

Social disadvantage in rural peripheries in Czechia and in eastern Germany

Opportunity structures and individual agency in a comparative perspective

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Photo: Susann Bischof

Living in rural peripheries

Recently, a political and media discourse on rural disadvantage has re-emerged in Europe and the U.S. The discussion emphasises an apparent rural-urban divide in voting behaviour. This discourse suggests that rural areas are particularly affected by widespread social disadvantage and poor infra-structure. The scholarly debate about these so-called rural peripheries has repeatedly focused on structural and discursive processes leading to rural peripheralisation. Yet, less attention has been devoted to:

- the consequences of living in rural peripheries for individual inhabitants;
- the relationships between the socio-economic status and social position of individual actors;
- the residential context of rural peripheries as a setting producing and reinforcing distinct forms of social disadvantage;
- the dynamics of peripheralisation;
- cross-national research.

Three levels of analysis

Macro-level

- Peripheralisation
- Rural restructuring
- Cross-national comparison

Meso-level

- Local and regional opportunity structures and social disadvantage
- Social networks

Micro-level

- Individual agency



Photo: Johanna Fick

Research questions

1) Spatial patterns of social disadvantage

- What is the extent and are the specifics of social disadvantage, and which deficiencies can specifically be identified in opportunity structures in rural peripheries?
- How does the situation in Czechia and eastern Germany differ?

2) Individual agency and opportunity structures

- Which local and regional opportunity structures matter in which ways to different disadvantaged social groups and how do individuals deal with them?
- How do restructuring processes impact on dealing with disadvantage?
- What differences can be found in Czechia and eastern Germany?

Research design: Employing mixed methods to connect structural conditions with individual agency

1) Quantitative analysis of social disadvantage and local/regional opportunity structures

Analysing spatial patterns of social disadvantage using area-level indicators on:

- Socio-economic and demographic situations
- Accessibility of services and transportation
- Specific restructuring tendencies (e.g., de- and reindustrialisation)

2) Qualitative case studies in two Czech and two eastern German regions

- 10 expert interviews
- 30 problem-centred interviews with socially disadvantaged persons (low qualified persons, single parents, elderly living alone)
- Coping strategies, use of local and regional opportunity structures
- Social networks, using VENNMAKER
- Time-space activity patterns, using GPS tracker

3) Triangulation and comparison of quantitative and qualitative results

- Intra-regional results on time-space activity patterns and social network integration
- Intra-regional results on local opportunity structures and individual coping strategies
- Regional and cross-national comparisons