

Key Rural Issues, Northern Ireland 2024



Department of
**Agriculture, Environment
and Rural Affairs**

An Roinn

**Talmhaíochta, Comhshaoil
agus Gnóthaí Tuaithe**

Department o'

**Fairmin, Environment
an' Kintra Matthers**

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Key Findings

Population and Education

- Population growth in rural areas from 2001-20 outstripped that in urban areas by a factor of almost 3 to 1 (20% to 7%). Updated population estimates based on the 2021 Census are anticipated later in 2025.
- Young people from rural areas are more likely to leave school with 5 or more GCSEs at A* to C (81%, 72% in urban areas).
- School leavers in rural areas are more likely to enter further or higher education (74%) than their urban peers (70%).

Employment and Industry

- Rural people of working age are more likely to be in full-time employment (61%) and less likely to be economically inactive (22%) than those living in urban areas.
- The urban/rural gap in public sector earnings has narrowed substantially (£30,902 in urban areas, £31,718 in rural areas) with average earnings in rural areas now exceeding those in urban areas, a trend also evident in average private sector earnings.
- Workers from rural areas report being more highly skilled (55%) and are more likely to report high job satisfaction than urban workers (85% to 80%).
- In 2024, more than half (58%) of NI businesses were in rural areas, yet rural businesses accounted for less than a quarter (21%) of employees and just over a quarter (28%) of total business turnover.
- Rural businesses predominantly engage in agriculture, forestry, fishing and construction (56%), with urban businesses more widely spread across a variety of sectors.

Tourism and Connectivity

- Rural workers (90%) were also much more likely to use their own transport to commute than those from urban areas (82%), though this gap has narrowed.
- In 2021, workers from rural areas had an average commute almost double that of urban-based workers, travelling on average more than 600 miles more during the year to get to work. Updated Travel Survey data is expected later in 2025.
- In 2022, six of the top ten most visited paid attractions in NI were in rural areas.
- Broadband availability and speeds in rural areas continue to increase rapidly, with full-fibre services available to 86% of rural NI households in 2024 (from 65% in 2022).

Health and Wellbeing

- People living in rural areas are consistently more likely to rate their happiness and life satisfaction as high, and their anxiety levels as low.
In 2024, life expectancy is higher in rural areas (80.3 years for males, 83.7 years for females). Rural dwellers wait longer for emergency service response than their urban counterparts, with ambulance waiting times continuing to increase in rural areas.

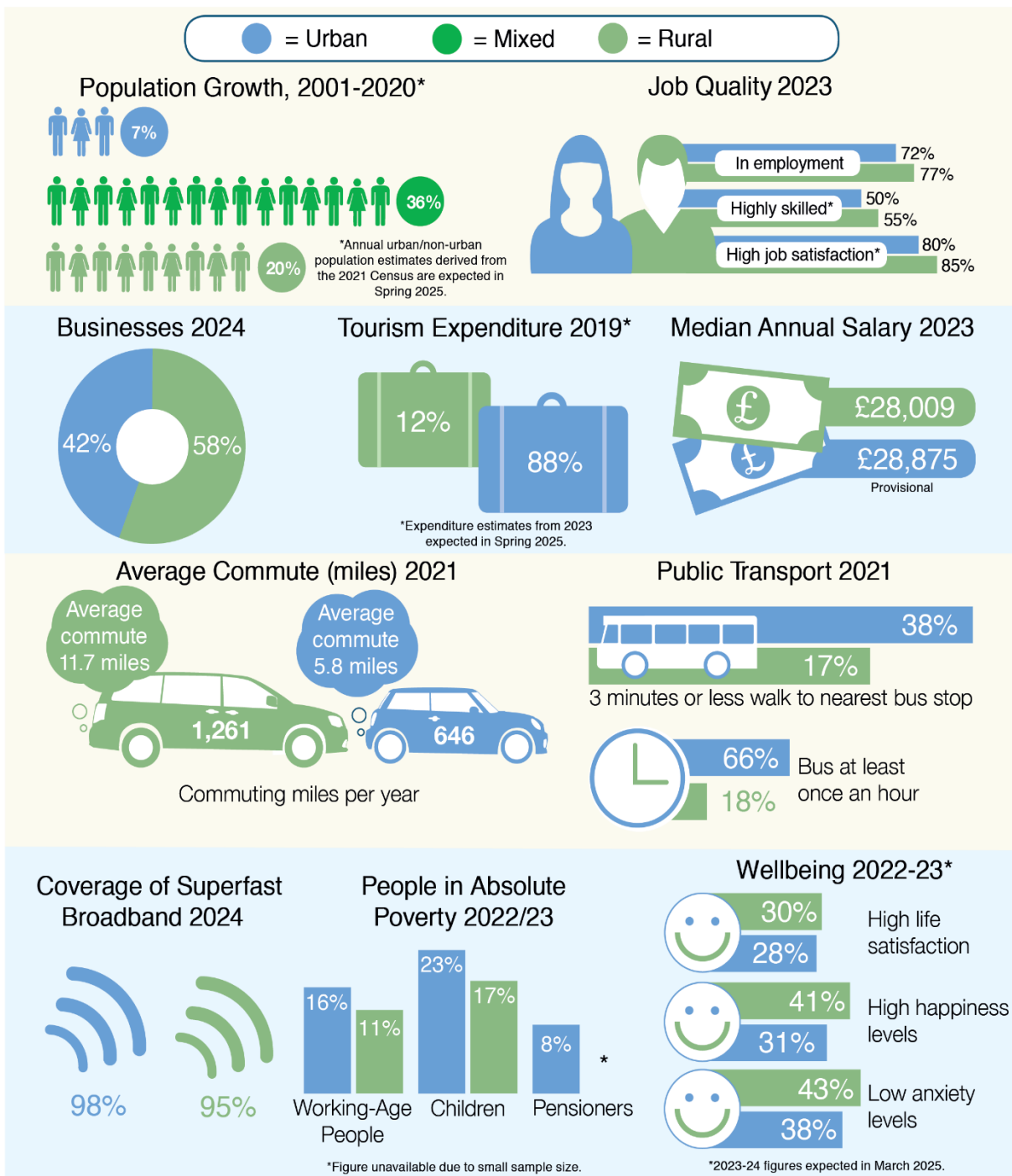
Crime

- People from rural areas are less likely to directly experience several crime types than those in urban areas (including burglary, vandalism and violent crime).
- Recorded racially motivated crimes decreased in rural areas by more than a third (39%) between 2022-23 and 2023-24, with recorded crimes with a sectarian motivation decreasing by a similar proportion (36%) over the same period.

Poverty, Housing, and Household Income

- Similar proportions of urban and rural households are in relative poverty (19% urban, 16% rural) or absolute poverty (16% urban, 11% rural).
- Rural children in 2022-23 were less likely to experience absolute poverty than their urban counterparts (17% in rural areas, 23% in urban areas).
- Levels of home ownership are higher in rural than in urban areas (83% to 67%), with house prices in rural areas continuing to outstrip those in towns and cities.

Northern Ireland Urban-Rural Statistics



Introduction

NISRA's 2020 mid-year estimates of population suggest that more than a third (36%) of Northern Ireland's (NI) population lives in a rural area. Despite similarities in many aspects of urban and rural life, there are also challenges which tend to be more pronounced in rural areas outside of Belfast.

The nature of rural industry and employment differs from that of towns and cities. Difficulties with access to services, and issues with connectivity, social and digital, can have a disproportionate impact on rural dwellers.

The cost of living also tends to be higher in rural areas, and rural households are more likely to experience fuel poverty. Despite the unique challenges presented by rural life, those living in rural areas on average enjoy a better self-reported quality of life than their urban counterparts, in terms of health, happiness and life satisfaction.

Key Rural Issues – Background and Aim

A considerable amount of data is regularly collected across Government Departments, from both survey data and administrative sources. This publication will co-ordinate relevant, publicly available data from a unique urban/rural perspective, to highlight key urban/rural differences and disparities across a range of domains.

In doing so, the publication will provide a robust evidence base to inform the future direction of rural policy in NI, to underpin the Rural Needs Act (2016), and to support the equitable treatment of rural communities in policies and programmes across Government.

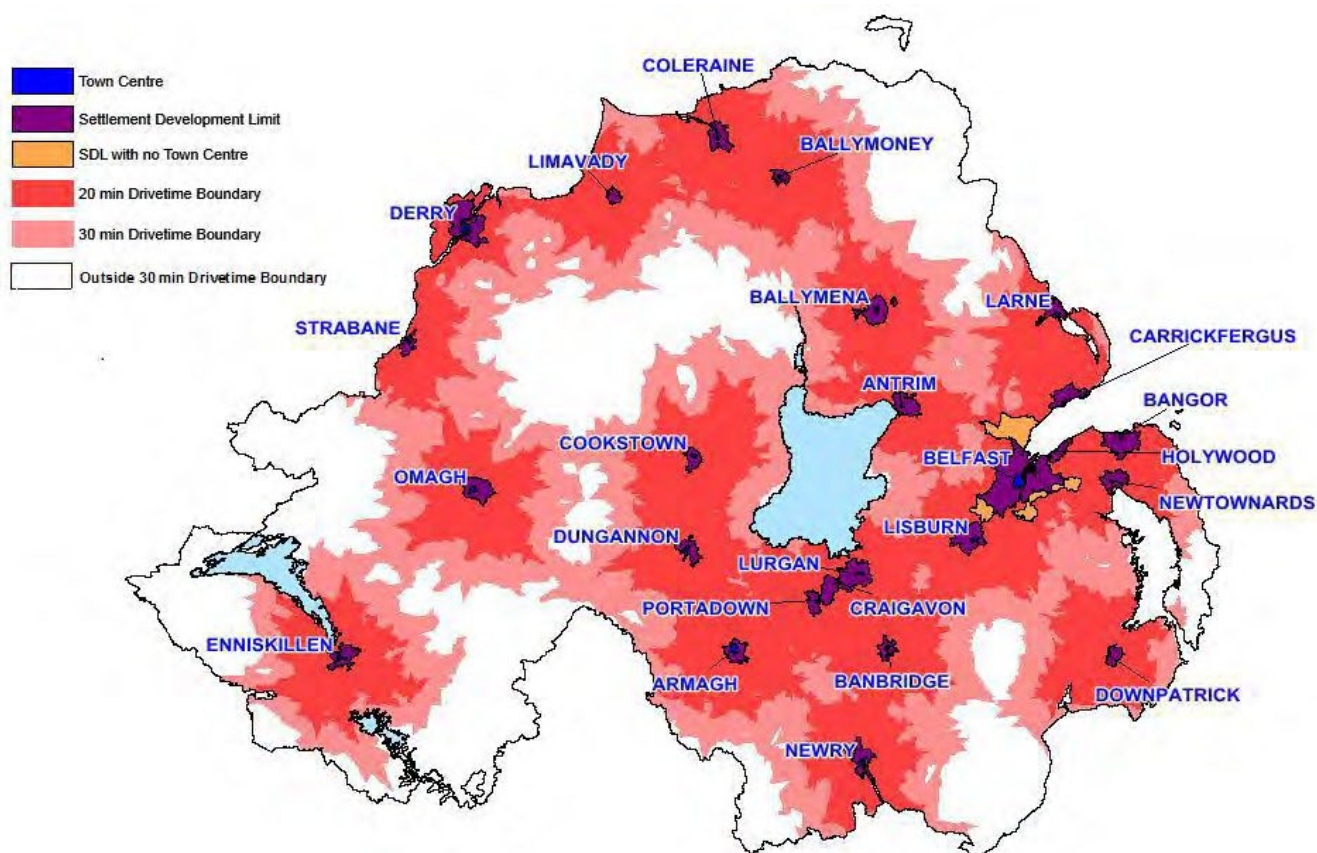
The collection and timeliness of statistical data across Government continues to be impacted by both methodological changes arising from the Covid-19 pandemic and resource pressures across NISRA. In some instances, updated urban/rural data has been limited or has not been available at the time of publication. This will be clearly indicated in each instance and for the latter, the most recent published data will be provided instead.

The domains explored in this publication in terms of urban/rural comparison include:

- Population
- Education
- Employment
- Industry
- Travel and Tourism
- Crime and Poverty
- Connectivity and access to services
- Health and Wellbeing
- Household Income, Housing and Poverty

Urban/Rural - Populations and Definition

Figure 1: NI Urban and Rural areas with 20 and 30 minute 'drive time' boundaries from settlements with a population of 10,000 or more



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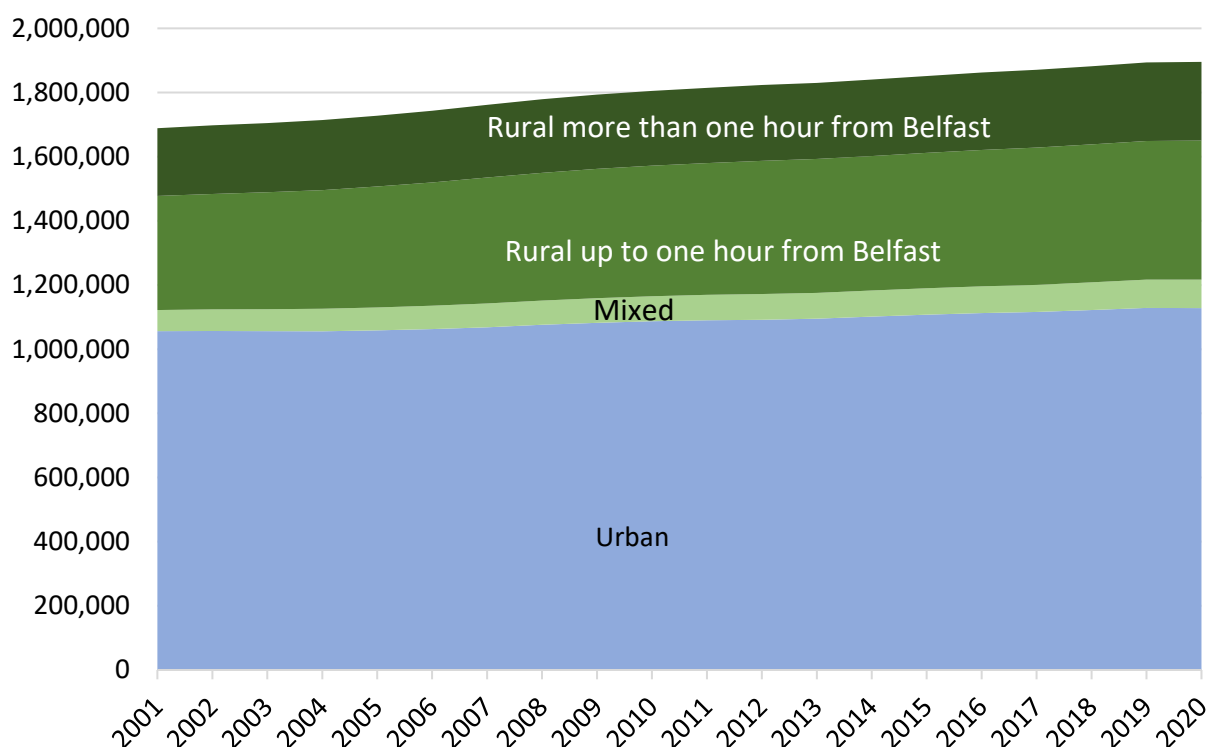
Source: *Review of the Statistical Classification and Delineation of Settlements, Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, 2015*

The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) carried out a review of settlement classification in 2015¹, which recommended a default urban/rural boundary at a population level of 5,000.

All settlements with a population of less than 5,000, and areas of open countryside, were defined as rural. The classification also incorporated measures of distance to settlements with a population of 10,000 or more. These measures were intended as proxies for accessibility, as previous research had indicated that towns of this size are large enough to

¹ Review of the statistical classification and delineation of Settlements, NISRA 2015
<https://www.nisra.gov.uk/publications/review-statistical-classification-and-delineation-settlements>

Figure 3: Urban and Rural Population Growth, 2001-2020



Source: NISRA Mid-year Population Estimates 2020

<http://www.ninis2.nisra.gov.uk/public/Theme.aspx?themeNumber=74&themeName=Population>

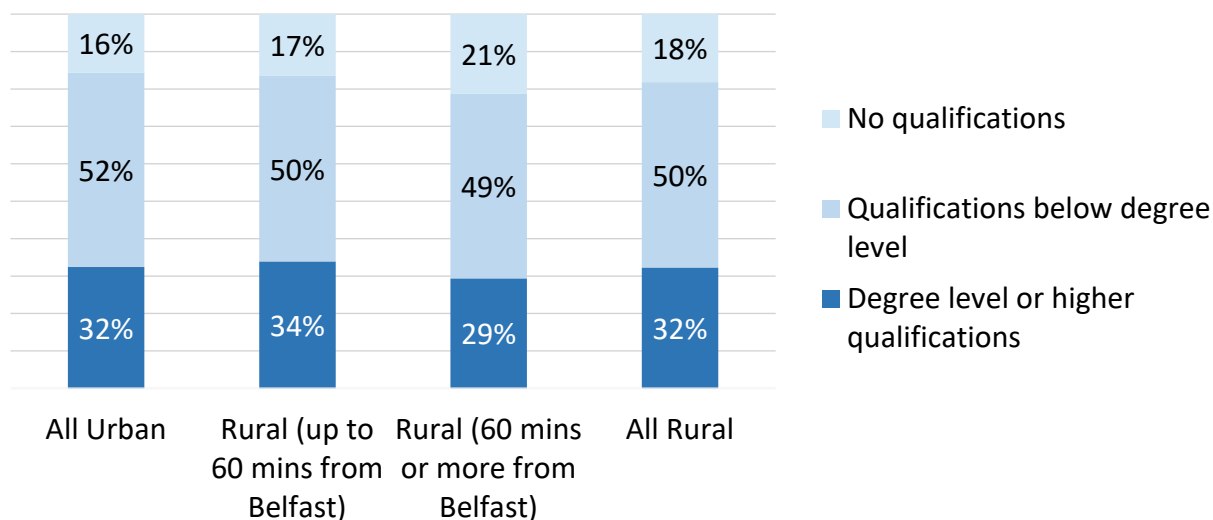
Under the 2015 settlement classification definition, more than 80% of the NI land mass is rural. Although more than a third of NI's population lives in a rural area, the rate of population growth in rural areas has been higher than in urban areas.

At the time of publication, updated mid-year population estimates based on 2021 Census data are not yet available. It is hoped that these will become available in Spring 2025 (<https://www.nisra.gov.uk/statistics/census/2021-census>). The analysis below is based on the most recent published urban/rural population estimates.

Between 2001 and 2020, the population of rural areas rose by 20%, compared to an increase of just 7% for urban areas. As a result, the rural share of the overall NI population grew from 34% to 36%. Areas with fastest growth were those close to urban centres, either in mixed rural/urban areas (36%) or less than an hour's commute from Belfast (22%).

Education

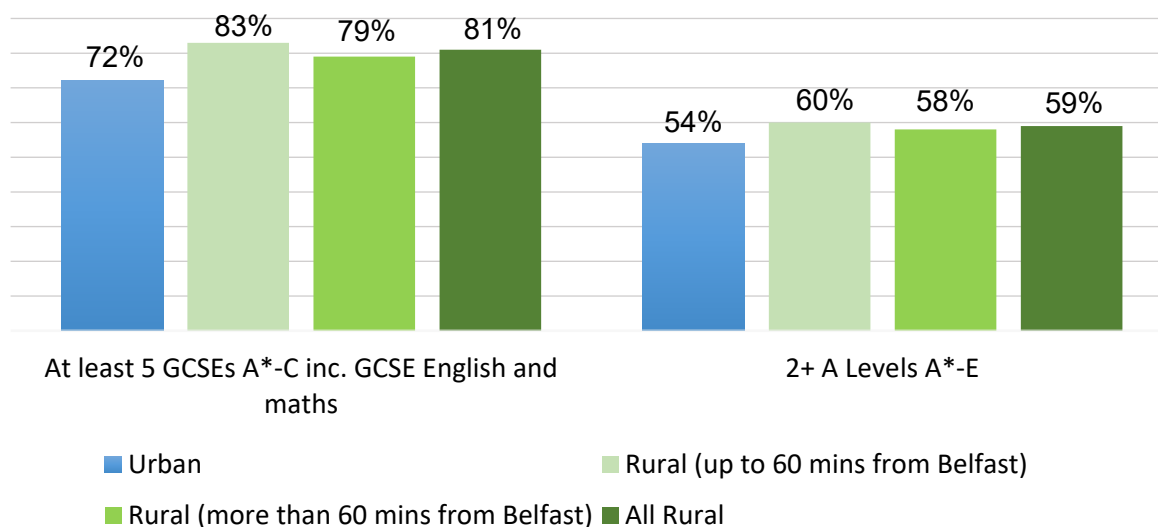
Figure 4: Highest Educational Qualification (persons aged 18-69), Urban/Rural Comparison, 2023-24



Source: Continuous Household Survey (NISRA), 2023-24

In 2023-24, the adult populations of rural and urban areas were similar in terms of overall educational attainment. However, there appear to be intra-rural differences in qualification levels. In 2023-24, rural dwellers who live more than an hour's drive from Belfast were slightly less likely to have achieved 'degree level or higher' qualifications (29%) than their urban counterparts (32%) and were more likely to have no formal qualifications (21% compared to 16%).

Figure 5: Qualifications of School Leavers by Pupil Residence, Urban/Rural Comparison, 2022-23

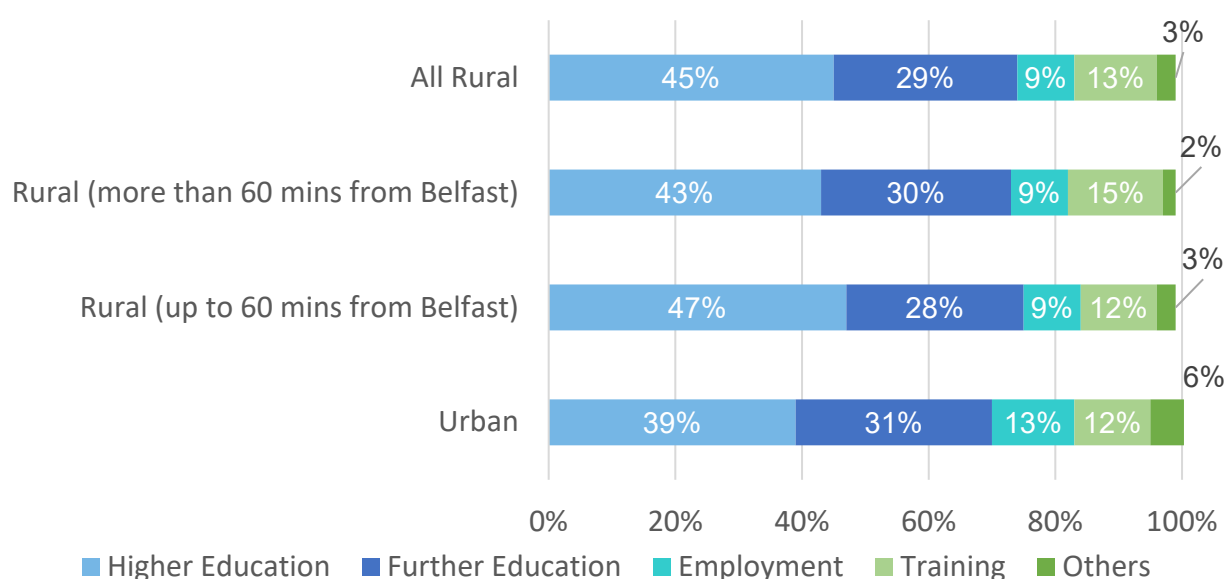


Source: NI School Leavers Survey, Department of Education (DE), 2022-23

In 2022-23, GCSE students from rural areas were somewhat more successful on average than their urban counterparts, in terms of exam pass rates. More than three quarters (81%) of students from rural areas left school with at least 5 GCSEs including English and Maths, compared to 72% of students from urban areas (Figure 5).

The urban/rural attainment gap at A-level was narrower, with 59% of rural school leavers having achieved two or more passes, compared to just over half of urban school leavers (54%, Figure 5).

Figure 6: Destination of School Leavers by Pupil Residence, Urban/Rural Comparison, 2022-23

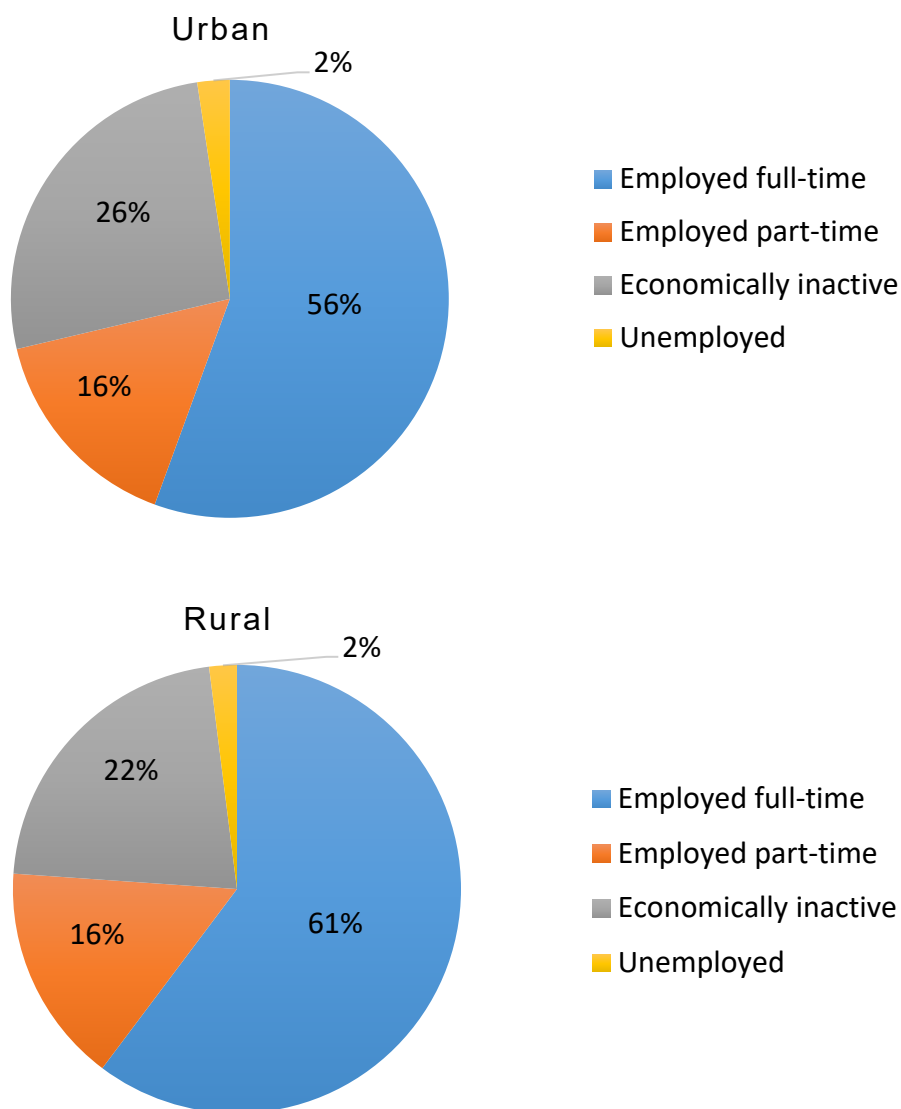


Source: NI School Leavers Survey, Department of Education (DE), 2022-23

In 2022-23, school leavers from rural areas were more likely than those from urban areas to enter higher education (Figure 6). Just under half (45%) of pupils living in rural areas proceeded to higher education in 2022-23, compared with 39% of school leavers from urban areas, with the gap narrowing to 6% from 8% in 2021-22.

Employment

Figure 7: Economic Activity Status of NI Working Age Population, Urban/Rural Comparison, 2023



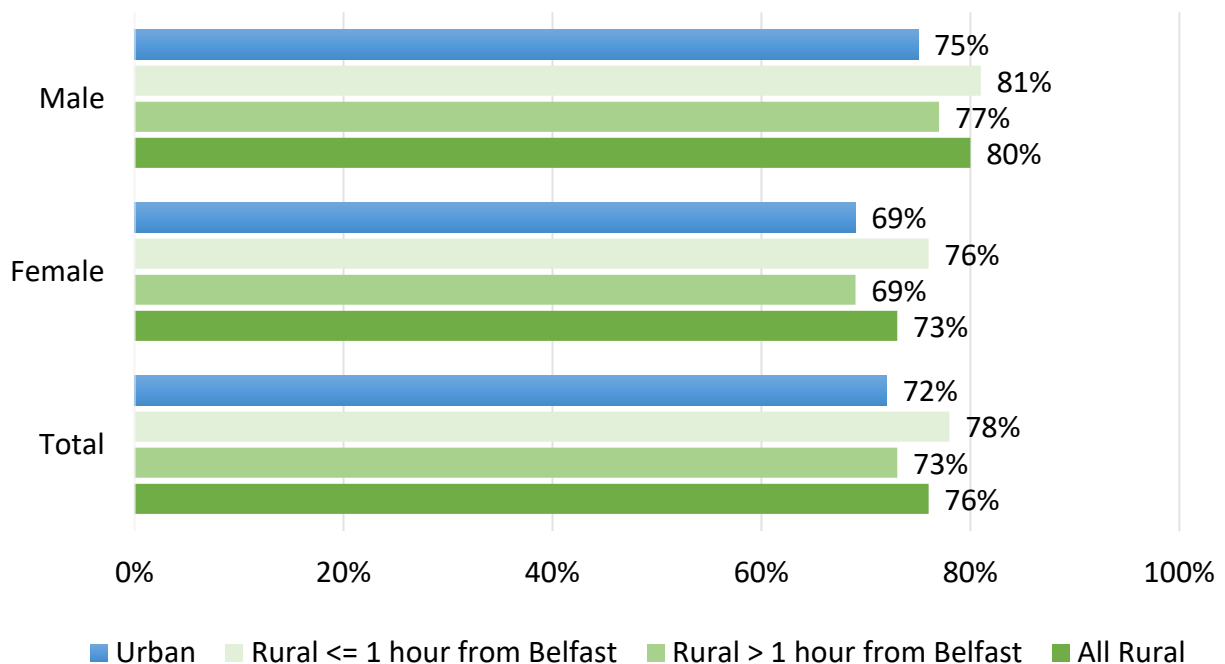
**Economic inactivity is defined as "people who are neither in employment nor unemployed as determined by the ILO measure. This group includes all those who are looking after a home, are long term sick or disabled, or are students, or retired."*

***Percentages may not sum due to rounding*

Source: NI Labour Force Survey, January-December 2023

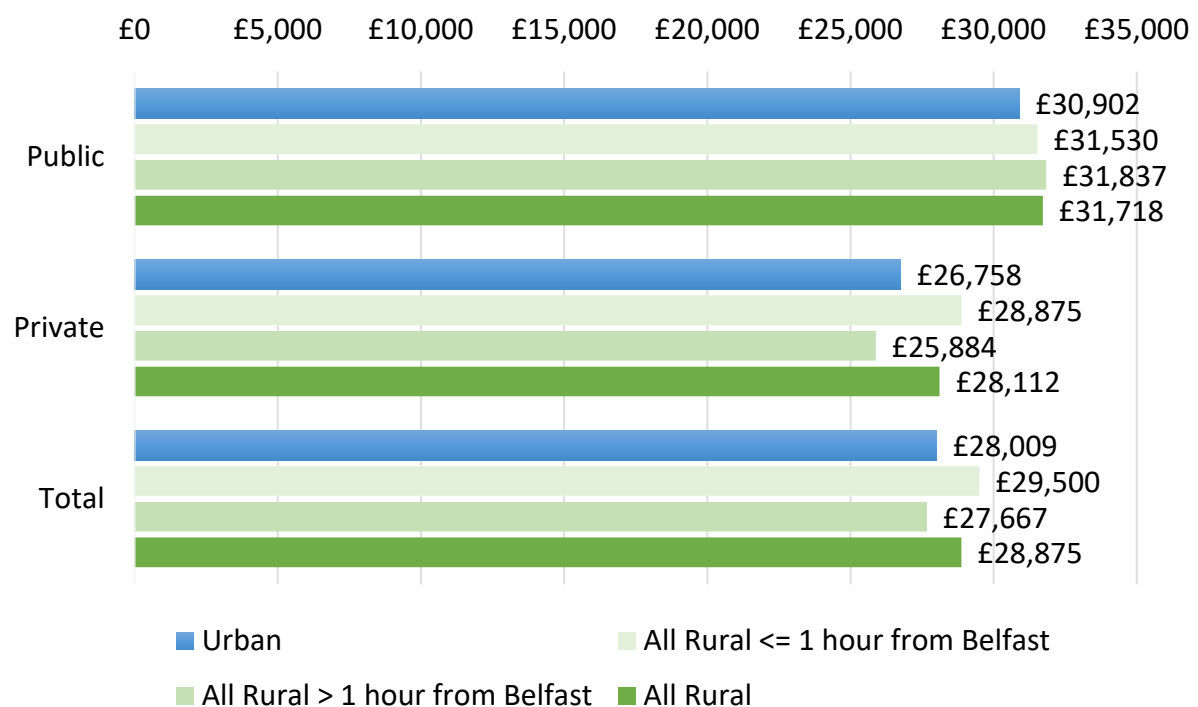
In 2023, people living in rural areas were more likely to be in full-time employment compared with those in urban areas (61% to 56%, Figure 7). Rural areas also saw slightly lower levels of economic inactivity (22%) than urban areas (26%). Overall employment levels for both men and women were higher in the rural (76%) than the urban population (72%, Figure 8), with the employment level highest among those living in rural areas within an hour's commute of Belfast (78%).

Figure 8: Percentage of Working Age Population in Employment by Sex, Urban/Rural Comparison, 2023



Source: NI Labour Force Survey, January-December 2023

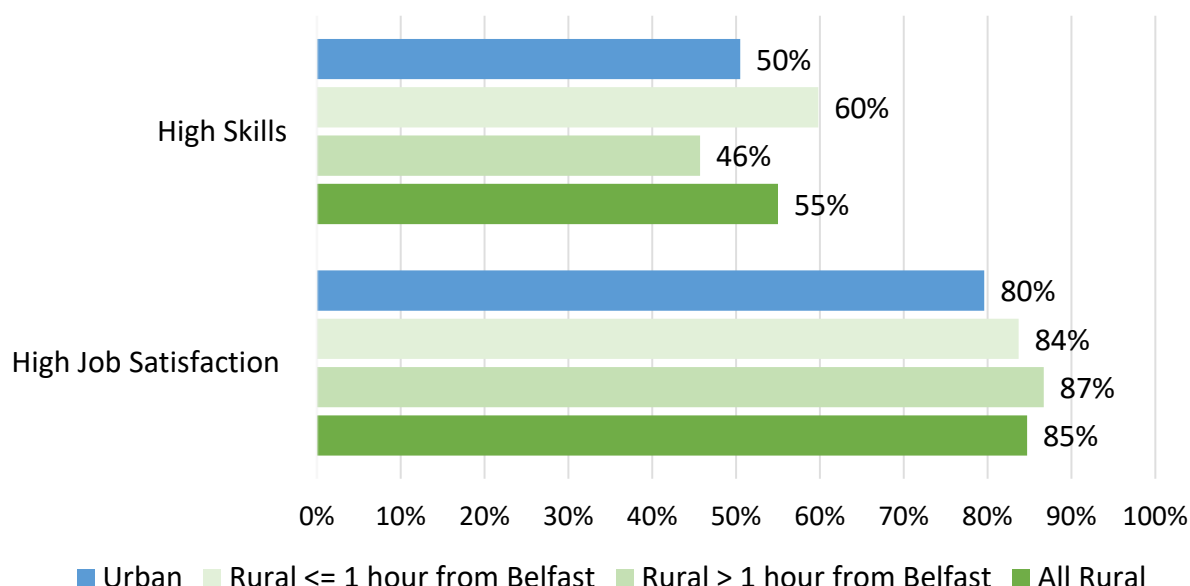
Figure 9: Median Annual Salary by Workplace Address/Sector, Urban/Rural/NI Comparison, 2023



Source: NI Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings (ASHE - provisional) 2023, NISRA

In 2023, the median annual salaries of public sector workers were £816 less than those in rural areas, with the gap narrowing from just under £2,000 in 2022. In the private sector, median salaries in urban workplaces were just over £1,300 lower than in rural workplaces (Figure 9).

Figure 10: Job Skills and Job Satisfaction, Urban/Rural Comparison, 2023



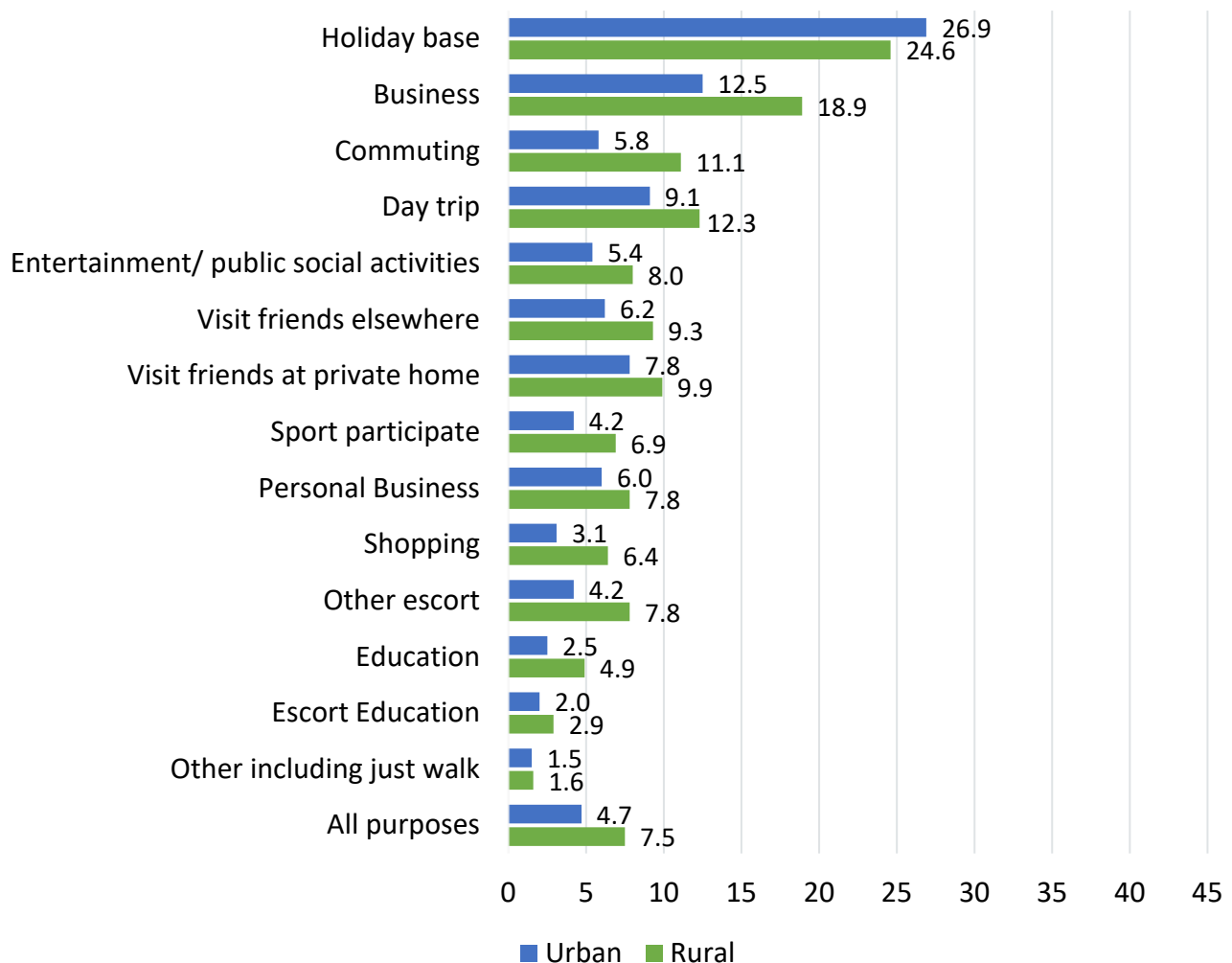
Notes: Based on employee address. Skills level figures exclude self-employed and those who did not state a skills level. High job satisfaction defined as score of 4 or 5 out of 5.

Source: NI Labour Force Survey, January-December 2023

Figure 10 provides an urban/rural comparison of the skill level of workers in 2023, and self-reported job satisfaction levels. In 2023, workers who lived in rural areas were substantially more likely to have 'High Skills' and more likely to report high job satisfaction (85%) than their urban counterparts (80%), with self-reporting 'high' job satisfaction levels in each rural sub-category (as well as in urban areas) increasing since 2020.

It is important to note that this information is based on the home address rather than the work address of respondents. Workers may commute long distances for more highly skilled and better paid employment than is available locally - this data reflects the quality of jobs in areas where people work, rather than live.

Figure 11: Average Distance Travelled (miles) for Business and Leisure, by purpose of journey, Urban/Rural Comparison, 2021^{1 2}



Source: Travel Survey for Northern Ireland (TSNI) 2021, DfI

1 Due to significant changes to the survey methodology because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2020 and 2021 survey estimates are reported as a single year instead of the usual three years combined and the results are not directly comparable to those from previous years.

2 A considerable amount of extra work has been required to investigate data collected from 2020 onwards. This, combined with the delay in receiving TSNI datasets during the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent delay to the publication of earlier reports, continues to have a knock-on effect on the usual publication timetable. The 2021 In-depth Report was published in December 2023. There was a significant delay in receiving 2022 data from the supplier and in-depth quality assurance checks have been required.

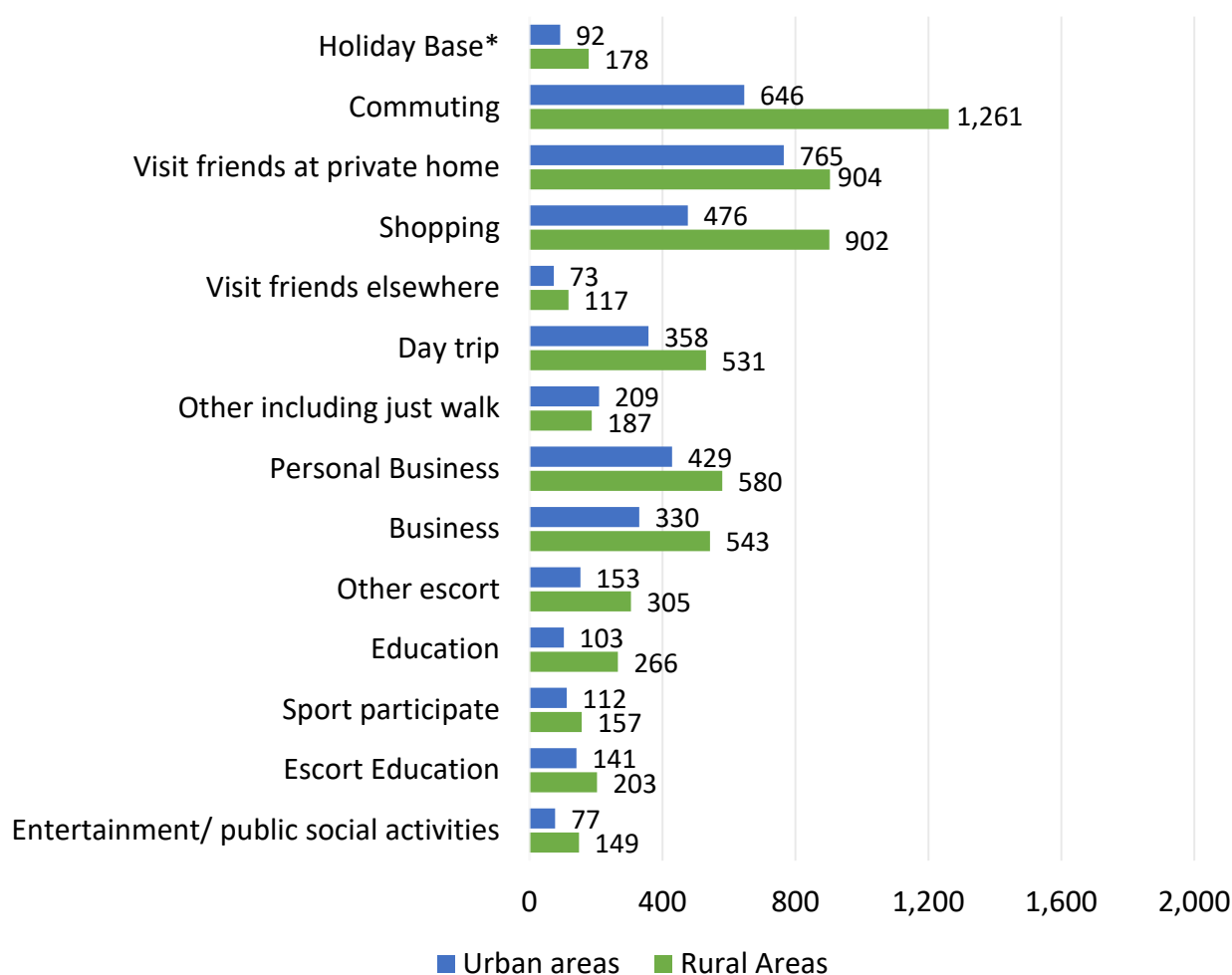
Further information is available at:

<https://www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk/topics/travel-survey-tsnj>

Analysis from the Travel Survey for Northern Ireland (TSNI) for 2022 is not yet available at the time of publication (see Figure 11, Footnote 2). Trends and analysis in Figures 11, 12 and 14 are based on data from the 2021 Survey, which is the most recent available information.

The Travel Survey for Northern Ireland (TSNI) for 2021 revealed that workers from rural areas had an average commute of more than double that of workers in towns and cities (Figure 11) and travelled on average more than 600 additional miles per year to their workplace (Figure 12). It is important to note that these figures may have been impacted both by changes in survey methodology and increased flexible working following the Covid-19 pandemic, particularly for urban workers. As an increasing number of employers introduce hybrid working models, there is scope for further divergence in these trends in future analysis.

Figure 12: Total Miles Travelled (per person per year), by Journey Purpose, Urban/Rural Comparison, 2021^{1 2}



Source: Travel Survey for Northern Ireland (TSNI) 2021, DfI

1 Due to significant changes to the survey methodology because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2020 and 2021 survey estimates are reported as a single year instead of the usual three years combined and the results are not directly comparable to those from previous years.

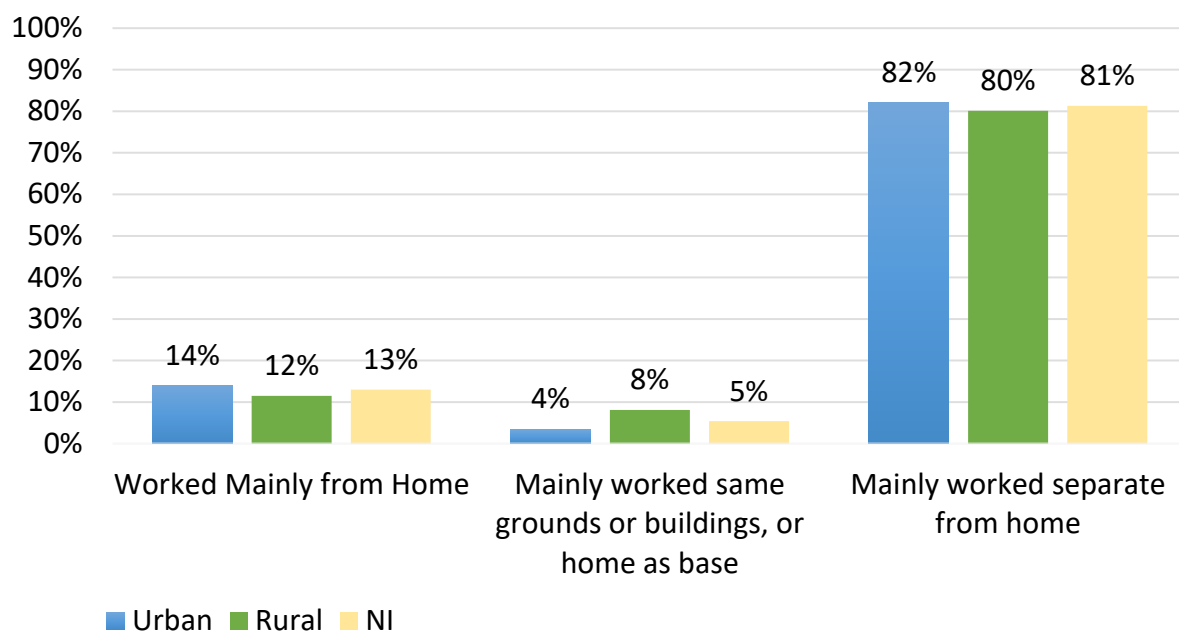
2 A considerable amount of extra work has been required to investigate data collected from 2020 onwards. This, combined with the delay in receiving TSNI datasets during the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent delay to the publication of earlier reports, continues to have a knock-on effect on the usual publication timetable. The 2021 In-depth Report was published in December 2023. There was a significant delay in receiving 2022 data from the supplier and in-depth quality assurance checks have been required.

Further information is available at:

<https://www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk/topics/travel-survey-tsn>

The 2023 UK Labour Force Survey demonstrates an increase in the proportions of rural (12%, from 6% in 2020) and urban (14%, from 8%) employees in NI worked primarily from home (Figure 13). It may be reasonable to assume that these figures have been influenced by recent changes for public and private sector workers to alternative working patterns including home and flexible working, following their introduction during the Covid -19 pandemic.

Figure 13: Physical Location of Main Job, Urban/Rural/NI Comparison, 2023

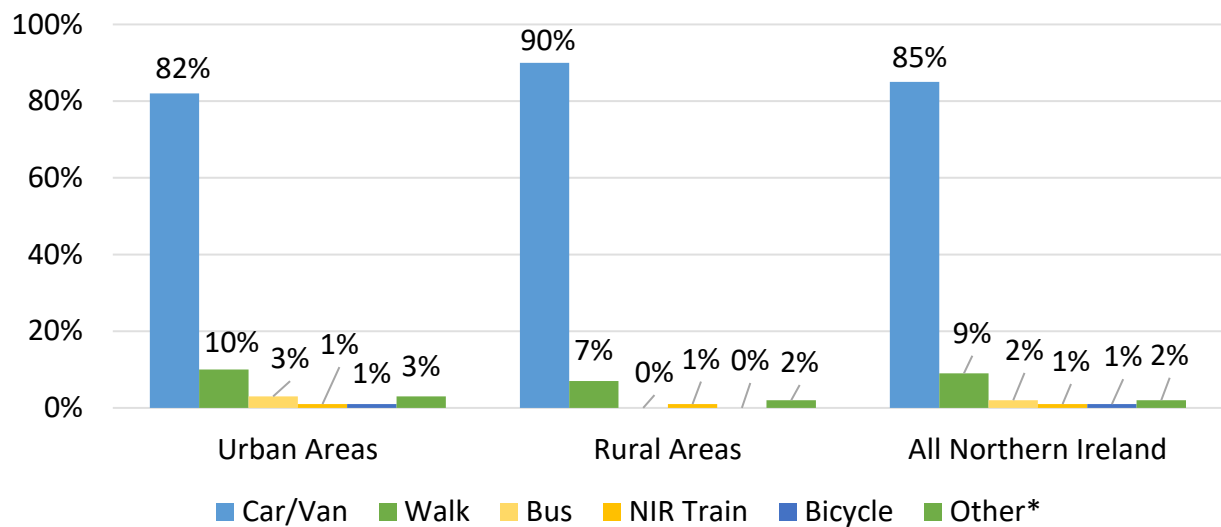


Note: Employed persons aged 16-64

**Percentages may not sum due to rounding*

Source: NI Labour Force Survey January-December 2023

Figure 14: Method of Travel to Work, Urban/Rural/NI Comparison, 2021¹



1 A considerable amount of extra work has been required to investigate data collected from 2020 onwards. This, combined with the delay in receiving TSNi datasets during the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent delay to the publication of earlier reports, continues to have a knock-on effect on the usual publication timetable. The 2021 In-depth Report was published in December 2023. There was a significant delay in receiving 2022 data from the supplier and in-depth quality assurance checks have been required.

Further information is available at:

<https://www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk/topics/travel-survey-tsn>

*Other includes Taxi, Minicab, Scooter, Motorbike and Moped

Source: Travel Survey for Northern Ireland (TSNI) 2021, DfI

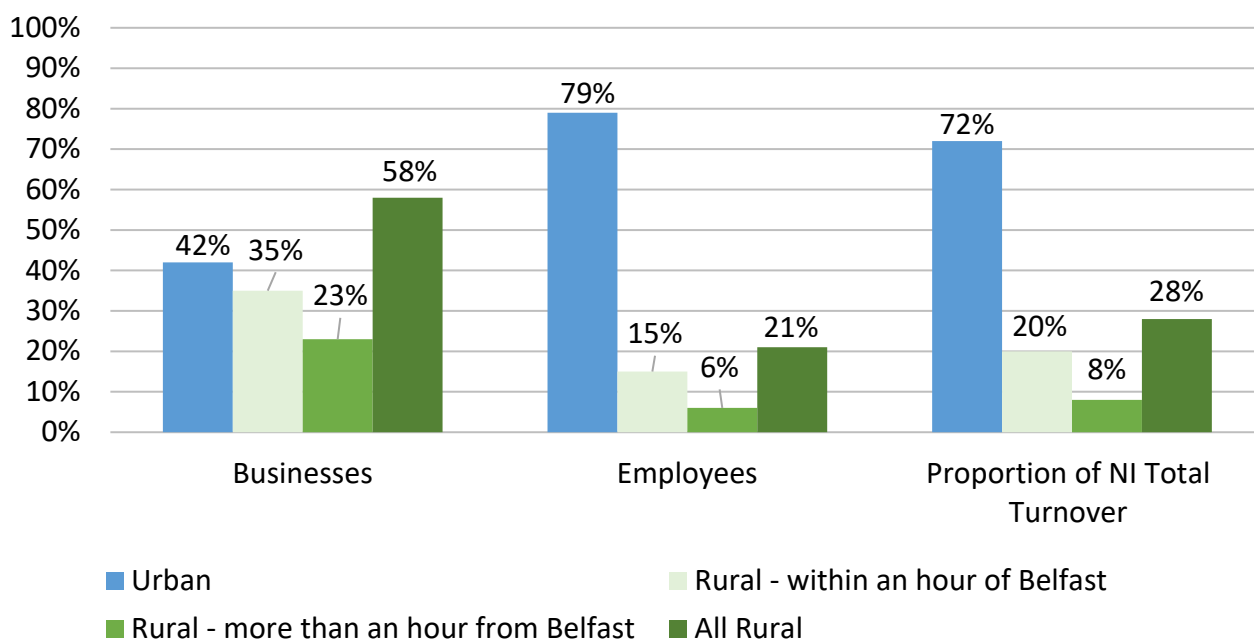
In terms of commuting methods, private car or van was still by far the most common in NI, for both urban and rural residents, according to the most recent data from the 2021 Travel Survey NI (Figure 14). The preference of a large majority of rural (90%), and more than three quarters of urban (82%) workers for private transport may be influenced by longer average journey distances, and reduced availability of public transport in rural areas.

Urban workers are more likely to walk to work (10%) or to travel by bus (3%) than those from rural areas (7% and 1% respectively).

Industry

In 2024, more than half (58%) of NI businesses are located in rural areas, yet rural businesses account for just 21% of employees, and just over a quarter (28%) of all business turnover (Figure 15).

Figure 15: Urban and Rural Businesses, Employees, and Turnover, NI, 2024

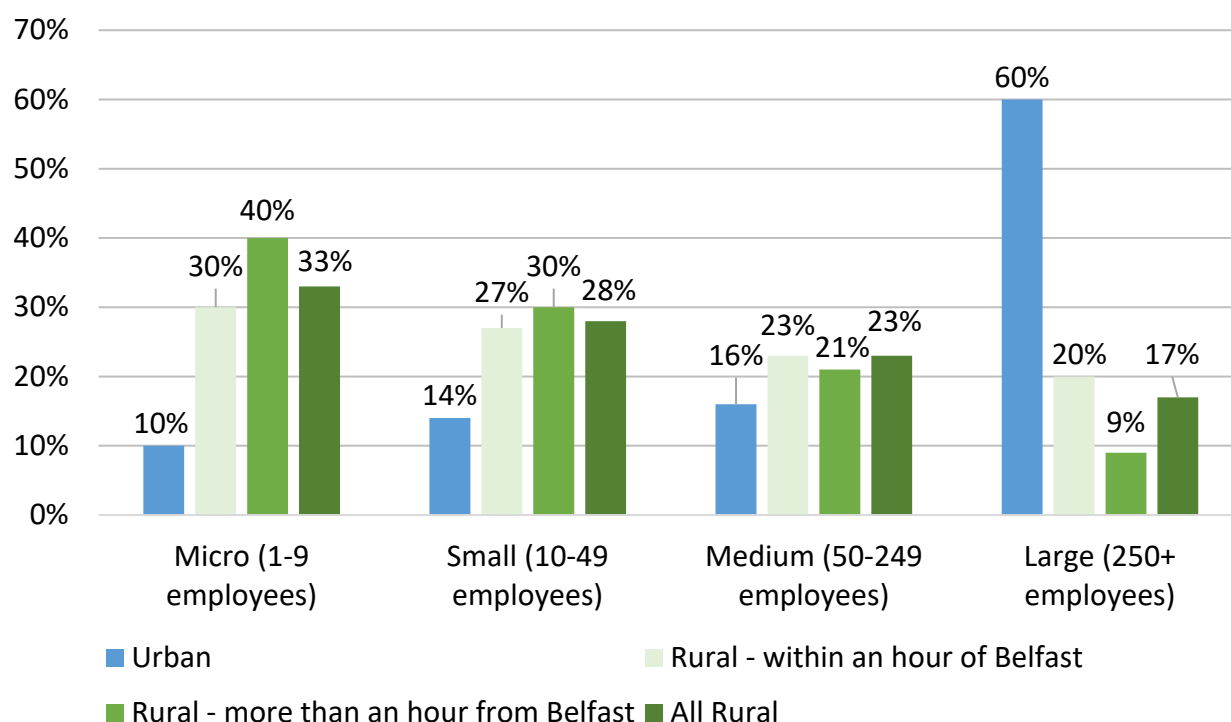


Source: Inter-Departmental Business Register 2024, DoF

Percentages may not sum due to rounding

Rural businesses in 2024 were typically small - around a third (33%) of all rural businesses are classed as 'micro', and have between one and nine employees, with just 17% of rural businesses classified as 'Large' (with 250 or more employees), while 60% of urban businesses belonged in this category (Figure 16). Consequently, urban businesses accounted for approximately 72% of all business turnover in NI in 2024.

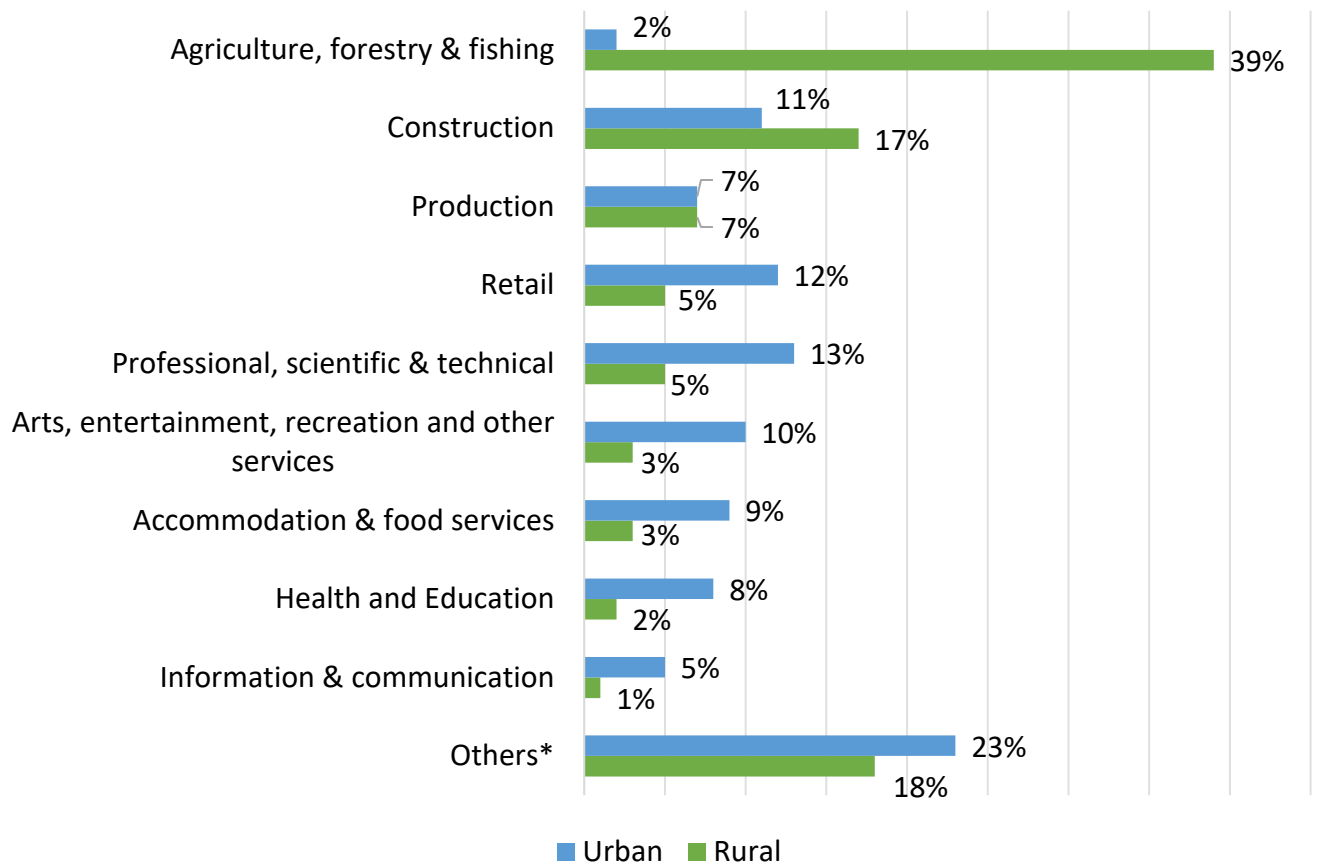
Figure 16: Business Size (Number of Employees), Urban/Rural Comparison, 2024



Source: Inter-Departmental Business Register 2024, DoF

In 2024, as in previous years, the rural and urban economies also differ substantially in terms of dominant sectors (Figure 17), with 39% of rural businesses belonging to the agriculture, forestry and fishing sectors, with construction as the next largest sector in rural areas (17%). Urban businesses encompass a broad variety of industries, with professional, scientific and technical businesses (13%) the largest, closely followed by retail (12%), construction (11%), and arts, entertainment and recreation (10%).

Figure 17: NI Industry Sector Representation, Urban/Rural Comparison, 2024



**'Others' include Finance, Insurance, Property, Public Administration, Transport and Storage*

Source: Inter-Departmental Business Register 2024, DoF

The predominance of agriculture businesses is even more pronounced in rural areas more than an hour from Belfast. Almost half (46%) of all businesses in these areas are engaged in agriculture, forestry and fishing, with a further 17% in construction (Table 1).

Table 1: Businesses by Industry Group, Urban and Rural, 2024

Broad Industry Group ⁽¹⁾	Urban	Rural			Total
		Rural - up to an hour from Belfast	Rural - over an hour from Belfast	All Rural	
Agriculture, forestry & fishing	2%	35%	46%	39%	24%
Production	7%	8%	6%	7%	7%
Construction	11%	17%	17%	17%	14%
Retail	12%	5%	5%	5%	8%
Accommodation & food services	9%	3%	3%	3%	6%
Professional, scientific & technical	13%	6%	3%	5%	8%
Health and Education	8%	3%	1%	2%	5%
Arts, entertainment, recreation and other services	10%	4%	3%	3%	6%
Others*	23%	19%	16%	18%	23%
All Industries	33,385	27,995	18,665	46,660	80,045

1 For full description of standard industrial classification (2007) see Office for National Statistics:

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/methodology/classificationsandstandards/ukstandardindustrialclassificationofeconomicactivities/uksic2007>

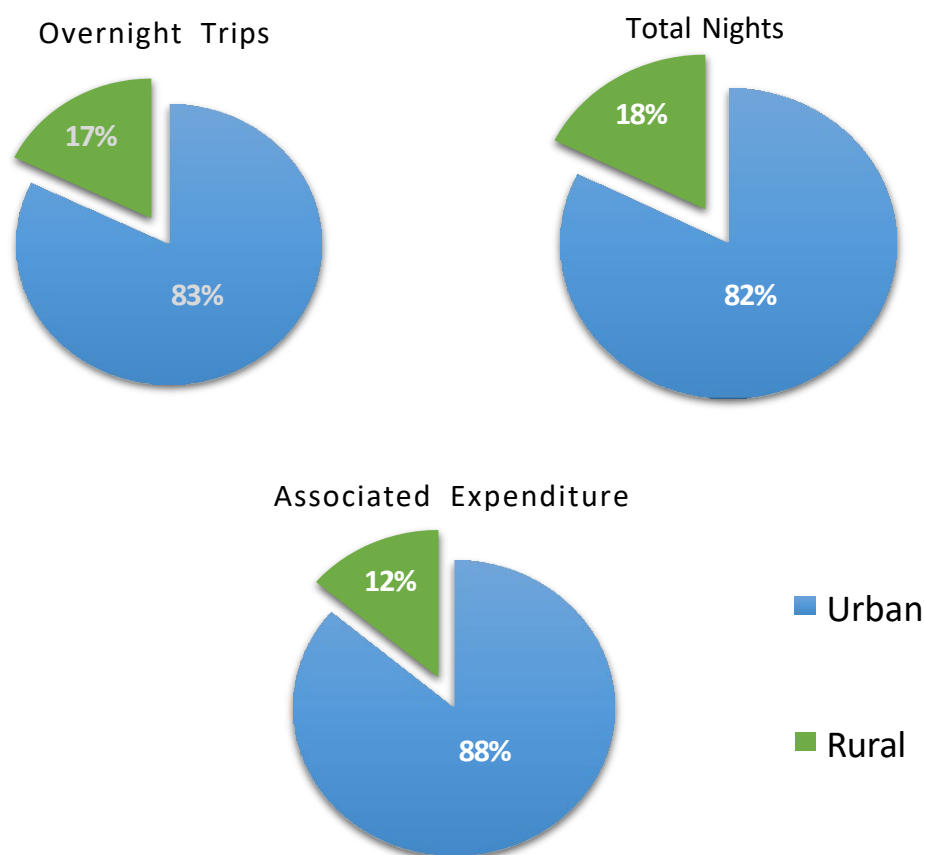
*'Others' include Finance, Insurance, Property, Public Administration

Percentages may not sum due to rounding

Source: Inter-Departmental Business Register 2024, DoF

Tourism

Figure 18: Overnight Trips to NI (Visits to Urban and Rural Areas), 2019¹



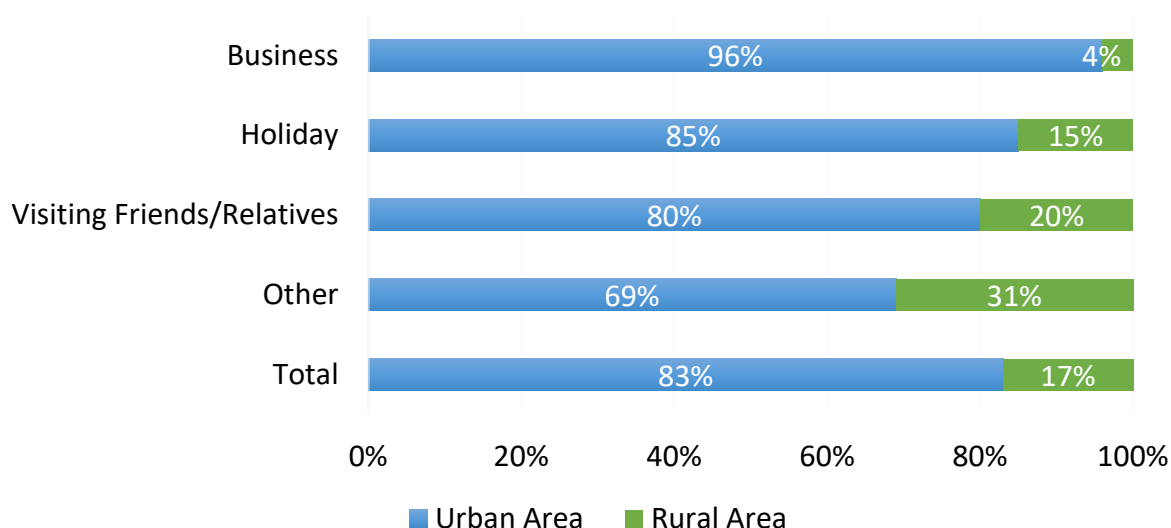
1 Tourism data is derived from a variety of sources. The COVID-19 pandemic has had significant effect on these sources and due to issues with data collection associated with these, NISRA is not in a position to publish the full range of statistics, including trips, nights and spend. Data collection recommenced during 2021, but quality assurance is ongoing, and sources outside of NISRA are still experiencing issues, meaning that these will not be available for 2021 or 2022. 2023 data will be available later in 2025. 2019 data is provided as the most recent available.

Sources: NI Tourism Statistics (NISRA) 2019, Northern Ireland Passenger Survey (NIPS), NISRA, Continuous Household Survey (CHS), NISRA, Survey of Overseas Travellers (SOT), Fáilte Ireland, Household Travel Survey (HTS), Central Statistics Office (CSO)

The Covid-19 pandemic has impacted on a number of data collections, and the availability of updated data for Figures 18 to 20. The most recent available data on overnight trips, nights and expenditure from 2019 is provided for these charts, and the associated analysis is based on the data from 2019 as the most recent published. Urban/rural breakdowns for 2023 are expected to be available later in 2025.

In 2019, just 17% of all overnight visits to NI, and 12% of associated expenditure, occurred in rural locations (Figure 18). These figures include visits within NI by people that live here, as well as by visitors from other countries. Total tourist expenditure on overnight trips in rural areas in 2019 was much smaller than in urban areas (£129m compared to £835m) showing the predominance of urban settings in NI tourism.

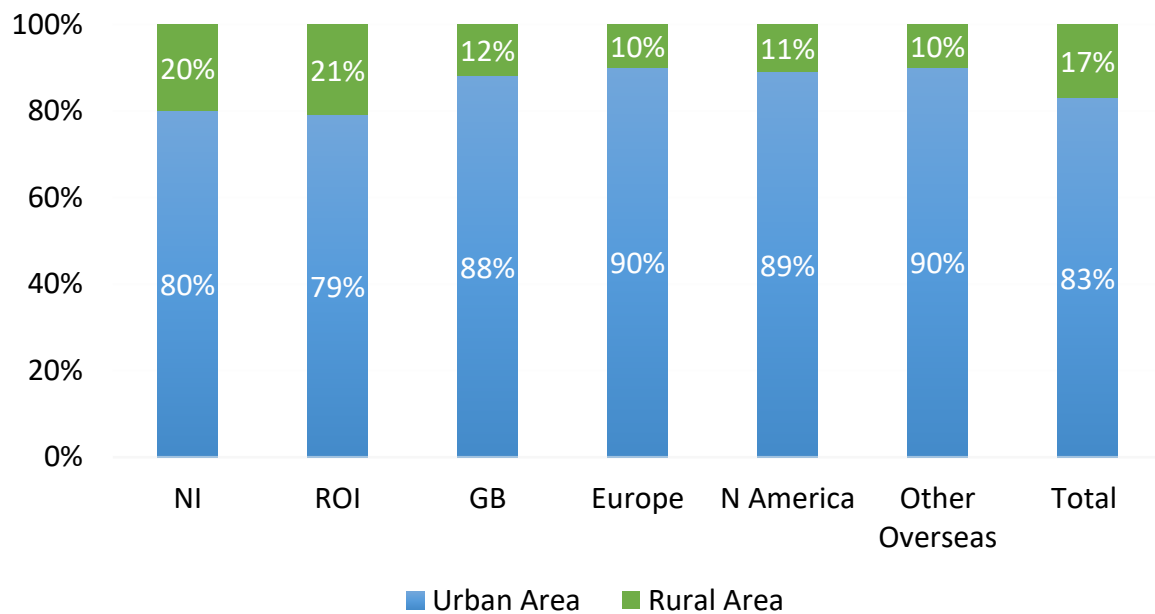
Figure 19: Overnight Trips to NI by Purpose of Visit, Urban/Rural Comparison, 2019



Sources: NI Tourism Statistics (NISRA) 2019, Northern Ireland Passenger Survey (NIPS), NISRA, Continuous Household Survey (CHS), NISRA, Survey of Overseas Travellers (SOT), Failte Ireland, Household Travel Survey (HTS), Central Statistics Office (CSO)

In 2019, 17% of all overnight visits were to rural areas, with a similar proportion of overnight visits (20%) comprising visits to friends and relatives. Just 4% of trips for business purposes were to a rural area, a decrease from 10% in 2018 (Figure 19).

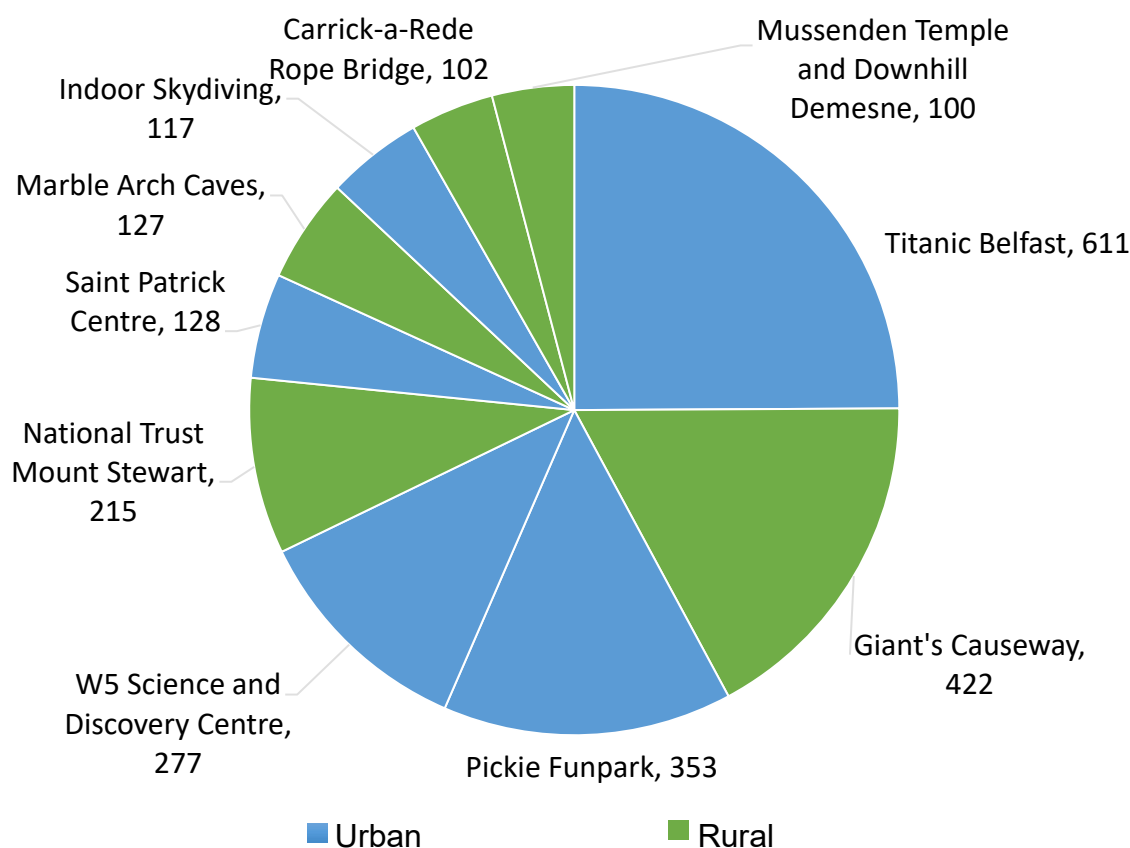
Figure 20: Overnight Trips to NI by Country of Residence, Urban/Rural Comparison, 2019



Sources: NI Tourism Statistics (NISRA) 2019, Northern Ireland Passenger Survey (NIPS), NISRA, Continuous Household Survey (CHS), NISRA, Survey of Overseas Travellers (SOT), Failte Ireland, Household Travel Survey (HTS), Central Statistics Office (CSO)

20% of overnight trips by NI residents were to a rural location, a decline of 3% from 2018, with a similar proportion (21%) of visitors from the Republic of Ireland making overnight trips to rural areas (Figure 20). Visits made by those coming from outside the island of Ireland were much less likely to be to a rural location

Figure 21: Number of Visits (000s) to the Top 10 Paid NI Attractions (Urban and Rural), 2022

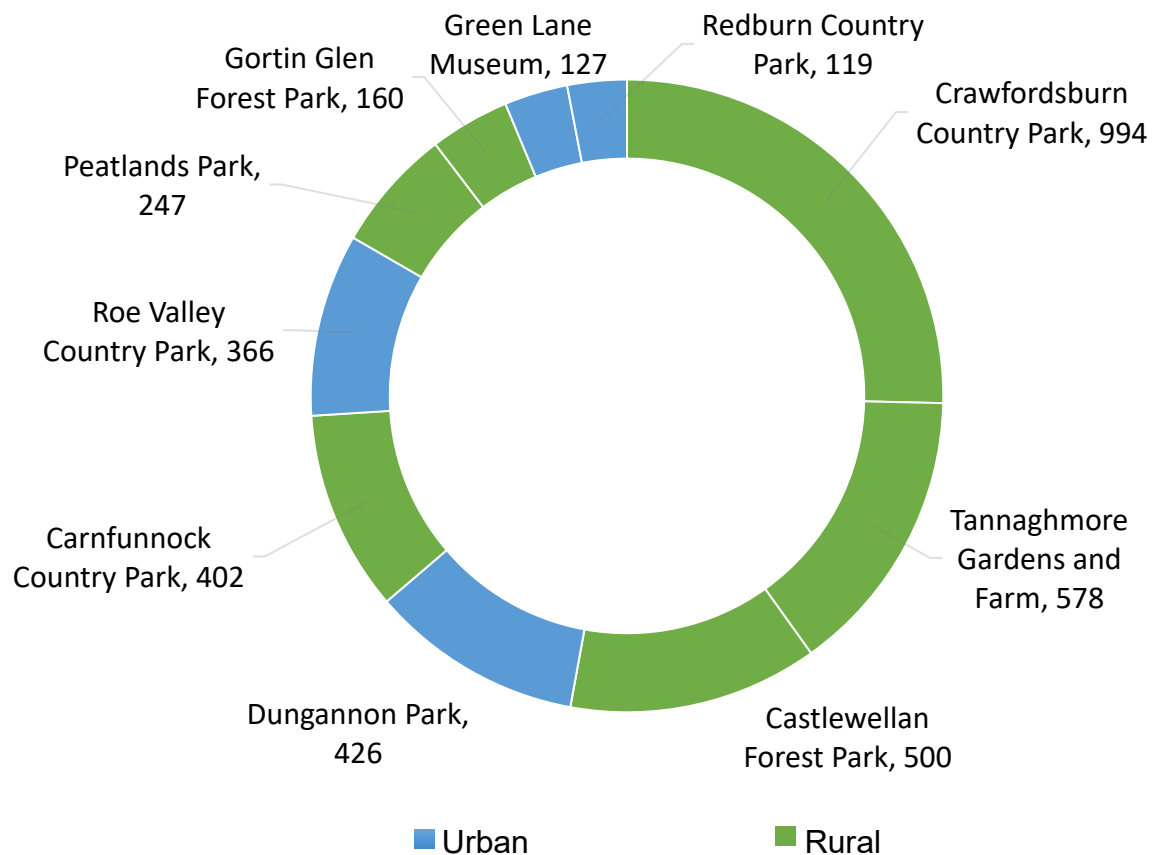


Source: NI Visitor Attraction Survey (NISRA) 2022

A review of statistical outputs carried out by NISRA has meant that the NI Visitor Attraction Survey did not take place in 2023, with no indication at present as to when it may be reinstated. As a result, Figures 21 and 22 and the associated commentary are based on the most recent published data (from the 2022 survey).

In 2022, 39% of all visits to the top ten tourist attractions in NI (Figure 21), were to attractions in rural locations. Five of the top ten paid attractions overall in 2022 were located in rural areas. 74% of all visits to the top ten country parks, forests and gardens were to those in rural areas (Figure 22).

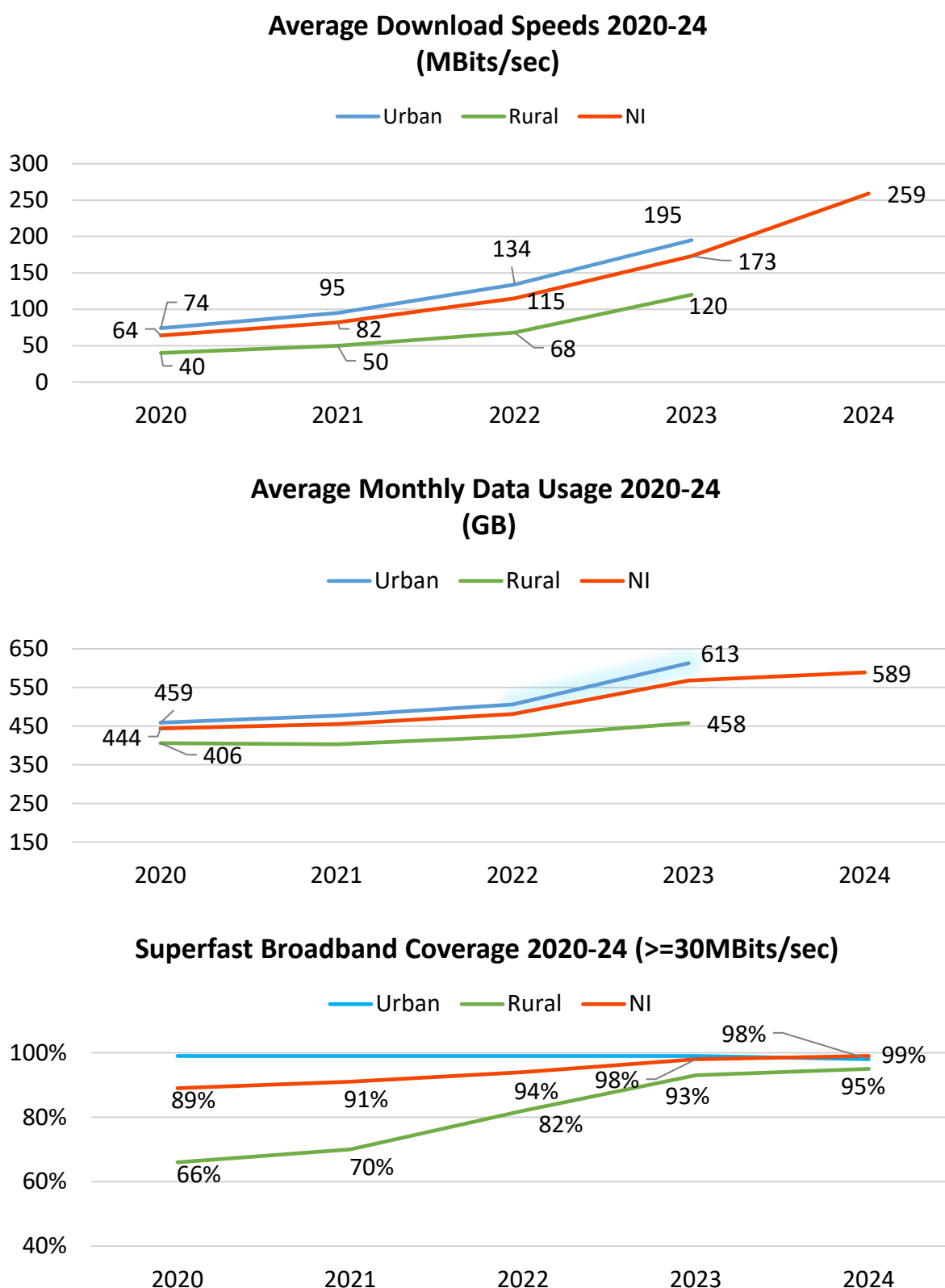
Figure 22: Visits (000s) to Top 10 Parks, Country Parks, Forests and Gardens (Urban and Rural), 2022



Source: NI Visitor Attraction Survey (NISRA) 2022

Connectivity

Figure 23: NI Average Broadband Download Speeds, Average Data Usage and Superfast Broadband Coverage, Urban/NI/Rural Comparison, 2020-24*



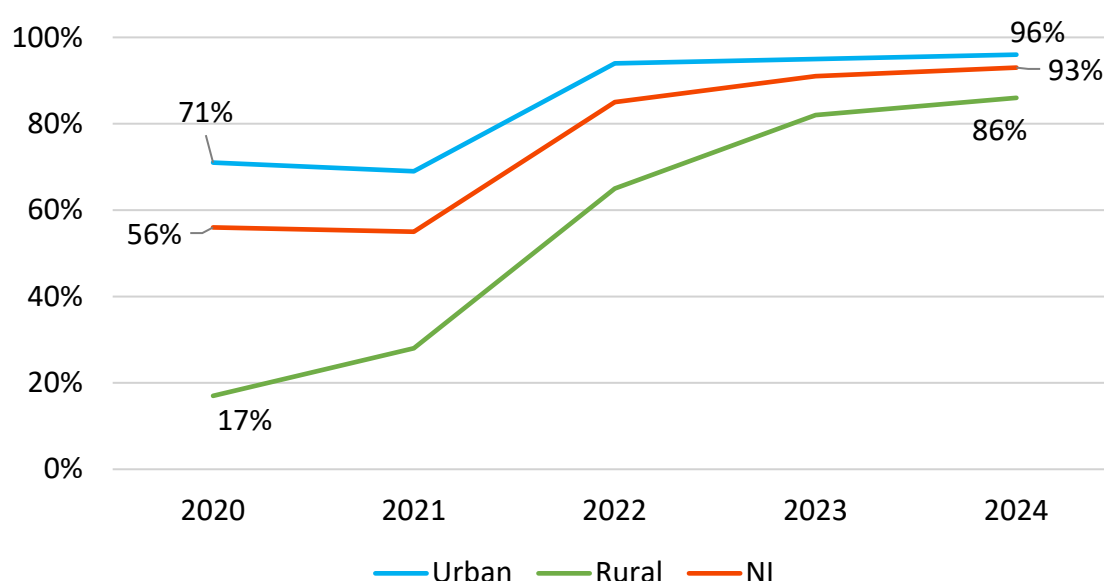
*Urban and Rural breakdowns of average download speeds and data usage are not available for 2024
Source: Connected Nations Report 2024 (Northern Ireland), Ofcom

Broadband availability and average download speeds have increased dramatically in recent years (Figure 23), largely due to the ongoing rollout of Project Stratum which is now nearing completion. This joint initiative by DAERA and DfE aimed to extend Next Generation Access (NGA) to premises across Northern Ireland. As of 2024, Northern Ireland has the highest availability (93% of premises) of full-fibre services of the four UK nations, ahead of England (69%), Wales (68%) and Scotland (62%).

In 2025, DfE is preparing to implement Project Gigabit to serve premises outside of the scope of Project Stratum. Recent investment in digital infrastructure has narrowed the urban/rural gap in broadband availability considerably - in 2024, 98% of rural homes in NI had access to superfast speeds, from 66% in 2020.

Access to full-fibre broadband connections has increased rapidly in both urban and rural areas since 2018. In 2024 this is approaching full coverage with 93% of residential properties able to access this service, and 86% of NI rural households having access to a full-fibre connection, from just 17% in 2020 (Figure 24).

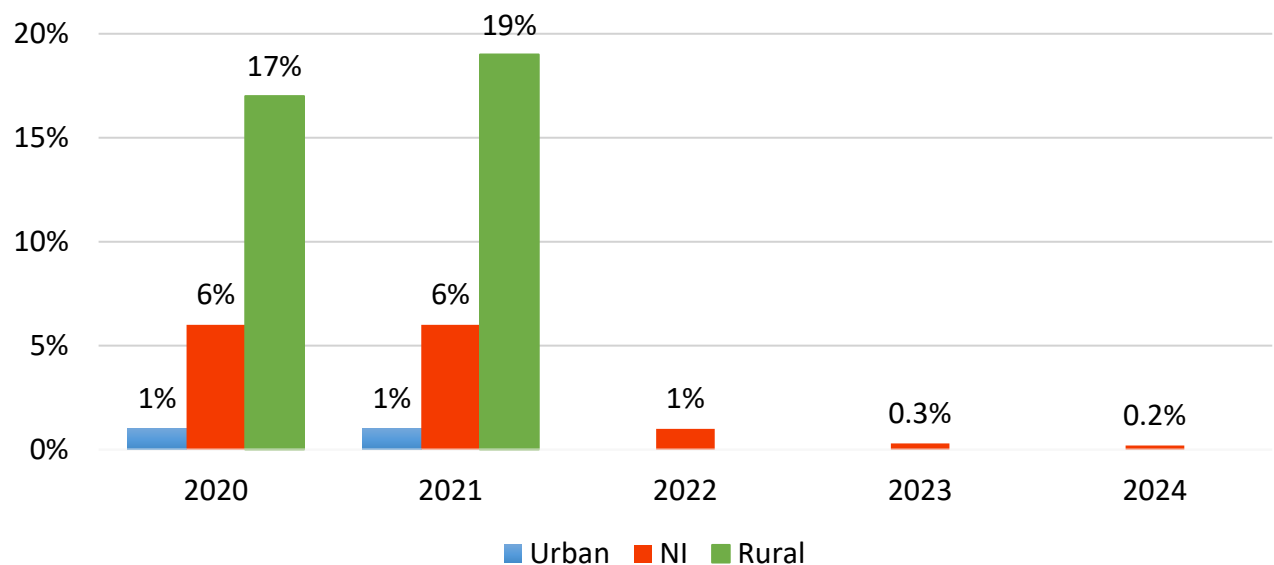
Figure 24: Coverage of Full-Fibre Broadband, Urban/Rural/NI Comparison (% of residential properties) 2020-24



Source: *Connected Nations Report 2024 (Northern Ireland)*, Ofcom

⁴ Defined by Ofcom as at least 10Mbit/s download and 1Mbit/s upload speeds, *Ofcom, 2021: Connected Nations 2021, Northern Ireland report*

Figure 25: Percentage of NI Properties Unable to achieve a 'Decent' broadband service, Urban/Rural Comparison, 2020-24¹



¹ Urban/Rural breakdowns are not available from 2022 onward due to small sample size

*Decent service is defined by Ofcom as at least 10Mbit/s download, and 1Mbit/s upload speeds
Based on 'Locale' classification of Urban and Rural

Source: Ofcom Connected Nations 2020-24, Northern Ireland Reports

https://www.ofcom.org.uk/data/assets/pdf_file/0032/249287/connected-nations-northern-ireland.pdf

There has been a substantial drop in the number of properties unable to achieve a 'decent' broadband connection from either a fixed or fixed wireless access (FWA) network. Ofcom estimates that in 2024, the NI figure is stands at fewer than 2,000 premises (residential and commercial), or approximately 0.2% of all premises (Figure 25).

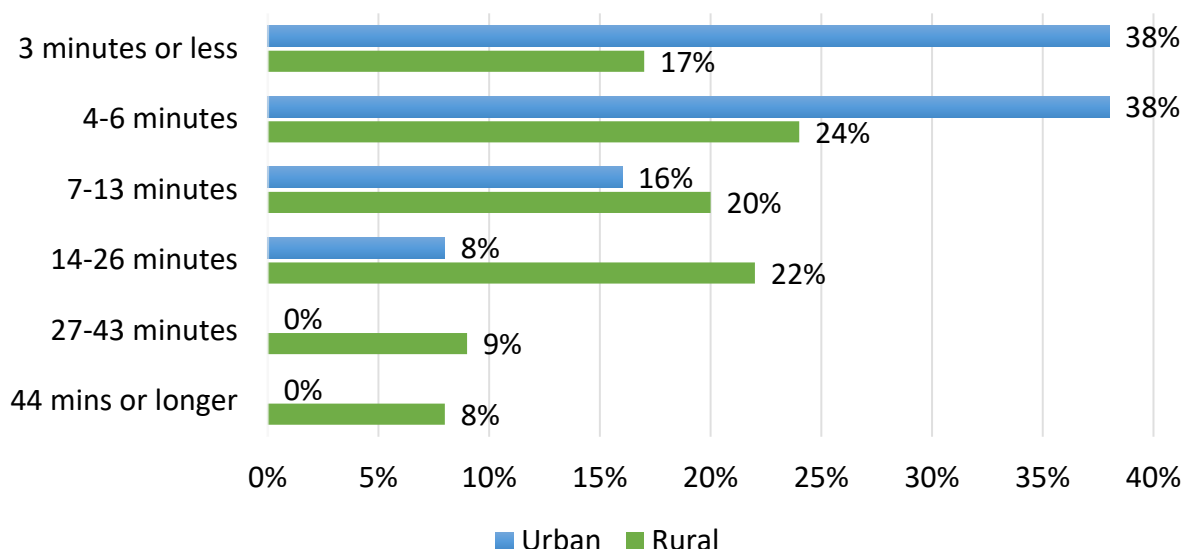
Physical Connectivity and Public Transport

Access to public transport in rural areas is often considerably more difficult when compared with towns and cities, and crucial rural bus services are under increasing threat due to decreasing profitability and reductions in subsidies.

Analysis from the Travel Survey for Northern Ireland (TSNI) for 2022 is not yet available at the time of publication (see Figure 11, Footnote 2). Trends and analysis in Figures 26 and 27 are based on data from the 2021 Survey, which is the most recent available information.

The 2021 survey revealed that just 17% of rural dwellers live within a 3-minute walk of the nearest bus stop, compared with 38% of those living in urban areas – with 8% of rural dwellers living a 44-minute or longer walk to their nearest stop (Figure 26).

Figure 26: Walking time to nearest bus stop, Urban/Rural Comparison, 2021



Source: Travel Survey for Northern Ireland (TSNI) 2021, DfI

This may account for the large majority of adults living in rural areas who report holding a full driving licence (91%, compared with 78% of urban dwellers). More than half (52%) of rural households reported 'never' using bus services.⁵

Distances to railway stations tend to be even longer for rural dwellers. When asked about walking distance from a railway station, an overwhelming majority (92%) of rural dwellers responded either that they would have to walk for 44 minutes or more, or that the distance was so great that the question did not apply.

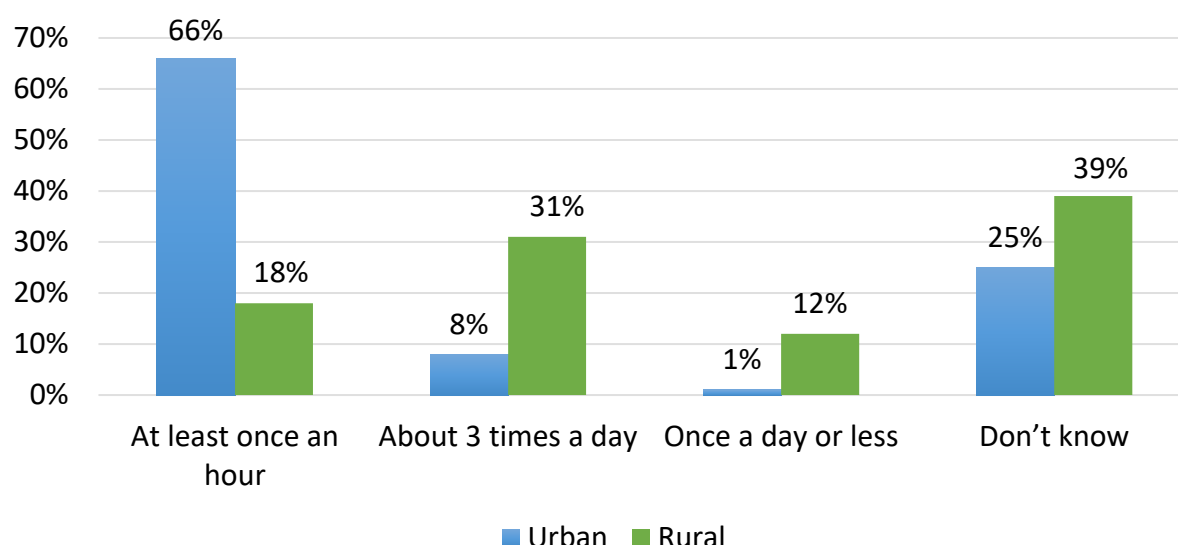
⁵ Jack, C and Patten, N. *The contribution of key basic services to rural dwellers' quality of life in Northern Ireland; a baseline review*, Agri-food and Biosciences Institute, 2014.

The frequency of public transport services also differs greatly between urban and rural areas. More than two thirds (69%) of urban dwellers reported a bus service frequency of at least once an hour, compared with 19% of those who live in rural locations (Figure 27). The frequency of rail services may be of less significance to the rural population, as railway stations tend to be concentrated in urban areas.

Distances to railway stations tend to be even longer for rural dwellers. When asked about walking distance from a railway station, an overwhelming majority (90%) of rural dwellers responded either that they would have to walk for 44 minutes or more, or that the distance was so great that the question did not apply.

The frequency of public transport services also differs greatly between urban and rural areas. Around two thirds (66%) of urban dwellers reported a bus service frequency of at least once an hour, compared with 18% of those who live in rural locations (Figure 27). The frequency of rail services may be of less significance to the rural population, as railway stations tend to be concentrated in urban areas.

Figure 27: Bus Service Frequency, Urban/Rural Comparison, 2021



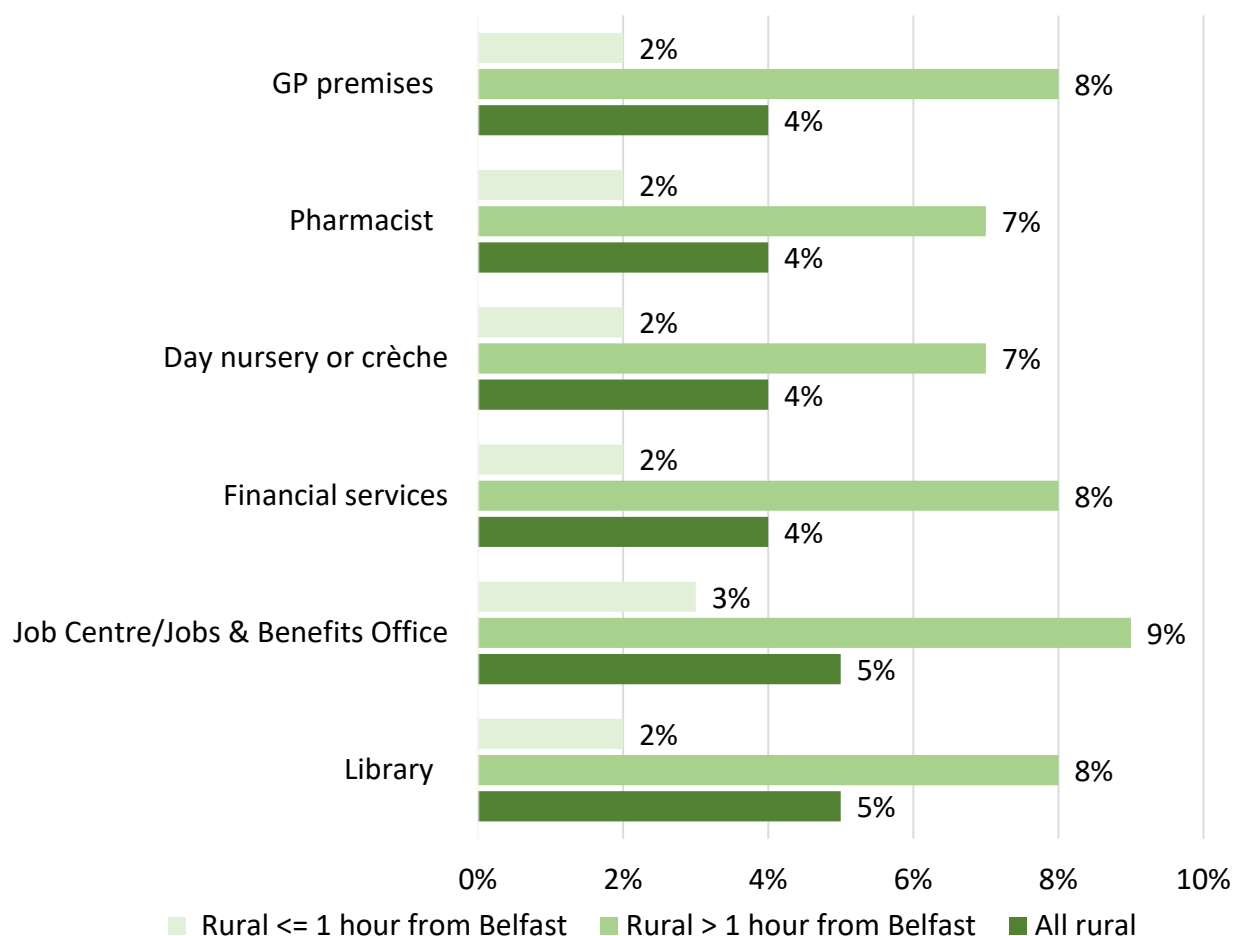
Source: Travel Survey for Northern Ireland (TSNI) 2021, DfI

Access to Services

Charts and commentary in this section are based on the 2017 Multiple Deprivation Measure (MDM) produced by NISRA, which is the most recent edition. NISRA hopes to produce an updated MDM to take account of demographic change since the 2021 Census, however there is no definitive timescale for this work at present. As such, data in Figures 28 and 29 is sourced from the 2017 MDM.

Access to key services can be a marker of disadvantage for people in rural communities, particularly for those living in more remote areas and for those without private transport. In rural areas more than an hour from Belfast, the 2017 NISRA Multiple Deprivation Measure (MDM) indicates that access to key services by public transport was particularly poor at this time (Figure 27) - while for others, journeys made by public transport may simply be impractical due to a combination of journey length and remote location.

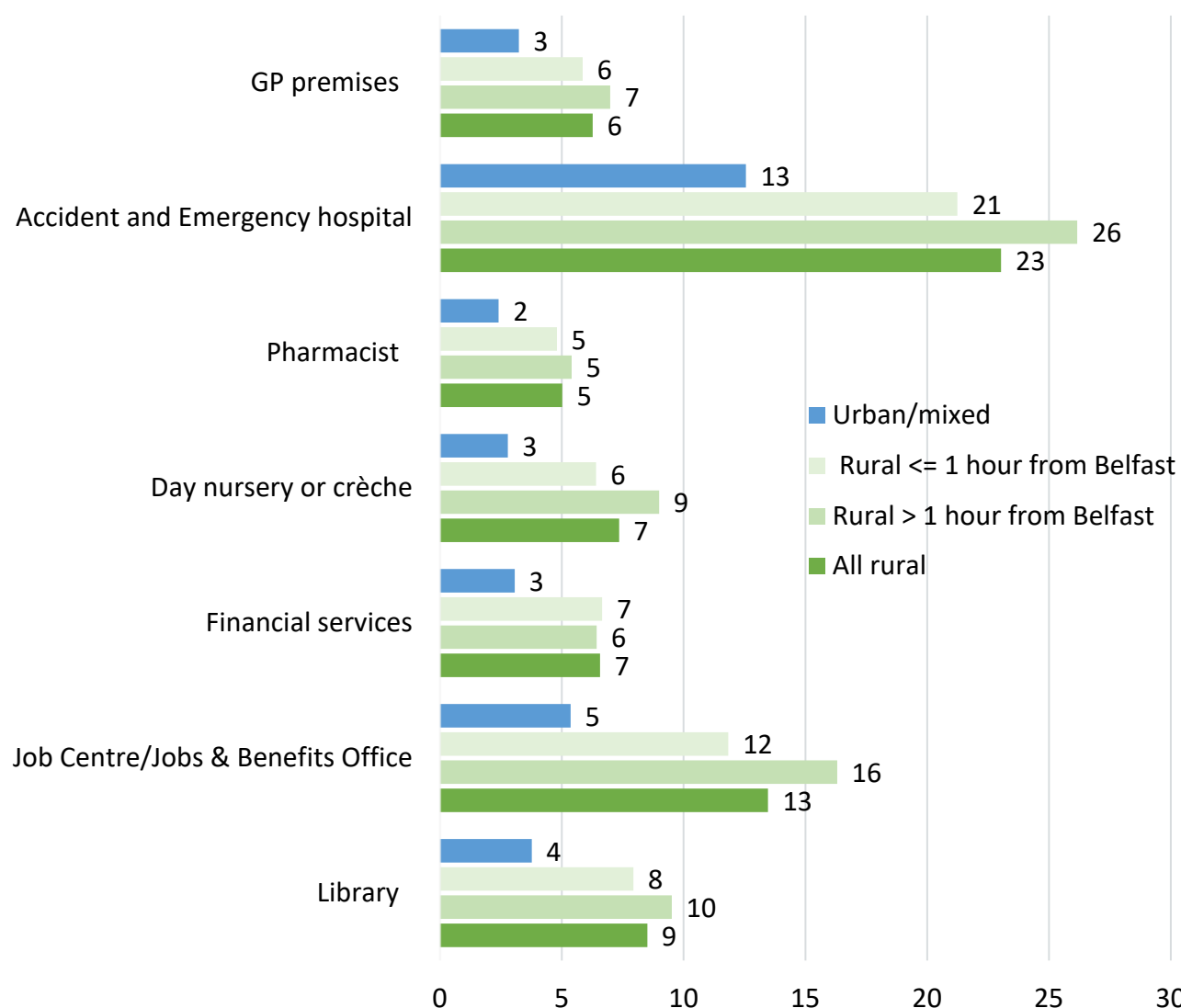
Figure 28: Proportion of Small Areas without Public Transport Access to selected services, 2017



Note: 'Financial Services' includes ATMs, banks, building societies and credit unions.

Source: Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measure (MDM), 2017

Figure 29: Average Journey Times (in minutes, by car) to selected services, 2017



Notes: 'Financial Services' includes ATMs, banks, building societies and credit unions.

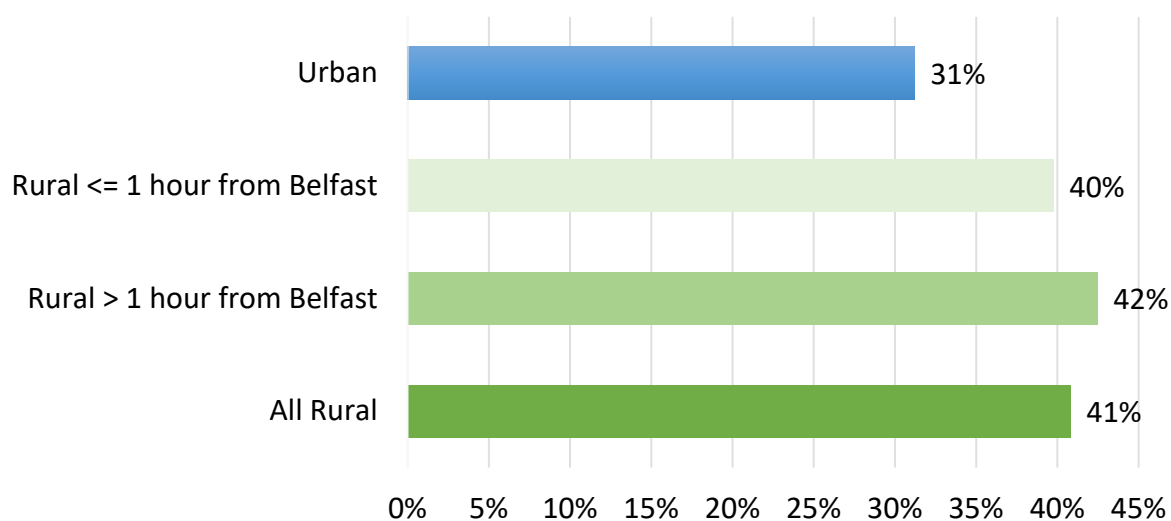
Source: Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measure (MDM), 2017

According to the 2017 MDM, for those living rural areas travelling by car, journey times to key services were substantially higher than for those living in towns and cities - sometimes double or greater. This disparity was again more pronounced in those rural areas further from Belfast.

The greatest urban/rural disparity in travel times were to hospitals with an accident and emergency facility, and to job centres/jobs and benefits offices. Those living in rural areas more than an hour from Belfast, were on average, a 26-minute drive away from an Accident and Emergency Department, compared to an average 13-minute drive time for those living in urban areas (Figure 29).

Health and Wellbeing

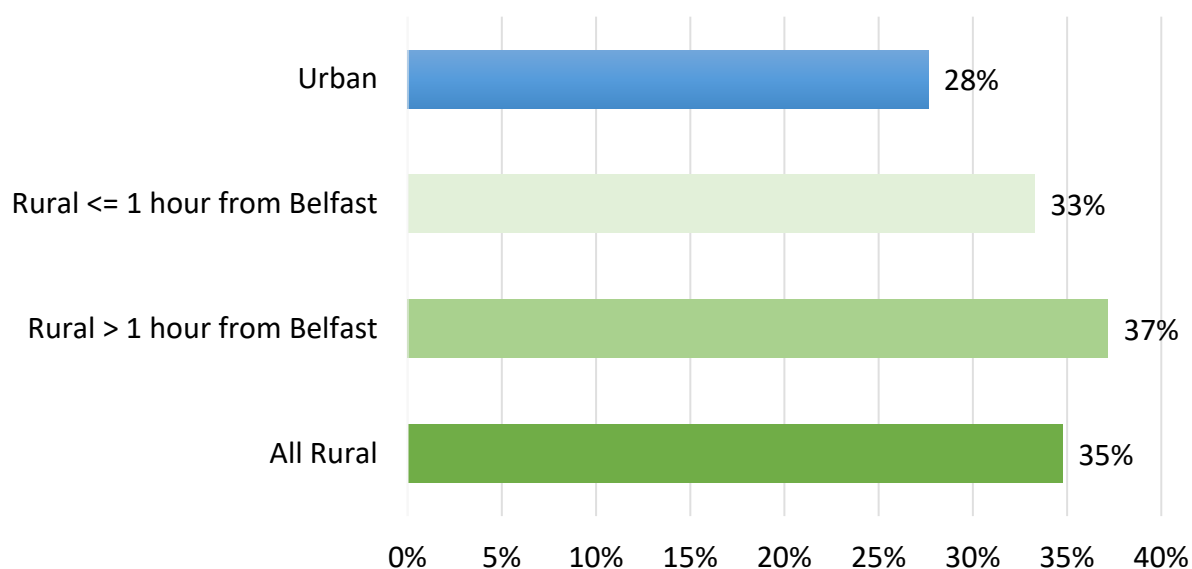
Figure 30: Self-Reported 'High' Personal Happiness, Urban/Rural Comparison, 2022-23



Note: Based on those scoring 9-10 on the question: 'Overall, how happy did you feel yesterday? Where 0 is 'not at all happy' and 10 is 'completely happy'.

Source: Continuous Household Survey, NISRA 2022-23

Figure 31: Self-Reported 'High' Life Satisfaction, Urban/Rural Comparison, 2022-23



Note: Based on those scoring 9-10 on the question: 'Overall, how satisfied are you with your life nowadays? Where 0 is 'not at all satisfied' and 10 is 'completely satisfied'.

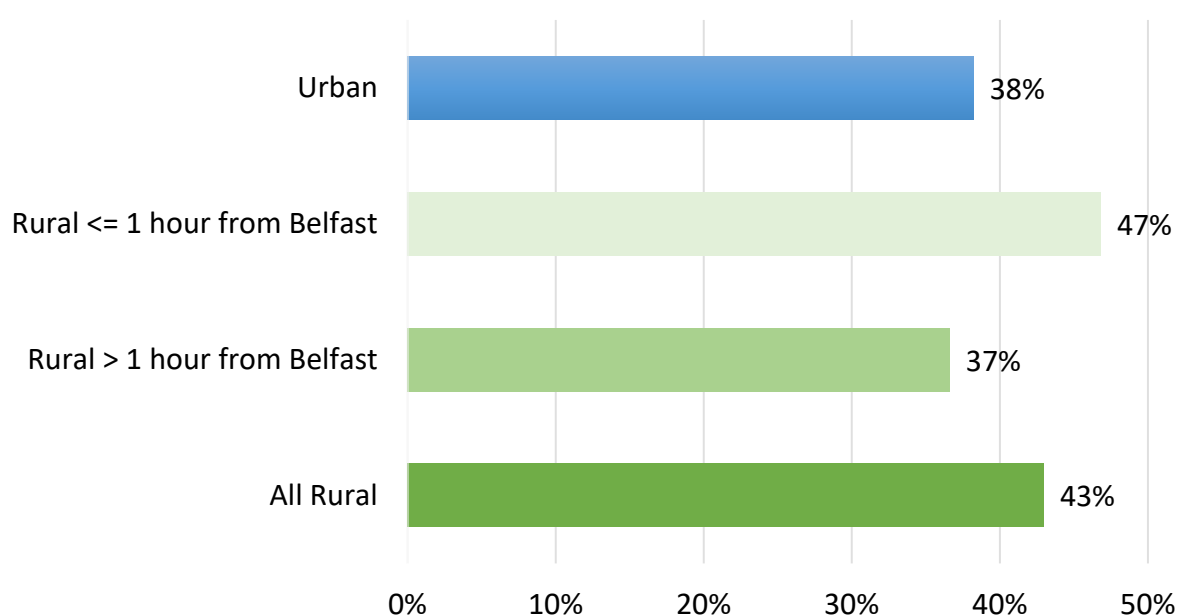
Source: Continuous Household Survey, NISRA 2022-23

The data source for Wellbeing urban/rural comparisons changed in 2020 from the ONS Annual Population survey to the NISRA Continuous Household Survey (CHS). TEO statisticians are currently working to provide the Individual Wellbeing 2023-24 report in HTML format, and this has caused a delay in the TEO publication schedule. It is hoped that urban/rural data from this report will be available by late February 2025, as a result the analysis in Figures 30-32 is based on the most recent published data.

In 2022-23, the survey found that people living in rural areas were consistently more likely to report high happiness levels (41% compared to 31% in urban areas, Figure 30) and high life satisfaction (35% compared to 28% in urban areas, Figure 31).

Similarly, rural dwellers were more likely to report lower anxiety levels than their urban counterparts (43% to 38%, Figure 32). However, the proportion of rural respondents reporting low anxiety has decreased by 5% from 48% in the 2021-22 survey.

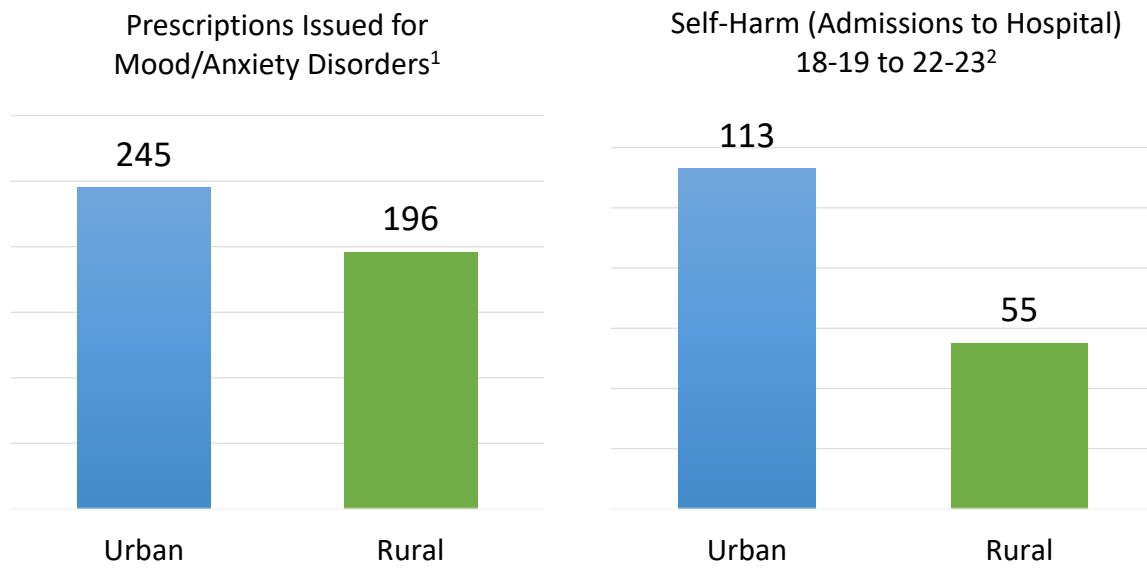
Figure 32: Self-Reported 'Low' Anxiety, Urban/Rural Comparison, 2022-23



Note: Based on those scoring 0-1 on the question: 'Overall, how anxious did you feel yesterday? Where 0 is 'not at all anxious' and 10 is 'completely anxious'.

Source: Continuous Household Survey, NISRA 2022-23

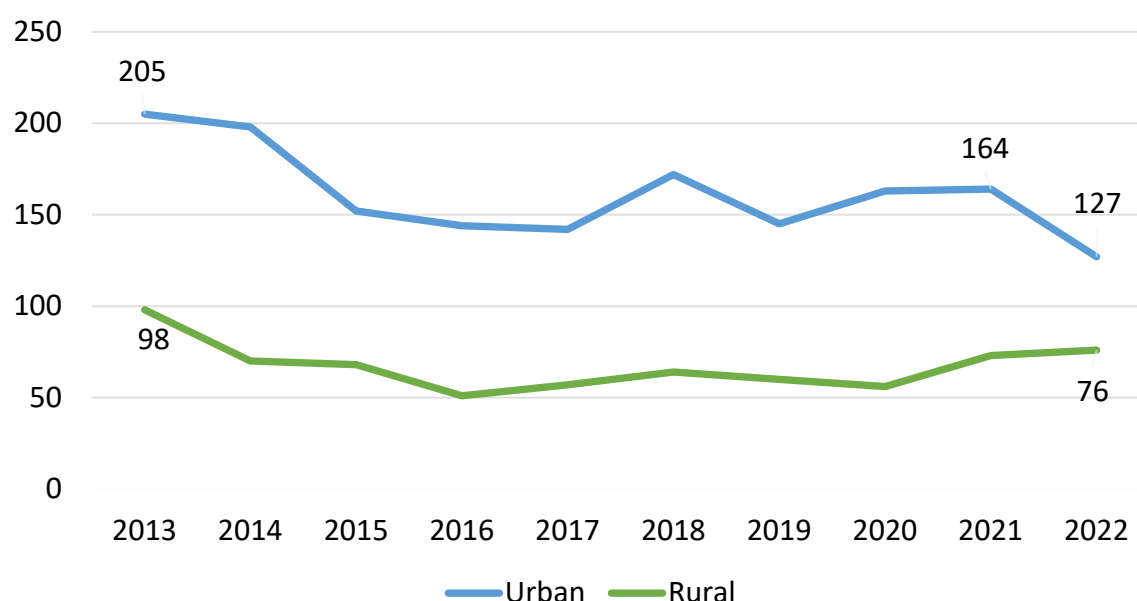
Figure 33: Prescriptions Issued for Mood Disorders (2022), Hospital Admissions for Self-Harm (to 2022-23), Urban/Rural Comparison



Notes: 1. Persons prescribed per 1,000 population, 2. Per 100,000 population

Source: Health Inequalities Monitoring Report 2024, Department of Health (DoH)

Figure 34: Number of Deaths Registered by Suicide in Northern Ireland, Urban/Rural Comparison, 2013-22



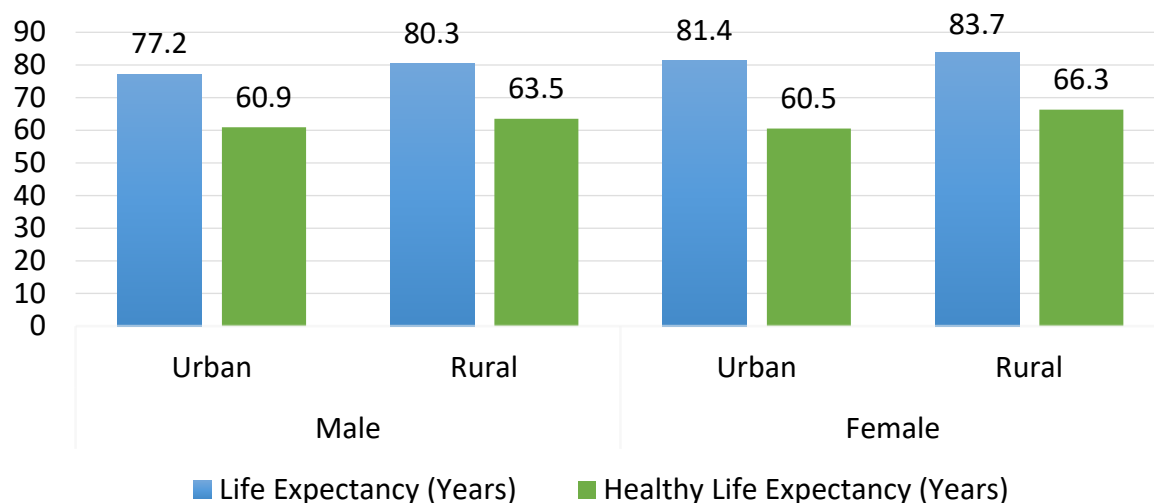
Note: All deaths data supplied by NISRA Vital Statistics Unit is based on the year of registration rather than the year of occurrence unless otherwise stated. Events such as suicide are likely to be referred to the coroner. This can take some time, therefore deaths recorded each year may have occurred prior to the registration year.

Source: NISRA Vital Statistics Unit (DoF), 2024

Up to 2021-22, the rate of hospital admissions due to self-harm in rural areas is less than half that in urban areas (Figure 33). Similarly, the number of prescriptions issued for medications to treat mood and anxiety disorders (per 1,000 population) in rural areas, is around 20% lower than in urban areas.

Fewer deaths by suicide are registered annually in rural areas, with the number of registered suicides in rural areas declining by (43%) between 2013 and 2020 (Figure 34). However, this figure rose sharply between 2020 and 2021, from 56 to 73, an increase of 30% in a single year, increasing further to 76 deaths in 2022.

Figure 35: Life Expectancy at Birth, and ‘Healthy’ Life Expectancy¹ (Years), Urban/Rural Comparison, 2020-22



1. This is the average number of years a person can expect to live in good health. HLE provides an estimate of lifetime spent in 'Very Good' or 'Good' health, calculated using respondents' perception of their own health according to the Health Survey Northern Ireland (HSNI).

Source: Health Inequalities Monitoring Report 2024, Department of Health (DoH)

Health inequalities monitoring data from DoH (covering 2020-22) suggests that life expectancy continues to be notably higher in rural areas in NI, than in urban areas. Males living in rural areas can, on average, expect to live more than three years longer, and females almost two and a half years longer than their urban counterparts.

This disparity is further emphasised in the projected 'healthy' years of life – rural males can expect just over two and a half additional years of 'healthy' life, and females almost six years more on average than urban dwellers (Figure 35).

Table 2: Median Emergency Service (Ambulance and Fire) Response Times (Minutes and Seconds), Urban/Rural Comparison, 2019-23

Ambulance	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Urban	00:13:14	00:15:01	00:22:45	00:20:59	00:22:12
Rural	00:20:33	00:22:34	00:28:46	00:27:53	00:31:39
Fire Service	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
Urban	00:07:02	00:07:04	00:07:22	00:07:27	00:07:18
Rural	00:14:36	00:14:09	00:14:33	00:14:52	00:15:01

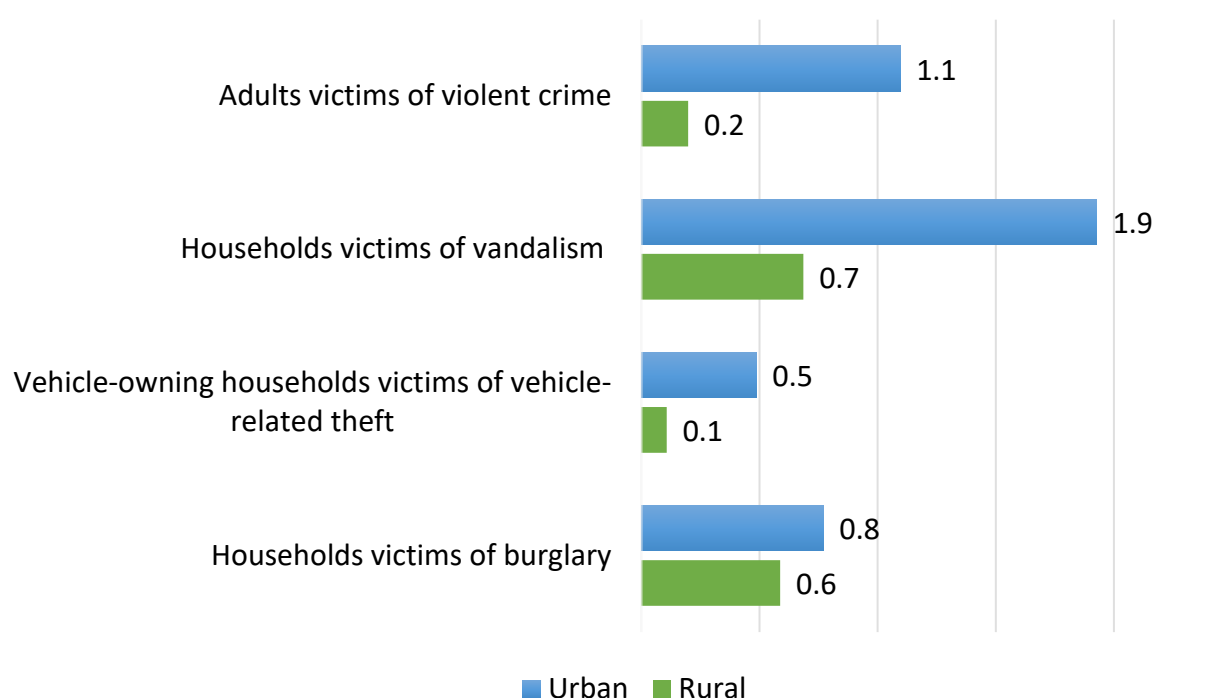
Source: Health Inequalities Monitoring Report 2024, Department of Health (DoH)

In terms of access to emergency services, ambulance and fire service response times were substantially longer in rural than in urban areas (Table 2). Average response times for ambulances have been lengthening in both urban and rural areas between 2019 and 2023, with average response times for an ambulance in rural locations passing 30 minutes for the first time in 2023.

Fire service response times have remained comparatively low over the same period. In 2022/23, people living in rural areas waited on average approximately 15 minutes for fire service response, more than twice as long as those living in urban areas (7 minutes 18 seconds on average).

Crime

Figure 36: NI Crime Victimisation Rates (as % of those surveyed), Urban/Rural Comparison 2021-22¹



**Bases for vehicle-related theft will be lower as they are based on vehicle owners only.*

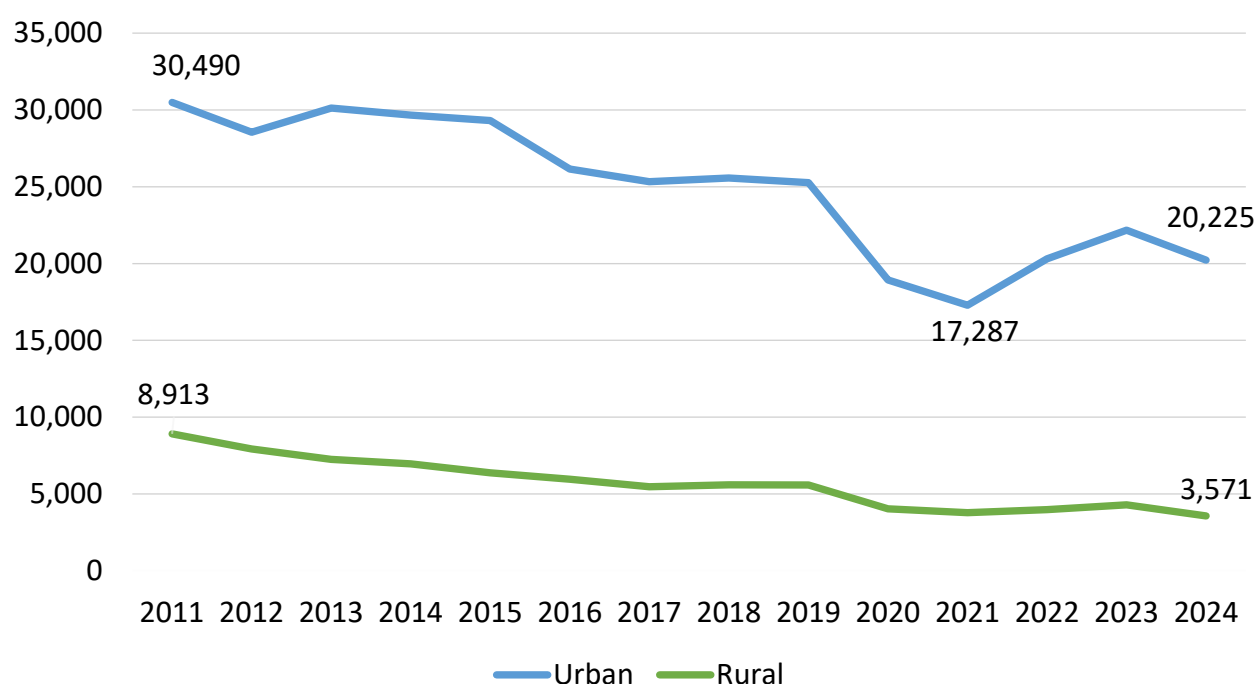
¹ Traditionally, the NISCS has been a face-to-face interview survey. Following government advice on Covid-19, however, face-to-face interviews were suspended in March 2020 and interviews were subsequently conducted via telephone for the 2020/21 and 2021/22 survey years. The 2020/21 and 2021/22 surveys will therefore be considered as discrete survey years and referred to as the 2020/21 and 2021/22 Northern Ireland Safe Community Telephone Survey (NISCTS) respectively.

Source: NI Safe Community Telephone Survey (DoJ), 2021-22

The Department of Justice (DoJ) had previously published the Crime Victimisation Rates for 2022-23, but these are currently being revised due to unforeseen circumstances. As a result, the 2021-22 figures remain the most up to date published figures (Figure 36) and analysis is based on these.

The 2021-22 NI Safe Community Telephone Survey results suggested that people living in urban areas were much more likely to experience certain types of crime than their rural counterparts, although the proportion of those surveyed having experienced each crime type was generally low. Urban households were almost three times more likely to experience acts of vandalism, with urban adults more than five times more likely to experience domestic burglary, than their rural counterparts.

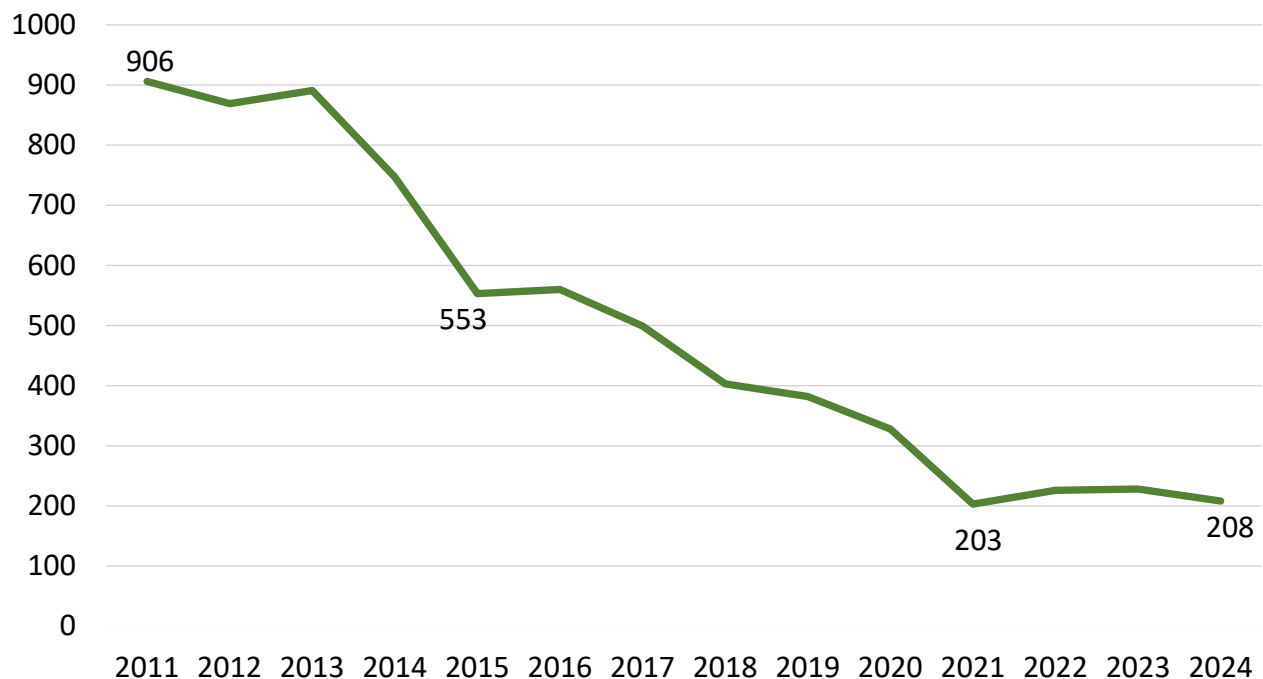
Figure 37: Trends in Burglary, Robbery and Theft Offences, Urban/Rural Comparison, 2011 to 2024



Source: *Agricultural and Rural Crime in NI Bulletin (PSNI), January 2025*

There had been a steady decline in the numbers of recorded burglary, robbery and theft offences in NI overall from 2011 to 2021. The rate of decrease has slowed since 2016/17 but decreased markedly between 2019 and 2020 in both rural, and especially urban areas, potentially due to limits on outdoor activities as a result of Covid-19 restrictions. The number of recorded offences in rural areas has continued an overall trend of slow decline between 2021 and 2024, while recorded offences in urban areas have increased by 15% over the same period, despite a drop between 2023 and 2024. Between 2011 and 2024, the number of burglary, robbery and theft offences recorded in rural areas has fallen by more than half (60%, Figure 37).

Figure 38: NI Trends in Agriculture Crime (Burglary, Robbery and Theft Offences for Agricultural- based Activity), Rural Areas, 2011 to 2024

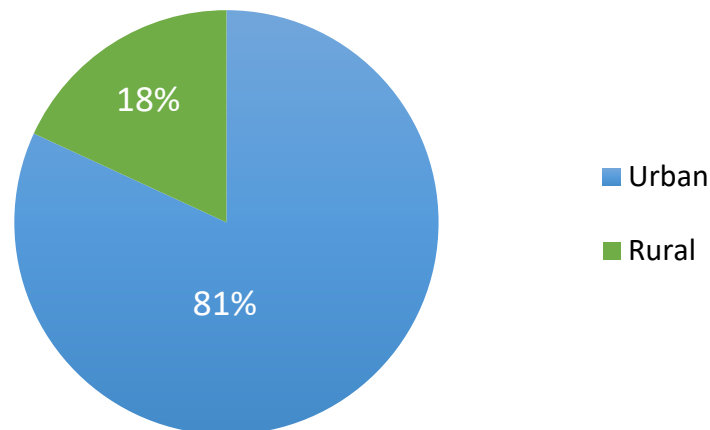


Source: Agricultural and Rural Crime in NI Bulletin (PSNI), January 2025

Over the period 2011 to 2021, the numbers of recorded offences relating to agricultural crime (burglary, robbery, and theft offences from agricultural premises) in rural areas has declined by more than three quarters (78%), from 906 in 2011, to 203 in 2021 (Figure 38).

There has been little fluctuation in the number of offences recorded between 2021 and 2024. It should be noted that agriculture-related crimes occur mainly, but not exclusively, in rural areas.

Figure 39: Police Recorded Crime (all offences), Urban/Rural Split, 2023-24*

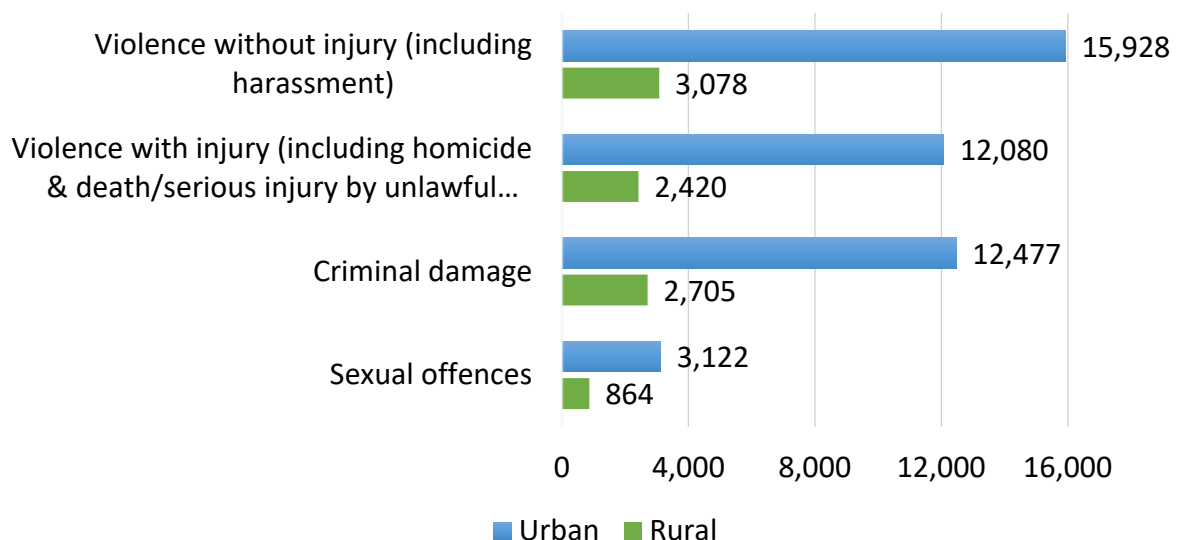


**1% of cases could not be classified due to missing postcode*

Source: PSNI, 2024

The 2023-24 Police Recorded Crime statistics from the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) revealed that more than three quarters (81%) of all recorded offences occurred in urban areas, with 19% of all recorded offences occurring in rural areas, a figure unchanged from 2021 (Figure 39). It is notable however, that the total number of recorded crimes in rural areas decreased by some 10% from 2022-23, with the total number of recorded crimes in NI decreasing by approximately 6% over the same period.

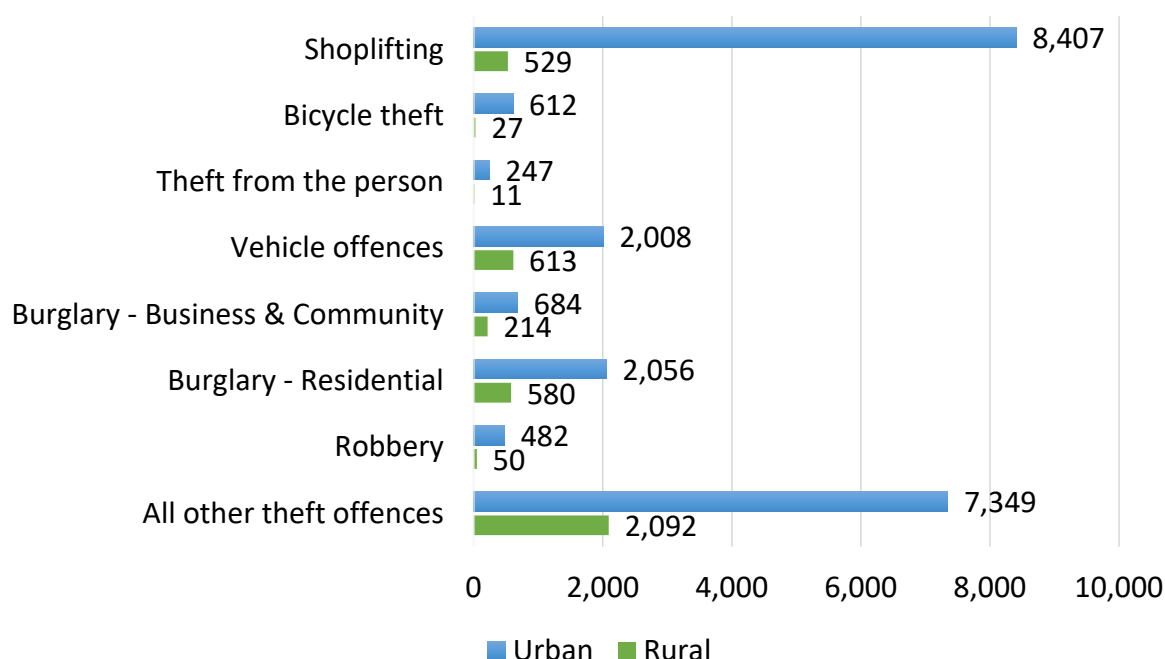
Figure 40: Police Recorded Crime (violent crime, criminal damage and sexual offences, Urban/Rural Comparison, 2023-24



Source: PSNI, 2024

Violent crimes, criminal damage and sexual offences, are much more likely to be recorded in urban areas. In 2023-24, the numbers of recorded offences in these categories mirrored the overall urban/rural split – with approximately five times as many offences recorded in urban areas. The gap narrows slightly in terms of sexual offences, where just over three quarters (78%) were recorded in urban areas (Figure 40). The total number of recorded crimes in urban and rural areas across all categories decreased from 2022-23, in line with the decrease in total recorded crime.

Figure 41: Police Recorded Crime (Robbery, Burglary and Theft Offences), Urban/Rural Comparison, 2023-24

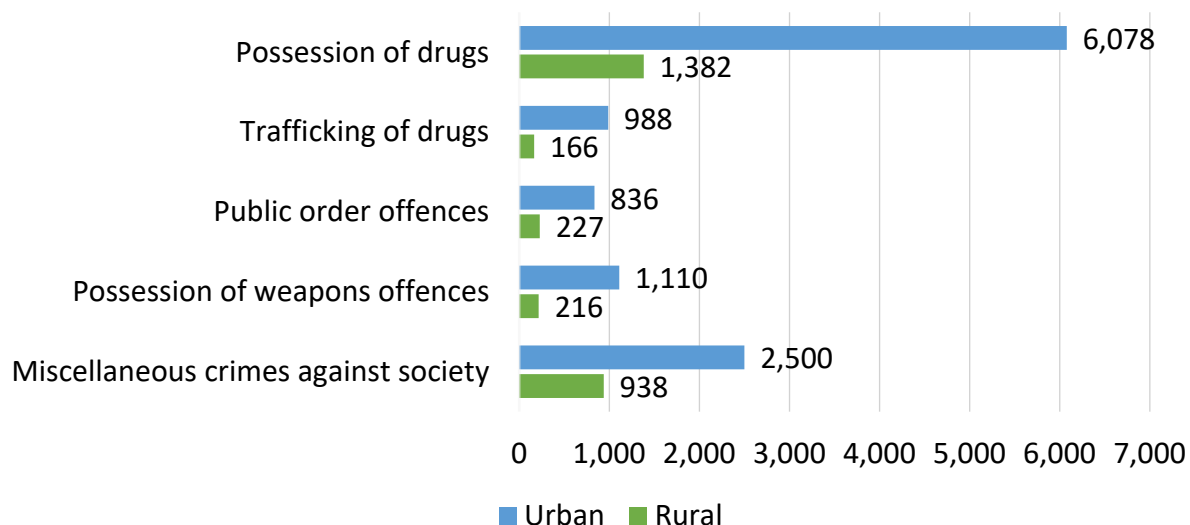


Source: PSNI, 2024

Robbery, burglary and theft offences were substantially more likely to be recorded in urban areas in 2023-24 (Figure 41). Shoplifting offences recorded in urban areas (94%) dwarfed the total for rural areas however, shoplifting offences in rural areas increased by more than a quarter (26%) from the previous year.

Recorded residential burglaries slightly across the same period, by 5% in urban areas and by 6% in rural areas.

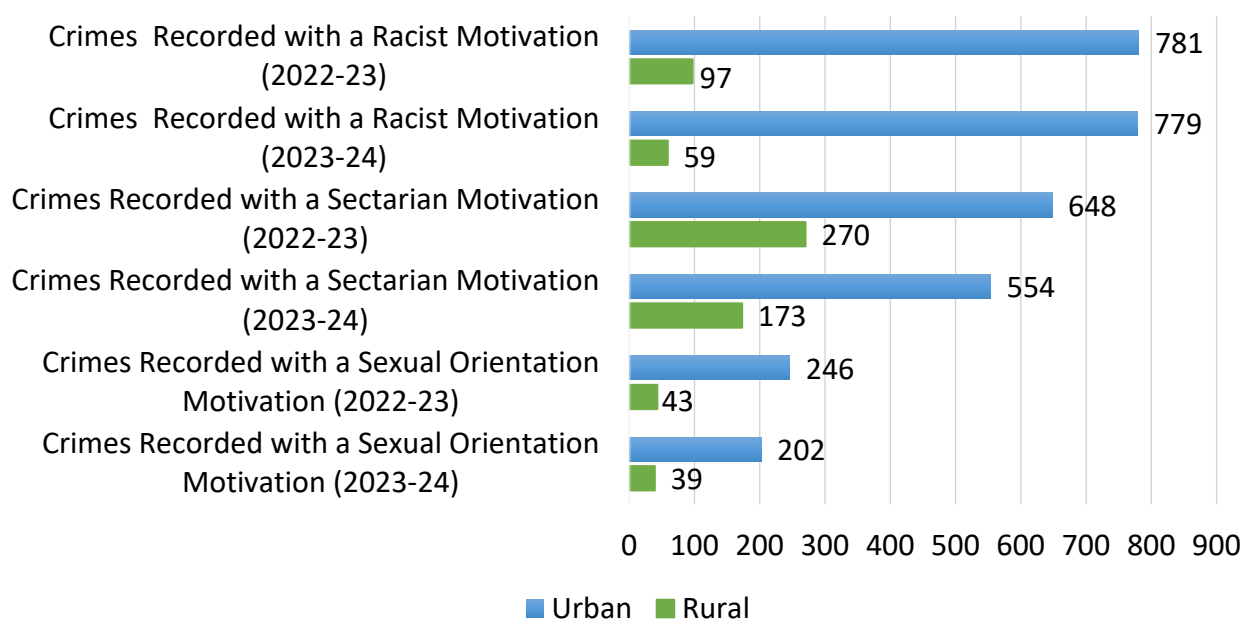
Figure 42: Police Recorded Crime (Drugs, Weapons, Public Order and Miscellaneous Offences), Urban/Rural Comparison, 2023-24



Source: PSNI, 2024

Recorded offences for drugs, weapon possession, public order and miscellaneous crimes again show a strong affinity with urban areas, however recorded drug possession offences decreased by 10% in 2023-24 from the previous year (Figure 42).

Figure 43: Recorded Crimes with a Hate Motivation, Urban/Rural Comparison, 2022-23 to 2023-24



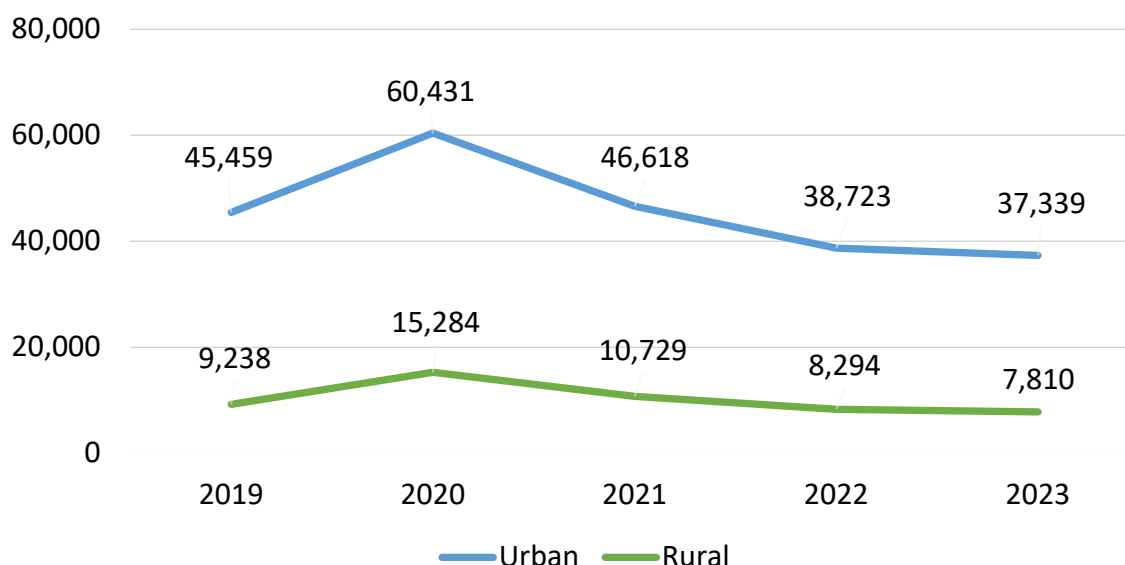
Source: PSNI, 2024

Hate crime remains a significant issue in NI society. An urban/rural comparison of the number of recorded offences with a racist, sectarian or sexual orientation motivation reveals mixed results across the three types of offence in both urban and rural areas between 2022-23 and 2023-24.

During this period, recorded racially motivated crimes barely changed in urban areas, but decreased by more than a third (39%) in rural areas. Recorded crimes with a sectarian motivation decreased by 15% in urban areas, with a much more substantial decrease of more than a third (36%) over the same period in rural areas, continuing the trend from the previous year.

Recorded crimes with a sexual orientation motivation showed a decline in both urban and rural areas between 2022-23 and 2023-24, with the urban decline in recorded crimes more pronounced (18%, Figure 43).

Figure 44: Recorded Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB) Incidents, Urban/Rural Comparison, 2019-23



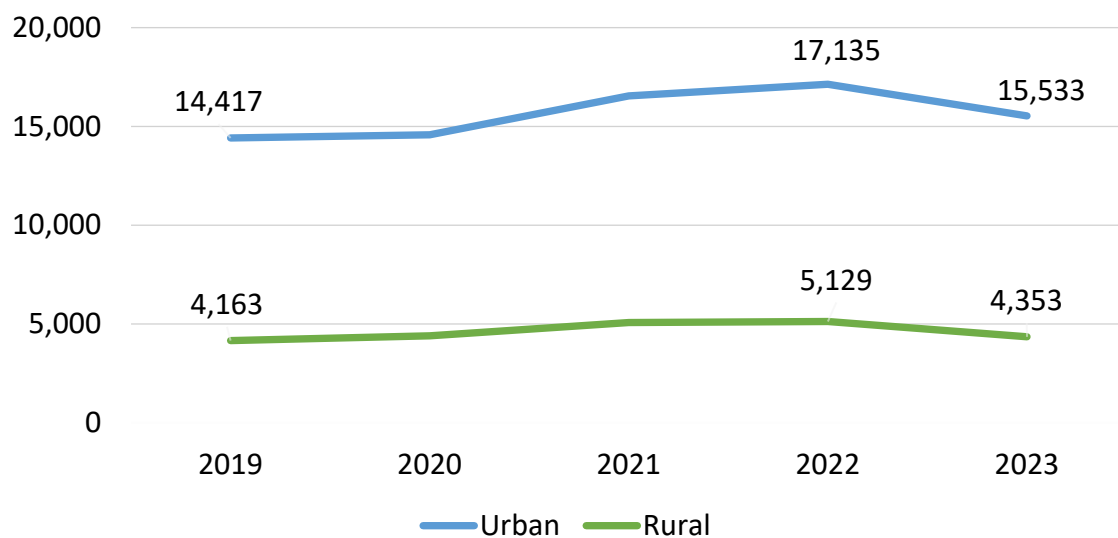
Source: PSNI, 2024

The number of anti-social behaviour (ASB) incidents recorded by PSNI has seen a decline in both urban and rural areas from a peak in 2020, and then decreasing considerably to 2023. While the vast majority (83%) of these incidents were recorded in urban areas in 2023, they are not an exclusively urban phenomenon.

From 2020 to 2023, recorded ASB incidents in urban areas decreased by more than a third (38%), with recorded incidents in rural areas over the same period dropping by almost half (49%, Figure 44).

Conversely, the number of crimes recorded with a domestic abuse motivation has increased over the period 2019-2022 in both urban and rural areas, before notably declining between 2022 and 2023, by 9% and 15% respectively (Figure 45).

Figure 45: Crimes Recorded with a Domestic Abuse Motivation, Urban/Rural Comparison, 2019-23

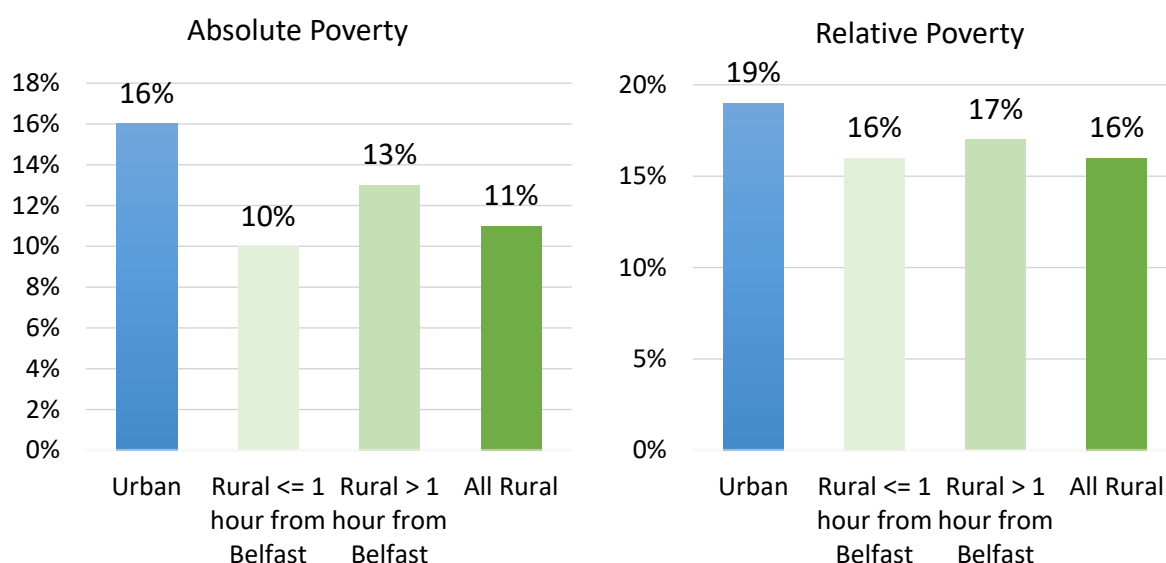


Source: PSNI, 2024

Household Income, Housing and Poverty

Rural households are at times just as likely as those in urban areas to fall below either relative or absolute poverty levels. However, overall figures for rural areas can disguise intra-rural differences in the experience of poverty. In 2022-23, poverty levels in households in rural areas which are more than an hour's journey from Belfast were higher than those of rural areas closer to the city (Figure 46).

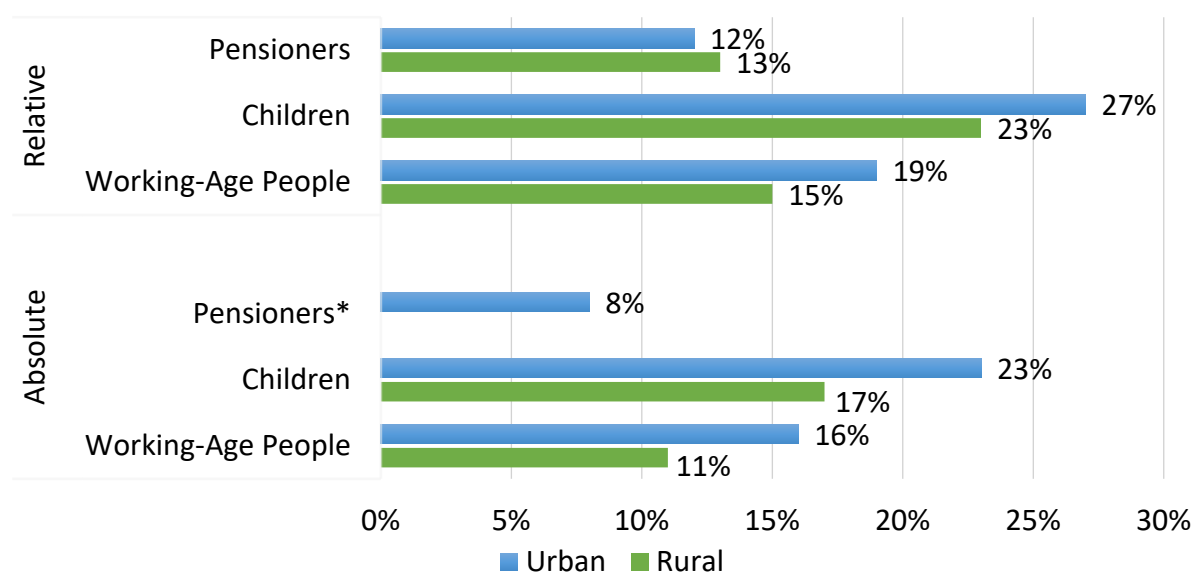
Figure 46: Proportion of Households in Poverty (after Housing Costs), Urban/Rural Comparison, 2022-23



Source: *Poverty and Income Inequality Report (PII)*, Department for Communities (DfC), 2022-23

In 2022-23, a greater proportion of the 'children' group was in relative poverty in urban areas than rural areas, with more than a quarter (27%) of the urban 'children' group in this category. This trend is mirrored in the 'working age' groups across both poverty types – those in urban areas were substantially more likely to be in relative or absolute poverty than their rural counterparts, which is the reverse of the 2021-22 trend (Figure 47).

Figure 47: Proportion of Individuals in Poverty (after Housing Costs), Urban/Rural Comparison, 2022-23



*Figure unavailable due to small sample size

Source: Poverty and Income Inequality Report (PII), Department for Communities (DfC), 2022-23

Table 3: Social Welfare Benefit Claimants/Recipients, Urban/Rural Comparison, August 2024

	DLA Recipients	PIP Claimants	ESA Recipients	Carer's Allowance Recipients	Income Support Claimants	Pension Credit Claimants	Universal Credit Claimants
Urban	49,000	149,300	63,300	32,700	7,880	38,310	125,020
Rural	23,420	64,330	26,680	15,440	2,590	20,830	43,610
<i>Unknown</i>	40	450	40	30	10	40	450
NI Total	72,460	214,080	90,020	48,180	10,470	59,170	169,150

All figures have been rounded to the nearest ten. Totals may not sum due to rounding. In producing this analysis, individual records were attributed to a LGD or as Urban/Rural on the basis of their postcode. Not all records can be correctly allocated using this method, and some cannot be allocated at all.

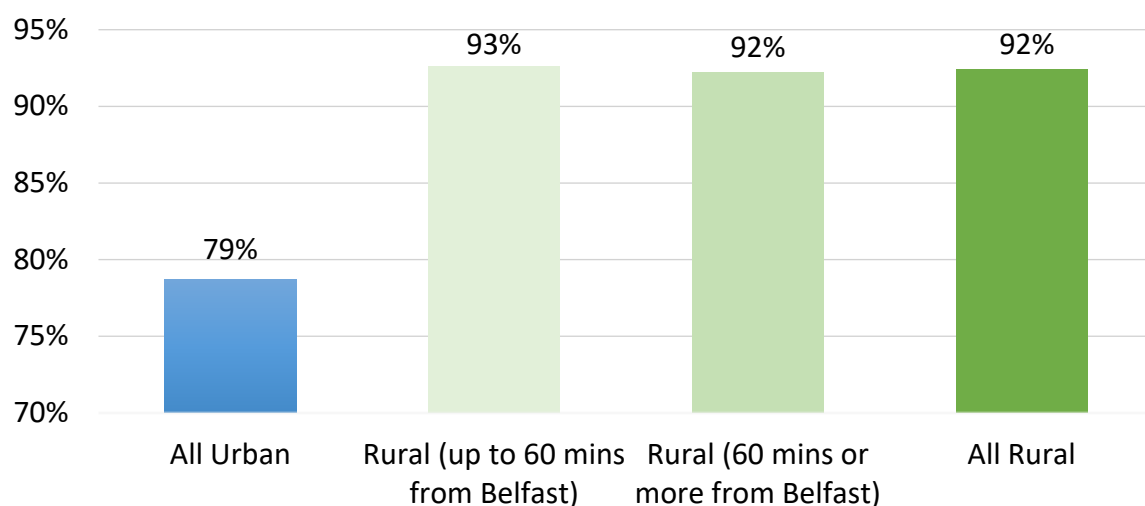
Source: Professional Services Unit (PSU), Department for Communities, 2024

The number of Universal Credit (UC) claimants living in rural areas had increased by 16% between 2022 and 2023, and 2023 to 2024 continued the trend with the total increasing by a further 22% to 43,610. Claimants in urban areas increased by 18% over the same period (2023-24, Table 3).

The number of those claiming Personal Independence Payment (PIP) in both urban and rural areas continues to increase notably from 2023 to 2024, by 10% and 9% respectively, a similar increase to the previous year.

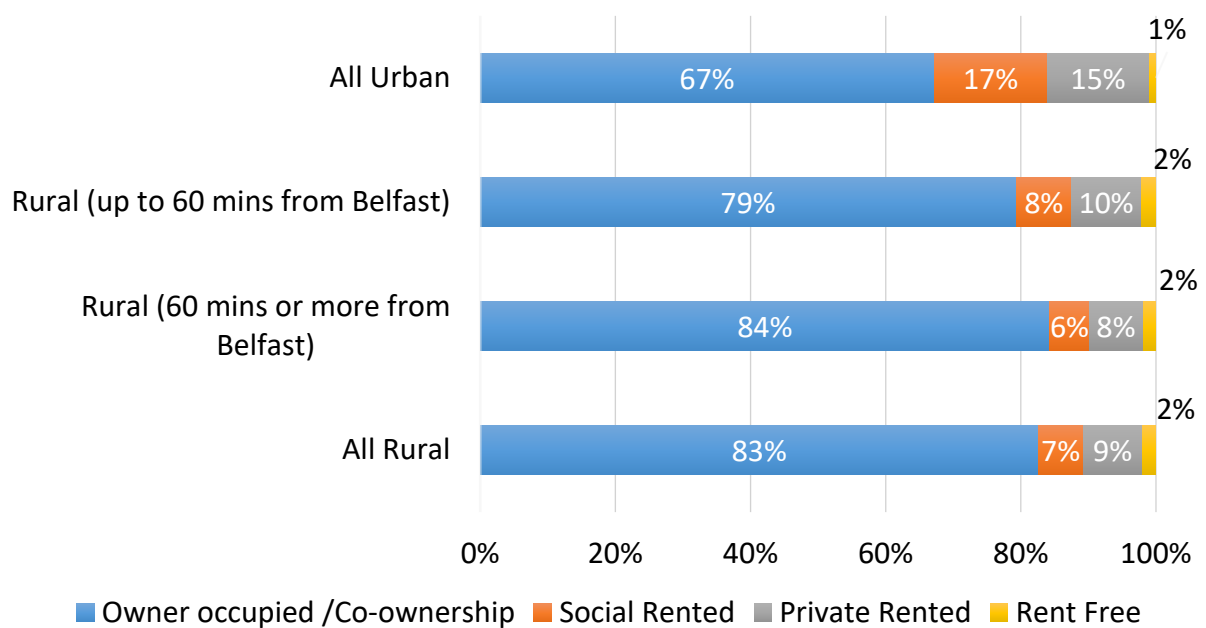
Private transport is also a necessity in many rural areas in terms of access to employment and basic services. Data from NISRA's Continuous Household Survey (CHS) indicates that 92% of rural households had access to at least one car or van in 2023-24 (Figure 48). As a result, vehicle ownership and running costs may consume a greater share of available household income.

Figure 48: Household Car/Van Ownership, Urban/Rural Comparison, 2023-24



Source: Continuous Household Survey 2023-24, NISRA

Figure 49: Housing Tenure, Urban/Rural Comparison, 2023-24

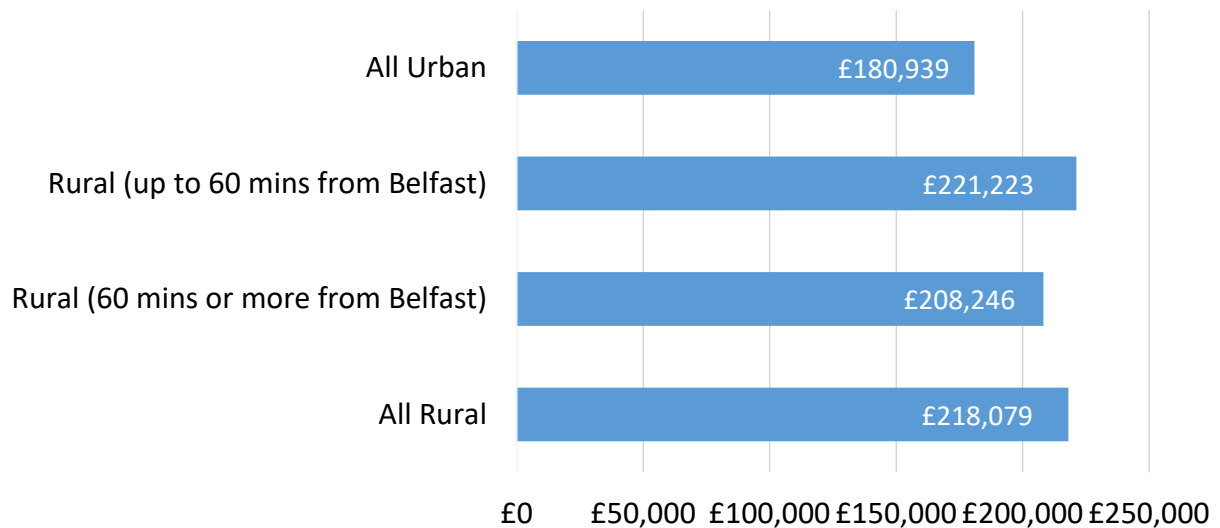


Source: Continuous Household Survey 2023-24, NISRA

Rural dwellers (7%) are less likely to live in a socially rented property than their urban counterparts (17%), according to the 2023-24 CHS results, perhaps unsurprisingly with access to social housing more limited compared in rural areas compared with urban areas. Rates of owner-occupation remain substantially higher in rural (83%) than urban areas (67%, Figure 49).

As of Quarter 3 in 2024, average house prices are substantially (17%) higher in rural than in urban areas, with property in rural areas within an hour's drive of Belfast most expensive of all (Figure 50). House prices in rural areas increased by 5% between Q3 2023 and Q4 2024. A combination of high demand and relatively low supply continues to drive prices upward in both urban and rural areas.

Figure 50: Average House Prices (NI), Urban/Rural Comparison, Q3 2024



Source: NI House Price Index, Land and Property Services (LPS) NISRA, Q3 2024

Further Information

This publication provides an overview of the wide range of information collected across Government to support the development of rural policy. Further sources of information on rural NI are provided below.

DAERA Rural Statistics

<https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/articles/rural-statistics-and-farmer-equality-indicators>

Rural Development

Management and implementation of the Rural Development Programme and the Rural White Paper Action Plan

<https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/topics/rural-development>

Rural Needs

Advice and guidance for public authorities in relation to their duties under the Rural Need Act (NI) 2016

<https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/topics/rural-development/rural-needs>

Bespoke Research

Farmer Equality Indicators

<https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/publications/equality-indicators-report>

Contains information on the farming population and rural/urban comparative data on demography, households below average income, the economy and labour market, earnings, industry, tourism, telecommunications, investment, health, education, housing, travel and transport, wellbeing and experience of crime

‘Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Isolation’

<https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/topics/rural-development/tackling-rural-poverty-and-social-isolation>

Lead Statistician

Des Muldoon

Statistics and Analytical Services Branch

Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs,

Clare House

303 Airport Road West

Belfast BT3 9ED

Telephone: 028 9052 4144

Email: ruralstats.PED@daera-ni.gov.uk

Other Research Reports

Skills, Education and Training: Results from the AFBI farm household survey: Jack, C, Anderson, D, Patten, N and Miller, C, AFBI, 2014

<https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/dard/skills-education-and-training-results-from-the-afbi-farm-household-survey-2014.pdf>

On-Farm and Off-Farm Returns to Education among Farm Operators in Northern Ireland: A Non- Technical Summary and Policy Discussion Document: Jack, C and Wallace, M, AFBI, 2011

<https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/dard/returns-to-education-report.pdf>



Department of
**Agriculture, Environment
and Rural Affairs**

www.daera-ni.gov.uk

Policy, Economics and Statistics Division
Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs
Clare House
303 Airport Road West
Sydenham Intake
Belfast
BT3 9ED



Department of
**Agriculture, Environment
and Rural Affairs**

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