

SECTION: CHAPTER: Geographies of the rural and the Covid-19 pandemic

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Abstract

Rural spaces and places are usually characterised by low population densities and remoteness from urban centres, where services and facilities are concentrated. Within this largely functional context, there is, in the many countries within the Global North, assumed notions of rural areas being characterised by neighbourliness, strong community spirit, and a tradition of volunteering. This contribution examines whether these assumptions are aligned with rural experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic. Heralding social distancing, isolation, shielding guidelines, and exhortations to 'stay at home', the pandemic disrupted practices and rhythms of everyday life, with distinctive impacts in rural places. In this chapter we use four themes to frame reflections upon intersecting strengths and weaknesses of contemporary rural societies in relation to the pandemic, including population density, community services, the rural economy and digital connectivity. We consider how rural contexts embody and enact distinctive capabilities which have shaped 'rural' responses to an emergency situation. It is likely that these responses will have implications for future efforts to create and support resilient rural communities. We offer insights into future trajectories rural places might follow, and opportunities for future research, that are moulded by pandemic experiences.

Bios

Andrew S. Maclaren is a research fellow in the Institute of Applied Health Sciences at the University of Aberdeen, having previously held a teaching fellowship at the university in the department of Geography and Environment. Andrew completed his doctorate at the University of Aberdeen after undergraduate and postgraduate studies at The University of Edinburgh. His interests lie in cultural, political, and social geographies with a particular focus on everyday life. His research has engaged with the lived experience, conceptualisation, and understanding of rural spaces and places. Andrew's research has been published in leading geography and interdisciplinary journals including *Progress in Human Geography* and *Sociologia Ruralis*.

Lorna J. Philip is a senior lecturer in Human Geography and Depute Head of the School of Geosciences at the University of Aberdeen. Her research focuses on contemporary rural life, especially change induced by rural demographic aging. She has undertaken research, funded by UK Research Councils, which has focused on retirement transition migration into rural areas, the potential of new digital technologies to promote social interaction amongst older rural adults, patterns of rural digital exclusion and explorations of rural digital divides. Recent work exploring the long-term impacts of flooding has provided insights into how rural communities respond to an unanticipated shock at different stages of a post-flood journey, findings potentially of relevance to understanding responses to the COVID-19 emergency.

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic offers a lens through which to (re)consider strengths and weaknesses of contemporary rural society. Such a place-specific perspective on the pandemic provides an

opportunity for rural geographers to further their explorations of how everyday lives are experienced and to reflect on positive, negative, short- and long-term outcomes of the crisis. 'Rural' is complex and diverse, the "other-than-urban meets the multifarious conditions of vastly differing scales and styles of living" (Clope, 2006, p.3). In this contribution, we focus on rural places within the Global North and are guided by Gallent and Gkartzios' (2019, p. 39) observation that "rural areas can be defined by their assemblage of material assets (patterns of land-use, economic activity, built form, etc.) and immaterial qualities (their particular social life and the subjective experiences of being in a rural space)". Amidst this plurality of material and immaterial attributes, rural geographies and geographers have focused on how people live in these diverse *places*, considering a study of rurality as "the study of the processes through which rurality is produced, reproduced, and contested, and of the places and practices that are associated with 'rural' ways of being" (Woods, 2009, p. 429).

The practices and rhythms of everyday life have been disrupted by COVID-19. Comparatively few commentaries on this disruption have focused specifically on impacts of the pandemic beyond urban areas. Here we offer some reflections on how rural contexts embody and enact place-based experiences and responses to an emergency situation, illustrating vulnerabilities and strengths in response to the pandemic that have implications for rural futures.

2. Rural spaces at a time of crisis

The effects of COVID-19 in rural places are too many and varied to be fully dissected here. By means of illustrating place (rural) specific experiences felt in many national contexts four themes are now considered.

2.1. A rural safe haven

Population density is one of several factors determining vulnerability to COVID-19. Worldwide, the highest numbers and rates of infection have been reported in large cities (Quinio, 2020). However, rural communities have also seen small outbreaks of the virus, challenging the 'safe haven' narrative which represented rural areas as a refuge from infection where small, dispersed populations facilitated social distancing and attributes of the natural environment would support a better quality of life during a period of lockdown. As COVID-19 spread, an urban to rural exodus was witnessed across the Global North. Large numbers of people who owned a rural second home, a camper van or had family members already resident in a rural area took flight as the imposition of national lockdowns loomed (see Gallent, 2020). Concerns about this exodus were quickly raised by rural communities and their civic and political leaders. In the United Kingdom, despite the national lockdown imposing travel restrictions, some rural communities were so concerned that they took direct action during lockdown to keep non-locals out, erecting 'keep out' notices and closing car parks and other visitor facilities. They were fearful because local health and social care services and the physically distant hospitals serving their communities lack the specialised facilities, equipment and staff required to deal with a COVID-19 outbreak and present a risk to already fragile rural health and care services.

2.2. Living in rural places: fragile services and community responses

Rural communities are often tight-knit and socially cohesive entities where community spirit is strong and social capital is deployed to support a myriad of formal and informal activities, services and facilities. But these actions are not simply enactments of an idyllic rural life. They are often the outcome of efforts to compensate for inadequate local services and facilities which have become more pronounced in recent years in response to the roll back of public services and concentration of social and private sector services – from post-offices to pubs, doctors to dentists, banks to bakers – up the urban hierarchy. Put crudely, it has been out of necessity that "tight community networks able to self-organise to adapt to structural changes" (OECD, 2020, p. 5) have evolved.

One underlying structural change of rural communities has been demographic ageing. However, rural geographies of ageing have created a strength of rural places. Those who live in rural areas are more likely to volunteer than their urban counterparts (NCVO, 2019) and volunteering rates are highest amongst the 'young old' (those aged 60-74). However, significant numbers of those normally involved in physically delivering voluntary, community, and social enterprise activities were prevented from doing so by social distancing and shielding guidelines, introduced because older people, especially those with underlying health conditions, are those most likely to fall seriously ill if they contract the virus. The volunteer pool could have dropped substantially at a time when demand was increasing, yet numerous examples of innovative responses have been reported (see Harrison, 2020) which have included younger community members and local businesses taking action and the deployment of digital platforms by people of all ages which has helped to counteract the loss of in-person interactions.

Retail options within most rural communities are limited (Wilson, 2017), with rural populations used to travelling for 'the big grocery shop' or for occasional, 'big ticket' items. With the growth of digitalisation, many rural residents are habituated to online shopping to mitigate deficiencies in the local retail sector. During the pandemic, national governments encouraged the public to make use of online retail services. However, the pandemic compounded existing barriers for rural residents such as hefty delivery charges, or specific carriers not delivering to remote addresses. Difficulties in securing delivery slots for items such as groceries proved particularly problematic for rural residents without alternative local shopping options. Online retail also relies on customers and suppliers being digitally enabled: the pandemic has further highlighted existing rural digital inequalities.

2.3. COVID-19, the rural economy and employment

Rural places are often considered synonymous with farming landscapes and an agricultural economy. COVID-19 has had a substantial impact on the farming sector due to vulnerabilities within the food supply system (Maye, 2020). Local and international travel restrictions have made it difficult to recruit the seasonal workers horticulture relies upon and maintaining social distancing is difficult whilst undertaking many agricultural tasks.

The OECD (2020, p. 14) articulated a timely reminder that "Rural economies are particularly vulnerable to economic shocks due to their less diversified economic base and greater dependency on tradable activities, which tend to suffer during economic shocks". The backbone of the rural private sector is small, often micro, businesses, many in the service economy (including leisure and tourism) and small-scale manufacturing and retail. These enterprises support numerous rural jobs and the OECD's warning that "Without further support, one-third of SMEs are at risk of going out of business within one month, and up to 50% within three months" is of concern (*ibid.*). Some rural enterprises have been able to amend their business model to incorporate home delivery or to produce a new product, contributing both to local community resilience and ensuring sufficient cash flow to keep the business viable in the short term. Many businesses, including non-essential retail, tourism and leisure, were required to cease trading under national lockdown restrictions and despite job retention schemes and the availability of various government-backed loans, face an uncertain future (Phillipson et al., 2020). The influx of tourists that sustains the economy of many remote rural places may not materialize this year, further compromising business viability once lockdown is eased.

2.4. A rural digital economy and society

The COVID-19 pandemic has enforced working from home at rates hitherto not seen. The ability to do this, and for business to enhance their digital capabilities, children to engage with online education and personal interactions to be maintained via social media and video conferencing, requires domestic and business premises being served by fit for purpose digital telecommunications. Rural ICT infrastructure supporting reasonable upload/download speeds and reliable connections is

far from universal, thus the rapid upturn in deployment of digital platforms to support all domains of life as the pandemic took hold across the world presented a further challenge in rural places and highlighted existing territorial digital divides (OECD, 2020) and the need for rural places to become more digitally connected.

3. Post-pandemic differentiated outcomes for rural places

The COVID-19 pandemic has simultaneously brought new challenges, stimulated innovative community responses and exacerbated existing inequalities that all warrant interrogation from a place specific perspective. As we seek to adapt to a 'new normal' what may be in store for rural communities across the Global North? Rural areas, especially remote and sparsely populated areas, were already economically fragile before COVID-19 brought additional economic travails. For example, what will the shape of the rural tourism industry, a mainstay of many local rural economies, be in five years' time? Without further, and longer-term external intervention, their public, private, voluntary, community, and social enterprise sectors may lack the financial and social capital required to 'bounce back' from the pandemic. Rural areas thus face an uncertain economic future and national governments should take action to ensure that they are not overlooked in the post-pandemic recovery programmes.

Discussions in the media and other fora suggesting that COVID-19 will prompt a new wave of counter urban migration have continued months after nationwide lockdowns were first announced. On a positive note, "partial social restrictions or total lockdown experienced in some countries could have reverted citizens' priorities leaving space for 'rural renaissance'" (de Luca et al., 2020); representations of the rural as a 'safe haven' may provide a stimulus for a rural population turnaround in the many areas where depopulation is an endemic challenge. However, an influx of comparatively affluent newcomers could, in some locales, exacerbate existing housing challenges, adding competition for limited housing stock, pushing prices up and further threatening the affordability of housing for the existing resident population. In-migration may be spatially concentrated in a few 'attractive' destinations or it may be a catalyst for a population revival in others. The proven experiences of many employees that they can work effectively from home may create new opportunities for more remote working that in turn allows preferences for living in rural places to be realised. Fewer commuter journeys could have environmental benefits, and, with less money being spent on travel, rural residents who transition to working from home may increase their spending in local shops and on local services, helping sustain existing jobs and perhaps stimulating the creation of new employment opportunities. The myriad expressions of community solidarity and endogenous social innovations in response to the crisis could further enhance the liveability of rural places, providing sufficient local capacity to sustain voluntary efforts beyond the short term is retained. Pressure on local housing supply, house prices, utilities, and public transport and the social turmoil that can arise following a re-composition of local populations a rural renaissance could bring may outweigh any potential stimulus to rural economies. Moreover, if efforts to redress the digital divides already acting as a drag on rural areas continue at a glacial pace, will a perception of 'rural places as backwaters' remain, with places unable to support the new future of home working, e-commerce, e-business and e-social lives?

At the time of writing, an end to the pandemic, and the havoc it has wreaked on the global economy and on the lives of individuals, is not in sight. What can be said with certainty is that the COVID-19 pandemic has had tangible, place-mediated impacts on material and immaterial expressions of contemporary rural life. There is considerable scope for new research spanning immediate and longer-term timescales that seeks to track and evaluate COVID-19 related change and its impact on rural people and places. For example, research in the medium term that identifies and evaluates patterns, drivers and impacts of a COVID-stimulated urban to rural movement of population would offer insights into future demographic trajectories and associated socio-economy sustainability of various types of rural area. New research opportunities exploring emerging relationships between

place of residence and place of work, travel patterns and consumer behaviour have been opened up by the pandemic, findings from which would inform transport planning, support further calls for investment to address digital inequalities and, potentially, help efforts to sustain rural town centres. Will the community spirit engendered by lockdown persist, further enhancing the appeal of rural areas as 'good places' in which to live? Is the volunteer base capable of responding to other external shocks, such as further retrenchment of public services as the state seeks to repay the debt incurred in responding to the pandemic? Looking to the future, which rural areas will be 'winners' and which will be 'losers' as a new normal is established? We can only hope that the insights rural geographers and others concerned with rural places continue to offer, as the world lives through this unprecedented period of turmoil, help lay the foundations for better, more sustainable rural places in the future.

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