

Rural Crime: Roots and Restoration

JOSEPH F. DONNERMEYER
Professor, Rural Sociology Program
The Ohio State University
Columbus, Ohio, USA

Abstract

Rural crime has long been a neglected topic in criminology. Of greater significance, however, is the stereotypical picture of rural communities and rural crime in mainstream criminology. This article is a revised and expanded version of a keynote address given at the November, 2006 International Conference on Rural Crime, sponsored by the Centre for Rural Crime, University of New England, New South Wales. It describes the roots of rural crime's neglect, and cites evidence from three advanced capitalist countries to illustrate the importance of studying rural crime and discarding poorly conceived notions that rural areas are crime free. The article suggests a framework for a more critical approach to the study of rural crime that incorporates both macro and micro level analyses. It recommends any approach to the study of rural crime begin by throwing out the idea that social disorganisation explains crime. Rather, crime is a function of social organisation. Exploration of this theme through consideration of previous research on agricultural crime in Australia and woman abuse in the rural US is discussed.

Key words: rural crime, theories of crime, agricultural crime, violence against women.

Rural Crime: An Essay on Roots and Restoration¹

Words are important.² They convey essential meanings that describe, interpret and conclude. For much of its history, the science of criminology ignored “rural crime.” The words meant nothing of importance to a general understanding of crime in terms of offending behaviour, victimisation, perceptions of citizens, and issues related to police, courts and other justice agencies.

As Donnermeyer, Jobes, and Barclay (2006, 199) lament:

“Throughout most of the twentieth century rural crime ranked among the least studied phenomena in criminology...If rural was considered at all, it was as a convenient ‘ideal type’ contrasted with the criminogenic conditions assumed to exist exclusively in urban locations. Rural crime was rarely examined, either comparatively with urban crime or as a subject worthy of investigation in its own right.”

The Roots of Neglect

The roots of rural neglect are deep. One primary focus during the early years of Sociology’s development was a concern with the transition from rural, agrarian forms of social organization to urban, industrial and post-industrial arrangements of human living, hence, setting the stage for the longstanding urbancentric focus of Sociology’s various sub-disciplines, including criminology. Two notable precursors to the criminological neglect of rural crime can be found in (1) the comprehensive review of rural

¹ This essay is a revised and expanded version of my keynote address, presented on December 1, 2006 at the International Conference on Rural Crime, organized by the Rural Crime Centre, University of New England, Armidale, New South Wales. The keynote included a powerpoint presentation, which can be found at the conference website. Please refer to: www.ruralfutures.unen.edu/ruralcrime/conference.htm.

² I begin by acknowledging my valued colleagues, Patrick Jobes and Elaine Barclay. Both have done more than anyone else to advance the scientific study of rural crime in Australia, and their influence extends internationally as well. They were not the first to examine crime within the rural context of Australia, but they deserve credit for galvanizing interest in its study, and thereby influencing a new generation of scholars to devote their considerable talents to the examination of crime outside the cities and suburbs of Australia and other countries. Patrick Jobes instigated my collaborative work with Elaine Barclay and we have indeed been a productive trio. Although Pat is now retired, I continue to learn and grow as a scholar through my work with Elaine and the leadership she gives to the Rural Crime Centre, which is housed within the Institute for Rural Futures at the University of New England. Finally, I extend a sincere thank you for the enthusiastic support given to prevention programs on behalf of agricultural and rural communities by Assistant Commissioner Steve Bradshaw, Western Region Office, New South Wales Police. There is only one reason for scholarship to exist, and it is NOT for the sake of knowledge in its own right. Criminologists who speak and write in words and phrases not easily accessed or understood by the general public are merely pretentious and polemical, regardless of their academic rank or the length of their vita. Scholars who believe their work is of higher quality if not generalisable to the real world are not scholars in any sense of the word. The purpose of real scholarship is the improvement of people lives and of the communities where they live, which requires the academic courage to make one’s science rigorous, critical, generalisable and accessible. Commissioner Bradshaw’s support provides a necessary link between the academic world and the rural realities of Australia. Without people like him, it’s all for naught.

sociological research by Sorokin, Zimmerman and Galpin (1931), and Wirth's (1938) influential article on the nature of urbanism. In the former, a full chapter is devoted to "rural social control" (i.e., rural crime). Sorokin et al (1931) consistently found that crime in the rural context of the United States and numerous European countries was much lower than urban crime rates, even though they focused only on official arrest rates, with no consideration given to the ways in which official statistics were compiled by police organisations headquartered in urban centres of these states and nations. Rural and remote regions were served by fewer criminal justice resources during those times, as they frequently are today (Weisheit, Falcone and Wells 2006). Perhaps the differential rates of arrest found by Sorokin et al (1931) are as much an artifact of a gap in the coverage of police services as any kind of substantial sociological reality. Their influential and comprehensive work helped deflect the attention of criminologists and rural sociologists from the study of rural crime.

Wirth's (1938) classic statement on the nature of urbanism is an intellectual pillar of social disorganisation theory, which is arguably the most frequently applied theory in criminology today. Wirth assumed that more densely populated places manifested more heterogeneous populations, and with this diversity comes a greater chance for the development of criminal subcultures and individualistic forms of deviance. He assumed (p. 15) that "the close living together and working together of individuals who have no sentimental and emotional ties foster a spirit of competition, aggrandizement, and mutual exploitation...To counteract irresponsibility and potential disorder, formal controls tends to be resorted to." It was the "transformation" of societies from rural to urban that had great sociological significance for Wirth. But, that is the not problem with his analysis. Indeed, social change of this type should be of intense interest to scholars from a number of the social sciences. Unfortunately, Wirth faced in only one direction, turning his back on forms of "competition, aggrandizement, and mutual exploitation" in the non-urban context, and since then, most of criminology has queued up in the same line, uncritically facing the city to the neglect of the rural.

Intimately associated with the Chicago School of Sociology, social disorganisation theory identifies characteristics of specific places with high levels of crime (Abbott 1997; Reiss and Tonry 1986). Led by Park, Shaw, McKay, Burgess, Wirth and others, well recognized pioneers in the empirical study of various sociological phenomena, including crime and deviance, the early advocates of social disorganization theory quite naturally focused on the urban milieu of Chicago and other large American cities. Their diversity of population by race, ethnicity and other features made fast-growing and rapidly changing urban neighbourhoods exciting and natural laboratories for the sociological investigation of crime. These neighbourhoods did not appear to be organised in the same way or to the same degree as smaller, agriculturally-dominated towns and villages, hence, they must be disorganised. For them, within a single urban place was more variety than could ever be found in a single rural locality. Yet, many times it was cross-neighbourhood comparisons they made, without thinking that

similar analyses could be conducted across rural communities of different types even though rural localities are not contiguous like their urban counterparts. Hence, the words “urban,” “disorganisation” and “crime” became remarkably synonymous.

Sociologists of the Chicago School were quite fond of drawing concentric circles to illustrate the social, cultural, and economic diversities found within the urban metropolplex. The unintended consequence is a simple one to grasp in retrospect: however inclusive a circle may be, something is excluded. For criminology, this was a misunderstanding of crime in the rural context. For generations of scholars occupying the inner circles of criminology, the mistaken belief arose that there was really no need to concern oneself with considerations of rural crime. Hence, an unrelenting circular logic: urban equaled disorganized, and disorganized equaled crime, and back again to the urban context. Unfortunately, this exclusion morphised into unquestioned assumptions that all rural places have less crime, and more importantly, have less variation in factors that are associated or correlated with variations in crime. Hence, the scientific study of rural crime was ignored. Giving them the benefit of the doubt, perhaps Sorokin et al., Wirth and others were correct for their time, but times change and current assessments of crime in the rural context should not depend on dated scholarship.

Counter-Evidence

Neglected through much of the twentieth century was the simple realization that if urban neighbourhoods vary, so too should there be considerable variation in crime and place-based characteristics among the thousands of rural locations found in countries of the world. Let’s look at the evidence for three advanced capitalist countries, Australia, England and the U.S.: three countries with much in common but so dramatically different as well. Although their rural populations represent a small proportion of their total size, they are important for illustrating rural crime and place based diversity in other ways. Highways penetrate deep into their rural interiors, populations migrate back and forth between their cities and hinterlands, and a popular culture of fads and fashions is shared to a considerable extent by all residents, rural and urban. In many rural places of these three countries, this mass culture, sometimes referred to as McDonaldization (Ritzer 2000), shares an uneasy relationship with older, more established forms of small town/village living and an agrarian heritage, and in the case of Australia and the U.S., Indigenous peoples who have not fared well (to greatly understate the case) since the arrival of Europeans.

In the United States, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) has collected information about crime since the mid-1930’s. It is called the *Uniform Crime Report (UCR)*. The *UCR* includes an index of 7 crimes: the 4 violent crimes of murder, rape, robbery and assault; and the 3 property crimes of larceny/theft, burglary and motor vehicle theft. Without a doubt, there are numerous flaws in the processing of this information, and these

shortcomings are already well documented by scholars (Cantor and Lynch, 2000). Yet, countless urban based empirical research, and several dozen rural focused studies as well, have given us deep insights into the relationship between crime and place in the rural context (Jobes et al. 2004). The *UCR* crime index is described as “crimes known to the police,” so it certainly does not refer to all crime, but is valuable for showing trends in crime and for empirical, statistical studies of crime’s expressions within and across communities of various kinds.

**Table 1: Crimes Known to the Police in the U.S.: 1995 and 2005
(per 100,000 persons)**

Year	Metropolitan Counties	Non Metropolitan Counties
1995 ³		
Violent crime	774.4	223.7
Metro/Non Metro Ratio		3.46/1
Property crime	4,986.4	1849.6
Metro/Non Metro Ratio		2.69/1
2005 ⁴		
Violent crime	509.7	206.8
Metro/Non Metro Ratio		2.46/1
Property crime	3,598.8	1700.1
Metro/Non Metro Ratio		2.12/1

³ Federal Bureau of Investigation (1996). *Crime in the United States – 1995*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation.

⁴ Federal Bureau of Investigation (2006). *Crime in the United States – 2005*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation.

Consistently, and throughout all of its history, *UCR* crime rates for urban America have been higher than rural rates. In 1995, the rate for metropolitan counties was 5,760.8 per 100,000 persons, and was 4,108.5 in 2005. This represents a 28.7 percent decrease. The national rate of crime for non-metropolitan or rural counties of America has declined as well, but to a lesser extent (8%), yet, the gap between metro and non-metro crime rates remains quite large. In 1995, the rate for non-metropolitan counties was 2,073.3 per 100,000, and 1,906.9 in 2005.

As Table 1 shows, in 1995 considering only the four violence offences in the crime index, the metro/non-metro ratio was 3.46 to 1 (774.6 to 223.7 per 100,000 persons). In 2005, the ratio had dropped to 2.46 to 1 (509.7 to 206.8 per 100,000 persons), which is still substantial. The metro/non-metro ratios for the three property offences shows a similar story. In 1995, the ratio was 2.69 to 1 (4,986.4 to 1849.6 per 100,000 persons); and 2.12 to 1 in 2005 (3,598.8 to 1700.1 per 100,000 persons).

If one was using the old Chicago School of Sociology logic, a circle would be drawn around the metro rates with a note in the margin that says something like “let’s focus our efforts here, rural is insignificant.” Using the *UCR*’s crime index, I show why this is both simplistic and wrong.

There are nearly 3,200 counties or county equivalents in the US, with approximately 1,100 counties classified as metropolitan. They contain about 80 percent of a U.S. population that now exceeds 300 million. Altogether, there are 351 metropolitan areas, ranging from those that barely exceed the minimum criterion of population size (a county with a city of 50,000 or more persons) to the greater New York City metropolitan area with nearly 19 million inhabitants. Approximately 2,100 counties remain non-metropolitan, and of those, nearly 700 have populations of less than 10,000 persons. In aggregate, the rate of violent crime for these 700 most rural and least populated of all US counties was 236.3 in 2005. Remarkably, this aggregate rate of violent crime actually exceeds the violent crime rates for 51 of the 351 metropolitan areas in the U.S.

Clearly, place and crime vary in ways which belie simplistic views that relegate rural crime to an insignificant status. Indeed, aggregated to a national level, urban rates may be higher, but there are plenty of exceptions to that generalization, and these multiple exceptions call into question not only the myth that rural crime is unimportant, but the theory of social disorganisation and its latter-day counterpart, collective efficacy, as well (Reiss and Tonry 1986; Sampson, Morenoff and Gannon-Rowley 2002; Sampson, Raudenbush and Earls 1997). If the crime rates of smaller, more rural places are sometimes higher, why? Are these higher crime rural locations merely more urbanised than lower crime rural places, as Fischer (1980) suggested? The *UCR* evidence says otherwise, and research by Wilkinson (1984), Nisbett (1992), Websdale (1998), and DeKeseredy et al (2006), among others, strongly suggest that small population size/density, cultural factors, social structure, and other factors play important roles that cannot be explained away by urbanisation.

Perhaps an exotic explanation would suffice. Maybe high crime rural communities exhibit unique, idiosyncratic social structures and cultural norms which are not representative of most other rural places. That may be so in a few localities, but even the unique case has the potential to illuminate features of the relationship between social and cultural dynamics and rural crime. The real problem with this approach is that dwelling too much on the unusual or oddball case easily drifts into stereotypical images that in turn provide grist for a Hollywood movie mill of chainsaw massacres and hapless canoeists seeking deliverance from mean spirited, gun-toting mountain men. Case studies of unique situations can be useful for advancing scholarship, but only when they construct rather than stereotype (McKinney 1966), and that requires conceptual frameworks in which both the theoretical and real context of their circumstances can be considered.

Is rural crime better explained by something other than urbanism or highly unique situations? Perhaps crime is a product of common forms of social order found at various rural places, and that rural crime is neither a deterministic expression of urbanisation nor an extremely deviant form of rural social organisation.

Rural variability in crime rates also can be found based within official sources of crime data for both England and Australia. The Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs for the United Kingdom publishes a “Rural Atlas” that includes crime rates for three types of rural districts in England: (1) districts with at least 37,000 persons living in rural settlements and market towns or at least 26 percent but not more than 50,000 persons living in these same rural places; (2) districts with at least 50 percent but less than 80 percent of the population living in rural settlements and market towns; and (3) districts with 80 percent or more of the population living in rural settlements and market towns. In this classification scheme, rural market towns can be as large as 30,000 persons that serve a countryside population, while rural settlements include small villages and areas with a dispersed population.

The map (Figure 1) displays rates (per 1,000 persons) for a variety of crimes, including motor vehicle theft, burglary, theft, vandalism or criminal damage, assault and personal robbery, all of which account for about 60 percent of recorded crime in these three types of rural districts. The gray coloured districts are urban, which is important when examining the map. If Wirth’s version of urbanism was correct, all of the rural districts with the highest crime rates (colour coded in red) would be contiguous to urban districts in England. They are not. The correlation with proximity to larger urban places is modest at best, with lots of room for error. Further, the only rural district with a crime rate below 20 offences per 1,000 persons is contiguous to a stretch of urban districts in the northeast of England. The map clearly shows a considerable diversity in crime rates among rural districts. Hence, even if official rates of crime are lower in rural England when compared to rates of crime in urban districts, it remains true that there is sufficient rural diversity in crime rates to warrant more focused attention by criminologists.

In like manner, an analysis of 123 rural or non-metropolitan local government areas (LGA’s) in the state of New South Wales, based on a recently published article by Jobes et al. (2004) shows much the same thing. Despite differences in the ways the three countries divide up the countryside, LGA’s in New South Wales are similar to some extent with rural districts in England and non-metropolitan counties in the U.S. Based on cluster analysis, 6 types of rural or non-metropolitan LGA’s were developed from available census information about their demographic, economic and social composition. After examination of their common characteristics, a label was assigned to each cluster. Then, using five crime types from the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research (BOCSAR), rates were calculated for the 6 clusters.

The graph below (Figure 2) shows three significant lessons about rural crime. First, from right to left, the clusters are arrayed by average population size. Although the cluster of rural LGA’s (large urban centres) with the largest average population showed some of the highest rates of crime, especially for car theft, malicious damage (vandalism), and break and enter (burglary), the LGA’s with the second smallest population also

displayed higher than average crime. In fact, rates of assault, the only violent offence in the mix of five crime types, was highest in this cluster of LGA's, which was labeled "medium unstable communities" due to a high proportion of seasonal workers, declining populations, and net out-migration.

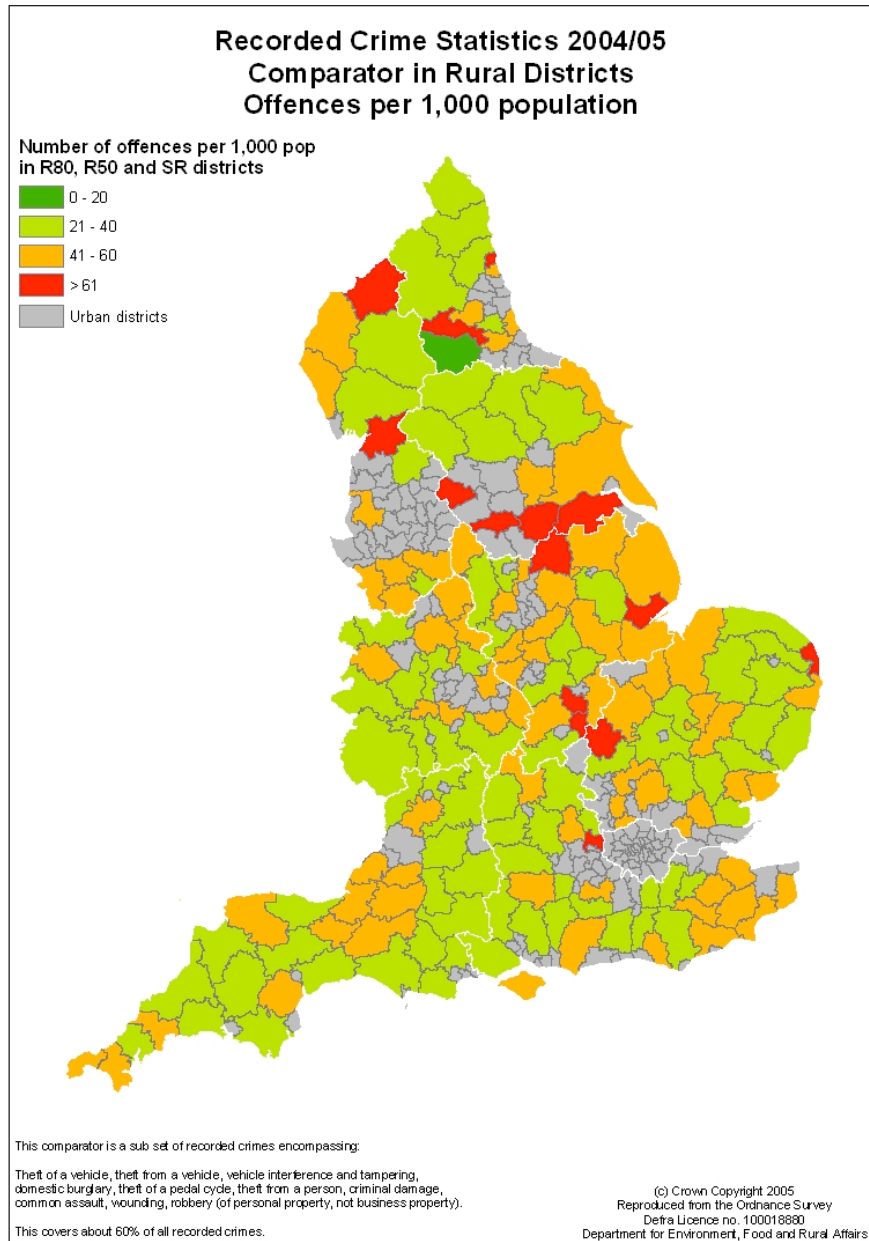


Figure 1: Official Crime Rates for Three Types of Rural Districts in England

Next to it was a set of rural, agriculturally based LGA's of similar population size, but with much less crime. These LGA's have less population turnover, displaying all the characteristics that form the opposite of what is meant by social disorganization, according to the theory. That may be so, but in the next section I argue that these two clusters, and in fact, all rural localities, simply display different kinds of social structures, and that crime varies not by disorganization, but by differing types of organisation. In other words, dichotomous depictions of rural communities, with the assumption that high crime rural communities must more disorganised than low-crime rural communities, masks the rural realities hidden within them all.

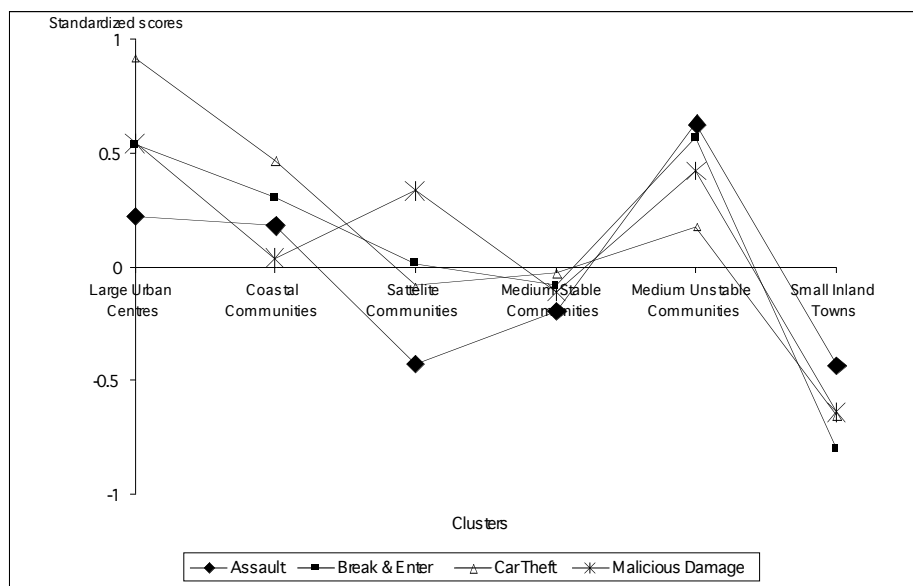


Figure 2: Crime Rate Profile for Six types of Rural Communities (Local Government Areas) in New South Wales, Australia

Restoration of Rural

In the past, research on rural crime has been scattered and segmented, both by location and discipline. Yet, slowly, a critical mass of work is beginning to emerge. Notable advances in recent years include a comprehensive examination of rural crime in the United Kingdom and Ireland (Dingwall and Moody 1999), an edited volume of substance use among rural populations of various countries (Edwards and Donnermeyer 2002), an in-depth assessment of hate crime and racism in rural Great Britain (Chakraborti and Garland 2004), a thorough assessment of rural crime and policing in the U.S. (Weisheit, Falcone and Wells 2005), two recently published books on rural crime in Australia (Barclay, Donnermeyer, Scott and Hogg 2007; Hogg and Carrington 2006), and a soon to be published monograph on woman abuse in rural communities by DeKeseredy (2008). In turn, these efforts showcase through their citations the small, but steady stream of peer-reviewed articles, book chapters and research reports about various aspects of rural crime that are published each year. The majority of

this rural-based scholarship starts from a place-based perspective, that is, whether or not they consciously and directly employ the ecological approach of the old Chicago School of Sociology, they recognize that locality is important for understanding aspects of rural crime. Further, many of these studies seek to link broad, macro-level economic, social and cultural forces to issues of crime at the local level in a way that is reminiscent of C.W. Mills' (1959) analysis of "public issues" and "personal troubles" from his classic work, *The Sociological Imagination*.

In a recent chapter in *Advancing Critical Criminology* (DeKeseredy and Perry 2006), I and my colleagues, Patrick Jobes and Elaine Barclay, proposed building from Mills' concept to develop a comparative framework for the examination of local context and rural crime across both space and time (Donnermeyer, Jobes and Barclay 2006). Crucial to this heuristic starting point is the concept of community, especially that of Liepins (2000, 30), who defined communities as places where local networks of actors engage in "temporally and locationally specific terrains of discourse and power." This starting point is extremely crucial for developing new approaches to the study of rural crime, as it avoids pitfalls associated with concepts like social disorganization, collective efficacy, and that classic stand-by, *gemeinschaft*. Although there is nothing intrinsically incorrect about these concepts, they tend to trap their adherents in ideas that within specific places, a high level of social organization/collective efficacy/*gemeinschaft* is the product of cohesion, and that cohesion is the product of harmonious relationships among actors due to factors such as homogeneity of populations along various demographic, social, economic and cultural variables. These missteps of interpretation result in two fallacies, both of which operated to reduce past interest in the study of rural crime.

The first fallacy, as already mentioned, is that crime is associated with disorganisation or diminished levels of collective efficacy, which fewer rural places display. The second fallacy is that external forces are relatively unimportant for examining conditions of organization / disorganization at the local level. Hence, all other things being equal, localized expressions of rural crime, when they do occur, are the consequence of localized contexts that are unique and not generalisable.

Let us consider the first fallacy – crime is associated with disorganisation or lack of collective efficacy – and how recent research on rural crime forms a way to critique mainstream assumptions in criminology, including our own (Jobes et al. 2004) ANZJOC article, in which we uncritically adopted social disorganisation theory, but subsequently helped us clarify our uneasy feelings about this approach. Studies by Barclay, Donnermeyer and Jobes (2004) and Donnermeyer and Barclay (2005) of livestock theft in New South Wales found high levels of non-reporting by farmers as victims. Some of these farmers simply wanted to keep peace with their neighbours, whom they suspected of stealing their livestock. Others who suspected their neighbours reported the theft to the police, but the police were reluctant to take the report seriously and investigate it because the victim was in some

way marginal to the community. For example, one victim held a full-time job in town, another moved there from the city, and a third was female. Missing livestock was apparently a problem of their mis-management, not a dishonest neighbour. In still another case, the neighbour as suspect had higher social standing in the community than the person reporting the theft, constraining the police from taking action. From a police perspective, a number of officers who were interviewed by us complained of a reluctance on the part of farmers to report thefts. These officers believed that there was concern among farmers that reporting their neighbours would upset the cohesion of the community and that they themselves would be stigmatized. Officers believed there was strong peer pressure within many small, agricultural communities of New South Wales to accept some amount of theft as part of the regular, day-to-day running of a farm enterprise.

On the surface, these findings seem rather narrow, perhaps even trivial, and certainly so specific to agricultural crime as it have no applicability to anything else criminological. Yet, interpreted from a different angle, these findings suggest something far more significant. They indicate that some forms of social organisation facilitate crime, not inhibit it. If this is true for livestock theft, which in fact can have a very high monetary value and should be regarded as an important focus of criminological research in its own right (Barclay and Donnermeyer 2007), why not for crime in general, whether the offence is rural-located or urban-bound.

Let us consider another type of crime, namely, violence against women in rural communities. DeKeseredy et al's (2006) research on woman abuse in the rural, hilly region of a Midwestern state in the U.S. similarly discovered that it was indeed forms of social organisation, not disorganisation, that was associated with crime. In their study, DeKeseredy et al. (2006) noted that local authorities frequently were not sympathetic to women as victims of violence by their partners because of community norms associated with family privacy, which many other rural studies have found as well (Websdale 1998). In addition, and perhaps more important, abusive males did not act in a social vacuum. They shared information and experiences with each other on how to commit this kind of violence, and do it in ways that would remain private and not come to the attention of authorities. They reinforced each other's attitudes about women and backed up their own rationalisations for such abusive behaviours (DeKeseredy et al. 2006). These friendship groups or cliques were not a highly differentiated subcultural groups, hiding out from the mainstream culture and social circles of the community. The conversations of these abusive men were at local places and face-to-face. It was organised and part of the local social structure and culture, even though others in these same communities would find such behaviour odious, immoral, illegal, and deserving of incarceration. It was as much a part of the community's *gemeinschaft* as going to church and attending monthly meetings of the garden guild. Psychological explanations for abusive and violent behaviours aside, it is clear that violence against women in the rural context, as found by DeKeseredy et al. (2006) was not a consequence of disorganisation. Even though the area studied by DeKeseredy et al (2006) had a depressed economy and high

poverty, these conditions do not mark disorganisation, but merely a type of local, organised context where this type of violence occurs.

In Australia, a similar pattern is described by Hogg and Carrington (2006, 150), who note the unique interaction of race and social class in the rural context that creates “social ordering of the private and public space”. For white women, embarrassment and a culture of self-reliance function to restrain victims from seeking assistance, even if help is available and accessible. In the context of small communities, people in general worry more about how others will think of them, and this serves to constrain some kinds of deviance and criminal behaviour, but functions to keep hidden and to facilitate other forms of criminal behaviour, such as woman abuse. But, this depends on one’s status or location in the local social order according to class and race. Hence, violence against women in rural Australia is publicly associated with lower class white women and Indigenous women, who frequently seek police assistance when they feel threatened by partners because they have fewer alternatives. Like DeKeseredy et al.’s (2006) study in rural America, these patterns are best understood neither in terms of social disorganisation nor as forms of exceptionalism that would suggest rural cases of woman abuse are unique. Instead, their findings point toward behaviours that are threads in the very fabric of rural social structure and culture, existing side by side with attitudes and behaviours that constrain crime and deviance.

For both examples, one representing a property offence and the other a violence offence, the same conclusion is reached: rural crime is best understood as an expression of organisation. Here is another tantalising example, this time from another advanced capitalist country, namely, Canada. In the summary of results from the General Social Survey for Canada, it was found that when compared to urban respondents, those from small towns and rural areas were more likely to know and trust their neighbours, to volunteer in their communities, and to feel a sense of belonging to the places where they live (Turcotte 2005). Yet, Statistics Canada also released a recent report indicating that rates of violent crime are higher for small urban places and rural areas than large urban places, based on official police crime data (Francisco and Chénier 2007). Large urban places are metropolitan areas with an urban core exceeding 100,000 persons, of which there are 27 in Canada. Small urban places are defined as places located outside of metropolitan areas, with at least 1,000 persons or a population density of 400 persons per square kilometre. Rural places represented as all other areas of the country not defined by the previous two. Not only are violent crime rates higher in general, but homicide rates for rural places across the country was 2.5 per 100,000 population, compared to 2.0 for large urban places and 1.7 for small urban places. It would indeed be naïve to jump to the conclusion that places where neighbours know and trust each other, volunteer, and feel a sense of belonging is correlated with higher rates of violence in general and homicide specifically. That would be precisely the kind of ecological fallacy committed against rural places by Wirth (1938), Sorokin et al (1931) and many others in the past. However, when considered in tandem, the reports suggest a need to discard old notions

of rural and crime (and urban and crime, as well) and work toward a new approach to rural crime scholarship, one that can account for why a crime like homicide rates can be higher on the aggregate in places that are seemingly more cohesive on the aggregate.

To take it a step further and keeping in mind the opening sentence to this essay that “words are important”, perhaps there is no such thing as disorganisation. Perhaps there is only organisation. When combined with a concept of community as elucidated by Liepins, we now arrive at a different view for developing theories that explain crime, especially in terms of theories related to the structural characteristics of places, be they rural or urban. To understand crime through both quantitative and qualitative analyses, we must interpret our findings within frameworks that start with the notion that forms of social organisation vary not only between places, but within places as well, even those that are small and sparsely populated. To revise an old phrase, “one *gemeinschaft* does not fit all.” Rural villages and urban neighbourhoods alike do not merely display monolithic social structures and networks, but are in fact quite variable, both within and between, with differing forms of organisation, some facilitating crime and others constraining crime, co-existing within the same place and at the same time. Some variations in co-existing forms of social organisation are based on social class differences, others on ethnic/race divisions, and others on factors representing that vast array of empirical indicators so often employed as proxy measures within social disorganisation theory itself (Jobes, Barclay and Donnermeyer 2002; Mawby, this volume). Whether through aggregate census data, surveys, or key informant interviews, these indicators measure differing forms of organisation, not levels of social disorganisation.

What then is intriguing about rural crime for the general study of crime is that there are so many rural places where variation both within and between can be studied, creating the possibility for a vast laboratory of both quantitative studies with large case numbers, such as the Jobes et al (2004) investigation of rural LGA’s in New South Wales, and qualitative, case studies, as illustrated by DeKeseredy et al.’s (2006) examination of woman abuse. Further, using both Mills’ (1959) multi-level approach to understanding the relationship of social structure and individual behaviour, and Liepins’ (2000) basic postulate that communities are places where power and social networks operate, we can begin to build a new viewpoint for the study of rural crime, and of urban crime as well.

Picture an hourglass, with any kind of place, whether large or small, occupying the middle, narrow neck. At the bottom is the local context in which networks of actors and specific actions take place. Both the theft of stock by a rancher’s neighbour (who also raises livestock) in a remote community of Australia, where everyone knows everyone else and where a certain amount of loss of this kind is expected (i.e., part of the local culture), and violence against women in an economically depressed region of the Midwestern U.S., are phenomena that occur in the bottom of the hourglass. This is where offenders rationalize, police pay selective attention to citizen

reports of crime, and victims suffer. In themselves, studies that focus on the bottom of the hourglass have great merit so long as they build up the base for frameworks that provide synthesis and generalisability to what happens across a variety of localities. They help illustrate the simultaneity and interrelationship of forms of crime-facilitating and crime-constraining social organisation within specific places. Without the imperative for comparative frameworks, the second fallacy will remain, namely, that the context of rural crime is unique and not generalisable to the urban condition and certainly not capable of critiquing and advancing the general field of criminology.

At the top of the hourglass are the larger macro forces that represent Mills' (1959) concept of "public issues," those macro or societal level forces that frequently are represented by the proxy measures of census data for the quantitative analyses of those who work from social disorganisation and related ecological theories (Donnermeyer 2007).

This helps address the second fallacy that some forms of crime are so localized as to need no understanding by recourse to macro-level considerations. The community is the link between macro forces and the micro level. It is the ecology in which all phenomena studied by criminologists occurs. It mediates the impact of change on individuals and groups, and understood in this way, local context is the expression of society-wide influences and the attitudes, behaviours, motivations and interactions, dare we say "aggrandizements", of those who live within the boundaries of specific places. It helps create a more critical perspective for place-based studies of rural crime, and helps free rural crime scholarship from obsolete and time-dated ecological concepts that fail to consider the simultaneity of micro and macro factors. In a soon to be published article by DeKeseredy, Donnermeyer, Schwartz, Tunnell and Hall (in press 2007), we interpret woman abuse within rural communities in terms of broad, structural level factors that enhance the formation of male peer support groups and modes of patriarchy for woman abuse. Although much more research is necessary in order to develop a more comprehensive understanding of violence against women, we believe it provides a way to combine the best features of an ecological approach, but from a more critical, macro level consideration of factors.

In addition to the concept of the hourglass as a physical metaphor of Mills public issues (macro) and personal troubles (micro), another place to begin the restoration of rural crime is a concept from the latter-day version of social disorganisation theory and the Chicago School of Sociology. Surprisingly, it is the concept of collective efficacy, which Sampson and Raudenbush (1999, 612) considered "particularly relevant to explaining the incidence of crime and disorder in public spaces, and to crimes like robbery and burglary that typically elicit target selection decisions based on visual cues." However, rather than view collective efficacy as merely a useful heuristic for visible crimes, I argue it is useful as a generalising concept for examining a larger array of crimes across a great variety of rural community structures. But, the key to thinking about the ties between collective efficacy and crime is through concepts used by scholars who conduct social

network analysis. In turn, social network analysis relies heavily on the concept of social capital, and the nature of bridging (weak ties) and bonding (strong ties) capital. Hence, social network analysis addresses the same issues of both early and latter day adherents to various place-based theories in criminology, namely, how social structures as expressed through cohesion, integration, relative heterogeneity of members, conflict, and inequality, are related to crime. Now, however, places themselves can be viewed as possessing overlapping strands of different kinds of networks, creating a complex mosaic of localised social structures, even in places with very small populations, rather than views that see places as relatively homogenous within. People who live at specific places may have multiple memberships in these networks, the networks themselves may vary in their degree of cohesion/integration, and different networks may either facilitate or constrain crime to varying degrees, depending upon the context. Hence, it is possible to develop new models of crime that help us understand how a police officer in a small, agricultural town of New South Wales ignores a complaint from a farmer when the suspected thief is a neighbour with higher social standing, yet that same officer regularly consults with community members about better securing their property. In the same vein, males who abuse their partners participate in small groups that reinforce and rationale violence against women may also volunteer for the food booth at the annual church picnic and the committee to study ways to attract more tourist business to their communities.

Conclusion

This essay humbly suggests the need for a new beginning for understanding crime in the rural context. There is much left to do in order to develop a more comprehensive view of the ways in which both macro and micro level aspects of social structure explains crime, and how consideration of rural crime can help advance criminological theory in general.

In one sense, it is indeed ironic to call for a new approach to the study rural crime with the mundane notion of an hourglass, an antiquated method for measuring time. In another sense, it is essential that we pay heed to the visual notion of an hourglass because it will help us apply our sociological imaginations to rural crime. As well, it will assist us with the integration of rural crime scholarship into urban criminology's theories and research findings that for so long ignored rural places and peoples. And, most importantly, and it will empower us to critically challenge the urban bias of criminology within all of its sub-fields, and to critically challenge the tenets and improve the frameworks of criminology theories.

Further, the hourglass is a reminder that rural crime is a multi-level set of phenomena that are expressions of how local social organization is affected by larger social forces. It also serves as a way to encourage anyone interested in the study of rural crime to be cognizant of commonality, synthesis and generalisability. Perhaps one of the most intellectually shortsighted approaches to the study of crime I occasionally encounter

among rural crime scholars is that of those who make no claim of generalisability, presumably because rural is exceptional or unique in some way. In fact, all rural crime research, no matter how locality-specific, should be interpreted in light of broader macro-level forces, and rural crime scholars always should examine ways they can critically challenge established and urban-biased notions of crime's patterns and dynamics. This challenge has no chance of success, however, without scholars of rural crime engaging in the daunting tasks of developing new frameworks for comparison and synthesis. Simply put, an unwillingness to generalise is a sign of scholarly cowardice.

As final words, I offer the following formula for advancing the study of rural crime. First, appreciate rural diversity, because variation is the basis for good science. Variability provides the opportunity for comparison and through comparison comes generalisability. However, appreciate diversity both across different kinds of rural places and within specific rural locales as well. Second, one should view variations in rural crime as expressions of organisation, not disorganisation. Finally, rural crime is neither exceptional nor unique, but more common than previous generations of criminologists ever imagined it. Therefore, borrow copiously from all the sub-fields of criminology, modify when appropriate, be critical at all times, and begin to build rural crime research into a force of innovation that advances scholarship within the general field itself.

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