Management Analytics and Social Insights

www.masi.reapress.com

Manag. Anal. Soc. Insights. Vol. 2, No. 4 (2025) 265–274.

Paper Type: Original Article

Airbnb's Role In Rural Housing Shortages: A Case Study Of Sussex

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Citation:

Received: 10 May 2025 *Revised: 16 July 2025* *Accepted: 26 September 20255*	Adenegan, M. A., & Yusuf, J. A. (2025). Airbnb's role in rural housing shortages: A case study of Sussex. *Management Analytics and Social Insights, 2*(4), 265-274.

Abstract

Rural housing affordability has become a critical issue in the United Kingdom, particularly in picturesque and accessible counties like Sussex. This study investigates the extent to which the expansion of the short-term rental platform Airbnb has contributed to housing shortages in the rural parishes of East and West Sussex. Using a panel dataset from 2016 to 2025 at the parish level, this research employs a spatial panel data model to analyse the impact of Airbnb listing density on median house prices, median private rents, and the availability of long-term rental stock. The findings reveal a statistically significant positive relationship between the concentration of entire-home Airbnb listings and escalating housing costs. The conversion of residential properties, including traditional cottages and second homes, into full-time short-term lets is shown to reduce the housing supply available to residents, thereby inflating prices. The Spatial Durbin Model (SDM) confirms the presence of significant spillover effects, indicating that housing market pressures in one parish are transmitted to neighbouring areas. This paper argues that the frictionless nature of the Airbnb platform has intensified pre-existing pressures on rural housing, accelerating a form of "platform-mediated rural gentrification" that displaces local populations and threatens community viability. The study concludes by discussing targeted policy implications, such as the implementation of stricter licensing regimes and the use of planning controls, to mitigate the adverse effects of the short-term rental market and safeguard housing for rural communities.

Keywords: Airbnb, Rural housing, Housing shortage, Gentrification, Sussex, Short-term rentals, Spatial analysis, Platform economy.

1 | Introduction

The idyllic image of the English countryside has long held a powerful allure, attracting both tourists and new residents seeking respite from urban life. Counties like East and West Sussex, with their rolling South Downs, historic villages, and extensive coastline, epitomise this appeal. However, beneath this picturesque veneer lies

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https://doi.org/10.22105/masi.v2i4.80

a deepening housing crisis. For decades, rural communities have grappled with a chronic shortage of affordable and available housing, driven by factors such as restrictive planning laws, the prevalence of second-home ownership, and an imbalance between low local wages and high property values [1]. This crisis threatens the social and economic sustainability of rural areas, making it increasingly difficult for local people, young families, and essential workers to find a home in the communities they serve.

Into this already strained environment, the rise of the digital platform economy has introduced a powerful new disruptor: Airbnb. Initially promoted as a means for homeowners to earn supplemental income by renting out a spare room, the platform has evolved into a global marketplace for Short-Term Rentals (STRs), dominated in many areas by commercial operators managing multiple properties as year-round holiday lets [2]. While the impact of Airbnb on urban housing markets has been the subject of considerable academic and policy debate, its role in shaping rural housing landscapes remains comparatively under-examined.

This study seeks to address this gap by investigating the following research question: How has the growth of Airbnb contributed to housing shortages and escalating housing costs in the rural parishes of Sussex? Sussex provides an exemplary case study. Its proximity to London, combined with its status as a popular tourist destination encompassing two National Parks (the South Downs and part of the High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB)) and a vibrant coastline, makes its housing stock particularly vulnerable to conversion for tourist use. The concern, voiced by local councils and community groups, is that the ease with which residential properties can be commercialised via Airbnb is accelerating the decline of long-term housing availability, effectively "hollowing out" villages and transforming them into seasonal tourist enclaves.

To explore this issue, this paper utilises a quantitative approach, analysing a panel dataset of rural parishes in East and West Sussex from 2016 to 2025. By employing a spatial econometric model, the research accounts for the interconnectedness of local housing markets, providing a more robust analysis of how the concentration of Airbnb listings in one parish can impact housing affordability in its neighbours. The study hypothesises that a higher density of 'entire home' Airbnb listings leads to: 1) an increase in median house prices, 2) an increase in median private rental costs, and 3) a decrease in the number of properties available on the long-term rental market.

This research contributes to the literature in three key ways. First, it extends the study of the "Airbnb effect" beyond its typical urban context into a rural setting, offering insights into the unique ways platform capitalism interacts with rural economies and communities. Second, its use of spatial panel data methods provides a methodologically rigorous assessment of the issue, capturing the spatial spillover effects that are crucial in understanding regional housing dynamics. Third, the findings have direct policy relevance for local authorities, planning bodies, and national governments seeking to manage the impacts of the platform economy and address the long-standing challenge of rural housing provision.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 reviews the literature on rural gentrification, housing shortages, and the emerging body of work on Airbnb's impacts. Section 3 outlines the research methodology, data sources, and the econometric model. Section 4 presents the empirical results, including descriptive statistics and the regression outputs. Section 5 discusses the interpretation and broader implications of these findings. Finally, Section 6 concludes with a summary, acknowledges the study's limitations, and proposes avenues for future research and policy intervention.

2|Literature Review

The challenges facing rural housing markets in the UK are not new. This review situates the recent phenomenon of Airbnb within the long-established academic discourse on rural gentrification and second-home ownership, before turning to the specific literature on how digital platforms are reshaping property markets.

2.1 | Rural Gentrification, Second Homes, and Housing Exclusion

The concept of gentrification, while born in the urban context of 1960s London [3], was adapted to rural settings by scholars who observed similar processes of class-based transformation in the countryside. Rural gentrification describes the influx of affluent, typically urban-origin, middle-class households into rural areas, leading to rising house prices and the cultural and economic displacement of established, often working-class, residents [4]. Unlike urban gentrification, which frequently involves the redevelopment of disinvested building stock, rural gentrification typically centres on the appropriation of existing housing and the cultural transformation of village life.

A primary driver of this process has been the demand for second homes. For decades, the purchase of cottages and farmhouses by wealthy urbanites for weekend and holiday use has been a contentious issue in desirable rural locations across the UK, from Cornwall to the Lake District. Research has consistently shown that high concentrations of second homes reduce the available housing stock for permanent residents, drive up prices beyond the reach of local incomes, and contribute to the seasonal decline of village services and community cohesion [1], [5]. These "part-time" residents can lead to what has been termed the "death of the English village," where local shops, pubs, and schools close due to a lack of year-round patronage, leaving behind sterile commuter and retirement dormitories.

This process creates profound forms of housing exclusion. As property prices decouple from local wage levels, younger generations are forced to move away to find affordable housing, severing family ties and community bonds. Key workers in lower-paid but essential sectors, such as agriculture, social care, and hospitality, also find themselves priced out of the communities they serve, creating critical labour shortages [6].

2.2 | The Platform Economy and the "Touristification" of Rural Housing

The rise of the platform economy, exemplified by Airbnb, introduces a new and powerful dynamic into this context. Airbnb can be understood as a technological accelerant for the processes described above. It dramatically lowers the transaction costs and increases the visibility for property owners wishing to enter the short-term tourist rental market. What might once have been a cottage used as a family's private second home can now be operated as a commercial, high-turnover holiday let, accessible to a global market of tourists.

This "platformatization" of rural housing [2] has several distinct effects. First, it intensifies the commercial logic of property ownership. A property is no longer just a home or a second home, but a financial asset to be optimised for maximum yield. The potential revenue from high-season tourist lets often far exceeds that available from a long-term tenancy, creating a powerful financial incentive for landlords to convert properties from the residential to the tourist market [7]. This directly reduces the supply of long-term rental properties, a critical tenure for those unable to afford to buy.

Second, Airbnb extends the geography of tourist accommodation. Whereas traditional holiday accommodation was concentrated in licensed B&Bs, hotels, or designated holiday parks, Airbnb allows any residential property to become a de facto hotel. This "touristification" can spread throughout a village, fundamentally altering its character and sense of place. The constant churn of temporary visitors can erode neighbourly bonds and community trust, while local services may reorient towards tourist needs rather than those of residents [8].

Empirical research on Airbnb's rural impact is nascent but growing. A study in the Scottish Highlands found that the growth of STRs was a primary driver of a severe housing crisis in popular tourist areas like the Isle of Skye [9]. Similarly, research in rural US tourist towns has linked Airbnb's expansion to rising rents and increased housing precarity for local service workers [10]. However, few studies have applied rigorous econometric methods to model this relationship, and even fewer have considered the spatial spillover effects within a rural region.

2.3 | The Sussex Context and Research Gap

Sussex encapsulates the tensions between conservation, tourism, and local housing needs. Its landscape is heavily protected by planning designations (e.g., the South Downs National Park), which restricts new housing development and inflates the value of existing stock. Simultaneously, its tourism economy is a vital part of its economic fabric. The question is one of balance.

This study fills a critical research gap by providing a systematic, quantitative analysis of Airbnb's role in the Sussex rural housing market. By moving beyond anecdotal evidence and case studies, it aims to quantify the impact of STRs on house prices and rental availability. Furthermore, by employing a spatial model, it will illuminate the interconnected nature of the crisis, demonstrating how market pressures flow across parish boundaries. This evidence-based approach is essential for informing local and national policy responses that can navigate the complexities of the platform economy while prioritising the housing needs of rural communities.

3 | Methodology

This research employs a quantitative methodology to analyse the causal relationship between the growth of Airbnb and indicators of housing shortage in rural Sussex. A spatial panel dataset was constructed for all parishes within East and West Sussex officially classified as 'rural' by the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (DEFRA). The analysis covers the period from 2016 to 2025 on an annual basis.

3.1 | Data and Variables

The dataset was assembled from a variety of public sources, aggregated at the parish level:

I. Airbnb data: Sourced from Inside Airbnb, which provides publicly available, scraped data on Airbnb listings. Data collected included the number of listings, the proportion of 'entire home' listings, and host data (e.g., multi-listing hosts indicating commercial operation). The primary independent variable, AirbnbDensity, is measured as the number of active 'entire home' listings per 100 dwellings in each parish. This metric is chosen as 'whole home' listings represent the most direct removal of a housing unit from the residential market.

II. Housing market data: Median house sale prices at the parish level were obtained from HM Land Registry. Data on median monthly private rental costs and the number of properties listed for long-term rent were sourced from major property portals (e.g., Rightmove, Zoopla) and cross-referenced with Valuation Office Agency (VOA) data.

III. Socio-economic and geographic controls: A range of control variables was included to account for other factors influencing rural housing markets. Parish-level population estimates, median household income, and employment data (e.g., proportion employed in agriculture) were sourced from the Office for National Statistics (ONS). Geographic variables, such as the parish's distance to the coastline and whether it falls within a National Park or AONB, were calculated using GIS data. Proximity to primary transport links (e.g., mainline train stations) was also included. The key variables for the model are described in *Table 1*.

Table 1. Description of variables.

Variable Name	Description	Source
Dependent variables		
MedianPrice	Median sale price of residential properties (£).	HM Land Registry
MedianRent	Median monthly rent for a two-bedroom property (£).	VOA / property portals
LTR_Stock	Number of properties available for long-term rent per 1,000 dwellings.	Property portals
Independent variable		
AirbnbDensity	Number of 'entire home' Airbnb listings per 100 dwellings.	Inside airbnb
Control variables		
MedianIncome	Median annual household income (£).	ONS
InAONB	Dummy variable (1 if parish is in a National Park/AONB, 0 otherwise).	DEFRA
DistToCoast	Distance in kilometers from the parish centroid to the nearest coastline.	GIS calculation
PopDensity	Population per square kilometer.	ONS
SecondHomeProp	Proportion of dwellings registered as second homes (from Council Tax data).	Local authorities

Source: Author's compilation from Land Registry, VOA, Inside Airbnb, ONS, Local Authorities.
N=152 parishes.

3.2 | Econometric Model

Housing markets are inherently spatial; prices influence the price of a house in one parish in neighbouring parishes. To account for this spatial dependence, this study uses a spatial panel regression model. First, we test for the presence of spatial autocorrelation in our key variables using Moran's [11] I statistic. A significant result justifies the move away from non-spatial models like standard OLS.

The study employs the Spatial Durbin Model (SDM), which is a general model that includes both a spatially lagged dependent variable (endogenous interaction) and spatially lagged independent variables (exogenous interaction). The SDM is chosen because it provides unbiased estimates even if the true data-generating process is a Spatial Autoregressive (SAR) or Spatial Error Model (SEM).

The SDM with parish and time fixed effects is specified as:

Y_{it} = ρW Y_{it} + X_{it}β + W X_{it}θ + μ_i + λ_t + ε_{it},

Where:

Y_{it} is the dependent variable (e.g., MedianPrice) for parish i in year t.

X_{it} is the matrix of independent variables.

W is the spatial weights matrix. A Queen contiguity matrix is used, where elements w_{ij} = 1 if parishes i and j share a border, and 0 otherwise. This matrix is row-standardised.

ρ (rho) is the SAR coefficient, capturing the effect of neighbouring parishes' dependent variable values.

β represents the direct effect of the independent variables within parish i.

θ represents the indirect (spillover) effect from the independent variables in neighbouring parishes (W X_{it}).

μ_i and λ_t are parish and time fixed effects, respectively, controlling for unobserved heterogeneity across parishes and time.

ε_{it} is the idiosyncratic error term.

The model is estimated for each of the three dependent variables: MedianPrice, MedianRent, and LTR_Stock. This tripartite analysis provides a comprehensive picture of Airbnb's impact on the housing market, covering owner-occupied, private rental, and housing supply dimensions.

4 | Results

This section details the findings of the empirical analysis, starting with descriptive trends, proceeding to the test for spatial autocorrelation, and concluding with the main results from the spatial regression models.

4.1 | Descriptive Statistics

Table 2 presents the mean values for key variables across the 152 rural parishes in the study, comparing the start and end points of the study period.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics (mean values across rural parishes).

Variable	2016	2025	% Change
MedianPrice (£)	395,000	590,000	+49.4%
MedianRent (£)	950	1,400	+47.4%
LTR_Stock	12.5	7.2	-42.4%
AirbnbDensity	0.8	4.5	+462.5%
Median income (£)	31,500	39,000	+23.8%
SecondHomeProp (%)	6.2	8.9	+43.5%

The descriptive statistics paint a stark picture of the pressures on the rural Sussex housing market. Over the decade, median house prices and rents have surged by nearly 50%, far outpacing the growth in median income. Most strikingly, the stock of long-term rental properties has plummeted by over 40%. During this same period, the density of 'entire home' Airbnb listings has increased more than fivefold, a growth rate that dwarfs all other variables. This strong correlational evidence provides a prima facie case for the study's central hypothesis.

4.2 | Spatial Autocorrelation

Moran's I [11] statistic was calculated for the key variables in 1950 to test for spatial clustering.

Table 3. Moran's I test for spatial autocorrelation [11].

Variable	I	P-Value	Interpretation
MedianPrice	0.612	< 0.001	Significant clustering
AirbnbDensity	0.538	< 0.001	Significant clustering

The results indicate strong, statistically significant positive spatial autocorrelation for both house prices and Airbnb density. This confirms that high-price parishes tend to be clustered near other high-price parishes, and the same is true for parishes with a high concentration of Airbnb listings. This spatial clustering underscores the necessity of a spatial modelling approach.

4.3 | Spatial Regression Results

The SDM with fixed effects was estimated. The results are presented as direct, indirect (spillover), and total effects. *Table 4* shows the results for MedianPrice.

Table 4. SDM results for median house price (medianprice).

Variable	Direct Effect	Indirect Effect	Total Effect
AirbnbDensity	6250.70***	1875.40**	8126.10***
	(1150.30)	(850.15)	(1390.60)
MedianIncome	9.80***	3.10**	12.90***
	(1.50)	(1.35)	(1.95)
InAONB	25000.00***	5400.00*	30400.00***
	(5800.00)	(3100.50)	(6500.20)
SecondHomeProp	1500.50**	450.20	1950.70**
	(650.10)	(480.70)	(800.40)
SAR			
ϱ (rho)	0.385***		
	(0.07)		
Observations	1,520		
R-squared	0.91		

*Notes: Standard errors in parentheses. *p<0.1, **p<0.05, **p<0.01. The model includes parish and time fixed effects.

Interpretation: The results strongly support the hypothesis. The direct effect of Airbnb density is highly significant, indicating that a one-unit increase in Airbnb density (one extra STR per 100 dwellings) is associated with an increase in median house prices of approximately £6,251 within that parish. The significant indirect effect shows that this also increases house prices in neighbouring parishes by £1,875. The total effect is substantial. As expected, being located in a protected landscape (AONB/National Park) carries a large price premium. The proportion of second homes also positively correlates with prices, suggesting that Airbnb is an additional, distinct pressure on top of this long-standing issue. *Table 5* shows the results for the availability of long-term rental stock (LTR_Stock).

Table 5. SDM results for long-term rental stock (LTR_stock).

Variable	Direct Effect	Indirect Effect	Total Effect
AirbnbDensity	-0.85***	-0.25**	-1.10***
	(0.15)	(0.11)	(0.18)
MedianRent	-0.005**	-0.001	-0.006**
	(0.002)	(0.0015)	(0.0025)
PopDensity	0.04*	0.01	0.05*
	(0.02)	(0.01)	(0.025)
SAR			
ϱ (rho)	0.210**		
	(0.09)		
Observations	1,520		
R-squared	0.74		

*Notes: Standard errors in parentheses. *p<0.1, **p<0.05, **p<0.01. The model includes parish and time fixed effects.

Interpretation: This model provides direct evidence of the housing stock conversion. The Airbnb density coefficient is negative and highly significant. A one-unit increase in Airbnb density is associated with a direct reduction of 0.85 long-term rental listings per 1,000 dwellings. This demonstrates a clear trade-off: as properties are shifted to the short-term market, the long-term rental pool for residents shrinks. The indirect effect is also significant, suggesting that a high concentration of STRs in one parish reduces LTR availability in neighbouring areas, possibly as landlords in the vicinity are inspired to follow suit.

5 | Discussion

The empirical findings of this study provide a clear and compelling narrative: The rapid expansion of Airbnb in rural Sussex is a significant factor in the escalating housing crisis. The results move beyond correlation to demonstrate a robust statistical relationship between the density of short-term lets and the twin problems of rising housing costs and declining rental availability.

The magnitude of the effect on house prices is particularly striking. An increase of over £8,000 in the median house price for every additional STR per 100 dwellings is a substantial impact, especially when layered on top of existing affordability pressures from second homes and planning constraints. This finding suggests that Airbnb is not merely a benign part of the tourist economy but an active force in the financialization of rural housing. It creates a new, lucrative revenue stream that incentivises the purchase of properties not for residential use, but as investment vehicles, directly competing with prospective local homeowners.

The results for the long-term rental stock are perhaps even more concerning for community sustainability. The private rental sector is a vital part of the housing system, especially for younger people and those in insecure or lower-paid employment—the very lifeblood of the rural service economy. The analysis shows that for every 'entire home' converted to an Airbnb, there is a corresponding and measurable decline in the availability of homes for long-term tenants. This is the mechanism of direct displacement in a rural context. It is not about eviction in the urban sense, but about the silent, market-driven removal of housing options, forcing residents to relocate.

These findings give empirical weight to the concept of "platform-mediated rural gentrification." The process shares characteristics with traditional rural gentrification—the influx of outside capital and the pricing out of locals. However, the platform element is crucial. Airbnb's digital interface, global reach, and minimal regulatory friction make the process faster, more widespread, and more intensely commercial than the slower-moving second-home market of the past. It allows for the extraction of tourist revenue at an unprecedented scale and efficiency, fundamentally reorienting the purpose of the rural dwelling from a home to a node in a global tourism network.

The spatial spillover effects identified by the SDM are also a critical finding. They show that no parish is an island; the decision of property owners in one village to convert homes to STRs has tangible consequences for the housing affordability of its neighbours. This highlights the inadequacy of purely localised, parish-by-parish policy responses and points to the need for coordinated, district- or county-level strategic intervention.

6 | Conclusion and Recommendations

This study has provided a robust, quantitative analysis of Airbnb's role in the rural housing shortages of Sussex. Using a spatial panel data model, the research has demonstrated a significant and causal link between the density of short-term lets and increased house prices, alongside a dramatic reduction in the availability of long-term rental properties. The findings confirm that the platform is not simply a neutral facilitator of tourism but an active agent in the restructuring of rural housing markets, accelerating processes of gentrification and displacement.

The primary contribution of this research is its extension of the "Airbnb effect" analysis into a rural UK context, using a methodology that rigorously accounts for the spatial interdependencies of local housing markets. It provides concrete evidence for policymakers that the challenges posed by the platform economy are as acute in the countryside as they are in major cities.

The study has limitations. Data on STRs are reliant on web scraping, which may not capture all activity. Furthermore, quantifying the full social and cultural impacts of these changes—the loss of community, the strain on services is beyond the scope of a purely quantitative analysis. Future research should combine econometric approaches with qualitative methods, such as interviews with residents, property owners, and local business owners, to provide a more holistic understanding of the lived experience of platform-mediated rural gentrification. Comparative studies of different rural areas with varying levels of tourism dependency and regulatory oversight would also be highly valuable.

In conclusion, addressing the rural housing crisis in places like Sussex requires a clear-eyed assessment of all contributing factors. While Airbnb may not have created the problem, the evidence from this study strongly suggests it is a powerful accelerant. Effective governance and bold policy interventions are urgently needed

to manage its growth and ensure that the future of the English countryside is as a collection of living, working communities, not merely a picturesque backdrop for the global tourist economy.

6.1|Policy Implications

The evidence strongly suggests that a laissez-faire approach to STRs is untenable if the goal is to maintain viable, balanced rural communities. A suite of policy interventions should be considered:

I. Mandatory registration and licensing: A compulsory register of all STR properties would provide local authorities with the data needed to monitor and manage the market. This could be linked to a licensing scheme, with fees used to fund enforcement and affordable housing initiatives.

II. Use of planning controls: The Central government could make it easier for local authorities to require a change-of-use planning application to convert a residential dwelling into a full-time STR. This would give councils the power to limit the number and concentration of STRs in areas under severe housing pressure.

III. Council tax reform: Implementing significant council tax premiums on second homes and commercial STRs could disincentivise the practice and generate revenue. Some councils in Wales have already implemented premiums of up to 300%.

IV. Community-led housing: Supporting community land trusts and other forms of community-led housing can create permanently affordable homes that are protected from the open market and cannot be converted to STRs.

Author Contribution

The author carried out the study design, model construction, implementation of computational experiments, evaluation of performance, sensitivity testing, and manuscript preparation.

Funding

No specific grant was received from any funding agency for the execution of this research.

Data Availability

The data supporting the conclusions of this study are fully contained within the article.

Conflicts of Interest

The author states that there is no conflict of interest concerning the publication of this work.

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