

Good relations: an urban issue?

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Media and other images often give the impression that good relations, segregation, peace lines and conflict in Northern Ireland are issues confined to towns and cities. However, physical markers of identity, such as flags, are clearly evident in many rural areas. Bell, Jarman and Harvey (2010) noted that barriers do exist in many rural communities. While they may not be as visible as the Peace Lines in Belfast, they can have a significant impact on shaping the behavior and attitudes of the people living in and around them. The *Together: Building a United Community* document (OFMDFM, 2013) highlights that in rural areas, these barriers may take the form of someone choosing to go to, or avoid, specific areas for shopping or other services.

This Research Update explores the attitudes of people living in urban and rural areas across Northern Ireland to good relations, and is based on data from the 2019 *Northern Ireland Life and Times* (NILT) survey. A companion Research Update (McKnight and Devine, 2021) takes a similar approach using data from the 2019 *Young Life and Times* survey of 16 year olds.

Where people live

NILT respondents were asked about the type of area that they live in. Table 1 shows that one quarter of respondents live in a big city or its suburbs (24%), with a further 44 per cent living in a small city or town. This means that the majority of respondents (68%) feel that they live in urban areas. Nearly one third of respondents (32%) live in a rural area, either in a country village or a farm or home in the country.

As seen in Table 2, similar proportions of the population living in urban and rural

Table 1: Where respondents live

		%
Urban	A big city	19
	The suburbs or outskirts of a big city	5
	A small city or town	44
Rural	A country village	16
	A farm or home in the country	16

Table 2: Characteristics of respondents

	%	
	Urban	Rural
Religious background		
Catholic	37	36
Protestant	41	46
No religion	22	18
Self-reported income level		
High income	8	8
Middle income	44	41
Low income	31	32
Average age (years)	51.5	55.8

areas are Catholic. However, compared with urban areas, there is a higher proportion of respondents living in rural areas who are Protestant, and a lower proportion who have no religion. While these differences are not statistically significant, they may have some impact on the pattern of responses to the attitudinal questions. When asked to rate their income level, the responses of urban and rural dwellers were similar. The average age of those living in rural areas is higher than for those living in urban areas, although this difference is

not statistically significant. This variation in age may reflect the higher proportion of Protestant respondents living in rural areas, as the average age of Protestant respondents (55.5 years) is higher than for Catholic respondents (50.7 years) and those of no religion (40.8 years).

Almost one quarter of NILT respondents (23%) said that they lived in mainly Catholic areas, 26 per cent reported living in mainly Protestant areas, and a higher proportion (43%) said that they lived in mixed areas. There was

no significant difference according to whether respondents lived in an urban or rural area. However, Table 3 indicates some variation according to the religious background of the respondent. In both urban and rural areas, a small majority of Catholic respondents live mainly Catholic areas, just under four in ten live in mixed areas, and few live in mainly Protestant areas.

Table 3: Area descriptor

	%							
	Catholic		Protestant		No Religion		All	
	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural
Mainly Protestant	5	3	43	39	37	22	28	23
Mainly Catholic	56	55	1	5	12	12	23	23
Mixed	35	39	50	48	44	37	43	43
I don't know	3	3	6	7	8	29	7	10

Community safety

Nine out of ten NILT respondents (92%) felt that they could be open about their own cultural identity within their local neighbourhood, with no difference between the responses of urban and rural residents (91% and 93% respectively), or between people with different religious backgrounds across these areas.

However, there were statistically significant differences in relation to perceptions of safety. The majority of urban and rural respondents felt safe or very safe living in their area (see Table 4). However, those living in rural areas were more likely than those in urban areas to say that they felt very safe (78%

notable finding is that 29 per cent of respondents with no religion living in rural areas do not know the religious mix of their neighbourhood.

and 67% respectively). This pattern is reflected among the responses of people of different religious backgrounds. In particular, a higher proportion of Protestant respondents in both urban and rural areas said that they felt 'very safe' in their local area, compared with Catholic respondents or those of no religion.

Table 4: Perceptions of area safety

	%							
	Catholic		Protestant		No Religion		All	
	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural
Very safe	66	75	72	83	62	72	67	78
Fairly safe	29	17	24	13	26	14	26	14
Neither safe/unsafe	4	6	2	3	11	14	5	7
Fairly/very unsafe	<0.5	0	1	1	1	0	1	1

Belonging

Table 5 shows that the majority of NILT respondents (89%) said that they definitely or probably felt a sense of belonging to their local neighbourhood. Notably, this was statistically significantly higher among those living in rural areas (94%) compared with those living in urban areas (87%). NILT respondents also had a strong sense of belonging to Northern Ireland (85% overall), and again, this was higher among those living in rural areas (90%) compared with those in urban areas (84%).

Table 5: Sense of belonging or influence

	% saying 'Yes, definitely' or 'Yes, probably'		
	Urban	Rural	All
Belong to local neighbourhood	87	94	89
Influence decisions in local neighbourhood	23	28	25
Belong to Northern Ireland	84	90	85
Influence decisions about Northern Ireland	22	24	23

Overall, Protestant respondents were more likely to say that they belonged to their neighbourhood (96%) compared with Catholic respondents (91%) and those of no religion (77%). Among Catholic respondents, those living in rural areas were more likely to feel that they belonged to their neighbourhood than those living in urban areas (96% and 89% respectively). However, there are no significant urban/rural differences among Protestant respondents or those with no religion.

Among respondents from a Protestant or no religion background, their sense of belonging to Northern Ireland was similar to the sense of belonging to their neighbourhood. However, Catholic respondents were less likely to report a sense of belonging to Northern Ireland compared with their neighbourhood. There were no significant urban/rural differences within these religious groupings.

Nevertheless, despite such a strong sense of belonging, few NILT respondents felt that they had any influence when it came to decisions made locally (25%), or those made about what happens in Northern Ireland (23%). Those with no religion have particularly low levels of perceived influence in local decisions (19%) or decisions about what happens in Northern Ireland (12%). While not statistically significant, respondents living in rural areas were slightly more likely to feel that they had influence in relation to local decisions, and this was true for Catholic and Protestant respondents. However, the reverse was true in relation to those with no religion.

When asked about segregation in their local neighbourhood, more than six out of ten respondents (63%) did not feel that Protestants and Catholics tended to go to different local shops or use different GP surgeries and other services. Those living in rural areas were significantly more likely than those in urban areas to say this (78% and 57% respectively), and this was also the case among the three religious groupings (Catholic, Protestant, and no religion). This could be indicative of less segregation within rural areas, or, equally, could reflect less choice/access to shops and services.

Perception of relations

There are two questions which provide important indicators of relations between the two main communities in Northern Ireland, and have been included in the Life and Times survey since it began in 1998. Firstly, one in four respondents (39%) in 2019 thought that relations between Protestants and Catholics had improved compared with five years previously, and a similar proportion (36%) thought that they were about the same. Seventeen per cent of respondents thought that relations had got worse. These figures continue the negative trend that has been evident since 2016, when 59 per cent thought that relations had got better, and only four per cent thought that relations had got worse.

The more pessimistic view of rural dwellers is evident in Figure 1. In particular, 22 per cent of rural respondents thought that relations between the two communities had got worse, compared with 15 per cent of urban dwellers. An exploration of attitudes according to religious background shows that rural Catholic respondents were more likely to think that inter-communal relations had worsened compared with those living in urban areas (24% and 15% respectively), and a similar pattern is evident among Protestant respondents (22% and 13% respectively). Among those with no religion, it is notable that 21 per cent of those living in rural areas said that they did not know if relations between the two communities had changed.

Figure 1: Perception of relations since 5 years ago (%)

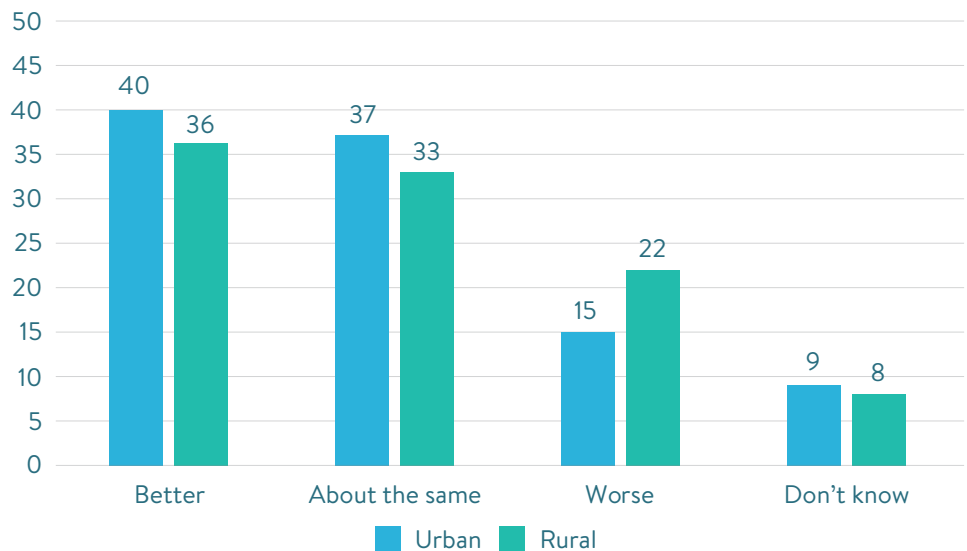
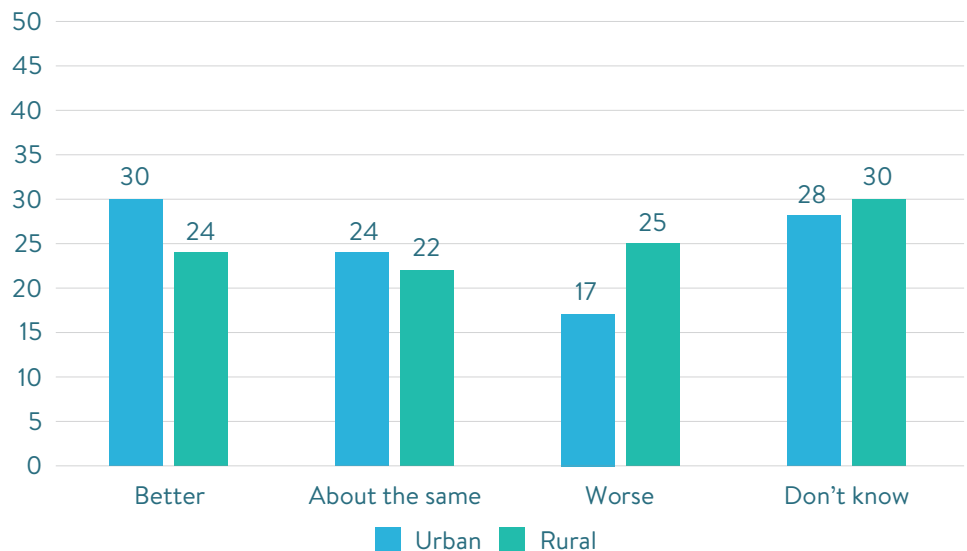


Figure 2: Perception of relations in 5 years' time (%)



Secondly, focusing on relations between Protestants and Catholics five years into the future, responses in 2019 were fairly evenly spread between better (28%), about the same (24%), worse (20%) and don't know (28%). Again, there has been a negative trend since 2016, when the proportion thinking that relations would improve (55%) was twice that in 2019. Reflecting the pattern seen in Figure 1, rural respondents were more negative than urban respondents in their assessment of future relations (Figure 2). While this pattern is evident among Catholic and Protestant respondents, the reverse is true for respondents with no religion. Once again, a high proportion of

respondents not affiliated to any religion (28%) gave a "don't know" response to this question.

Support for mixing

Nearly nine out of ten respondents would prefer to work in a mixed-religion workplace (88%), and this figure is similar for urban and rural respondents. Table 6 shows that this level of support does not vary according to religious background. Preference for mixed-religion neighbourhoods is slightly lower, albeit still the majority view. Three quarters of NILT respondents (77%) would

prefer to live in such a neighbourhood, whilst 18 per cent would prefer to live in a neighborhood with people of only their own religion. Support for mixed neighbourhoods is higher among respondents living in rural areas (82%) compared with those living in urban areas (75%), and this is the case for Catholic respondents and those with no religion.

Matching the pattern seen in previous years, the preference for mixed-religion schools (61%) is lower than for neighbourhood and workplace, with no difference according to whether the respondent lived in an urban or rural area.

Table 6: Support for mixed-religion situations

	%							
	Catholic		Protestant		No Religion		All	
	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural
Mixed-religion workplace	84	87	91	91	89	92	88	89
Mixed-religion neighbourhood	67	78	80	82	78	86	75	82
Mixed-religion school	52	56	64	60	76	74	61	61

Flags

Around one third of NILT respondents (32%) supported the flying of flags on lampposts on special dates for particular celebrations; support for this was higher among urban (33%) than rural (28%) residents. When location and religious affiliation are considered, support for flags on lampposts is greater among Catholic and Protestant urban respondents than those living in rural areas. However, the opposite is true for those with no religion.

Respondents living in rural areas were significantly more supportive of the immediate removal of flags from lampposts, even if this causes trouble: 61 per cent compared with 53 per cent of those living in urban areas. While Catholics and Protestants living in rural areas were more likely to agree with taking flags down straightaway, the opposite was true for those with no religion: 41 per cent of those in urban areas agreed, compared with 54 per cent of those living in rural areas.

The issue of flying union flags on public buildings has been controversial. This was particularly evident in the response

to the decision made by Belfast City Council in 2012 that the union flag should be flown on designated days only rather than every day. This policy of flying flags on public buildings on designated days is supported by a small minority in urban areas (54%), with higher support in rural areas (60%). However, 15 per cent of respondents in urban areas and 9 per cent in rural areas feel that the union flag should not be flown at all on public buildings. Among Catholic and Protestant respondents, rural dwellers were more likely than urban dwellers to support a policy of designated days. However, those with no religion showed similar enthusiasm for designated days (50%) or for flying flags all the time (22%) regardless of where they lived. At the same time, nearly one quarter (24%) of those with no religion living in rural areas said that they did not know.

Discussion

The analysis within this Research Update has focused on exploring differences in attitudes between people living in urban areas and those living

in rural areas. It has also highlighted how attitudes can vary according to religious background within these areas.

Some of those differences may reflect the socio-economic and demographic characteristics of people living in those areas, rather than where they live. In order to fully explore the full effect of rurality on attitudes, more sophisticated analysis is required. In their analysis of data from the Young Life and Times survey, Devine and Schubotz (2014) found that young people living in rural areas were more supportive of residential, workplace and educational segregation than those living in more urban areas. However, the effect of rurality was reduced once other variables, such as attending a segregated school, was taken into account. Nevertheless, exploring the NILT data through a focused urban/rural lens remains useful. It highlights that while segregation, markers of identity and inter-communal relationships are not purely 'urban concerns', location does influence how these are perceived and experienced by respondents.

Key Points

- 78% of respondents living in rural areas felt very safe living in their area, compared with 67% of those in urban areas.
- 94% of those in rural areas and 87% of those in urban areas felt a sense of belonging to their local neighbourhood.
- Only one quarter of respondents felt that they can influence decisions made locally or in Northern Ireland.
- Respondents living in rural areas were more pessimistic about current and future relations between Protestants and Catholics.
- The majority of NILT respondents would support mixed-religion workplaces (88%) or schools (61%), with similar levels of support in urban and rural areas.
- 77% of NILT respondents would support mixed-religion neighbourhoods, with higher levels of support in rural (82%) than urban areas (75%).
- 33% of urban respondents and 28% of rural respondents were supportive of flying flags on lampposts.
- 53% of urban respondents and 61% of rural respondents felt that these flags should be removed straightaway.

References

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The Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) survey is carried out annually and documents public opinion on a wide range of social issues. NILT is a joint project of the two Northern Ireland universities and provides an independent source of information on what the public thinks. For more information, visit the survey website at www.ark.ac.uk/nilt

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