in Rural and Non-Rural Areas

	Rural			Non-Rural			Sig. Diff.
	Coef.	p-value	Mean	Coef.	p-value	Mean	
North East	-0.046	0.865	0.073	0.211	0.169	0.043	
North West	0.190	0.504	0.065	0.453	0.000	0.137	
Yorkshire & Humberside	-0.516	0.055	0.075	0.642	0.000	0.082	***
East Midlands	-0.189	0.464	0.110	0.274	0.024	0.077	*
South West	0.224	0.364	0.105	0.054	0.685	0.080	
Eastern	-0.021	0.927	0.163	0.219	0.066	0.087	
London and South East	0.099	0.662	0.195	0.715	0.000	0.257	***
Wales	-0.142	0.649	0.063	0.475	0.001	0.052	*
Scotland	0.001	0.998	0.060	0.542	0.000	0.092	*
Female	0.136	0.244	0.574	0.151	0.011	0.563	
Age 18-24	-0.158	0.644	0.043	-0.539	0.000	0.083	
Age 25-34	-0.279	0.193	0.097	-0.159	0.073	0.175	
Age 50-64	0.111	0.514	0.290	0.141	0.102	0.225	
Age 65 and over	0.255	0.320	0.309	0.153	0.289	0.235	
Cohabiting	0.110	0.618	0.104	0.084	0.409	0.100	
Divorced/Separated	0.072	0.734	0.123	-0.132	0.161	0.141	
Widowed	0.251	0.242	0.122	0.070	0.527	0.104	
Single	-0.039	0.839	0.136	0.258	0.006	0.233	
Children in Household	-0.419	0.040	0.309	-0.117	0.174	0.356	
Number in Household	0.129	0.156	2.320	0.037	0.244	2.391	
Unemployed	0.362	0.226	0.033	-0.148	0.237	0.063	
Full-Time Education	0.606	0.299	0.014	0.502	0.014	0.030	
Permanently Sick	0.304	0.341	0.041	-0.150	0.344	0.043	
Retired	-0.318	0.104	0.318	-0.035	0.777	0.251	
Looking After Home	0.289	0.268	0.068	-0.087	0.455	0.065	
Other Economic Position	0.103	0.896	0.007	0.013	0.976	0.007	
Surveyed in 2013	0.166	0.138	0.467	0.135	0.014	0.505	
Not a UK National	0.364	0.322	0.017	0.359	0.003	0.107	
Ethnic Minority	0.624	0.039	0.050	0.465	0.000	0.100	
Christian	0.330	0.007	0.535	-0.020	0.751	0.453	**
Other Religion	0.522	0.223	0.018	-0.182	0.235	0.070	
Degree	1.793	0.000	0.230	1.556	0.000	0.223	
HE below degree	1.078	0.000	0.118	0.724	0.000	0.110	
A level or equivalent	1.011	0.000	0.156	0.777	0.000	0.164	
O level or equivalent	0.663	0.000	0.194	0.496	0.000	0.186	
CSE or equivalent	0.345	0.209	0.050	0.260	0.029	0.065	
Foreign qualifications	0.192	0.785	0.006	1.011	0.000	0.019	
Pseudo R-squared		0.052			0.046		
N		1198			4642		

Notes: Reference categories are West Midlands, Married, Employed, No Religion and No Qualifications. ***, ** and * indicate significant differences for the coefficients between rural and non-rural areas at the 1%, 5% and 10% levels respectively. The models include a single ethnic minority dummy and some of the categories for religion have been combined, compared to those presented in Table A1 in the Appendix, due to some small cell sizes in the rural areas.

APPENDIX

Table A1

Full Ordered Logit Estimates from Specification 4

	Mean	Unweighted		Weighted	
		Coef.	p-value	Coef.	p-value
Big city	0.099	0.353	0.006	0.431	0.003
Suburbs of big city	0.242	0.132	0.152	0.134	0.185
Small city/town	0.454	0.102	0.173	0.075	0.361
Population Density Quartile 2	0.272	-0.102	0.175	-0.065	0.432
Population Density Quartile 3	0.256	-0.085	0.327	-0.036	0.710
Population Density Quartile 4	0.245	-0.128	0.178	-0.063	0.544
North East	0.049	0.227	0.090	0.243	0.085
North West	0.122	0.422	0.000	0.385	0.001
Yorkshire and Humberside	0.080	0.436	0.000	0.536	0.000
East Midlands	0.083	0.217	0.050	0.148	0.241
South West	0.085	0.166	0.157	0.158	0.217
Eastern	0.102	0.218	0.039	0.232	0.046
Inner London	0.040	1.081	0.000	1.042	0.000
Outer London	0.065	0.556	0.000	0.455	0.003
South East	0.139	0.525	0.000	0.553	0.000
Wales	0.054	0.379	0.004	0.277	0.058
Scotland	0.086	0.446	0.000	0.474	0.000
Female	0.565	0.161	0.002	0.107	0.064
Age 18-24	0.075	-0.449	0.000	-0.419	0.002
Age 25-34	0.159	-0.177	0.031	-0.148	0.099
Age 50-64	0.239	0.153	0.046	0.175	0.038
Age 65 and over	0.250	0.210	0.088	0.176	0.186
Cohabiting	0.101	0.072	0.434	0.088	0.373
Divorced/separated	0.138	-0.118	0.167	-0.128	0.170
Widowed	0.108	0.106	0.270	0.162	0.111
Single	0.213	0.150	0.077	0.188	0.047
Children in Household	0.346	-0.170	0.030	-0.191	0.029
Number in Household	2.376	0.054	0.071	0.064	0.052
Unemployed	0.057	-0.121	0.303	-0.138	0.305
Full-Time Education	0.027	0.485	0.012	0.427	0.033
Permanently Sick	0.043	-0.093	0.512	0.031	0.846
Retired	0.265	-0.113	0.260	-0.069	0.530
Looking After Home	0.066	-0.047	0.655	0.042	0.723
Other Economic Position	0.007	0.128	0.747	0.162	0.733
Surveyed in 2013	0.497	0.126	0.012	0.114	0.044
Does not identify as a UK National	0.090	0.395	0.000	0.363	0.001
Black	0.031	0.808	0.000	0.762	0.000
South Asian	0.037	-0.118	0.616	-0.255	0.312

Chinese/Other Asian	0.014	-0.281	0.291	-0.363	0.189
Other ethnic group	0.018	0.287	0.151	0.249	0.263
Catholic	0.088	0.140	0.134	0.192	0.083
Anglican	0.211	0.008	0.910	0.024	0.752
Other Christian	0.171	-0.003	0.965	0.037	0.647
Hindu/Sikh	0.016	-0.136	0.649	-0.030	0.925
Muslim	0.032	0.222	0.325	0.267	0.283
Other religion	0.012	0.130	0.587	0.086	0.729
Degree	0.224	1.618	0.000	1.591	0.000
Higher education below degree	0.112	0.792	0.000	0.753	0.000
A level or equivalent	0.162	0.843	0.000	0.840	0.000
O level or equivalent	0.187	0.546	0.000	0.512	0.000
CSE or equivalent	0.062	0.279	0.011	0.226	0.083
Foreign qualifications	0.016	0.964	0.000	0.944	0.000
Pseudo R-Squared			0.046		0.048
N (Unweighted)			5822		5822

Notes: Reference categories are Rural, Population Density Quartile 1, West Midlands, Married, Employed, White, No Religion and No Qualifications.