Gainers and Losers in Britain’s Changing Patterns of Population Distribution

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Every ten years, the Census of Population provides the basis for checking the accuracy of annual estimates of the British population that have been rolled forward from the previous Census using data on births, deaths and migration. The Census held on 29 April 2001 produced an overall total that was so much smaller than the expected figure that the annual population estimates were revised back not just to 1992 but to 1982. This paper draws on the latest version of the 2001 mid-year population estimates, as revised by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) in September and November 2003 and still considered provisional pending further checks on the quality of Census counts in some parts of the country. Its aim is to identify the main features and trends in the geography of the British population, looking principally at the experience of the last decade but also comparing this with the picture presented by the revised data for the previous ten years 1981-91 and in selected cases with 1971-81. To draw out particular aspects of this changing geography, use is made of a variety of spatial frameworks built up from the local government districts for which population estimates are released.

The main findings include the following:

The North-South divide in the UK’s population growth widened further in 1991-2001. Though the North’s population trend moved from overall loss to gain between the 1980s and 1990s, the upward shift in growth rate was lower than nationally, with the % point difference from the South widening from 2.6 in 1971-81 to 4.4 in 1981-91 and 5.7 in 1991-2001. Between 1991 and 2001 the population of the South (defined as London, South East, South West, East of England and East Midlands Government Office Regions) grew by 1.57 million, the North’s by just 41,000. The main reason for this big differential is the concentration of the UK’s international migration gains in the South, with migration out of northern Britain contributing only to a much smaller extent.

The most spectacular feature of 1991-2001 was the growth of London, and especially Inner London. Defined in terms of the GOR (and Greater London Authority), the latest version of the population estimates puts its 2001 population as 479 thousand higher than in 1991. This amounts to 30% of the UK’s total growth and makes London the country’s fastest growing region, at 7% growth rate compared to the 5.5% increase posted by second-placed East of England. This continues the remarkable recovery made between the 1970s and 1980s when London’s change moved up from a
723 thousand loss to a 23 thousand gain. It also represents an inversion of the capital’s traditional model of suburbanization, with the 1990s growth rate highest in Inner London at 9.2% compared to 5.7% for Outer London and 4.5% for the 46 Home Counties’ districts that form one definition of the rest of London’s wider ‘city region’.

Population change rates also recovered for England’s other large conurbations between the 1980s and 1990s, but only by a much smaller degree. The six former metropolitan counties saw an upward shift in population growth by 60,000 between the two decades, but that still left them with an overall loss of 209 thousand people between 1991 and 2001. Nearly all this 60,000 shift was accounted for by the six principal cities of these metros, and this despite the fact that two of them – Birmingham and Newcastle upon Tyne – recorded higher losses in the 1990s than in the previous decade. In the other four cases, the principal cities appear to be leading the population turnaround of their conurbations.

Looking across the settlement system as a whole, counterurbanization remains the dominant feature. This is particularly the case in the North, where they continued to be a very clear negative relationship between growth and urban status. Generally, however, the pace of the urban-rural shift in population distribution was slower in the 1990s than previously. Compared to the 1980s, growth was most markedly lower for districts with New Towns, coastal resorts and remoter rural areas, though these remained some of the fastest-growing types of area in the country. Along with London and the principal metro cities (see above), small non-metro cities and rural districts close to the metro areas also saw an above-average rise in their growth rates. In terms of absolute numbers, the labour market areas experiencing the largest population increases (after London) were those centred on Southampton, Milton Keynes, Bournemouth, Northampton, Norwich, Oxford, Worcester, Leicester and Edinburgh.