**Estimates of County and Borough Populations in England, 1200-1589**

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In recent years, estimates of the population of medieval England have risen considerably, to roughly 5 to 6.5 million on the eve of the Black Death. The new estimates by historical demographers and economists, particularly Hatcher and Bailey (2001), Hatcher (2003), and Clark (2007a), are based on a wider range of sources and more sophisticated statistical methods; but they are also based on a greater appreciation of the dynamism of the European economy during the High Middle Ages and of the devastating losses caused by periodic famines and by the Black Death (Hatcher 1996, 2008; Miller and Hatcher, 1978, 1995; and Clark 2007b).

Estimating the populations of particular counties and boroughs poses its own difficulties. Scholars have worked creatively, however, with the Domesday Survey of 1086, the lay poll tax of 1377, the clerical poll tax of 1377-1381, and other fragmentary enumerations, such as the lay subsidy from Kent of 1334, to estimate local populations in particular years (Russell 1948: 17-146, Given 1977: 15-32). And these estimates yield a remarkably consistent portrait of relative size of county and borough populations from 1086 to 1377, whether the populations are calculated forward from the Domesday Survey to 1280 using Given’s method, or backward to 1280 from the 1377 poll tax using Clark’s estimates of the changing size of England’s population from decade to decade. Clark estimates that England’s population was 1.6 times larger in 1280 than in 1377 (which is close to the 1.5 times that Given used for his extrapolation from Russell). A comparison of the two methods of estimation yields the follow populations for the counties and boroughs in Given’s study of homicide in thirteenth-century England.

County 1280 Givens 1280 Russell / Clark Percent difference

Bedford 43400 48902 1.13

Kent 107400 143542 1.34

Norfolk 348900 235189 0.67

Oxford 89100 65732 0.74

Warwick 31900 72766 2.28

Bristol 17000 15256 0.90

London 40000 56055 1.40

Total 677770 637770 0.94

Only the estimate for Warwickshire is substantially different. And if the estimates are summed over the five counties and two boroughs (Bristol and London), the difference between the estimates are negligible.

It is possible, therefore, to estimate county and borough populations plausibly from 1200 to 1540 by extrapolating from Russell’s estimates for 1377 using Clark’s estimates of England’s changing total population from decade to decade. Clark’s estimate of the population of England in 1377 (3,337,000) was 1.50557 times Russell’s estimate for the lay population (2,238,352), and 1.48355 times Russell’s estimate for the lay and clerical population (2,271,583), but Russell could not assign the clerical population to particular jurisdictions. Thus, the best option available is to use the multiplier for the lay population and to assume that the clerical population was distributed somewhat randomly across England.

The resulting population estimates are higher for 1280 than the estimate that Given used to estimate homicide rates for thirteenth century England, but they yield only slightly lower estimates of the homicide rate, because they allow for the rapid growth in England’s population over the course of the thirteenth century, something Given was unable to do because of the limits of the demographic scholarship of the time. Given used his estimates for 1280 for the entire century, which meant that he overestimated the population in the early years of the century and underestimated it in the later years of the century. That is why his estimates of homicide rates in thirteenth century England are still plausible and reliable, despite the advances in medieval economic and demographic history over the past thirty-five years.

The county estimates are plausible, but the borough estimates for Bristol and London appear to be implausibly high before the famines and epidemics of the fourteenth century. It appears, therefore, that it would be wise not to use the multiplier based on Clark’s national population estimates to estimate Bristol’s and London’s populations over time. Estimates based directly on Russell’s estimates for 1377 appear to be more plausible.

EXCEL and CSV files

Comparison of Russell’s and Givens’ population estimates for medieval England

English County and Borough Populations, 1200-1589, from estimates by Clark and Russell

Estimates of Population, Wages, and Prices by Clark and Wrigley

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