

# **PEOPLE and PLACE**

## **A Census Atlas of the Republic of Ireland**

Major changes in the distribution of population, migration patterns, the geography of employment, commuting, rural housing, the social structure of rural and urban areas, as well as some cultural attributes are confirmed in a new book based on the Census of Population.

PEOPLE and PLACE edited by the Vice-President of NUI Maynooth, **Professor Jim Walsh**, and published by the **National Institute for Regional and Spatial Analysis (NIRSA)** at NUI Maynooth contains several maps that present new ways of visualising how Irish society is organised today in different parts of the country. In particular information on commuting patterns have been used to construct maps of the ways in which rural and urban areas are intertwined, which also illustrate that there are some areas beyond the daily reach of the principal urban centres. PEOPLE and PLACE also provides new classifications of urban and rural areas which confirm that the social geography of contemporary Ireland is extremely complex and no longer amenable to description by a few selective indicators.

The evidence represented on the maps confirms that public debates on issues such as rural housing, the appropriateness of the National Spatial Strategy, and the alleged failures of the planning system are at times misguided by outdated localised preconceptions that are at variance with evidence from the most comprehensive surveys available through the Census of Population. This book will provide a solid evidence base for future debates where local considerations can be contextualised and understood against a broader framework.

The linkages between themes such as migration, changing age profiles, commuting, rising education levels, access to electronic information sources, new occupation distributions and increased levels of social and spatial mobility, along with trends in regard to new types of households, contribute to the identification of new classifications of rural and urban areas. The simple equation of rural with predominantly agricultural employment and related household structures is no longer valid. While many aspects of the new social geography established since the mid 1990s are to be welcomed there are also significant concerns that some features of the geographical transformation in the Celtic tiger era are unsustainable from an environmental, social and economic perspective. These include especially the social impacts of long distance commuting, the extent of the reliance of voluntary caring in many rural areas, the environmental and energy consequences of vastly increased numbers of car based journeys to school, college and work, and additionally the potential impacts in some areas of increased numbers of one off rural houses on energy consumption, ground water contamination and visual blight of the landscape.

PEOPLE and PLACE contains the most comprehensive ever mapping and analysis of the results of the Census of Population. The patterns and trends depicted on the 200 full colour maps in PEOPLE and PLACE highlight the need for a coherent and proactive approach to integrated spatial planning at all geographical levels extending from the local to the national.

At the launch Professor Walsh strongly supported the implementation of the National Spatial Strategy as envisaged in the National Development Plan 2007-2013. He said that while the fundamental framework set out in the NSS was robust it will require some adjustments to take account of the most recent evidence and especially the latest projections for regional population growth. It is necessary to put in place sustainable planning strategies for each of the Gateways including Dublin.

The evidence contained in PEOPLE and PLACE also confirms that county towns and some other small urban centres have very important roles for the populations residing beyond the catchment areas of the NSS Gateways and Hubs. The need for strengthened rural-urban linkages is likely to become even greater in the future as the underlying structure of the rural economy in many areas is very vulnerable over the medium to longer term.

Furthermore, the pressures on many rural areas will increase as the population is set to increase by an amount even greater than that experienced between 1991 and 2006. The expected increases present not only major challenges but also significant opportunities to effect a smooth transition to a knowledge based economy and society where the goals of economic competitiveness, social inclusion and environmental sustainability are reconciled. Without an understanding of the underlying economic and social dynamics, and a visualisation of the outcomes as illustrated by the maps in this book, it is more likely that the high level goals of competitiveness, inclusion and sustainability will not be achieved. The evidence presented in this book shows that undesirable outcomes are to be expected in the absence of a coherent development strategy underpinned by a clearly articulated evidence-based spatial planning framework.

The Census of Population is the most comprehensive social survey of the population at a particular time. Each census provides a snapshot that can be illustrated by a series of maps to demonstrate a wide variety of geographical patterns and trends in many aspects of the structure and distribution of the population, and also in attributes related to the economy, society, culture and lifestyles. The 2002 Census is the latest for which comprehensive datasets are available at this stage for mapping. Later this year large amounts of data will become available from the 2006 Census.

The 2002 Census was important for several reasons. It provided the first detailed geographical information to confirm the impacts of the profound changes that have occurred within and between the urban and rural parts of Ireland in the Celtic tiger era. It was taken in April 2002, and therefore provides a very important statistical baseline for Ireland at the dawn of the twenty first century. Furthermore, it coincided with the baseline for the government's long term National Spatial Strategy.

The data from Census 2002 confirm that a significant break with historical trends occurred in the mid 1990s in many aspects of Ireland's population and its socio-economic profile. Most importantly,

- immigration became the dominant influence on population growth throughout most parts of the State, and was a significant factor in reversing the long term of rural depopulation;

- Repopulation has replaced long term depopulation trends in some disadvantaged rural areas. Over the same period the highest levels of population decline have become a feature of some parts of the cities and towns;
- new types of households with increasing numbers of childless couples, or alternatively households with children in non-marital relationships, have become more widespread in both urban and rural areas;
- female participation rates in the labour force increased very significantly in the hinterlands of the cities and larger towns, and also in selected rural areas where a new service based economy expanded;
- employment in the building and construction sector became a major component of the rural economy in many areas. This combined with a continuing heavy reliance on agriculture and traditional manufacturing has left some rural areas very vulnerable to the consequences of an economic downturn;
- considerably more children and students travelled to school or college by car in 2002 compared to the early 1990s, adding to congestion levels on roads carrying vastly increased numbers of cars;
- distances to work increased significantly while journey times became extremely long in many areas due to longer distances and greater congestion; long distance commuting is not confined to the extended Dublin hinterland – it is also evident in around Cork, Limerick and Galway;
- population growth became more dispersed with consequent increases in houses in small towns and rural areas where services are frequently inadequate;
- single rural dwellings (one-off houses) became a major area of environmental and social concern. However, the severity of the problems associated with one-off houses are localised in mainly coastal areas. The overall density of one – off rural houses remains low.
- in overall terms the extent of social segregation at the level of Electoral Districts declined due in large part to the influx of middle class migrants into rural and small urban centres.

These trends which are highly inter-related have resulted in a social geography of rural Ireland where different types of rural areas are merging and leaving a much more blurred and complex human landscape than previously.

The early results from the 2006 census confirm that the patterns and trends established between 1996 and 2002 have continued at an accelerated pace without any significant change in their direction.

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