

Austerity's impact on rural poverty has been overlooked, study finds

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Researchers at Cardiff University, Queen Mary University of London, and University of Exeter have revealed the significant impact of austerity on rural areas.

The findings, published in the Journal of Rural Studies, provide the most comprehensive account to date of how changes in spending power and service spending have affected [rural communities](#) in England and Wales. Using both statistical and qualitative data, the research highlights how austerity has compounded long-standing but often ignored problems of rural poverty.

Academics say the research provides new evidence of the 'hollowing out' of rural local government through the closure of libraries, youth centers and transport services and the ways local authority spending power has diminished through the merger of District Councils and creation of Unitary Authorities. According to analysis, the establishment of Dorset Unitary Authority in 2019 amounted to a loss of £21.7m (-6.59%) in 2019-20 core spending power. Similarly, the creation of West Suffolk District Council in 2019 amounted to a loss of £3.3m, or 16.8%.

Changes which could have a direct and rapid impact on [food insecurity](#) are also disproportionately affecting people in rural areas, according to the study.

Jobseeker Allowance claimants in rural areas are more likely to experience higher-level sanctions, the research says. Despite comprising only 12.4% of total sanction referrals made in England between November 2012 and October 2019, rural areas accounted for 17.8% of all known high-level sanctions in that period. These measures lead to an individual's loss of income for 13, 26 or 156 weeks and are imposed if a claimant fails to accept or apply for a job, is dismissed for misconduct, or is deemed to have left employment without good reason.

Using Freedom of Information data, the report also shows that rural authorities are far more likely than their urban counterparts to have closed discretionary Local Welfare Assistance Schemes (LWAS) schemes, which are designed to help people in financial crisis. Just under

one in three (9 of 28) rural authorities have done so, compared to one in seven urban authorities (16 of 116).

Dr. Andrew Williams, based in Cardiff University's School of Geography and Planning said: "It is well documented that austerity has hit the most deprived urban areas the hardest, but the impact on rural poverty is often overlooked given difficulties in measurement and idyllic representations of countryside."

Professor Jon May, based at Queen Mary University of London's School of Geography, said: "Beyond the image of 'leafy shire counties' and 'idyllic chocolate box villages', the last decade has seen a steady dismantling of the social infrastructures—bus routes, libraries, youth centers—which many people in rural areas rely on.

"Poverty and food insecurity are rising, as too the number of food banks as a disproportionate number of people in rural England and Wales face some of the worst impacts of austerity."

"Still bleeding: The variegated geographies of austerity and food banking in rural England and Wales" is published in the *Journal of Rural Studies*.

"This research is not about pitting the needs of the 'rural poor' against their urban counterparts, but highlighting the severity and specificity of the problems austerity poses for people in [rural areas](#) in a context where these problems have until now remained largely invisible," says Williams.

More information: Jon May et al. Still bleeding: The variegated geographies of austerity and food banking in rural England and Wales, *Journal of Rural Studies* (2020). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jrurstud.2020.08.024](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2020.08.024)

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