

Urban-rural Europe - quality of life in rural areas

Statistics Explained

Data extracted: October 2022.

Planned article update: December 2024.

" In 2021, more than four fifths (83.4 %) of the EU's rural population lived in a house, while a relatively high proportion of city dwellers were living in flats. "

" In 2020, approximately 1 in 10 persons (10.5 %) living in rural areas of the EU stated that they suffered from noise; much higher shares were recorded for people living in towns and suburbs (16.3 %) and in cities (23.9 %). "

Traditionally, the central measure of [national accounts](#) , has been divided by the total number of inhabitants to create a proxy measure for analysing living standards – GDP per inhabitant. While GDP continues to be used for monitoring economic developments, playing an important role in economic decision-making, it is increasingly complemented by additional indicators to inform policy debates on social and environmental issues. This is because GDP does not take account of externalities such as environmental sustainability or issues such as income distribution or social inclusion; these are increasingly seen as important drivers for [sustainable development](#) and the quality of life.



Source: Eurostat (ilc_mddw04), (ilc_mddw05) and (ilc_mddw06)

The quality of life can be defined as the general well-being of people living in society. It is a broad concept that encompasses a number of dimensions, both objective factors (material resources, health, work status, living

conditions and so on) and the subjective perceptions that people have (in other words, how they feel and view their own lives).

This article seeks to offer a portrait of the quality of life in rural areas of the [European Union \(EU\)](#) , identifying the benefits and challenges that people living in rural areas face. It forms part of [Eurostat](#) 's online publication [Rural Europe](#) .

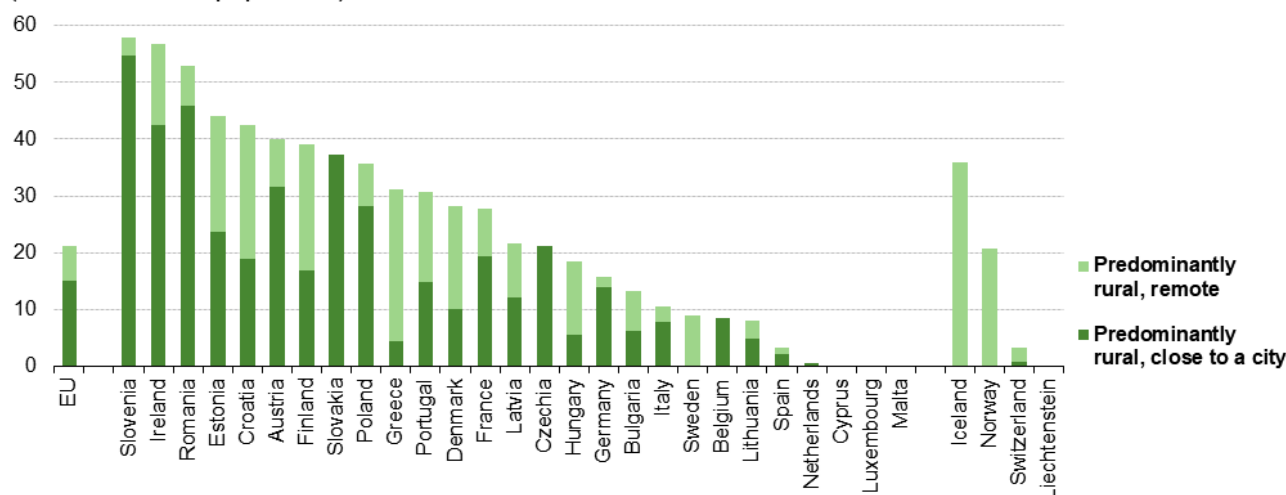
Accessibility

Accessibility can be broadly defined as how quickly and easily a destination can be reached given the available means of transport. It is increasingly considered a key policy goal in land-use, transport and regional planning. One of the principal challenges faced by people living in rural areas is a lack of access to a range of services: where is the nearest school, bank, health centre, pharmacy, supermarket, or cultural centre and how easy is it to get there?

People living in [cities](#) , [towns and suburbs](#) generally have better access to a wide range of services when compared with those living in [rural areas](#) . Territorial disparities in access to services may be amplified by demographic developments – for example, the depopulation of rural areas across the EU may directly impact commercial and public service provisions. Often, this is simply a reflection of lower levels of demand, whereby the number of inhabitants in rural areas falls below the critical mass of people required to sustain the economic viability of certain services.

Population living in predominantly rural regions, 2021

(% share of total population)



Note: within the urban–rural typology: there are no predominantly rural regions for Cyprus, Luxembourg, Malta and Liechtenstein.

Source: Eurostat (online data code: demo_r_pjangrp3)

eurostat

Figure 1: Population living in predominantly rural regions, 2021 (% share of total population) Source: Eurostat (demo_r_pjangrp3)

The [urban–rural typology](#) can be extended, disaggregating [predominantly rural regions](#) into those rural regions that are close to a city and those that are remote. People living in predominantly rural regions close to cities may benefit from the services that they have on offer, whereas people living in more remote areas often have to rely more on services that can be supported locally. Figure 1 shows that slightly more than one fifth (21.2 %) of the EU population was living in a predominantly rural region in 2021. A large proportion (approximately 70 %) of the rural population were living in a rural region that was within close proximity of a city. However, there were substantial differences in terms of the structure and distribution of rural populations across EU Member States:

- in Slovenia, Ireland and Romania, a majority of the total population was living in predominantly rural regions;
- by contrast, in Sweden, Belgium, Lithuania, Spain, the Netherlands, Cyprus, Luxembourg and Malta, less than 1 in 10 persons was living in a predominantly rural region;

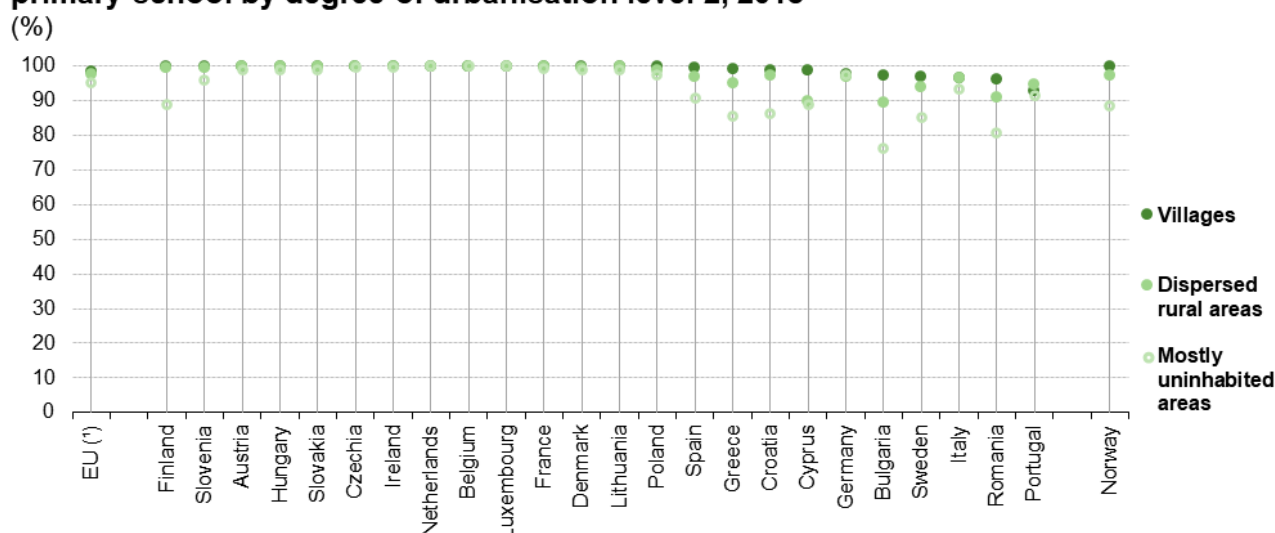
- more than half of the rural populations of Sweden, Greece, Hungary, Denmark, Finland, Croatia, Bulgaria and Portugal were living in remote rural regions.

Remoteness can play an important role when assessing accessibility issues. Figures 2 and 3 present information on the share of rural populations living within 15 minutes driving time of a primary school or of a main health care services. The data are analysed using level 2 of the [degree of urbanisation](#) classification, which identifies – from most to least densely populated areas – villages, dispersed rural areas, and mostly uninhabited rural areas. As may be expected, accessibility was generally higher for people living in villages than it was for people living in mostly uninhabited areas. For example, 98.5 % of the EU's (excluding Estonia, Latvia and Malta) population living in villages in 2018 could drive to a primary school within 15 minutes, while a lower share (95.1 %) was observed for those people living in mostly uninhabited areas.

Looking in more detail at the accessibility of primary schools in 2018.

- In most EU Member States, the vast majority of the rural population was living within 15 minutes driving time of a primary school; this was also the case for the subpopulation of people living in mostly uninhabited areas.
- Among rural populations, the highest levels of accessibility for primary schools were generally recorded for people living in villages and the lowest levels for those living in mostly uninhabited areas:
 - in Germany, the lowest levels of access were observed for people living in dispersed rural areas;
 - in Latvia, Lithuania and Portugal, the highest levels of access were recorded for people living in dispersed rural areas.

Population living in rural areas within 15 minutes driving time of a primary school by degree of urbanisation level 2, 2018



Note: Estonia, Latvia and Malta, not available. Ranked on the share for villages.

(*) Excluding Estonia and Malta.

Source: TomTom Multinet, 2020, Geostat population grid 2018, Eurostat-GISCO school location, 2020

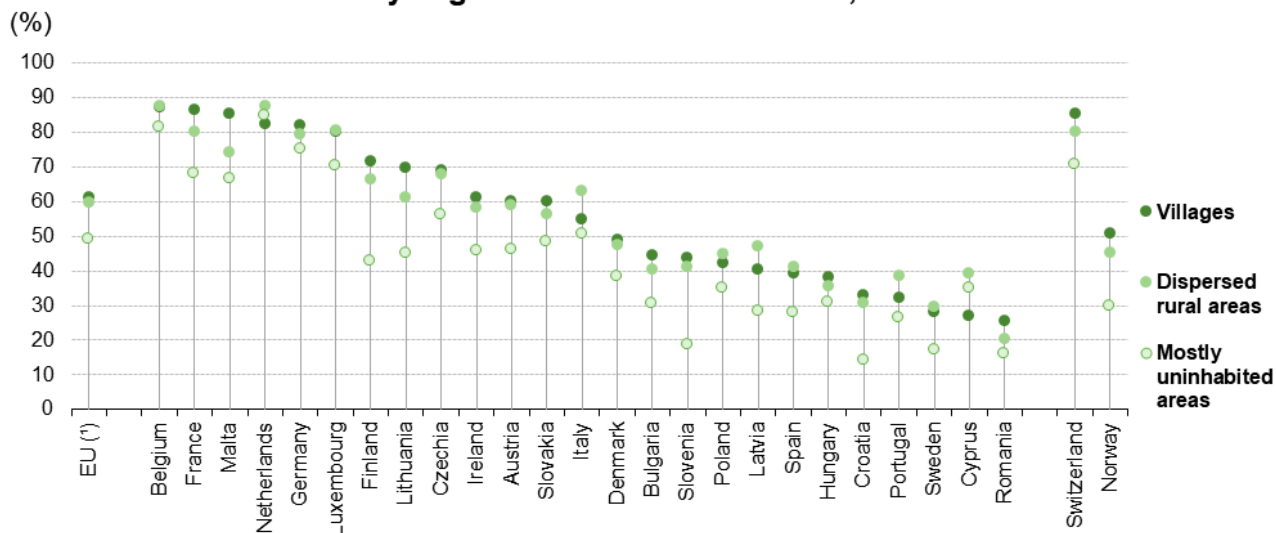
Figure 2: Population living in rural areas within 15 minutes driving time of a primary school by degree of urbanisation level 2, 2018 (%) Source: TomTom Multinet, 2020, Geostat population grid 2018, Eurostat-GISCO school location, 2020

Figure 3 concerns the accessibility of main healthcare services, these are generally considered to be hospitals offering in-patient services, although the definitions applied may vary (for example, there may be a minimum threshold for the number of beds, some healthcare facilities without in-patient services may be included, some hospital facilities providing out-patient services may be included).

- Compared with the situation for primary schools, a lower share of EU's rural population (excluding Estonia and Greece) had access to main healthcare services within 15 minutes driving time in 2018; approximately three fifths (61.3 %) of people living in villages could drive to a main healthcare service within 15 minutes, while just less than half (49.3 %) of those living in mostly uninhabited areas could do so.

- The highest levels of access to main healthcare services (among rural populations) were generally recorded for people living in villages and the lowest levels for those living in mostly uninhabited areas:
 - in Cyprus and the Netherlands (that are both relatively densely populated territories with relatively few people living in rural areas), the lowest levels of access were observed for people living in villages;
 - in Belgium, Spain, Italy, Cyprus, Latvia, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal and Sweden, the highest levels of access were recorded for people living in dispersed rural areas.

Population living in rural areas within 15 minutes driving time of a main healthcare service by degree of urbanisation level 2, 2018



Note: Estonia and Greece, not available. Ranked on the share for villages.

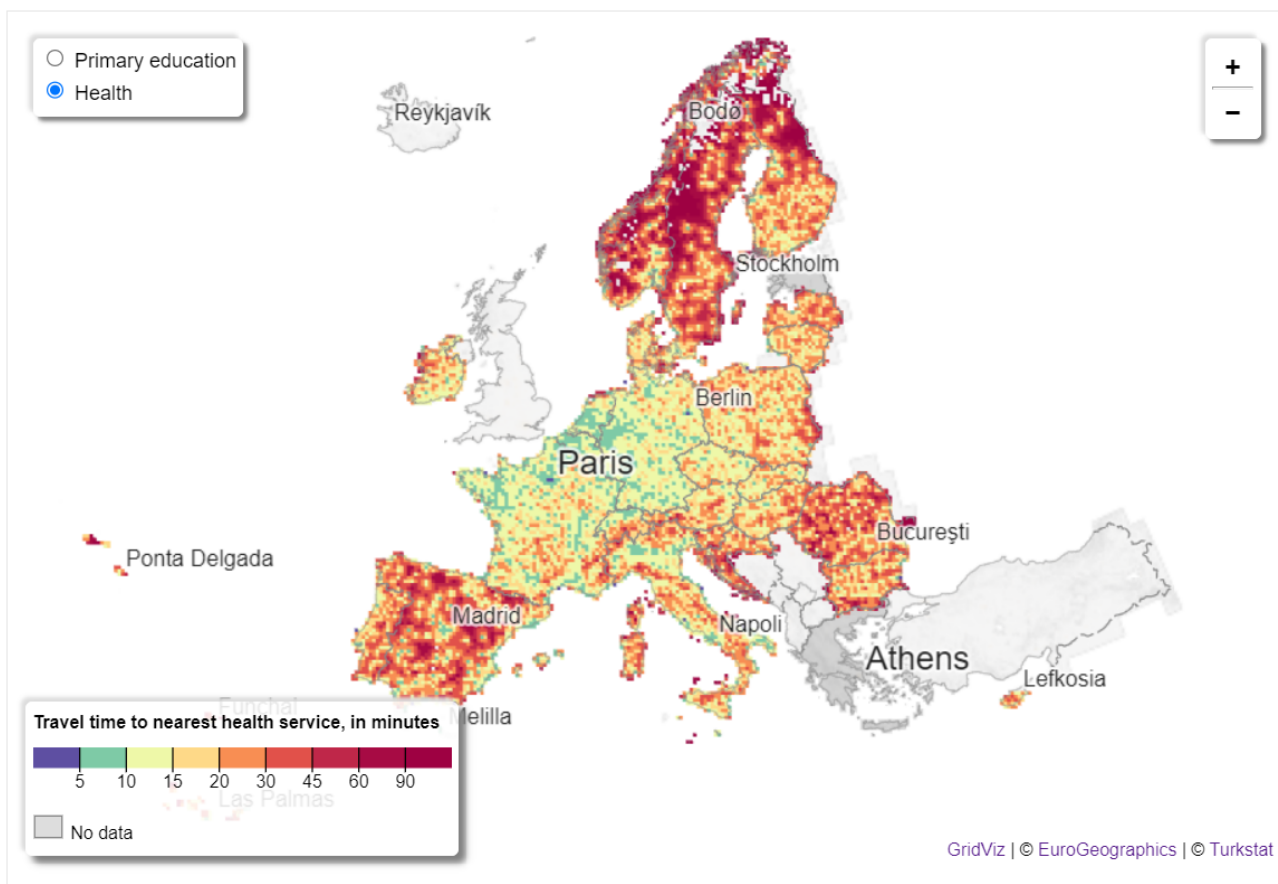
(*) Excluding Estonia and Greece.

Source: TomTom Multinet, 2020, Geostat population grid 2018, Eurostat-GISCO hospital location, 2020

eurostat

Figure 3: Population living in rural areas within 15 minutes driving time of a main healthcare service by degree of urbanisation level 2, 2018 (%) Source: TomTom Multinet, 2020, Geostat population grid 2018, Eurostat-GISCO hospital location, 2020

Map 1 provides an alternative presentation of information relating to the accessibility of primary education and main healthcare services. It confirms that people living in the most remote and sparsely populated areas of the EU often face considerable challenges to access basic services that contribute to the quality of their lives.



Map 1: Accessibility of education and main healthcare services, 2018 Kosovo*: this designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence. Source: TomTom Multinet, 2020, JRC-GEOSTAT 2018 population grid, Eurostat-GISCO school and hospital locations, 2020

Based on the residential population grid (1 km² cells), a study on [Road transport performance in Europe](#), conducted by the European Commission's Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy uses three metrics to develop a new framework for assessing transport performance:

- **accessibility** is defined as the total number of destinations that can be reached within a fixed period of time (for example, a 90-minute threshold) – it depends on the density and speed of transport networks and the spatial distribution of destinations;
- **proximity** is the total number of destinations located within a fixed distance (for example, within a 120 km radius) – it captures the spatial distribution of destinations;
- **performance** is the ratio between accessibility and proximity, comparing the number of accessible destinations to the number of nearby destinations; the result is expressed as an index, with higher values indicating better performance for the mode of transport under investigation.

Detailed data can be aggregated – using population weights – to provide information, for example, by degree of urbanisation, by region, or for individual EU Member States. Figure 4 shows transport performance by car in rural areas of the EU. In 2016, Romania, Slovakia, Bulgaria, Hungary, Poland and Croatia had the lowest levels of transport performance in rural areas, while the highest levels were recorded in Malta, Belgium and the Netherlands. People living in villages generally enjoyed a higher level of transport performance than people living in mostly uninhabited rural areas. This pattern was repeated across the rural areas of most EU Member States, although:

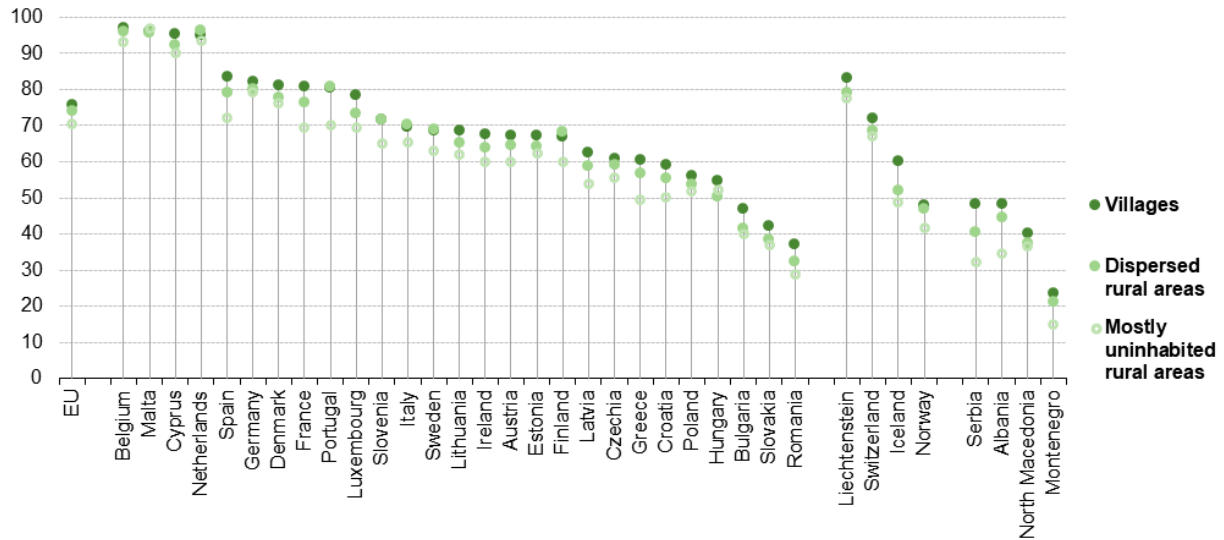
- in Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, Slovenia, Finland and Sweden, the highest level of transport performance by car was recorded for dispersed rural areas;
- in Malta, the highest level of transport performance by car was recorded for mostly uninhabited rural areas.

A more detailed analysis for predominantly rural regions – at [NUTS](#) level 3 – is presented in Figure 5. Rural regions characterised by the lowest levels of transport performance by car were primarily located in south-eastern Europe –

Bulgaria, Greece and Romania – they were joined by a mountainous region in western Austria (Osttirol).

Transport performance by car for rural areas by degree of urbanisation level 2, 2016

(index, population accessible by road within 1h30 / population in a 120km radius x 100)



Note: ranked on the share for villages.

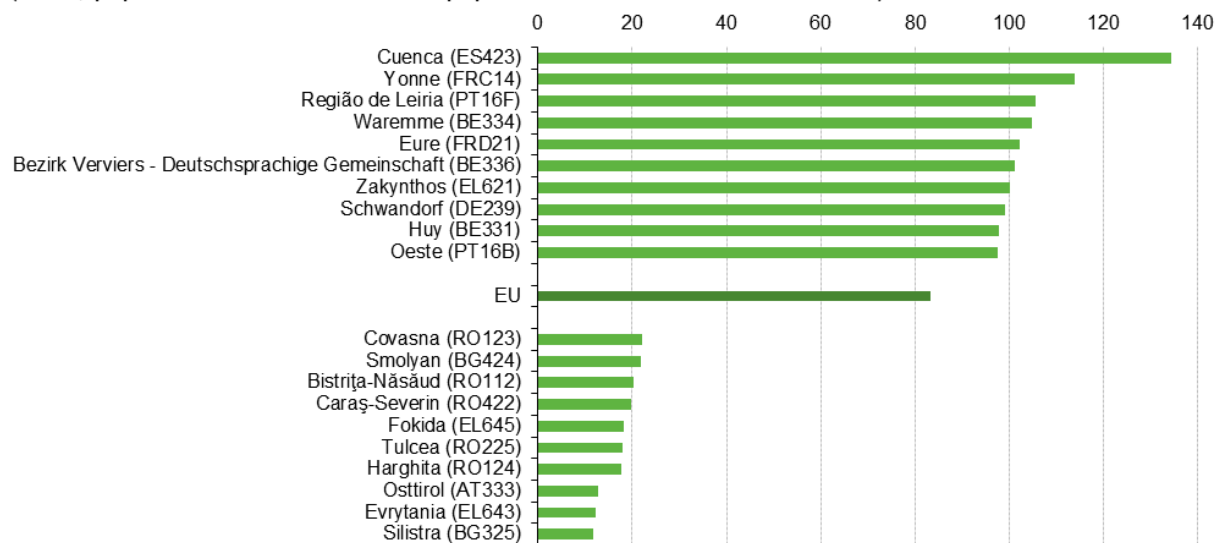
Source: European Commission, Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy



Figure 4: Transport performance by car for rural areas by degree of urbanisation level 2, 2016 (index, population accessible by road within 1h30 / population in a 120km radius x 100) Source: European Commission, Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy

Transport performance by car for selected predominantly rural regions, 2016

(index, population within 1h30 travel / population within 120km radius x 100)



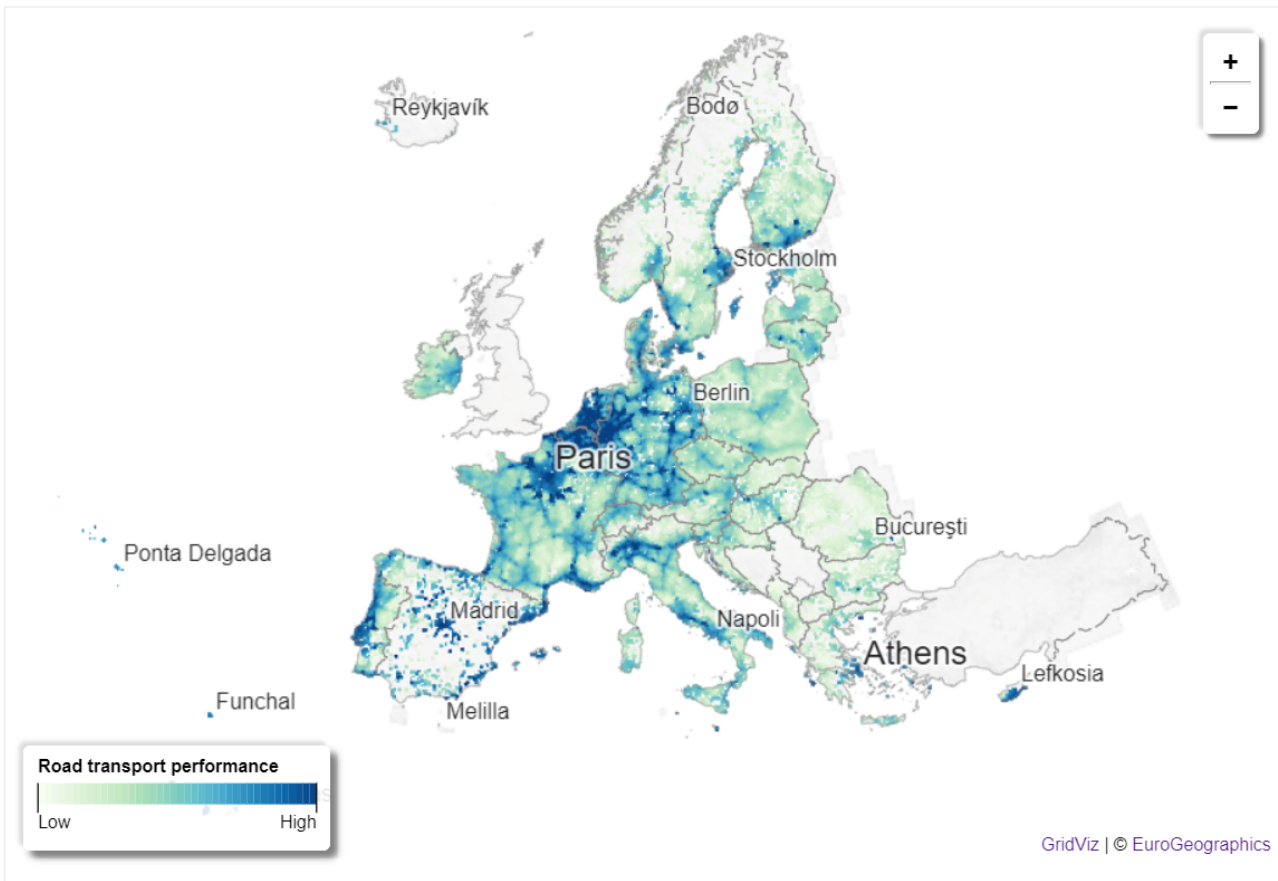
Note: the figure shows the 10 predominantly rural regions (NUTS level 3) with the highest and lowest transport performance by car, based on NUTS 2016.

Source: European Commission, Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy

eurostat

Figure 5: Transport performance by car for selected predominantly rural regions, 2016 (index, population accessible by road within 1h30 / population in a 120km radius x 100) Source: European Commission, Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy

Map 2 makes use of the more detailed dataset to also present information about road transport performance in the EU. It confirms that people living in some of the most densely populated areas with highly developed motorway networks benefit from both accessibility and transport performance, when compared with people living, for example, in remote, rural areas.



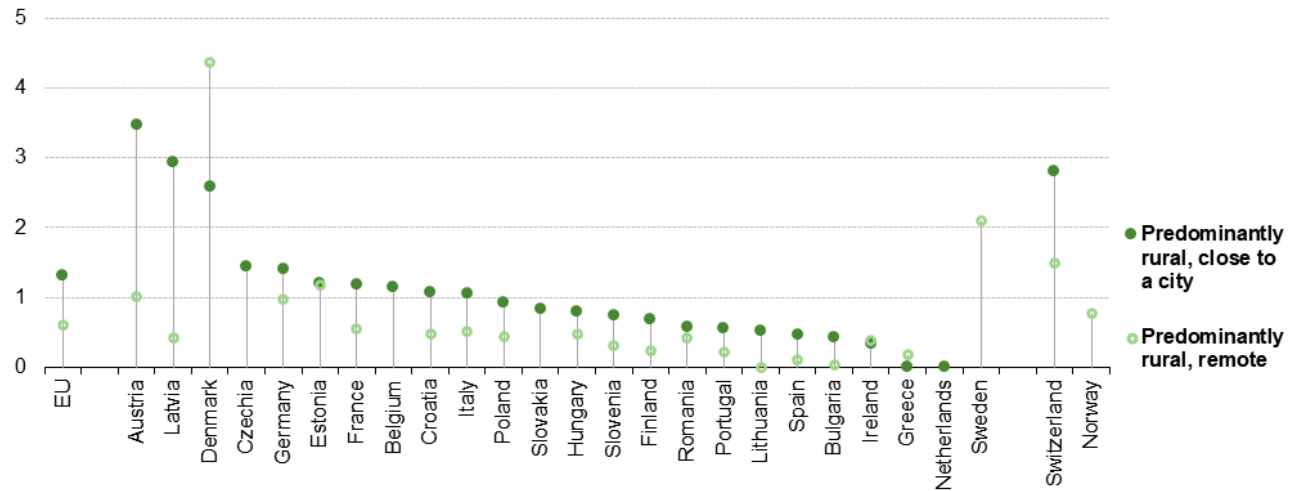
Map 2: Road transport performance, 2016 (index, population accessible by road within 1h30 / population in a 120km radius x 100) Kosovo*: this designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence. Source: European Commission, Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy

As part of the EU's efforts to achieve climate neutrality, 2021 was designated European Year of Rail, highlighting the benefits of rail as a sustainable and safe means of transport. The Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy conducted a study on [Passenger rail performance in Europe](#) which is used as the source of information for the data presented in Figure 6. The study confirmed that cities consistently outperformed towns, suburbs and rural areas in terms of passenger rail performance. Large cities with frequent services and well connected rail networks scored highly, as did smaller cities with relatively fast connections to larger nearby cities.

Figure 6 confirms that the highest levels of passenger rail performance in 2019 for predominantly rural areas were observed in Denmark, Austria, Latvia, Germany and Estonia, while the lowest levels of performance were in Lithuania, Bulgaria and Greece. Note that Zeeuwsch-Vlaanderen – the only predominantly rural region of the Netherlands (in the south-west corner) – does not have any passenger rail services (although there are plans to connect this region by rail to Ghent in Belgium).

Transport performance by rail plus a short walk for predominantly rural regions, 2019

(index, population accessible by rail within 1h30 / population in a 120km radius x 100)



Note: there is no public railway in Cyprus, Malta or Iceland. Within the urban–rural typology: there are no predominantly rural regions for Cyprus, Luxembourg, Malta and Liechtenstein; there are no predominantly rural, remote regions in Belgium, Czechia or the Netherlands; there are no predominantly rural, close to a city regions in Sweden or Norway. Ranked on the share for predominantly rural regions close to a city.

Source: European Commission, Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy

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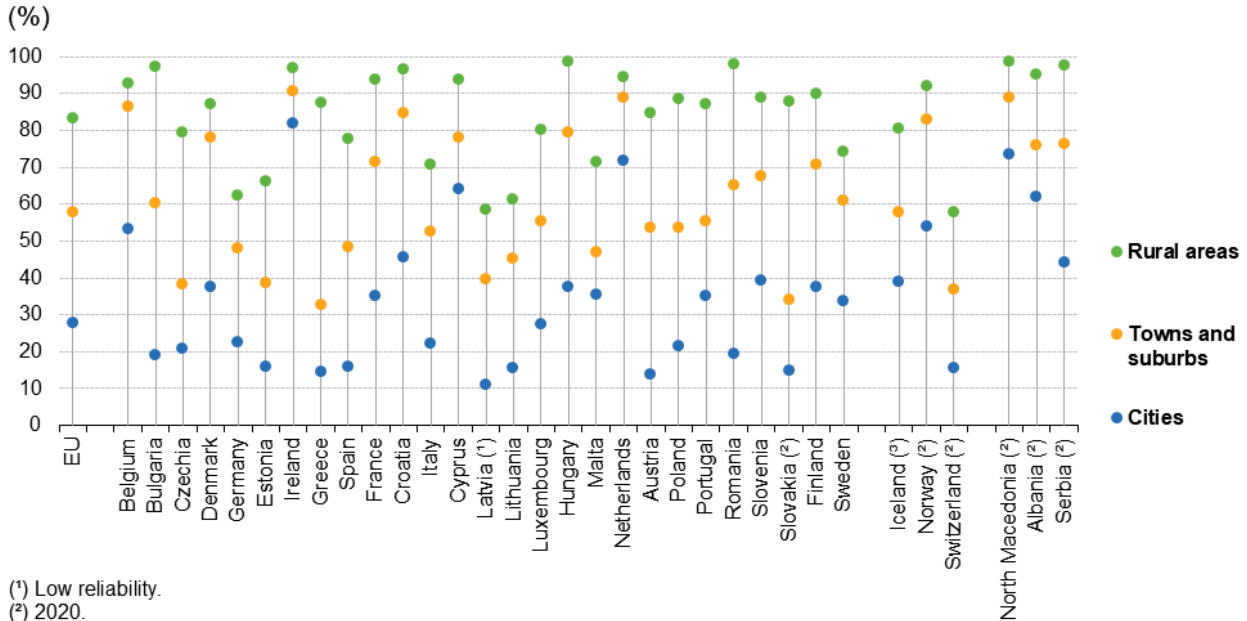
Figure 6: Transport performance by rail plus a short walk for predominantly rural regions, 2019 (population accessible by rail within 1h30 / population in a 120km radius x 100) Source: European Commission, Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy

Personal well-being

Quality of life indicators cover a broad range of topics/dimensions, including material living conditions, employment, education, health, social interactions, safety and security, trust, discrimination and the environment. The information presented in this section is from [EU statistics on income and living conditions \(EU-SILC\)](#). The target population consists of all persons living in private households (as such, those living in collective households and in institutions are generally excluded).

One of the most basic human needs is shelter: as such, satisfactory accommodation is a valuable part of most people's lives. To some degree, an individual's choice of dwelling is predetermined by the local housing stock that is on offer: a higher proportion of people living in cities tend to live in flats, whereas those living in rural areas are more likely to live in a house. In 2021, more than four fifths (83.4 %) of the EU's rural population lived in a house. This was a much higher share than that recorded for people living in towns and suburbs (57.8 %) or urban areas (27.9 %). This pattern – a higher proportion of people living in rural areas residing in houses – was repeated in each of the EU Member States. Looking in more detail at rural populations, the share of people living in houses ranged from just less than 60 % in Latvia (low reliability) and less than 70 % in Lithuania, Germany and Estonia, up to more than 95 % in Croatia, Ireland, Bulgaria, Romania and Hungary.

Share of people living in a house by degree of urbanisation, 2021



(*) Low reliability.

(*) 2020.

(*) 2018.

Source: Eurostat (online data code: ilc_lvho01)

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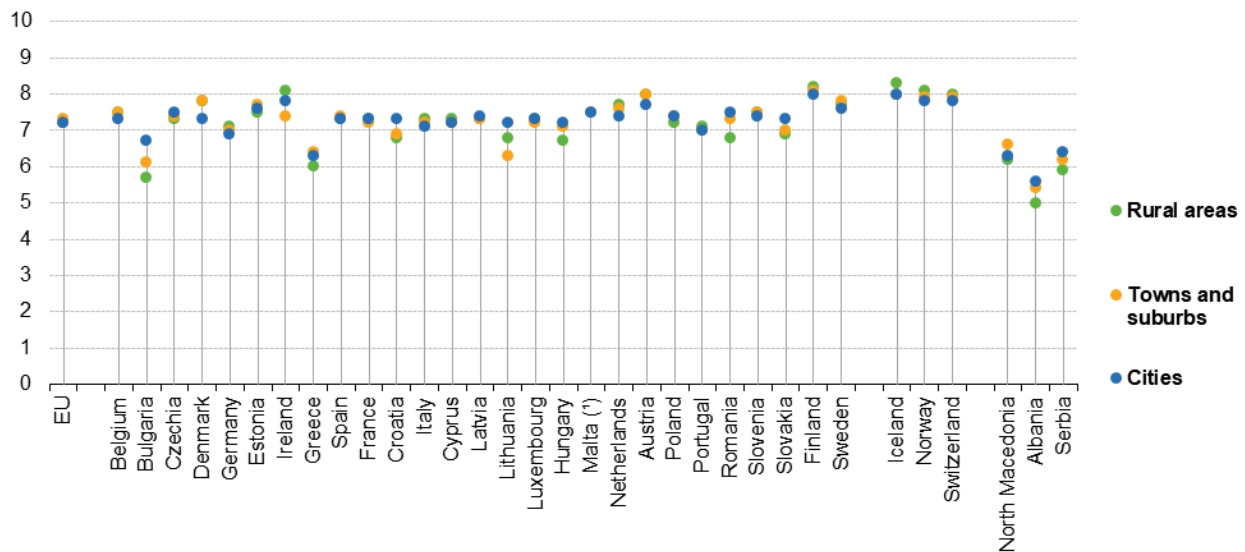
Figure 7: Share of people living in a house by degree of urbanisation, 2021 (%) Source: Eurostat (ilc_lvho01)

Figure 8 presents information on a range of different aspects that impact personal well-being (the data shown are for people aged 16 years or over). One important factor that may influence an individual's quality of life is their employment. Generally, higher levels of income tend to have a positive impact on the quality of life (although this may be diminished by having to work long(er) hours or having to face increased levels of stress). On a scale of 0–10 (from very dissatisfied to very satisfied), people in the EU rated their job satisfaction at an average of 7.2 in 2018; there was little difference in the figures when analysed by degree of urbanisation: people living in towns and suburbs rated their job satisfaction slightly higher, at 7.3.

In some of the EU Member States, there were larger differences in job satisfaction ratings when analysed by degree of urbanisation. This was particularly the case in Hungary, Bulgaria and Romania, where in 2018 people living in rural areas were less likely to be satisfied with their jobs (than people living in towns and suburbs and in particular cities). The opposite pattern was observed in Ireland, where those living in rural areas were more likely to be satisfied with their jobs.

Satisfaction with job situation among people (≥ 16 years) by degree of urbanisation, 2018

(scale 0–10)

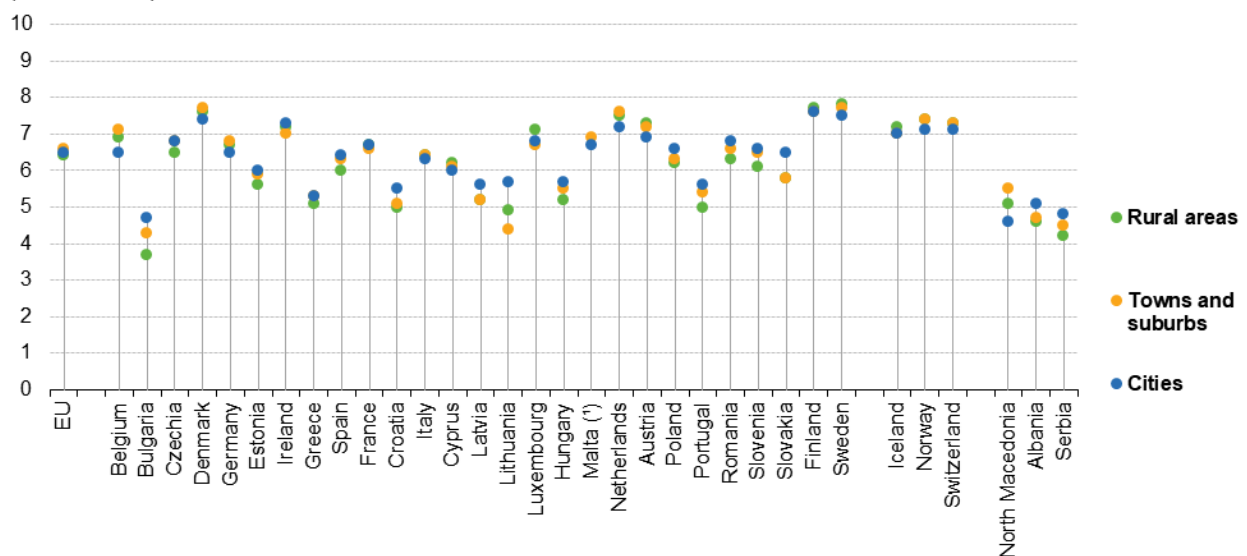


(*) Rural areas: not available (low reliability).
Source: Eurostat (online data code: ilc_pw02)

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Satisfaction with financial situation among people (≥ 16 years) by degree of urbanisation, 2018

(scale 0–10)

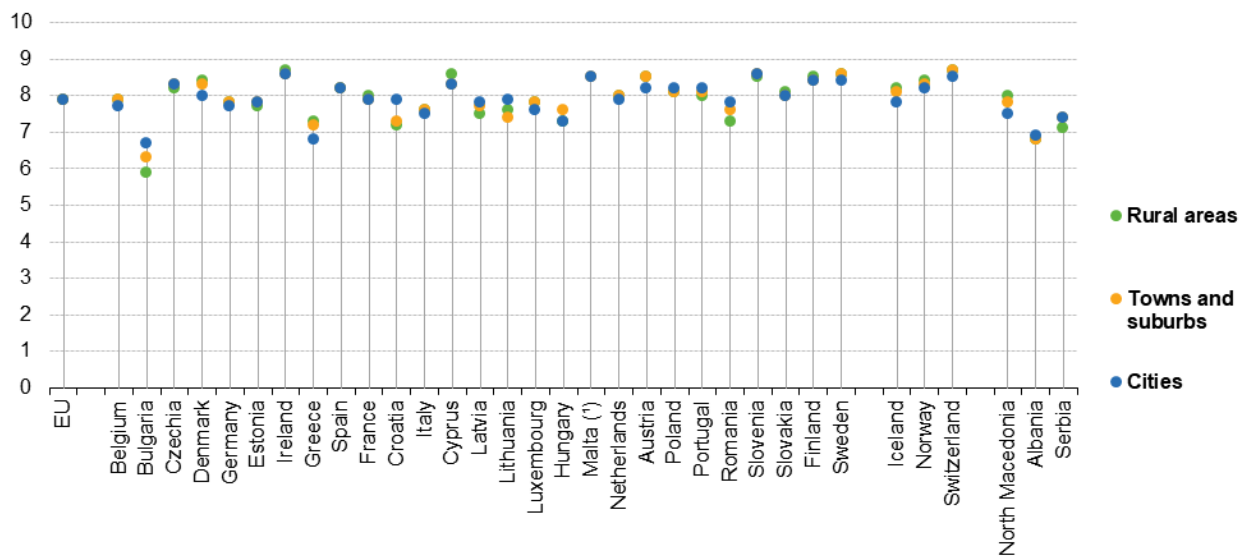


(*) Rural areas: not available (low reliability).
Source: Eurostat (online data code: ilc_pw02)

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Figure 8 (part one): Personal well-being indicators (≥ 16 years) by degree of urbanisation, 2018 (scale 0–10)
Source: Eurostat (ilc_pw02)

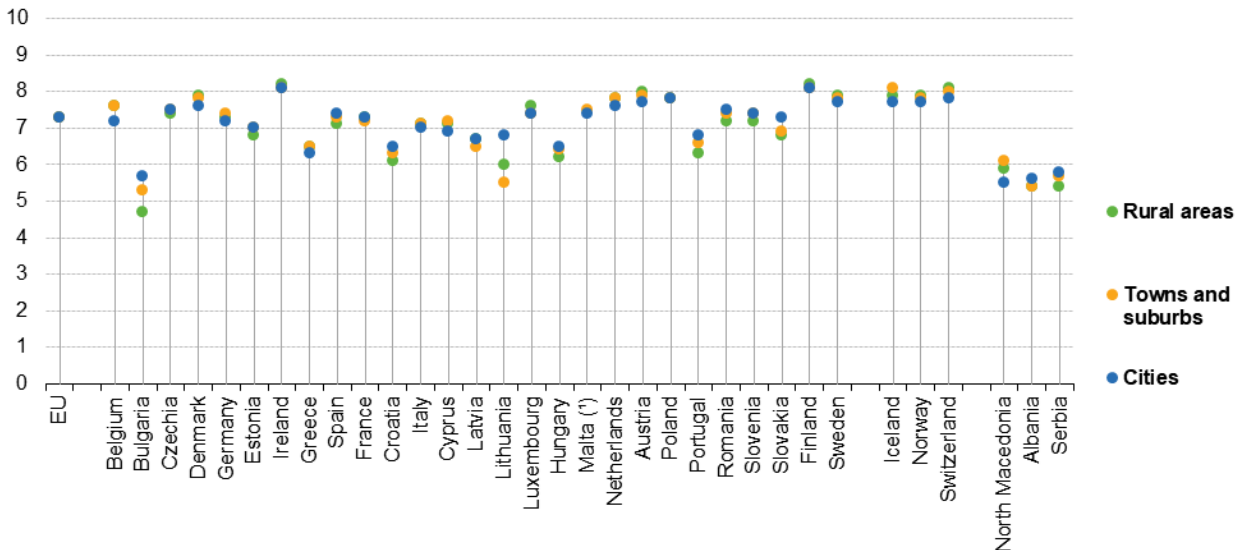
Satisfaction with personal relationships among people (≥ 16 years) by degree of urbanisation, 2018 (scale 0–10)



(*) Rural areas: not available (low reliability).
Source: Eurostat (online data code: ilc_pw02)



Overall life satisfaction among people (≥ 16 years) by degree of urbanisation, 2018 (scale 0–10)



(*) Rural areas: not available (low reliability).
Source: Eurostat (online data code: ilc_pw02)



Figure 8 (part two): Personal well-being indicators (≥ 16 years) by degree of urbanisation, 2018 (scale 0–10)
Source: Eurostat (ilc_pw02)

One of the principal questions asked by researchers within the domain of quality of life indicators, concerns how money affects an individual's happiness and emotional well-being. People's relationship to money is highly idiosyncratic: when some people have enough money for their basic needs (a safe place to live, being able to buy food or clothes) then additional income does not make a considerable difference to their well-being; other people may be more motivated by financial compensation.

Figure 8 above (use the dropdown list to change the indicator) also presents an analysis of individual's satisfaction with their overall financial situation (the data again refer to people aged 16 years or over). In 2018, people in the EU rated their satisfaction with their financial situation at an average of 6.5. People living in rural areas were slightly less satisfied with their financial situation (6.4) than people living in cities (6.5) or towns and suburbs (6.6). A more

detailed analysis by EU Member State reveals that people living in the rural areas of Luxembourg, France, Cyprus, Luxembourg, Austria, Finland and Sweden had a higher level of satisfaction with their financial situation (compared with people living in towns and suburbs or cities). By contrast, people living in rural areas of eastern and **Baltic** Member States were less satisfied with their financial situation (when compared with people living in cities), as were people in rural areas of Spain and Portugal.

In 2018, people aged 16 years or over in the EU rated their satisfaction with personal relationships at 7.9; there was no difference when analysed by degree of urbanisation (see Figure 8 above; use the dropdown list to change the indicator). While people living in rural areas of all western and **Nordic** Member States and most southern ones tended to rate their personal relationships more highly (than people living in cities), the opposite was true in the Baltic Member States and most of the eastern ones.

The final indicator in this section covers an assessment of life satisfaction (see Figure 8 above; use the dropdown list to change the indicator). It is intended to provide a broad, reflective appraisal of life, and refers to how a respondent is feeling; the intent is not to obtain their current emotional state but rather a reflective judgement on their level of overall life satisfaction. In 2018, the average rating in the EU was 7.3; once again, there was no difference when analysed by degree of urbanisation. People in western and Nordic Member States tended to be more satisfied with their lives than those living in eastern, southern and Baltic Member States, this was particularly true for people living in rural areas of the Nordic Member States.

Health

The EU population enjoys near-universal access to **healthcare** services – for example, if contracting a disease or being involved in an accident – alongside timely and reliable public health information. Furthermore, life expectancy is among the highest in the world, and infant mortality rates have dropped to very low levels.

Ill health not only undermines an individual's (and their family's) quality of life, but it can shorten their lifespan. At an aggregate level, poor health can hinder economic and social development by reducing the human capital available within a society. As such, long and healthy lives are not only a personal aim but can also provide a more general indication of societal well-being.

Although people living in rural areas may be disadvantaged in terms of their access to health care facilities (see the start of this article for more information), their overall health may benefit from the local environment they live in; for example, the quality of air they breathe. Rural residents may be at lower risk of developing a range of health issues, including for example, breathing difficulties linked to pollution, or mental health issues triggered by some of the negative aspects of urban living.

Health status can be measured by asking people how they perceive their own health. In 2021, some 69.0 % of the EU population (aged 16 years or over) declared their own health as good or very good; this share was higher in cities (70.7 %) than it was in towns and suburbs (69.2 %) or in rural areas (66.3 %). Across the EU Member States, the share of people who perceived their health as good or very good ranged from less than half in Lithuania (47.9 %) and Latvia (49.8 %) to more than three quarters in Belgium (76.4 %), Luxembourg (76.5 %), Cyprus (77.2 %), Greece (78.3 %) and Ireland (81.2 %).

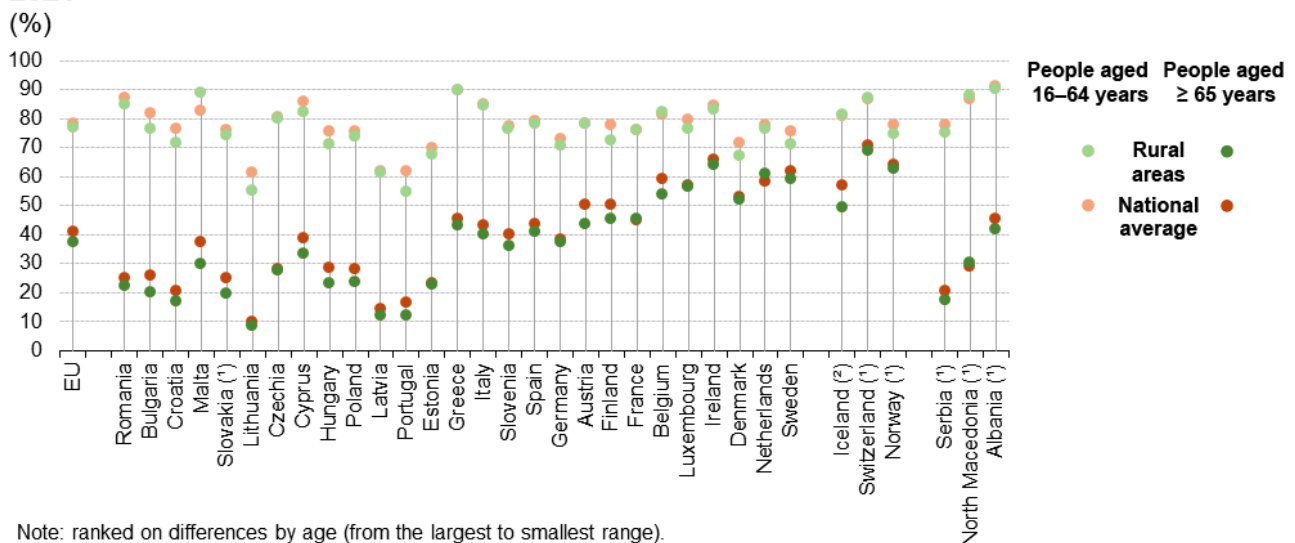
Self-perceived health has a distinct age pattern, as progressively fewer older people tend to rate their health as being good or very good, while the share reporting bad or very bad health increases with age. The share of older persons (aged 65 years or over) in the EU reporting their own health as good or very good was 41.0 % in 2021; the share among older persons living in rural areas was 3.7 percentage points lower, at 37.3 % (see Figure 9). This pattern – a lower share of older people living in rural areas reporting their own health as good or very good – was repeated in the vast majority of EU Member States; the Netherlands and France were the only exceptions. The proportion of older people living in rural areas that reported their own health as good or very good was at least 5.0 percentage points lower than the national average (for all older people) in Slovakia (2020 data), Hungary, Cyprus, Belgium, Bulgaria, Austria and Malta.

Figure 9 also includes an analysis of self-perceived health for the working-age population (defined here as people aged 16–64 years). In 2021, some 78.5 % of the working-age population in the EU declared they had good or very good health status, which was 1.7 percentage points higher than the corresponding figure for working-age people living in rural areas (76.8 %). This gap existed in most of the EU Member States. France, Austria and Belgium were exceptions with small differences between the rural and national shares; Malta was the only other Member State

where the share of the working-age rural population declaring their own health as good or very good was higher than the national average, in this case with a 6.4 points difference. The situation for working-age people in Malta was in stark contrast to the situation for older people living in rural areas of Malta, as they were far less likely than the national average to declare their own health as good or very good (a gap of 7.3 points).

Across each of the EU Member States, a higher proportion of working-age people (16–64 years) than older people (aged 65 years or over) unsurprisingly declared they had good or very good health status in 2021. Within rural areas, the gap was relatively small in Sweden, Denmark and the Netherlands (12.2–15.3 percentage points), while gaps of more than 50 points were observed in Poland, Czechia, Slovakia (2020 data), Croatia, Bulgaria, Malta and Romania (which had the biggest gap, at 62.6 percentage points).

People living in rural areas with good or very good health status, 2021



Note: ranked on differences by age (from the largest to smallest range).

(*) 2020. (**) 2018.

Source: Eurostat (online data code: hlth_silc_18)

eurostat

Figure 9: People living in rural areas with good or very good health status, 2021 (%) Source: Eurostat (hlth_silc_18)

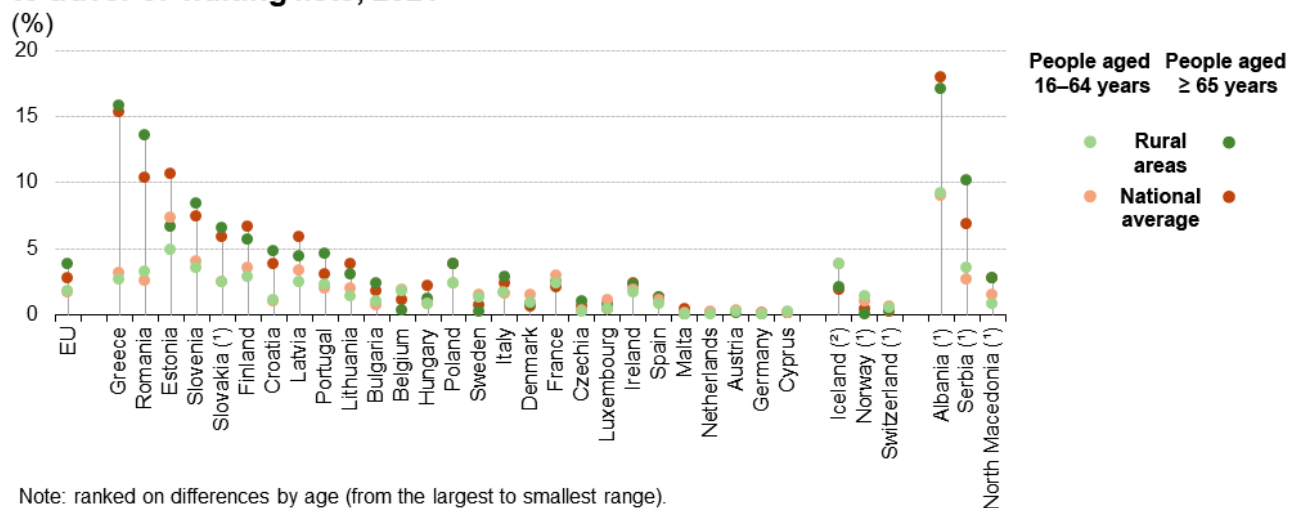
Unmet needs for medical care can be due to a number of reasons, including (among others) because of financial reasons (too expensive), distance/transport (too far to travel) or timeliness (waiting lists). These three reasons are related to the organisation and functioning of health care services and are the focus of the analysis here. The statistics presented in Figure 10 are based on a person's own self-assessment of whether they needed a medical examination; the shares are calculated relative to all people (in the relevant age range), regardless of whether they had a need for medical examination or not). In 2021, 2.0 % of the EU population (aged 16 years or over) declared they had an unmet need for medical examination for one of the three specified reasons; this share was higher in rural areas (2.3 %) than it was in towns and suburbs or in cities (both 1.9 %).

In 2021, some 3.8 % of older people (aged 65 years or over) living in rural areas of the EU declared an unmet need for medical examination for the three selected reasons; this was 2.0 percentage points higher than the 1.8 % share recorded among the working-age population (aged 16–64 years) living in rural areas.

- The share of older people living in rural areas with unmet needs for medical examination for these reasons ranged from less than 1.0 % in nine of the EU Member States up to 13.6 % in Romania and a peak of 15.8 % in Greece.
- The share of working-age people living in rural areas with unmet needs for medical examination for these reasons ranged from less than 1.0 % in 10 of the Member States up to 3.3 % in Romania, 3.5 % in Slovenia and a peak of 4.9 % in Estonia.
- In rural areas, a higher proportion of older people (compared with working-age people) declared unmet needs for medical examination for these reasons in 20 of the Member States:

- the opposite pattern was observed in Denmark, Cyprus, Austria, Sweden and Belgium (as older people were less likely than working-age people to report unmet needs);
- in Germany and Malta, there were no unmet needs for medical examination (neither for the working-age population nor for older people) for the three selected reasons.

People living in rural areas with self-reported unmet needs for medical examination or treatment due to being too expensive, too far to travel or waiting lists, 2021



Note: ranked on differences by age (from the largest to smallest range).

(*) 2020. (²) 2018.

Source: Eurostat (online data code: hlth_silc_21)

eurostat

Figure 10: People living in rural areas with self-reported unmet needs for medical examination or treatment due to being too expensive, too far to travel or waiting lists, 2021 (%) Source: Eurostat (hlth_silc_21)

The third wave of the [European health interview survey \(EHIS\)](#) surveyed people aged 65 years or over, asking them whether they had difficulty in doing certain types of activities. These included personal care activities (for example, eating, getting in and out of a bed, or dressing) or household activities (for example, preparing meals, or doing housework).

Figure 11 shows that 15.1 % of the EU population aged 65–74 years reported severe difficulties with personal care and/or household activities in 2019. A much higher share, almost two fifths (39.5 %), of elderly people (aged 75 years or over) reported severe difficulties with personal care and/or household activities.

In 2019, older people living in rural areas were generally more likely to report severe difficulties with personal care and/or household activities.

- The share of the EU's rural population aged 65–74 years with severe difficulties was 15.4 % (0.3 percentage points higher than the average for all people of this age).
- The share of the EU's rural population aged 75 years or over with severe difficulties was 43.5 % (4.0 points higher than the average for all people of this age).

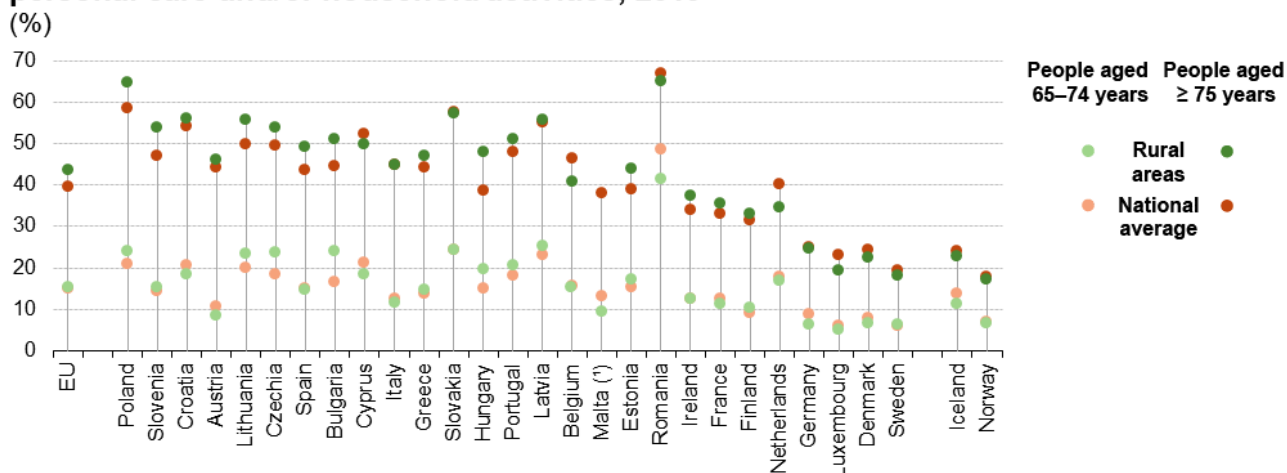
Across the EU Member States (no data for Malta), the share of elderly people (aged 75 years or over) with severe difficulties was generally higher for people living in rural areas (than it was for all people of this age). This pattern was observed in 17 Member States, although the [Benelux Member States](#), Cyprus, Denmark, Romania, Sweden, Germany and Slovakia were exceptions (as elderly people living in their rural areas were less likely than all elderly people to declare severe difficulties).

In 2019, the share of the EU's rural population facing severe difficulties with personal care or household activities was 2.8 times as high among elderly people (aged 75 years or over) as the corresponding share for people aged 65–74 years:

- a much higher ratio was observed in Austria, as elderly people were 5.4 times as likely to face to face severe difficulties as those aged 65–74 years;

- a much lower ratio was observed in Romania, as elderly people were 1.6 times as likely to face to face severe difficulties as those aged 65–74 years.

Older people living in rural areas facing severe difficulties with personal care and/or household activities, 2019 (%)



Note: ranked on differences by age (from the largest to smallest range).

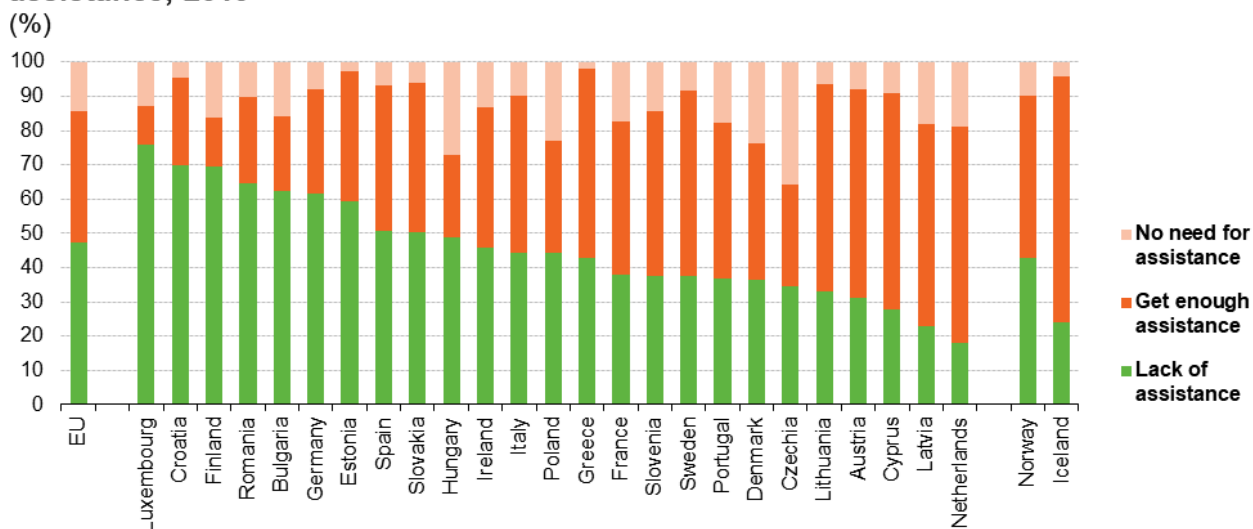
(¹) 2020. (²) 2018.

Source: Eurostat (online data code: h1th_silc_21)

eurostat

Figure 11: Older people living in rural areas facing severe difficulties with personal care and/or household activities, 2019 (%) Source: Eurostat (h1th_ehis_tau)

Older people (≥ 65 years) living in rural areas facing severe difficulties with personal care and/or household activities by type of assistance, 2019 (%)



Note: Belgium and Malta, not available (low reliability).

Source: Eurostat (online data code: h1th_ehis_tadlhu)

eurostat

Figure 12: Older people (≥ 65 years) living in rural areas facing severe difficulties with personal care and/or household activities by type of assistance, 2019 (%) Source: Eurostat (h1th_ehis_tadlhu)

The final analysis in this section presents information on the type of assistance received by older people (aged 65 years or over) for personal care or household activities. In 2019, almost half (47.4 %) of all older people in the EU

facing severe difficulties with personal care and/or household activities reported they had a lack of assistance, while 38.4 % declared they got enough assistance and 14.2 % said they did not require any assistance.

- Approximately three quarters (75.7 %) of all older people living in the rural areas of Luxembourg facing severe difficulties with personal care and/or household activities declared that they had a lack of assistance; there were also relatively high shares, approximately 7 out of 10, recorded in Croatia and Finland.
- Less than one quarter of older people living in rural areas and facing severe difficulties with personal care and/or household activities declared that they had a lack of assistance in Latvia, along with less than one fifth in the Netherlands.

Attractiveness

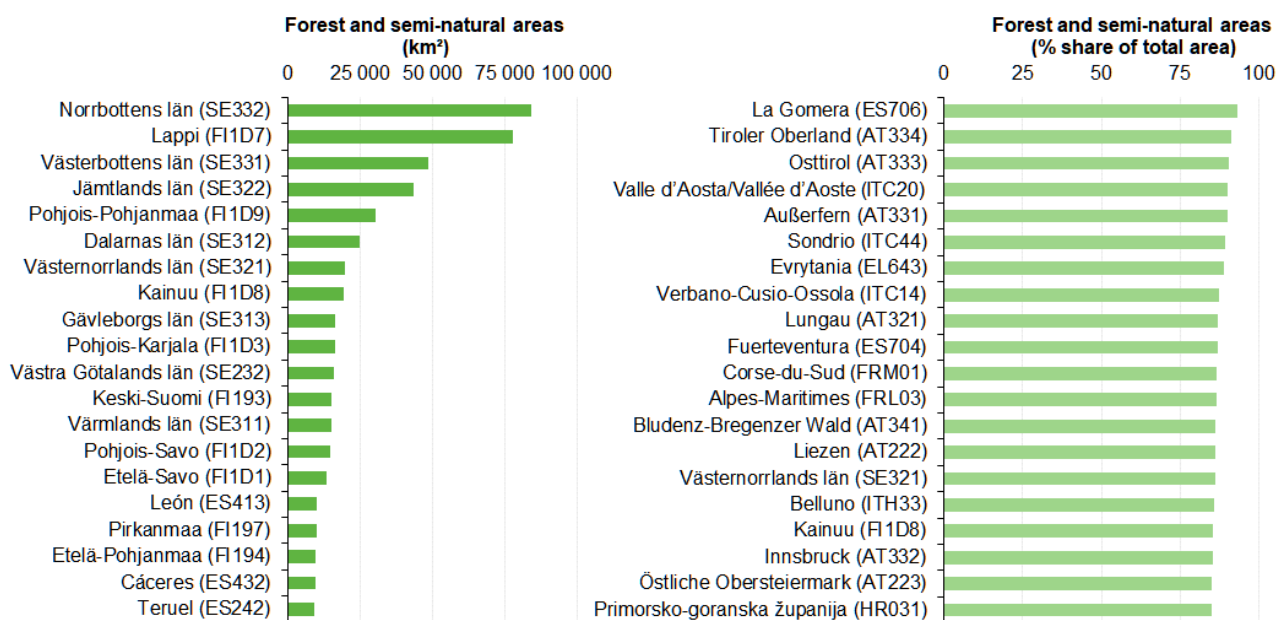
Forests

The EU's rural areas are valued for, among other characteristics, their natural landscapes, varied food production, as well as the possibilities that they provide for a range of recreational activities and tourism. With opportunities for developing the green economy, the rollout of digital technologies, and the expansion of teleworking in a post-COVID economy and society, there is renewed attention on the attractiveness of rural areas as places to work with increased levels of well-being and security.

Forests and other semi-natural areas offer unique natural habitats; they are essential to our survival/well-being, cleaning the air, water and soil. They also regulate the climate and ecosystems, protect biodiversity, play an integral part in the carbon cycle, support livelihoods, and supply goods and services that can drive sustainable growth. According to the [European Environment Agency \(EEA\)](#), forests and other semi-natural areas covered 1.9 million km² of the EU's land area in 2018. These areas allow people – not just those living in rural areas – to connect with nature and benefit from a range of natural habitats, thereby promoting physical and mental health.

Forest and semi-natural areas, 2018

(km² and % share of total area)



Note: the figure shows the 20 predominantly rural regions (NUTS level 3) with the largest forest and semi-natural areas and the 20 regions with the highest shares of their total area covered by forest and semi-natural areas.

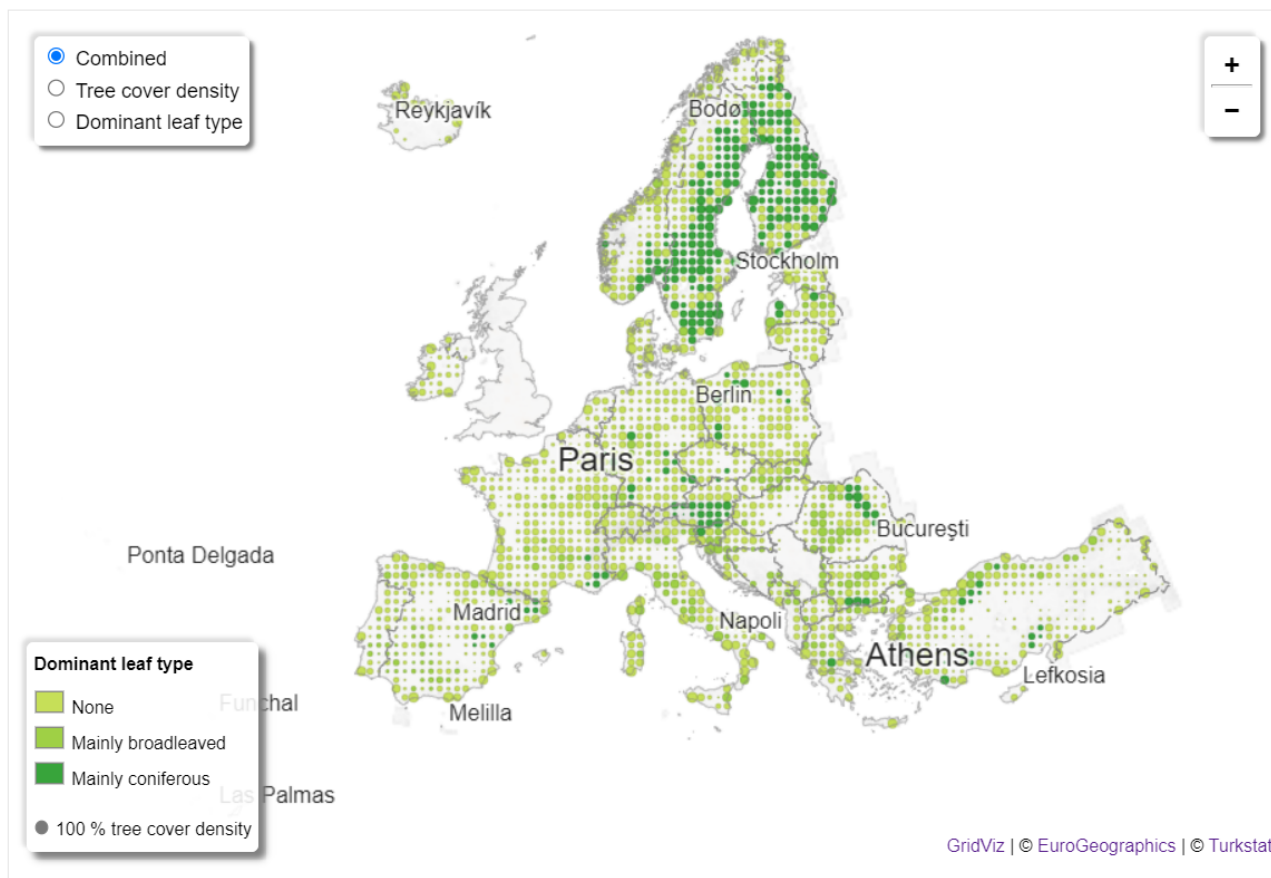
Source: European Environment Agency (<https://www.eea.europa.eu/data-and-maps/dashboards/land-cover-and-change-statistics>)

eurostat

Figure 13: Forest and semi-natural areas, 2018 (km² and % share of total area) Source: (European Environment Agency (EEA) – land cover and change accounts – dashboard)

In 2018, the largest areas of forests and other semi-natural areas in the EU were located in the Nordic Member States: Norrbottens län, Västerbottens län and Jämtlands län in Sweden and Lappi and Pohjois-Pohjanmaa in Finland; see Figure 13. Forests and other semi-natural areas covered more than 90.0 % of the area of five NUTS level 3 regions in the EU: La Gomera (in Canarias, Spain; 93.1 %), three regions in western Austria – Tiroler Oberland (91.1 %), Osttirol (90.3 %) and Außerfern (90.1 %) – and Valle d’Aosta/Vallée d’Aoste in Italy (90.2 %).

A more detailed picture of the distribution of forests is presented in Map 3, which highlights tree cover density and the dominant leaf type for 1 km² grid cells across the EU. It confirms that some of the areas that were most densely covered by forests and other semi-natural areas in 2018 were in Nordic Member States, where mainly coniferous forests predominate.



Map 3: Forests, 2018 (maximum grid resolution = 500m²) Kosovo*: this designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence. Source: Copernicus land monitoring service

Forest fragmentation may lead to the isolation and loss of species, degraded habitat quality, and a reduction in the forest’s ability to sustain the natural processes necessary to maintain ecosystem health.

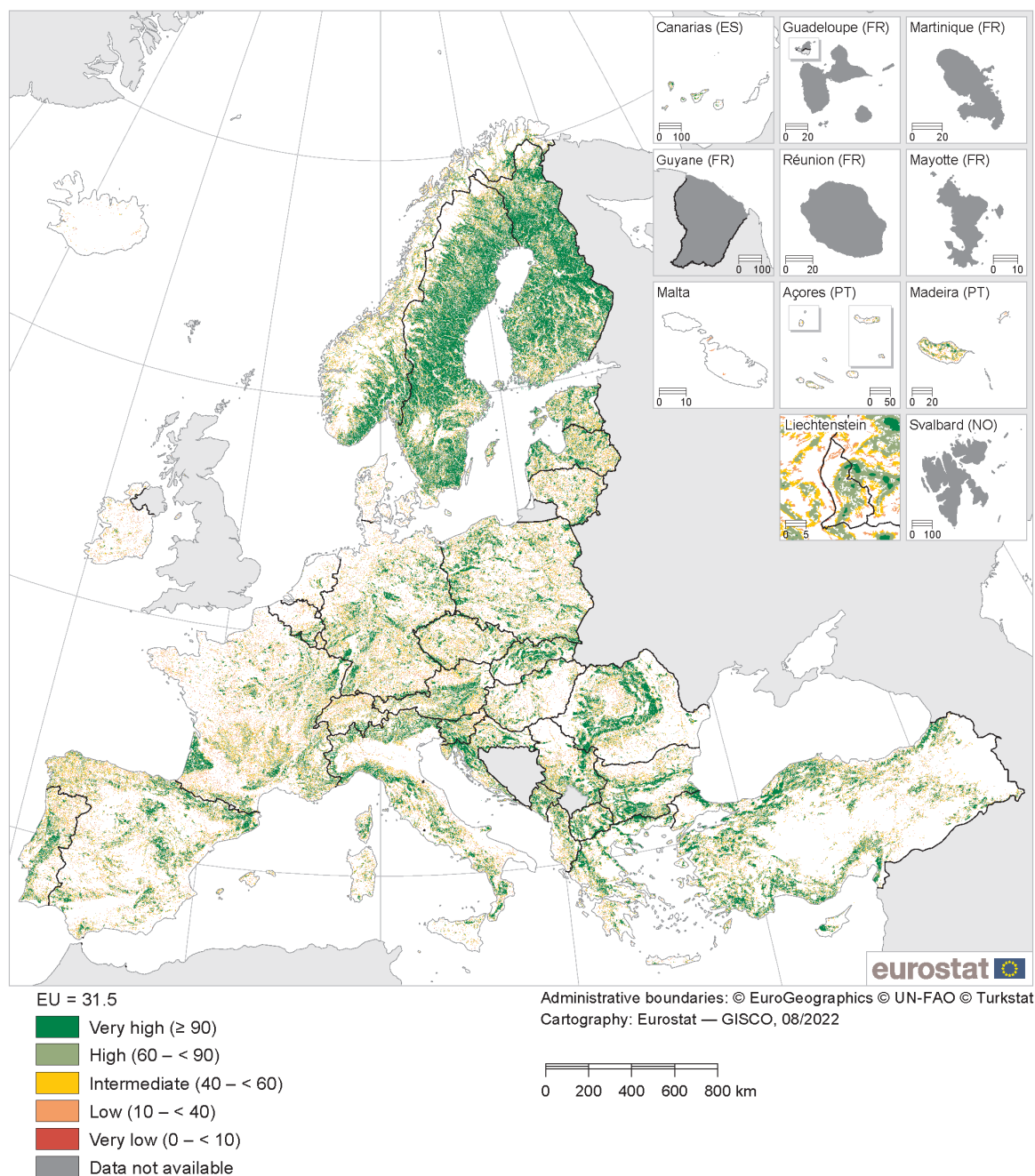
Forest connectivity is measured by forest area density (the proportion of forest area within a local observation area, expressed on a scale from 0–100 % indicating increasing degrees of connectivity) and then grouped into five different connectivity ranges¹.

Across the EU, some 31 % of the total forest area was classified as interior (in other words, very highly connected with a forest area density of at least 90 %); see Map 4. These very highly connected forest areas were particularly concentrated in the most remote parts of Finland and Sweden, and also included several regions in eastern EU

¹For more information on forest connectivity, see Vogt, P. and G. Caudullo, *EUROSTAT – Regional Yearbook 2022: Forest connectivity*, EUR 31072 EN, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2022, ISBN 978-92-76-52435-9, doi:10.2760/838111, JRC129266.

Member States, for example, in Romania and Slovakia. At the other end of the range, particularly fragmented forest areas were found across Belgium, Denmark, Malta and the Netherlands, where forests were often characterised by mosaic patterns interspersed with other land uses; in Germany and France forest areas with a relatively high degree of forest fragmentation were also quite common.

Forest connectivity, 2018
(% of forests in a fixed local neighbourhood area)



Note: forest area density (FAD) is defined as the proportion of all forest pixels within a fixed local neighbourhood area (529 hectares).
Source: CORINE Land Cover (CLC), Joint Research Centre (JRC), European Commission

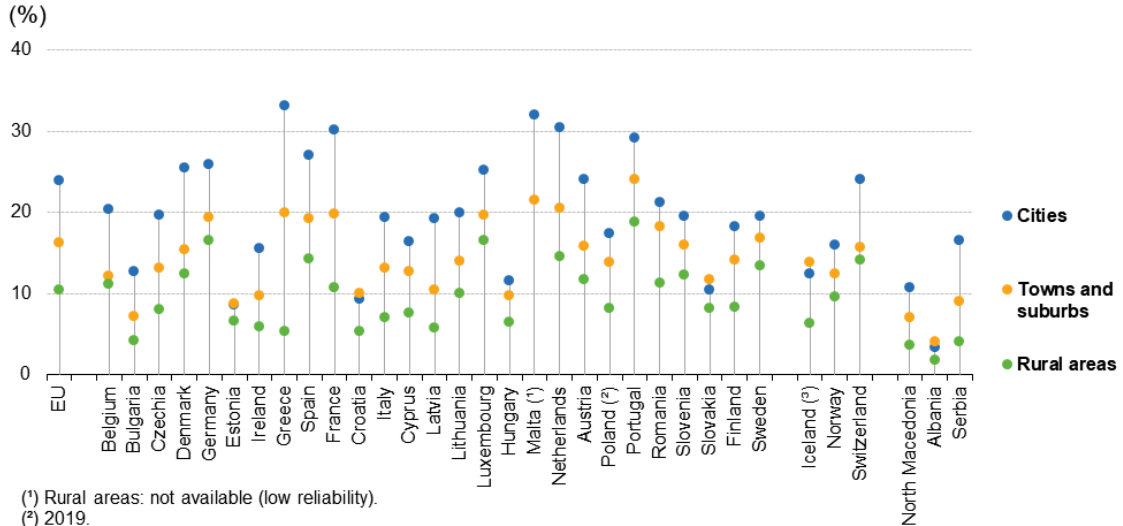
Map 4: Forest connectivity, 2018 (% of forests in a fixed local neighbourhood area) Source: Corine landcover (CLC), Joint Research Centre (JRC), European Commission

Environmental and social issues

Noise pollution (such as noise from neighbours or road traffic noise) is a major environmental concern affecting the health and well-being of people in the EU (for example impacting upon their stress levels, sleep disturbance, cardiovascular and metabolic system, or cognitive impairment in children). In 2020, approximately 1 in 10 persons

(10.5 %) living in rural areas of the EU stated that they suffered from noise; much higher shares were recorded for people living in towns and suburbs (approximately one in six persons; 16.3 %) and in cities (almost one in five persons; 23.9 %). This pattern – a lower proportion of people living in rural areas suffering from noise – was repeated in all 26 of the EU Member States for which data are available (incomplete data for Malta). The risk of suffering from noise was particularly low (when compared in absolute terms with the situation across cities) among people living in rural areas of Greece, France and the Netherlands.

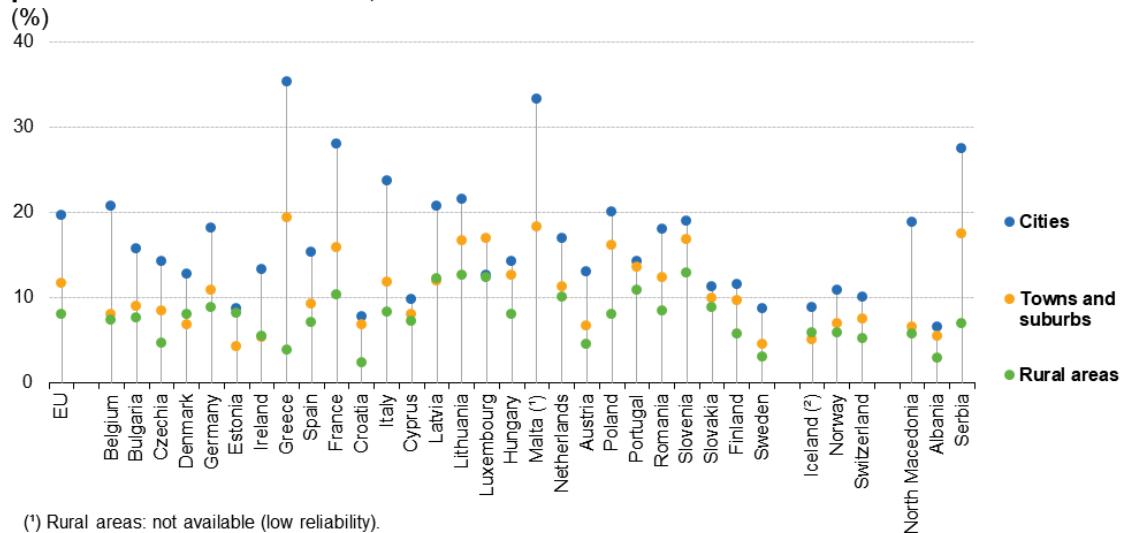
People living in a household considering they suffer from noise, 2020



Source: Eurostat (online data code: ilc_mddw04)



People experiencing pollution, grime or other environmental problems in their local area, 2020



Source: Eurostat (online data code: ilc_mddw05)



Figure 14 (part one): People experiencing problems where they live/in their local area, 2020 (%) Source: Eurostat (ilc_mddw04), (ilc_mddw05) and (ilc_mddw06)

People facing the problem of crime, violence or vandalism in their local area, 2020

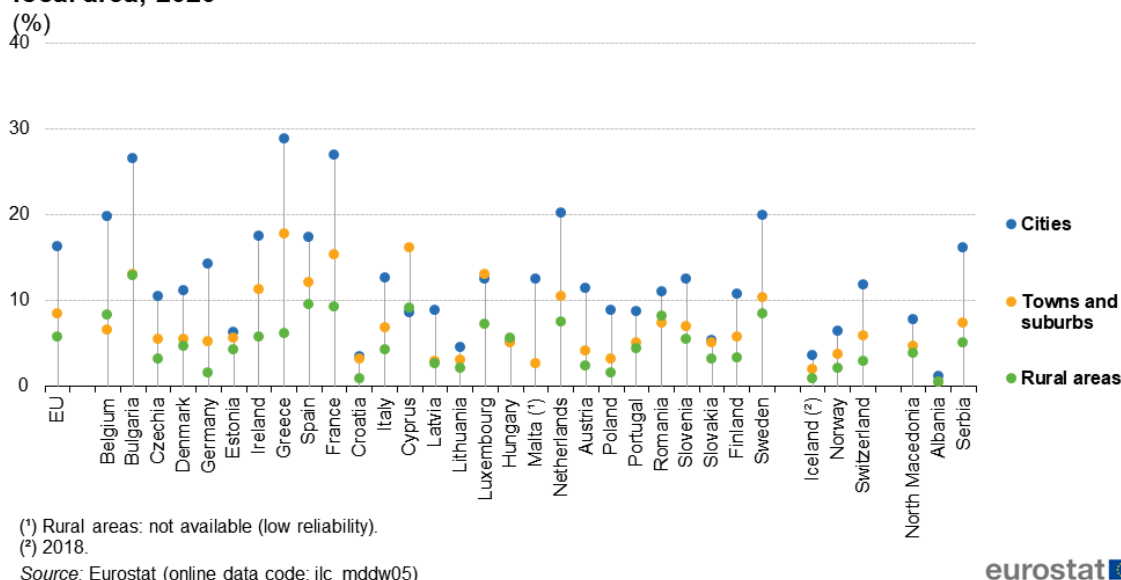


Figure 14 (part two): People experiencing problems where they live/in their local area, 2020 (%) Source: Eurostat (ilc_mddw04), (ilc_mddw05) and (ilc_mddw06)

In 2020, less than one tenth (8.1 %) of the EU's rural population experienced pollution, grime or other environmental problems in their local area (see Figure 14; use the dropdown list to change the indicator). This was considerably lower than the shares recorded among people living in towns and suburbs (11.7 %) or cities (19.6 %). A similar pattern was repeated for most of the EU Member States, although there were some exceptions.

- Luxembourg was the only Member State where people living in cities did not experience the highest share of issues related to pollution, grime or other environmental problems.
- In Denmark, Estonia, Ireland, Latvia and Malta (no data for rural areas), the lowest share of people experiencing pollution, grime or other environmental problems was recorded for those living in towns and suburbs (rather than in rural areas).

The attractiveness of rural areas may also be measured in relation to the share of people facing problems associated with crime, violence or vandalism. In 2020, some 5.8 % of the EU population living in rural areas faced these problems: much higher shares were recorded for people living in towns and suburbs (8.4 %) and, in particular, cities (16.3 %). This pattern – a lower share of people living in rural areas facing the problems of crime, violence or vandalism – was repeated in the vast majority of EU Member States (see Figure 14 ; use the dropdown list to change the indicator).

- In Belgium, Hungary, Malta (no data for rural areas) and Romania, the lowest share of people facing the problems of crime, violence or vandalism was observed for those living in towns and suburbs.
- In Cyprus, the lowest share was recorded among people living in cities.

In rural areas, the proportion of people facing the problems of crime, violence or vandalism ranged from 0.9 % in Croatia up to 12.9 % in Bulgaria.

Tourism

In 2021, there were 1.8 billion nights spent at EU tourist accommodation establishments; a majority (56.7 %) were spent in hotels and similar accommodation (NACE Group 55.1; hereafter referred to as hotels). Holiday and other short-stay accommodation (NACE Group 55.2; hereafter referred to as holiday accommodation) accounted for approximately one quarter (25.5 %) of all nights spent in the EU, leaving a 17.9 % share for camping grounds, recreational vehicle parks and trailer parks (NACE Group 55.3; hereafter referred to as camping grounds).

Nights spent at tourist accommodation establishments by degree of urbanisation, 2021 (%)

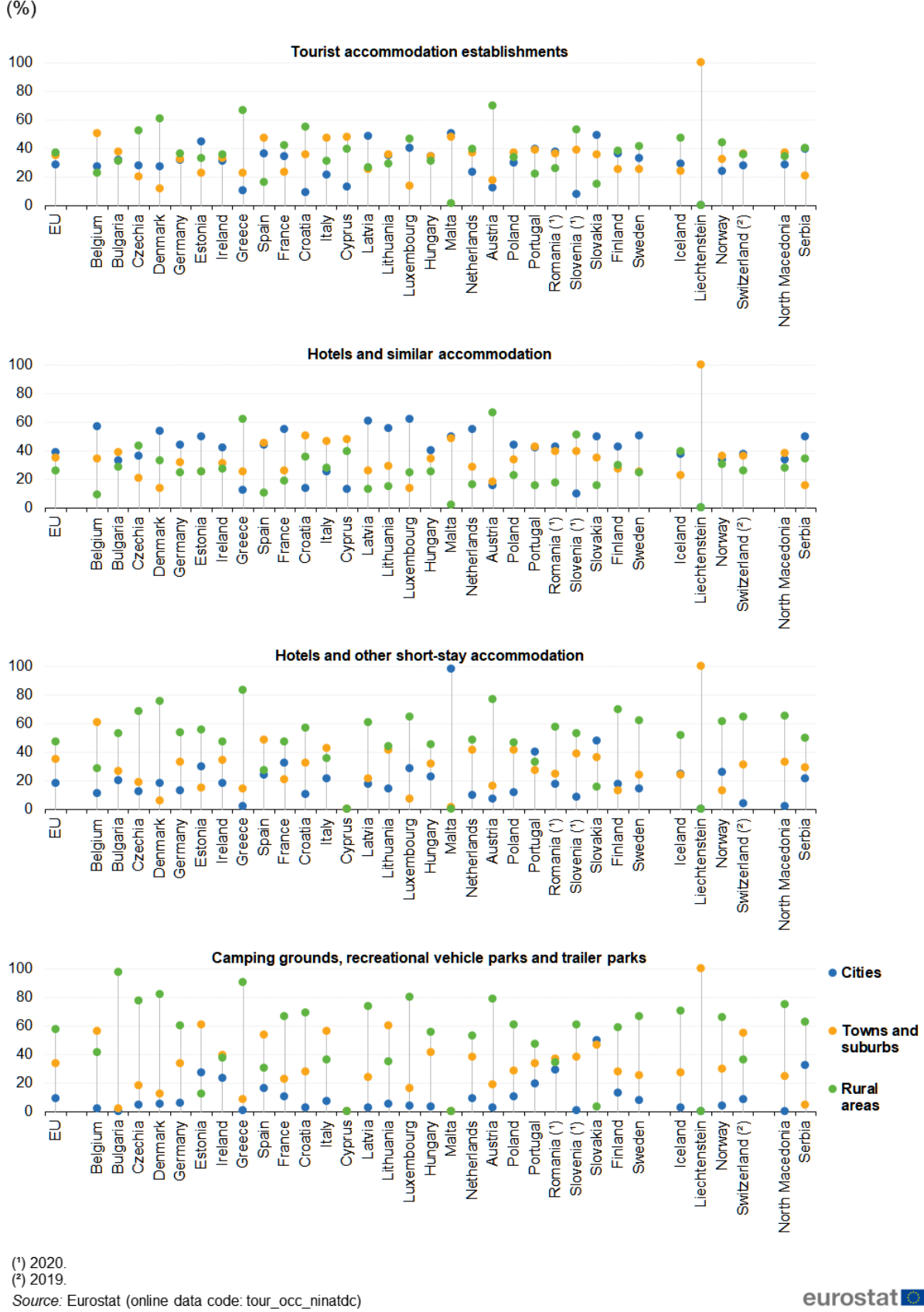


Figure 15: Nights spent at tourist accommodation establishments by degree of urbanisation, 2021 (%)
 Source: (tour_occ_ninatdc)

Rural areas accounted for more than one third (36.9 %) of the total nights spent at EU tourist accommodation establishments in 2021; this was higher than the shares for towns and suburbs (34.8 %) or for cities (28.3 %). Rural areas were the most popular destinations for people staying in holiday accommodation or in camping grounds, whereas cities were the most popular destinations for people staying in hotels (note that, aside from trips for private purposes such as leisure, the statistics presented also encompass business trips).

Looking in more detail at some of the key figures for rural areas:

- Austria and Greece were the only EU Member States to report that rural areas accounted for more than three fifths of all nights spent in hotels;
- Greece, Austria and Denmark were the only EU Member States to report that rural areas accounted for more than three quarters of all nights spent in holiday accommodation;
- Bulgaria, Greece, Denmark and Luxembourg were the only EU Member States to report that rural areas accounted for more than four fifths of all nights spent in camping grounds.

EU regions have been affected by tourism in different ways since a rapid expansion in mass tourism during the 1950s. Some regions continue to receive very few visitors, while others have seen their numbers of tourists grow at a rapid pace. The success of tourism is, in the long-term, closely linked to its sustainability – the conservation and enhancement of cultural and natural heritage, including the arts, gastronomy or the preservation of biodiversity.

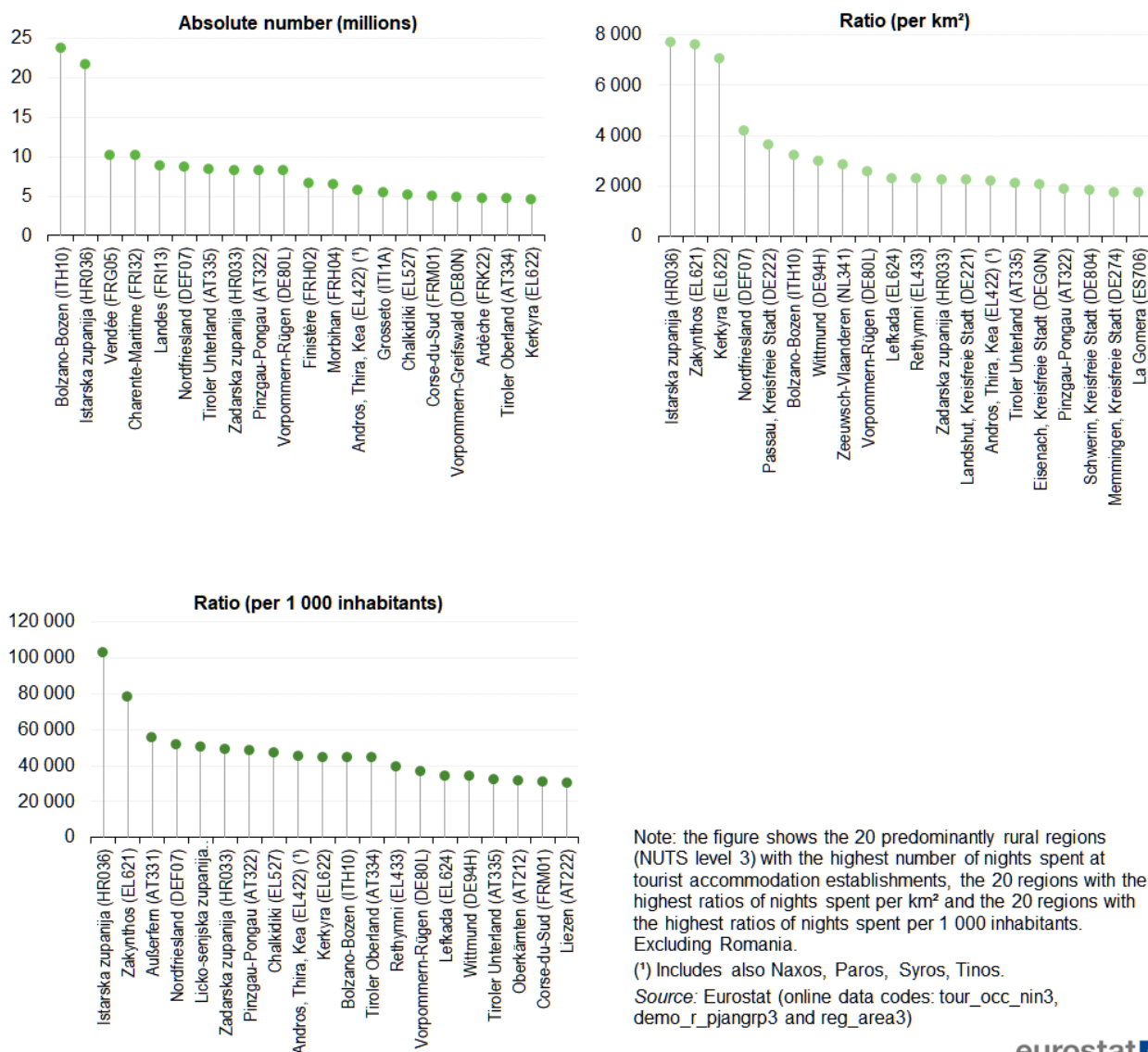
There are a wide range of predominantly rural regions (NUTS level 3 regions where at least 50 % of the population live in rural grid cells) across the EU that appeal to tourists. In 2021 – when many tourist destinations were still suffering from the impact of the COVID-19 crisis – the Italian Alpine region of Bolzano-Bozen and the Croatian coastal region of Istarska zupanija had the highest number of nights spent at [tourist accommodation establishments](#) (23.8 million and 21.7 million, respectively). There were two other predominantly rural regions in the EU where upwards of 10.0 million nights were spent in tourist accommodation establishments – both of these were in western France – Vendée and Charente-Maritime.

Tourism density — defined here as the relationship between the total number of nights spent and the total area of each region — provides one measure that may be used to analyse sustainability issues. Note that the number of nights spent in tourist accommodation does not include tourists staying at non-rented accommodation (for example, in second homes) or same-day visitors and that these visitors/tourists may also impact sustainability. In 2021, there were, on average, some 431 nights spent in tourist accommodation for every square kilometre (km²) across the EU. For predominantly rural regions, tourism density was generally high in those regions where space was at a premium (in other words, regions where there was relatively little space available), for example, some island regions. The highest ratios were recorded in Istarska zupanija, and two Greek island regions in the Ionian Sea (Zakynthos and Kerkyra (Corfu)); all three of these predominantly rural regions had tourism density ratios of more than 7 000 nights spent per km².

An alternative tourism pressure indicator can be calculated as the number of nights spent in tourist accommodation relative to the resident population of a region; this can highlight the pressure on a region's infrastructure. In the EU, there were 4 096 nights spent in tourist accommodation per 1 000 inhabitants in 2021. By far the highest ratio of nights spent in tourist accommodation relative to the resident population was recorded in Istarska zupanija (103 137 nights spent per 1 000 inhabitants), followed by Zakynthos (78 197) and the western Austrian Alpine region of Außerfern (55 839).

Nights spent at tourist accommodation establishments in selected predominantly rural regions, 2021

(millions, per km² and per 1 000 inhabitants)

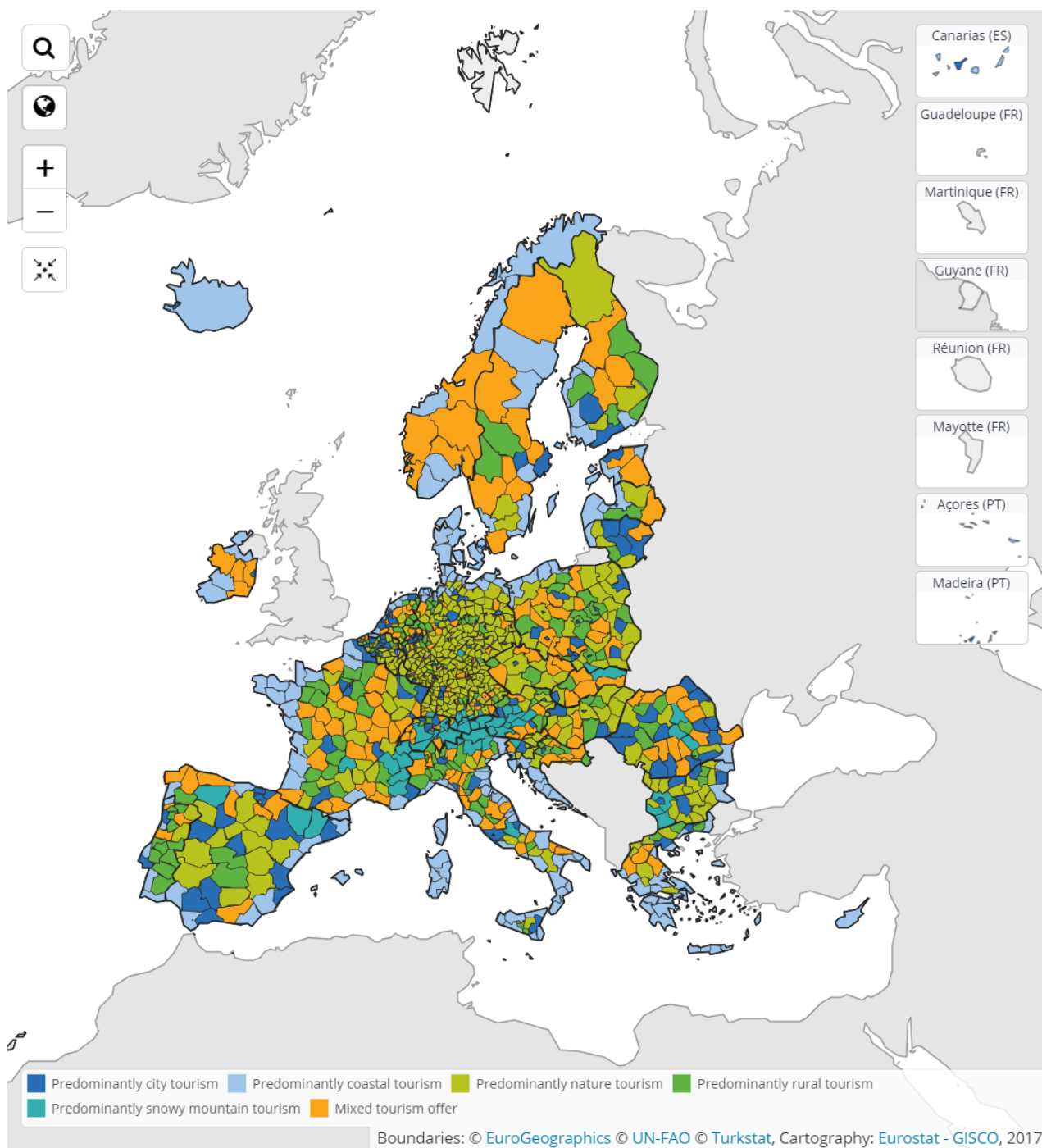


eurostat

Figure 16: Nights spent at tourist accommodation establishments in selected predominantly rural regions, 2021 (millions, per km² and per 1 000 inhabitants) Source: Eurostat (tour_occ_nin3), (demo_r_pjangrp3) and (reg_area3)

Typology for dominant tourism

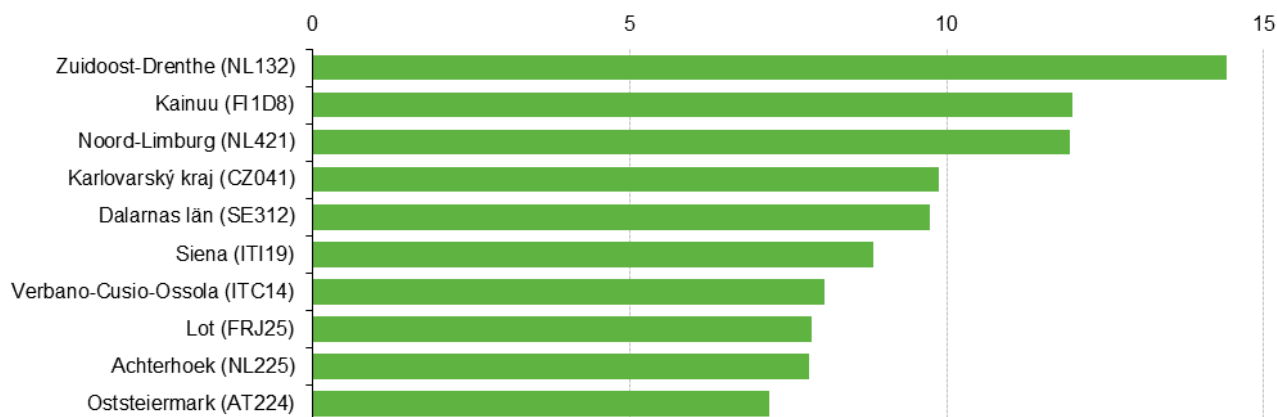
As part of the EU's [tourism dashboard](#), each NUTS level 3 region may be classified according to one of six tourism typologies, based on their tourism capacity (in other words, the number of rooms) – see the map below.



Map B1: Dominant tourism typology, 2021 Note: each tourism destination is classified according to one of six tourism typologies. The classification is first determined at NUTS level 3 based on the proportions of tourism capacity (in other words, the number of rooms) across different geographical zones. Source: European Commission, Joint Research Centre (Tourism dashboard) based on Eurostat data

Looking in more detail, the highest ratios of tourism intensity among regions classified as predominantly rural tourism were observed for Zuidoost-Drenthe (in the north-east of the Netherlands), Kainuu (in central Finland) and Noord-Limburg (in the south of the Netherlands); they were the only predominantly rural tourism regions to report more than 10 nights spent at tourist accommodation per inhabitant.

Tourism intensity in regions classified by predominantly rural tourism, 2020 (per inhabitant)



Note: the figure shows the 10 rural regions with the highest level of tourism intensity (the number of nights spent at tourist accommodation relative to the resident population).

Source: European Commission, Joint Research Centre (<https://tourism-dashboard.ec.europa.eu/>) based on Eurostat data

eurostat

Figure B1: Tourism intensity in regions classified by predominantly rural tourism, 2020 (per inhabitant)
Source: European Commission, Joint Research Centre (Tourism dashboard) based on Eurostat data

Source data for tables and graphs

- [Quality of life in rural areas: tables and figures](#)

Context

To ensure that rural areas continue to play an essential role in terms of homes, jobs, food, biodiversity and varied ecosystems, a European Commission Communication set out *A long-term vision for the EU's rural areas – Towards stronger, connected, resilient and prosperous rural areas by 2040* (COM(2021) 345 final). In shaping this vision, the Commission gathered views of rural communities and businesses via public consultations and stakeholder-led events, to outline a comprehensive plan designed to help rural communities and businesses reach their full potential in the coming decades. Four complementary areas of action emerged, embodying a long-term vision for stronger, connected, resilient and prosperous rural areas by 2040.

- **Stronger rural areas:** should be home to vibrant local communities, whereby both women and men are empowered to take active part in policy and decision-making processes.
- **Connected rural areas:** public transport services should be maintained or improved (including connections to peri-urban and urban areas) alongside investment in digital infrastructures to ensure better-connected EU rural areas.
- **More resilient rural areas that foster well-being:** the preservation of natural resources, the restoration of landscapes, the greening of farming activities and the shortening of supply chains should make rural areas more resilient to climate change, natural hazards and economic crises.
- **Prosperous rural areas:** the diversification of economic activities and improving the value added of farming and agri-food activities should result in sustainable local economic strategies with positive effects on employment.

See also

Online publications

- [Eurostat regional yearbook](#)

- [Health in the European Union – facts and figures](#)
- [Living conditions in Europe](#)
- [Quality of life indicators](#)
- [Rural Europe](#)
- [Urban Europe](#)

Methodological publications

- [Applying the Degree of Urbanisation – 2021 edition](#)
- [EU statistics on income and living conditions \(EU-SILC\) methodology](#)
- [Methodological manual on territorial typologies – 2018 edition](#)

Background articles

- [Geographical information system of the Commission \(GISCO\)](#)

Publications

Statistical publications

- [Eurostat regional yearbook – 2022 edition](#)
- [Urban Europe – statistics on cities, towns and suburbs – 2016 edition](#)

Methodological publications

- [Applying the Degree of Urbanisation – A methodological manual to define cities, towns and rural areas for international comparisons – 2021 edition](#)
- [Methodological manual on territorial typologies – 2018 edition](#)

Database

- [Degree of urbanisation \(degurb\)](#)
- [Health \(hlth\)](#)
- [Other typologies \(urt\)](#)
- [Quality of life](#)
- [Regional statistics by NUTS classification \(reg\)](#)

Dedicated section

- [Degree of urbanisation](#)
- [Health](#)
- [Income and living conditions](#)
- [NUTS – Nomenclature of territorial units for statistics](#)
- [Quality of life](#)
- [Regions](#)
- [Rural development](#)

Methodology

- [Applying the degree of urbanisation – A methodological manual to define cities, towns and rural areas for international comparisons – 2021 edition](#)
- [Health – methodology](#)
- [Income and living conditions – methodology](#)
- [Methodological manual on territorial typologies – 2018 edition](#)
- [Quality of life – methodology](#)
- [Statistical regions in the European Union and partner countries: NUTS and statistical regions 2021 – 2022 edition](#)

Legislation

Statistical legislation

- [Health – legislation](#)
- [Income and living conditions – legislation](#)
- [Quality of life – legislation](#)
- [Regulation \(EU\) 2017/2391](#) of the European Parliament and of the Council of 12 December 2017 amending Regulation (EC) No 1059/2003 as regards the territorial typologies (Tercet)
- [Consolidated and amended version of Regulation \(EC\) No 1059/2003](#) of the European Parliament and of the Council on the establishment of a common classification of territorial units for statistics (NUTS)

Policy legislation

- [Commission Delegated Regulation \(EU\) No 522/2014](#) of 11 March 2014 supplementing Regulation (EU) No 1301/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council with regard to the detailed rules concerning the principles for the selection and management of innovative actions in the area of sustainable urban development to be supported by the European Regional Development Fund
- [Regulation \(EU\) No 1305/2013](#) of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 December 2013 on support for rural development by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD)
- [Regulation \(EU\) No 1310/2013](#) of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 December 2013 laying down certain transitional provisions on support for rural development by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD)

Visualisations

- [Regions and cities illustrated \(RCI\) – Degree of urbanisation](#)
- [Regions and cities illustrated \(RCI\) – Urban–rural typology](#)

External links

- [Urban Agenda for the EU](#)

European Commission – Directorate-General Agriculture and rural development

- [Rural development](#)
- [The new Common Agricultural Policy: 2023–27](#)

European Commission – Directorate-General Regional and Urban Policy

- [Cities and urban development](#)
- [Cohesion in Europe towards 2050; eighth report on economic, social and territorial cohesion](#)

- Rail transport performance in Europe
- Road transport performance in Europe
- Territorial cohesion
- Urban–rural linkages

European Committee of the Regions

- European Committee of the Regions

European networks

- European Network for Rural Development
- European Urban Initiative

United Nations

- Habitat III – The new Urban Agenda
- Sustainable development goals – Rural development