

The Changing Face of Rural Ontario: Population and Employment

By Heather Clemenson

A Rural Minority

In the mid-nineteenth century over 86% of Ontario's population lived in rural areas. But, as early as 1911, the rural population became a minority accounting for only 47% of the provincial total.

In the 1986 census (the most recent for which published data are available), Ontario had the lowest percentage of rural population of any province in Canada, with the rural population accounting for approximately 18% of the total (1.6 million out of 9.1 million).¹

Farm Population a Minority

The composition of Ontario's rural population has also changed. Since statistics were first compiled on the farm population in 1931, Ontario's farm population (that is, all people living in farm households) has consistently declined as a percentage of the rural population: from 59% in 1931 to less than 14% by 1986. As early as 1941, the farm population had been overtaken in number by the rural non-farm population. And by 1986, the rural non-farm population accounted for approximately 1.4 million of Ontario's 1.6 million rural residents.

Rural/Urban Fringe

The growth of the rural non-farm population reflects not only a decline in employment in farming and a shift in the occupations of rural residents, but also the movement of former urban residents into rural areas. This latter change was particularly strong in the 1971-76 period, when the rate of growth in rural areas of Ontario, as elsewhere in Canada, briefly exceeded the urban. Much rural population growth in this period resulted from former urban dwellers moving into rural Ontario, particularly to areas adjacent to large towns and cities. Urbanites moved out of the city to enjoy the attractions of country living, but remained close enough to commute to work and to have access to the services and amenities of the city. In fact, close to one-third of Ontario's rural population is found in the



fringe of urban areas.

New issues have arisen in rural areas surrounding urban centres, where people with different values, needs and expectations share rural space. Problems with trespassing and vandalism, complaints of noise, dust, and odour from farming activities, and different attitudes to land use and the local environment are some of the outcomes of the complex changes in rural Ontario arising from the integration of rural and urban lifestyles.

Villages and Small Towns

If villages and small towns with a population from 1,000 to 10,000 are included in a broader definition of rural, just over a quarter of Ontario's population lived in rural and small town areas in 1986.

Numerous factors have played a role in the steady demise of many rural service centres, including the decline of the farm population and the resultant decrease in demand for local services. Improved roads and vehicles have made distance between centres appear shorter and more accessible to people who are able to travel greater distances for both employment and services. There is greater variety in the goods and services now consumed and shopping patterns have shifted from local to more regional centres. One stop shopping and socialization with people outside the local community are becoming the norm. All of these factors have had a significant impact on small rural towns

and villages.

Although many small rural settlements in Ontario have disappeared or declined since the end of the nineteenth century, others have adapted to the changes of the twentieth century in a variety of ways. Tourism has revitalized the economic base of many small rural communities, particularly those advantageously located near scenic areas, provincial parks and other recreational amenities, or boasting attractions based on the community's own heritage.

Numerous small communities have attracted an older population. They are often preferred areas for retirement, and many have a higher percentage of elderly residents compared with urban areas. It is not unusual for some rural centres to have a growing population of elderly residents some three or four times above the national average. The working population in such rural communities have a higher dependent population to support, in terms of taxes and service provision, than their counterparts in urban areas. Small towns and villages in fact have the highest dependency rates² of any communities in Ontario.

If small towns are the preferred location for retirement, does this present an opportunity for rural areas in terms of job creation and future services? Or, if this situation is not being addressed, does it lead to problems of health care provision

continued on page 8