



UNDERSTANDING CONTEMPORARY IRELAND

Edited by Brendan Bartley and Rob Kitchin



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4

Urban Systems

Des McCafferty

In the popular imagination, Ireland has long existed as a rural, agrarian society, and much of the symbolism, imagery and mythology of the country has reflected its strong rural heritage. The reality, however, is that significantly more people live in urban than in rural areas. This is true not just of Northern Ireland, where modern urbanisation dates from the nineteenth century, but also of the Republic of Ireland, where the decline of employment in agriculture, the restructuring of manufacturing, the growth of the services sector and recent immigration have fuelled a shift in population from rural to urban areas. This chapter considers the changing form of urbanisation, as expressed in the urban systems of the island. It looks at some of the key structural aspects of those urban systems, and the challenges that they pose for public policy formation, especially in the realm of territorial development. The emphasis will be mainly on the Republic of Ireland, though important contrasts and similarities with Northern Ireland will be noted throughout. The chapter begins with a brief consideration of the concept of an urban system, and its application in Ireland. It then proceeds to examine recent (post-1981) trends in the distribution of population across the settlement systems of both Ireland and Northern Ireland. This is followed first by an analysis of the size distribution of urban centres, and then by a consideration of their spatial distribution, noting the changes that have resulted from the regionally differentiated pattern of urban growth. The chapter concludes with a review of some policy and planning issues arising from recent developments.

URBAN SYSTEMS IN IRELAND

The key idea behind the urban system concept is that, to understand the individual city or town, it is necessary to study it within the context of its links to other places, in particular other urban centres. These relationships, which may be expressed through flows of materials, goods, services, information, or people, affect not just the kinds of work done in towns and cities, but also their social character and, arguably, the political outlook of their inhabitants. Together the set of urban places and the functional relationships between them constitute the urban system. Urban systems can be identified on various geographical scales, ranging from the regional to the international and global. Because of the

pre-eminence of the territorial state as regulator of production and exchange throughout the modern era, urban systems have been defined most often at national level. However, in recent years much attention has been devoted to the development of a European urban system, given meaning by the deepening of European integration in the context of the EU, and of a global urban system, brought into existence by the process of neo-liberal globalisation (Sassen, 1994; Knox and Taylor, 1995). Much of the renewed impetus for urban systems research derives from analyses of these transnational systems.

Reflecting the historical importance of the state in the development of urban systems, two different systems have traditionally been identified in Ireland, north and south of the border respectively. However, while the separate development of these systems was strongly influenced by political partition in 1920, the process had begun earlier (Harrison and Anderson, 1980; Pringle, 1980). Nineteenth-century industrialisation imparted to the towns of East Ulster a different functional role from that of towns elsewhere in Ireland, which continued to be mainly engaged in service provision to their rural hinterlands. The dominance of this rural service role in the South, in a context of declining population, resulted in a weakly articulated, inchoate urban system. The policy shift from protectionism to free trade in the late 1950s boosted Southern Irish industrialisation, but it was still not until 1971 that more than 50 per cent of the population was enumerated in 'aggregate town areas'. Urbanisation has therefore taken place in a context where the economy has developed into one of the most open in the world. In a comparatively short time, the external dependency involved in the colonial relationship with Britain has been replaced with that entailed in the process of globalisation. As a result, Irish towns and cities have had little opportunity to develop the kind and intensity of interlinkages that define a well integrated, national urban system. Instead, urban change and development have been largely affected by forces and processes operating beyond the national level, a condition that, as Taylor (2004) points out, does not fit well with traditional urban systems analysis.

Notwithstanding these reservations about the strength of urban integration in Ireland, consideration of the set of urban places is still worthwhile for several reasons. First, the study of the urban system affords valuable insights into what Bourne (2002) refers to as 'the macro-geography of the urbanisation process', allowing us to gain an overview of how that process is crystallising at various nodes in the national territory. Second, and related to this, there is the increasingly important role of the urban system as mediator of regional development in Ireland. As the service sector expands, in part through the growth of internationally traded services, and as the manufacturing base is increasingly restructured towards high technology/high-value-added activities, production and employment are becoming increasingly concentrated in urban areas. In this context, the development prospects of regions depend very heavily on their urban structures. This was recognised as long ago as the Buchanan report on regional development (Buchanan, 1968); it was reaffirmed by the NESC report on population distribution and economic development (NESC,

1997), and it is fundamental to the National Spatial Strategy (DoELG, 2002).

URBANISATION AND THE URBAN SYSTEMS

The outcome of recent urbanisation in Ireland in terms of the urban system can be ascertained from an examination of population change by size category of settlement, for the period from 1981 to 2002. The population data used here refer to built-up urban areas, as defined for census purposes. This definition extends beyond administrative boundaries (where these exist) to incorporate the urban 'environs' or suburbs. All settlements over 1,500 in population are included initially, and they are divided, fairly arbitrarily, into six size categories as illustrated in Table 4.1. The largest of these size categories contains just a single centre, the continuously built-up Greater Dublin area. For discussion purposes, these categories will be referred to as Dublin, the other cities, large, medium and small towns, and (borrowing a term from Northern Ireland usage) 'intermediate settlements'.

Table 4.1 Population change by town size category, 1981–2002, Republic of Ireland

Size category	Absolute change	% change	Share of urban growth	Change in urban share
200,000+ *	89,499	9.78	21.33	-4.75
35,000–200,000 **	79,327	25.86	18.91	0.52
10,000–35,000	239,274	93.14	57.04	7.84
5,000–10,000	-13,301	-5.38	-3.17	-2.89
3,000–5,000	-753	-0.75	-0.18	-0.97
1,500–3,000	25,451	28.76	6.07	0.26
Aggregate town areas	419,497	21.91	100.00	0.00

* Dublin, ** Cork, Galway, Limerick, Waterford

Source: CSO (2002)

The population of the state increased by 474,000, or 13 per cent between 1981 and 2002, with 89 per cent of the increase (419,000) taking place in the aggregate town areas, which grew in population by 1 per cent per annum. Significant differences are evident in the distribution of population growth across size categories, and the general pattern is one of strongest growth in the larger towns and the cities (see Table 4.1). The size category that has shown both the largest absolute gain and the highest rate of growth over the last 20 years is that ranging from 10,000 to 35,000 population. This category almost doubled in population, with an increase of 240,000, or 57 per cent of the total urban increase in the period. As a result, its share of the urban population increased by almost 8 percentage points, from 13 per cent in 1981 to 21 per cent in 2002. The cities other than Dublin also experienced a relatively high rate of growth, and as a result increased their share of urban population, as did the intermediate

settlements (population 1,500 to 3,000). All other settlement categories declined in terms of their percentage share. Dublin's population expanded by almost 90,000 persons over the period as a whole, but its growth rate was below that of the aggregate town areas (and indeed the national average), so that its share of urban population decreased by almost 5 percentage points, from 48 to 43 per cent. Population decreased in both absolute and relative terms in the medium and small town categories.

The population trends described above are in part due to changes in the number of centres in each size category: as settlements grow (or decline) they can pass from one category to the next. For example, the strong population growth of the large towns category is in part due to the expansion of medium-sized towns to the point where they exceeded the 10,000 population threshold. In fact the number of large towns (10,000–35,000) increased from 16 to 28 over the 21 year period, and the number of medium settlements (5,000–10,000) from 40 to 53, the latter a reflection of population growth in rural villages. In contrast, the number of settlements in the two largest size categories remained static. To allow for changes in the number of settlements per size class, we can focus on the *average* size of centres in each category, and on the change in these averages over the period (see Table 4.2). This reveals an increase of over 10 per cent in the average size of centres in the large town category, a similar rate of growth to that of Dublin. The highest growth in average size – 26 per cent – occurred in the cities other than Dublin.¹ By contrast with the cities and large towns, towns with populations between 5,000 and 10,000 showed very little growth in average size of centre, and the average size of intermediate settlements actually declined.

Table 4.2 Trends in the number and average size of centres, 1981–2002

Size category	No. of centres 1981	No. of centres 2002	Change in average size 1981–2002
200,000 +	1	1	9.78
35,000–200,000	4	4	25.86
10,000–35,000	16	28	10.37
5,000–10,000	35	33	0.35
3,000–5,000	27	25	7.19
1,500–3,000	40	53	-2.83

Source: CSO 2002

Clearly, population growth in Ireland since 1981 has been strongly focused on the cities and larger towns in the middle of the size range. This trend also prevailed in the 1970s (Cawley, 1991) and indeed has been identified as far back as the 1950s (NESC, 1997). The strength of the trend suggests that, within the context of on-going urbanisation, there has been a degree of deconcentration of urban population away from the capital city. While there appears to be evidence here of 'polarisation reversal', with the Republic entering the 'intermediate city stage' in the model of differential urbanisation developed

by Geyer and Kontuly (1993), both these concepts carry connotations of spatial decentralisation (Geyer, 1995) which, it will be argued below, are not supported by empirical data.

Some insights into the nature of recent urbanisation north of the border can be obtained from data published in connection with the Northern Ireland Regional Development Strategy introduced in 2001. These data are not directly comparable with those for the Republic of Ireland, with, for example the Belfast Metropolitan area (BMA) much more widely bounded than the Greater Dublin area, so that it incorporates both open countryside and large 'free-standing' towns such as Bangor and Carrickfergus. These form part of the functional region of Belfast, but are not part of the continuous built-up area. Bearing in mind this difference, the data indicate some similarity with trends in the Republic in the case of the large centres of population (10,000+), which grew strongly throughout the period and marginally increased their share of population (see Table 4.3). However, what is more striking is the inverse relationship between size of settlement and both absolute and relative population growth. Thus, between 1981 and 1998 small towns and villages increased in population by 59,000 (23 per cent), as compared to an increase of just 14,000 persons (2 per cent) in the BMA. As a result, the distribution of population shifted away from Belfast towards the smaller centres. This shift was even more pronounced in the earlier part of the period. Most (58 per cent) of the growth in the smaller settlements occurred in the 1980s, but the Belfast region lost more than 3 per cent of its population, a trend that was led mainly by a sharp decrease in the population of the city itself. While the BMA recovered in the 1990s to record the largest absolute population gain (+33,273), much of this growth took place in the small towns and villages within the region (Department for Regional Development, 2001b).

Table 4.3 Population change by town size category, 1981–1998, Northern Ireland

Category	Absolute change	% change	Share of urban growth	Change in urban share
Belfast Metropolitan Area	14,057	2.44	11.40	-3.49
Towns over 10,000	50,439	14.13	40.91	1.02
Small towns and villages	58,782	23.14	47.68	2.47
All nucleated settlements	123,278	10.38	100.00	0.00

Source: Department for Regional Development (2001b)

These data suggest that, compared with the South, urbanisation in the North has been associated with an even greater degree of population deconcentration within the urban system. This finding is consistent with an analysis for the period 1971–86 by Poole (1991), who found evidence of a degree of counter-urbanisation, particularly in the eastern part of Northern Ireland and in the early 1980s.²