



Northern Ireland
Assembly



The Open University



Knowledge Exchange Seminar Series (KESS)

New and Shifting Populations in Belfast: Analysis and Impact

Population changes:

Population within the Belfast council area has experienced a modest rise over the last decade, compared to a general pattern of decline from the 1970's onwards.

However, this modest 1.3% growth compares to double that rate (2.6%) in the Belfast Urban Area, and triple that rate (3.9%) in the Belfast Metropolitan Area. Population growth outside the BMA is even higher, with a NI average of 7.5%. Belfast therefore performs poorly when compared to other parts of Northern Ireland. New housing developments in surrounding towns seem to continue to draw people away from Belfast, leaving the city with difficulty in maintaining a vibrant urban environment. Anticipated new cuts to public spending will make this situation worse over the coming years.

Also when measured against population growth in comparable UK cities, Belfast seems to lag behind. Cities like Sheffield, Cardiff and Leicester have seen a decline in population since the 1960's being transformed into significant population growth in the last decade, adding to the liveliness of their urban environments.

There are large differences in population growth when comparing the two main communities in NI. In general, the number of persons stating to have a Catholic background has increased in BMA councils and beyond, while the number of persons stating to have a Protestant background has fallen. Only exceptions to this trend are towns like Banbridge and Craigavon, where Protestant population has increased, although not as rapidly as the Catholic population.

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The last ten years have seen a shift in the religious demography of Belfast. The Catholic share of the population rose from 47% in 2001 to 49% in 2011, the Protestant fell from 49% to 42%, and the those who declared no religion (the nones) from 3% to 7%. Some of this change can be attributed to the arrival of the recent wave of immigrants since Poles, Lithuanians, and Portuguese normally declare themselves to be Catholic. In the East of the city, Island, The Mount, Ravenhill, Bloomfield, and Woodstock wards had more than 10% of their populations born outside the UK or the Republic of Ireland with significant shares of immigrants from A8 Accession States which include Poland and Lithuania. Duncairn ward in the North inner-city of Belfast shares these same characteristics.

In the arrival of these new immigrant communities, Belfast is similar to many other cities across the UK and Ireland. Some of the shift in the religious demography can be explained by the possible increased likelihood of those who said they were Protestant in 2001 to state that they were 'none' in 2011.

Finally, some of these changes can be explained in terms of the different demographics of Catholics and Protestants. Protestants, for example, tend to be older than Catholics. Therefore, everything else being equal, proportionately more Protestants will die in any given time period with fewer born than would be the case for the younger Catholic population.

In 2001, no one group formed a majority of 50% or more. The analysis of 2011 Census data reinforces this point. Belfast is now, demographically, a pluralist city with no group able to claim it forms the majority. This holds true whether religion or 'religion brought up in' is considered or the new question on national identity.

Segregation:

Northern Ireland, as a whole, has experienced a fall in residential segregation between 2001 and 2011. It is likely that Belfast has shared in this trend with the rest of Northern Ireland. More work needs to be done to understand fully why residential segregation has fallen recently. However, it is likely that the decrease between 2001 and 2011 is a result of the demographic balance of some areas being changed by immigration, by changes in the way in which people describe their religion in the Census, to local differences in births and deaths between Catholics and Protestants, and to genuine mixing in some areas.

Yet, in other ways, the population of Belfast has not shifted nor does it reveal new features. There is evidence that changes in the population of Belfast since 1991 are much smaller than were seen in the 1970s and 1980s. Compared to those decades, the recent past has seen comparative stability. Evidence on internal migration suggests that the population of Belfast, and indeed Northern Ireland, is static compared to other UK regions. This means that although some changes in segregation, such as the reduction observed 2001 to 2011 are possible, there is now little scope for the dramatic changes seen in

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the 1970s and 1980s, and thus little opportunity now for much more residential mixing, given the large-scale population changes needed to lead to desegregation.

Deprivation:

The spatial distribution of deprivation has not experienced major changes over the last decade. The same areas that were identified as being socially deprived in 1991 usually remained in roughly the same relative position by 2011, despite a succession of area-based policies by government through the 1970s, 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s that aspired to address their problems. The risk of being in the most deprived decile is about four times higher in the city than in Northern Ireland as a whole. These wards are also the most segregated; their populations have among the lowest life expectancy; have high morbidity characteristics; low levels of labour market participation and poor educational attainment. Especially in a deprived area like inner North Belfast, spatial segregation, in the form of a patchwork of small geographies dominated by either one of the main communities, is hemorrhaging the opportunities for prosperity.

Yet, when looking at the GDP per head, Belfast council is one of the best performing sub-regions within the UK – between 6th and 7th of all UK NUTS III areas. That makes Belfast one of the urban powerhouses of the UK economy.

Nevertheless, social mobility is still poor. Few people move from the most deprived areas to the least deprived areas. Although only a few miles separate the Lower Newtownards Road from Stormont, the chances of someone moving house between these areas is negligible. Migration as measured by address changes moves people about between deprived and slightly less deprived places with its overall result being to concentrate socially-deprived people in socially-deprived places. It is not an escape route to affluence except in a few cases.

Concluding remarks:

- **We are all minorities now;**
- **This suggest a new way of doing politics;**
- **Spatial programmes to address deprivation and segregation have produced modest outcomes over the last 40 years;**
- **If we want a radically different result, we need a radically different policy.**

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