



# National Institute of Justice

*Research in Action*

Jeremy Travis, Director

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## Rural Crime and Rural Policing

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Police practices vary from one area to another, and studying the varieties of police behavior can yield important insights into the role of law enforcement officers in a community. Most studies of variations in police behavior have been conducted in urban settings. Neglecting rural policing and rural crime might be justifiable if there is nothing about policing, crime, or the community in rural environments that precludes directly applying knowledge from urban areas. It is evident, however, that rural environments are distinct from urban environments in ways that affect policing, crime, and public policy.

The following discussion examines what is known about rural crime, rural policing, and how they are shaped by the rural environment. It is obvious that rural policing is shaped by the nature of rural crime and the features that distinguish rural culture and rural life. Consequently, the discussion begins with a description of what is known about rural crime.

### Rural crime

This section first examines rural versus urban crime patterns and then shifts to a description of patterns of rural crime.

Changes in rural crime are also considered, and they are followed by a discussion of special issues and emerging problems.

### Rural crime versus urban crime

Most research concludes that crime is less frequent in rural areas, and it is often speculated that greater informal controls in rural areas protect against high crime rates.<sup>1</sup> The belief that crime is less frequent in rural areas is supported by recent Uniform Crime Reports (UCR) data that present crime by type and population group. Of particular interest is a

### Issues and Findings

**Discussed in this Brief:** An overview of the research literature and an analysis of rural crime and rural policing issues, and how the distinctive elements of the rural environment affect them.

**Key issues:** Although rural crime rates have been lower than urban crime rates, patterns of rural crime indicate both the exporting of urban problems to rural areas and unique problems.

**Key findings:** Even though less is known about rural crime than urban crime, available information indicates some key dimensions:

◆ Urban drug trafficking has been seen as the driving force behind the spread of drug use and the development of gangs in rural areas.

◆ Crimes such as homicide, rape, and assault are more likely to occur among acquaintances than is true in urban areas.

◆ Crimes unique to the rural environment include agricultural crimes (e.g., thefts of crop and timber) and wildlife crimes (e.g., poaching).

◆ Rural law enforcement officers, more than their urban counterparts, often work with lower budgets, less staff, less equipment, and fewer written policies to govern their operations. Despite these problems, rural police appear to be more efficient than urban police and more respected by the public.

◆ Features of the rural culture that affect law enforcement operations include informal social control among citizens, a mistrust of government, and a reluctance

to share internal problems. These characteristics may result, for example, in failure to report a crime out of the belief that it's a private matter.

◆ Major differences among rural areas exist, such as border areas may have problems with illegal immigrants while other areas may have illegal marijuana crops.

Differences among rural areas as well as differences between urban and rural areas have implications for crime and law enforcement responses. Previous studies have been limited and sometimes contradictory; explanations should be sought through specific examination of particular rural crime issues.

**Target audience:** Rural law enforcement officers, State and local policymakers, and researchers.

comparison between crime in cities of 250,000 or more and that in rural counties, counties that are outside metropolitan statistical areas and cover areas not under the jurisdiction of urban police departments. Examining UCR index crimes for 1990 reveals several interesting patterns:

- Index offense rates, including homicide, are higher for urban areas than for rural areas.
- The gap between rural and urban crime is greater for violent crime than for property crime.
- The rank order of offenses for property crime is roughly similar for urban and rural areas. That is, larceny is the most common crime and motor vehicle theft the least common crime in both areas.
- The greatest difference between rural and urban crime is robbery, which occurs almost 54 times more often per 100,000 citizens in urban areas.
- The rank order for violent crime is thrown off by the large rural-urban difference in robbery.
- The urban rate is much higher for crimes with the most similar rates across areas, such as rape.

Substantial rural-urban differences are also found from national household victimization surveys, such as the National Crime Survey (NCS). The 1990 NCS reported that the percentage of households indicating any form of victimization in urban, suburban, and rural areas was 30 percent, 23 percent, and 17 percent, respectively. This pattern of differences appears to hold true for both violent and property crime. A researcher found that approximately 25 percent of victimizations of rural residents took place while they were away from their communities, while this was true for only 10 percent of urban residents. It was concluded that rural residents are more vulnerable to robbery when visiting urban areas.<sup>2</sup> This also means that the usual rural-urban comparisons of victimization rates probably understate the

difference in victimization between the two areas.

Instead of comparing rural and urban areas, some studies have considered rural crime alone.<sup>3</sup> This research generally focuses on patterns of rural crime and documents variations in crime across rural areas. Thus, a good understanding of rural crime requires not only appreciating how it differs from urban crime, but how rural crime and rural justice vary across rural communities.

In addition, a number of researchers have concluded that rural areas experiencing rapid growth will also experience a disproportionately large increase in crime. In 21 of 23 studies, crime grew even faster than the population in rural communities with rapid population growth. In fact, crime increased at three to four times the speed at which the population increased. Researchers speculated that “the accumulated findings may best be explained by narrowly focusing on changes in community social structure that accompany rapid growth and result in impairment of informal social

controls, particularly the declines in a community’s density of acquaintance-ship.”<sup>4</sup>

### Trends in rural crime

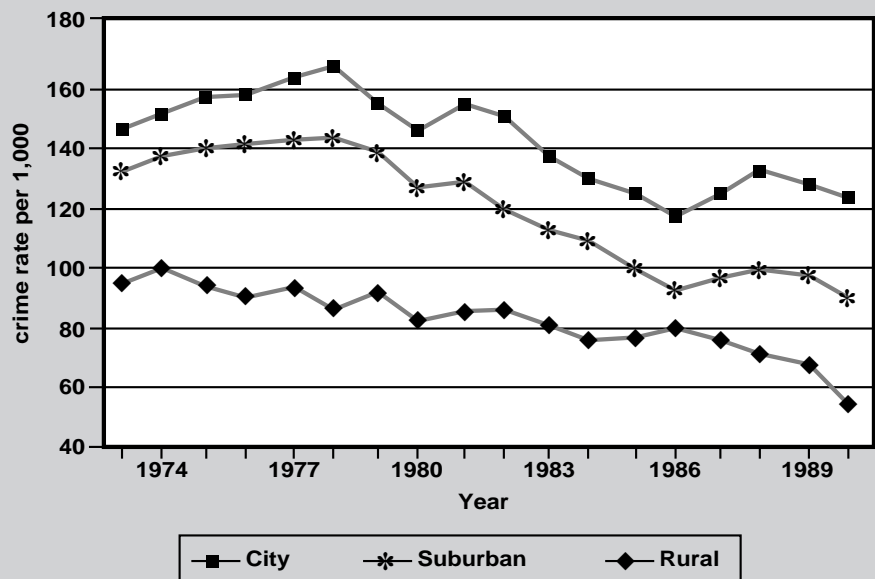
There has been concern that rural and urban crime rates are converging, and the issue has raised considerable debate. Some have argued that with modern communication and transportation, rural-urban differences are shrinking through what has been called “massification.”<sup>5</sup>

UCR data from 1980 through 1990 can be used to make rural-urban comparisons over time for both violent and property offenses. These data show that in both large cities and rural counties, violent crime rose between 1980 and 1990, while property crime changed relatively little. Contrary to the convergence hypothesis, the gap between rural and urban crime changed little during the 1980’s.

When changes for specific index offenses are considered, the greatest change for violent crime is for robbery. In 1980, the rate for robbery in urban

Figure 1:

### Annual Rates of Personal Victimization per 1,000 persons over age 21



Source: Constructed from data presented in Bachman, Ronet, “Crime in Metropolitan America,” *Rural Sociology* 57(4), 1992, 546–560, and Bachman, Ronet, *Crime Victimization in City, Suburban and Rural Areas*, Report for the Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1992.

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areas was 35 times greater than the rate in rural areas. By 1990, robbery was 54 times more frequent in urban areas, and most of the increased difference was a product of increasing urban rates and modestly decreasing robbery rates in rural areas. A lesser increase was observed for aggravated assault rates, which were 3.7 times more frequent in urban areas in 1980 but 5.3 times more frequent in urban areas by 1990. The urban-rural gap narrowed very slightly for rape rates and widened very slightly for murder. For property crimes, the greatest change in the gap between urban and rural rates was for motor vehicle theft, which was 7.7 times more frequent in urban areas in 1980 but 13.3 times more frequent in 1990. Burglary and larceny changed little.

Overall, UCR data do not support the idea that crime rates in rural and urban areas are converging. One problem with UCR is that crimes of particular concern as emerging issues in rural areas such as gang activity and drug trafficking are nonindex offenses and are not reported by population density.

NCS permits considering changes in victimization rates over time. The NCS data show that the percent of households reporting victimization for any crime dropped from 1973 through 1990 across both urban and rural areas. Data in figure 1 show little support for the argument that urban and rural crime rates are converging.

Data on violent crime in selected California counties were used to argue that the gap between rural and urban crime was less important than their relative patterns of change over time. The statistics demonstrated that changes over time in urban counties were followed by changes in rural counties, and one researcher concluded that cultural change continually generated in major urban areas diffuses to smaller cities and then to the rural areas.<sup>6</sup> Cultural cycles, whether they be of violent crime, fashion, or inventions, begin in urban areas and ripple out through the countryside.

This argument is consistent with contemporary observations about the expansion of urban drug trafficking and gangs into rural areas, an issue to be addressed in the next section.

### **Special issues and emerging problems**

The focus on rural-urban comparisons has also meant a focus on particular categories of crime, often the street crimes listed in the UCR. Many issues relevant to rural policing, such as gang activity, do not neatly fit these categories, or are emerging issues that have not been explored in the professional literature. What follows is a sampling of these topics, often based on reports in the popular press. Because many of these discussions are based on anecdotal evidence, the information should be interpreted with caution. However, these are areas that merit further research and may be of increasing concern to rural police.

**Gangs.** Stereotypically, gangs are a problem that involves inner-city (often minority) youths. For example, some contemporary gang research includes no discussion of gangs in suburban and rural areas.<sup>7</sup> However, there are numerous discussions of how urban street gangs diffuse out to the countryside.<sup>8</sup> Many of these discussions see drug trafficking as the driving force behind the spread of gangs to rural areas, a move facilitated by an improved interstate highway system.

While the focus is primarily on urban street gangs in rural areas, biker gangs have a long history of criminal activity in rural settings.<sup>9</sup> Unfortunately, bikers are notoriously difficult to study,<sup>10</sup> and few details of their activities are documented.

**Substance abuse.** Another issue is the problem of substance use, including alcohol and illegal drugs. This issue has two dimensions: use by rural citizens and criminal drug trafficking organizations in rural areas. Professional literature has discussed the issue of drug use, while the issue of rural trafficking organizations has more often been addressed in the

popular press. Alcohol, among the most popular of the mind-altering drugs, is of particular concern in rural areas. Each year more people are arrested for driving under the influence (DUI) than for any other single offense, and DUI is more common in rural areas.<sup>11</sup> The findings are less consistent for illegal drugs, though studies are more likely to conclude that use is more frequent in urban areas.

One way to compare rural and urban areas is to use self-report surveys. One survey found that rural youths began using both legal and illegal drugs at a younger age, but a higher percentage of urban youths were users.<sup>12</sup> Another survey compared adolescent drug use in three rural communities with the drug use in an urban community, and it concluded that the differences in drug use among rural communities may have been greater than differences between rural and urban areas.<sup>13</sup> This survey emphasized the importance of local variation and suggested that local policies and programs for rural areas not be based on aggregate national data.

An indirect way of comparing rural and urban drug use is to use arrest statistics. Researchers compared drug arrest data in North Carolina for urban and rural counties between 1976 and 1980 and concluded that rural arrest rates were consistently lower, and no evidence was found that rural and urban rates were converging.<sup>14</sup> Another study estimated that the rate of drug arrests in urban areas is nearly four times that in rural counties. The researchers speculated that because most drug enforcement is proactive, variations in arrest rates among jurisdictions are more the result of differences in enforcement efforts than of differences in consumption patterns.<sup>15</sup>

Recent reports suggest that patterns of urban drug use, including crack, are spreading to rural areas.<sup>16</sup> Whether these reports anticipate emerging trends or are merely isolated cases remains to be seen. They do signal another area that should be monitored closely.

The issue of drug trafficking and production in rural areas is less understood. Some reports suggest that rural areas may serve as production sites for methamphetamine, designer drugs, crack, and marijuana.<sup>17</sup> Other reports argue that rural areas have become important transshipment points for drugs destined for urban areas.<sup>18</sup> The problem is exacerbated by an improved highway system and by the large number of isolated airstrips set up for corporate farms and for cropdusters serving rural farmlands.

**Vice and organized crime.** There is good reason to believe that vice and organized crime are features of the rural environment.<sup>19</sup> For example, small communities near major highways often have problems with prostitution set up for truck drivers. Also, areas that were traditionally involved in moonshining and bootlegging can use some of the same routes and expertise to transport drugs, stolen auto parts, and other illegal merchandise. In 1989, the so-called “Cornbread Mafia,” operating out of Kentucky, was discovered to have marijuana operations in at least nine States. By April of 1990, 86 people were arrested as part of the operation, and the government had confiscated 475,000

pounds of marijuana on 33 farms.<sup>20</sup> At the same time, a group of more than 30 people operating out of the Southwest, who called themselves “The Company,” ran an elaborate indoor marijuana operation. At the time of the group’s arrest, approximately \$1 million in growing equipment was seized by authorities.<sup>21</sup>

While anecdotal evidence suggests that vice and organized crime are also a rural problem, there is simply too little information to make general statements or to even speculate on similarities and differences with urban organized crime groups.

**Violence.** The nature of rural interactions means that crimes such as homicide, rape, and assault are more likely to occur among acquaintances than is true in urban areas. This, combined with the greater distrust of government, may also mean that the police are less likely to be called when these crimes occur. Given these factors, both investigating and preventing violent interpersonal crimes in rural areas may require different strategies than in urban areas.

Some of these issues can be illustrated using the studies available on domestic violence in rural areas. In an observa-

tional study of families in a rural Appalachian community, given the fictitious name Raven Ridge, it was noted that both the police and prosecutor were reluctant to act in abuse cases and, as a consequence, women were reluctant to call them for assistance:

“Most people I met agreed that police protection in Raven Ridge was inadequate. John explained that it took at least an hour for an officer to arrive after a call was placed, and that once the cruiser arrived, the officers would sit in the car and beep the horn rather than come to the door. His explanation for this behavior was that so many officers had been shot responding to domestic calls that few were willing to risk going to the door. . . . Acceptance of a man’s authority over his wife and the belief in the sanctity of the home, together with officers’ belief that they would be in danger if they responded to domestic calls, resulted in the failure of the legal system to provide protection for physically battered women. . . . Given the geographic isolation, lack of protection, and lack of economic opportunities available to them, women acquiesced to control in the short term while thinking about ways to improve their situation over time.”<sup>22</sup>

In a study of police jurisdictions in Ohio, it was found that the highest rates for domestic violence disputes were in the least populated jurisdictions. In neither cities nor rural areas were the police likely to make an arrest following a domestic violence complaint, though they were somewhat more likely to in urban areas.<sup>23</sup>

Even less is known about rural-urban differences in child abuse, but two studies by the National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect<sup>24</sup> suggest the issue is worth further study. The first study was conducted in 1980 and the second in 1986. The studies differed in one important respect. In the 1980 version, abuse was defined as “demonstrated harm as a result of maltreatment.”<sup>25</sup> The 1986 study included a definition of abuse that mirrored the 1980 definition, but also in-



Rural patrol can include the Nation’s inland waterways.

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cluded children “placed at risk for harm,” such as being left alone. When the first definition was used, abuse rates were higher in rural than in major urban counties. However, when the broader definition was used, urban rates of abuse were higher. The studies were based on a relatively small number of counties and could not address contextual issues that may have explained these differences. However, the findings suggest there may be important rural-urban differences and point to the need for more research.

**Hate crimes.** Related to the issue of violence, though less well documented, are the so-called “hate groups” in rural areas. Many of these groups are based on a combination of anti-semitism, racism, fundamentalist Christianity, and a deep suspicion of government.<sup>26</sup> One researcher described the literature published by one group, the Iowa Society for Educated Citizens (ISEC):

“The literature decries race mixing, gun registration, the liberal (i.e., Jewish) media, the IRS, homosexuality, the Council on Foreign Relations, and driver’s licenses—the last because by accepting them, citizens are, in effect, legitimizing what the self-proclaimed patriots consider illegitimate authority. But the target of choice for ISEC members. . . is the Federal Reserve Bank: root of farmers’ problems and the front organization for the international Jewish bankers.<sup>27</sup> Many—especially members of the Posse Comitatus—refuse to recognize any government authority higher than the county sheriff.”<sup>28</sup>

Sometimes these beliefs lead directly to violence, as when members fight paying taxes and farm foreclosures, or when they commit robbery and theft to fund their activities. Many groups weave together violence and religion, believing that Armageddon is near and that they must be heavily armed for self-protection. As one researcher notes, “Fundamental to the beliefs of the Posse was that only rural dwellers would survive a war and that unprepared urban individuals seeking food and shelter would become enemies. Accordingly, followers

were instructed to collect arms and stockpile food.”<sup>29</sup> Some try to hasten the inevitable by fostering a race war, or by making the banking system collapse by flooding the country with counterfeit money.

Some hate groups base their beliefs on distortions of existing rural values and emphasize religion, patriotism, and independence from government tyranny. The number of active members of these groups is unknown, but probably totals no more than 10,000 or 20,000. However, these groups have a high potential for crime, particularly violent crime. Unlike urban skinheads, rural hate groups are generally composed of “ordinary” people who shun public attention for themselves and their cause. Further, there is evidence of increasing communication among these groups around the country through newsletters, publications, audio- and videotapes, and even electronic bulletin boards.<sup>30</sup>

**Arson.** The 1991 annual report of the National Fire Prevention Association indicated relatively stable arson rates in rural counties between 1983 and 1991.<sup>31</sup> The report showed that as the size of the community decreased the rate of arson offenses also decreased, from a rate of 90 per 100,000 people in cities of 250,000 or more to a rate of only 22 per 100,000 in rural counties. However, compared with urban areas, rural communities more often lacked the resources and staff to fully investigate arson. Small staffs and substantial travel distances can slow response time and impede rural arson investigations. Also, rural fires more often advance to the “total burn” syndrome, in which the structure is completely destroyed. In fact, the damage by fires in rural areas has been at least three times more than the damage in urban areas.<sup>32</sup> Total burn arson fires often require additional manpower and equipment to sort through the debris. Consequently, rural fires have often not been investigated for arson unless the preliminary evidence was particularly compelling.

**Special crimes.** Most of the crimes discussed to this point (e.g., homicide and child abuse) take place in both urban and rural areas. Some crimes, however, are peculiar to the rural setting. For example, rest-stop crime and crimes tied to the presence of interstate highways are both growing concerns. In addition, special rural crimes include wildlife and agricultural crimes.

**Agricultural crime.** The focus in this discussion on agricultural crime is its impact on the country as a whole through escalating food and insurance prices. Illustrating the scope of the problem, 80 percent of surveyed Iowa farmers said they were victims of theft over a 3-year period. UCR data do not separate agricultural crime from other offenses. However, each year the UCR does list specific items of theft and the rate at which these items are recovered. Among the listed items is livestock, which accounts for losses of approximately \$20 million each year, only about 17 percent of which is recovered. Researchers have assembled selected incidents of agricultural crime that illustrate its scope and seriousness. These include:

- \$1 million in annual thefts of avocado, lime, and mango fruit in Florida.
- \$1 million in annual losses to timber thieves and vandals in western Washington alone.
- \$2 million in annual losses from pesticide thefts.
- \$30 million a year lost to theft from California farmers.

In addition, these researchers noted that single offenses can be enormously costly. They cited embezzlement at an Iowa grain elevator that produced a loss of \$10 million. They also cited anecdotal evidence that organized crime was active in agricultural crime in several States.<sup>33</sup>

**Wildlife crimes.** Similar to agricultural crimes, wildlife crimes are primarily a rural phenomenon. Wildlife crimes, especially poaching, have become a major concern for conservation police officers. According to the U.S. Fish &

Wildlife Service, during FY 1990 wildlife shipments entering and leaving the United States had a declared value of more than \$1 billion.<sup>34</sup> According to a 1986 publication, the estimated replacement costs of illegally harvested fish and wildlife exceeded \$45 million in Illinois, while the poaching of deer alone was estimated to cost Pennsylvania more than \$93 million a year.<sup>35</sup>

Many rural residents have poached to provide food for themselves and their families, while others have prided themselves on simply killing a wildlife “trophy.”<sup>36</sup> It was found that for many poaching was exciting and was seen as a test of wit and skill between the poacher and the game warden. Many poachers were proud that they could easily outmaneuver the technology and complex modern strategies of the game warden. In addition, poaching may reinforce the rural mistrust of outsiders and of government.<sup>37</sup> “They [poachers] are constantly in contact with others who support an ‘us’ and ‘them’ orientation toward the larger society. Both game wardens and the laws they enforce represent outsiders.”<sup>38</sup>

### Rural setting of crime and justice

Crime and criminal justice do not exist in a vacuum. The rural setting has several features shaping both crime and policing. This section begins with a discussion of the rural environment and then turns to what has been observed about the functions of law enforcement agencies in rural settings.

**Geographic isolation.** The effects of geography alone pose serious problems for rural justice, having an impact on such things as response time and the speed with which support services can be provided. One study, for example, contradicts UCR data and suggests that the homicide rate in rural areas is higher, and because access to medical treatment in rural and urban areas is different, even if the violent act is the same in both.<sup>39</sup> Similarly, rural officers can expect a longer wait for backup. Geographic

isolation can be a particular problem for the many rural officers who patrol alone and whose interactions with suspects have no witnesses. The large geographic areas covered by some rural police also make responding to calls more expensive and more time consuming than in urban areas.

Geography is also likely to have different meanings in different parts of the country. A common unit of study for rural issues is the county, which is also a convenient unit regarding law enforcement and the courts. Counties differ in size (square miles), terrain, population density, and climate. For example, it periodically happens that hikers are lost in the mountains of Montana for 1 or 2 weeks before they find other people. One would be hard pressed to find similar incidents occurring in the “wilds” of Delaware. Clearly, rural officers in the two States are likely to confront very different problems.

**Availability of guns.** The presence of guns is another area in which rural and urban populations differ. It has been observed that gun ownership is much more prevalent in rural areas where more than double the number of residents owned guns than their urban counter-

parts.<sup>40</sup> While many of the rural gun owners are hunters who use rifles or shotguns, the percentage of citizens owning handguns has also been higher in rural areas than in central cities (23 percent versus 15 percent). It is sometimes assumed that the availability of guns is relevant to gun-related violence, but the case of rural areas shows that the relationship is far more complex. While rural residents are more likely to own guns, it appears they are less likely to use guns in the commission of crimes. It has also been found that crime was lowest in counties with the highest rates of legal firearm ownership.<sup>41</sup> Similarly, a 1990 report by the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) found that the rate of crimes committed with handguns was more than three times as great in urban areas—5.9 per 100,000 in central cities versus 1.7 per 100,000 in nonmetropolitan areas.<sup>42</sup>

**Economic factors.** High rates of poverty have long been associated with high rates of crime. Crime has been less frequent in rural areas, although poverty has been a common problem in rural America. For example, of the 159 high-poverty counties in the United States in 1979, only six contained a city with a population of 25,000 or more.<sup>43</sup> Further,



Officer encounters adverse physical conditions in isolated area.

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the 1986 poverty rate in rural areas was 50 percent higher than in urban areas.<sup>44</sup> While urban researchers have expressed alarm over the rise of a “permanent underclass,” this deep socioeconomic and cultural isolation “has been the experience of generations of the rural poor, especially in the South, where rigid social stratification has kept them out of the mainstream.”<sup>45</sup> In recent decades the eroding economic base of many rural areas has encouraged high levels of out-migration by young educated and skilled workers, which makes future economic development more difficult.<sup>46</sup>

The economic problems facing rural areas can be expected to not only affect the nature and extent of crime, but the resources available to rural law enforcement. Where tax bases are small, rural police departments are likely to be seriously understaffed and without important resources. One of the authors of this review interviewed a local sheriff whose desk consisted of an old door stretched across two half-height filing cabinets and who had a total of three officers (including himself) to patrol a large county 7 days a week, 24 hours a day.

While poverty is common in many rural areas, some areas have experienced economic development. This has been most evident in “collar counties” that surround some major urban areas. An analysis of census data show that the highest poverty levels are in rural nonmetropolitan areas, while the lowest poverty levels are in rural locations within metropolitan areas.<sup>47</sup> In addition, pockets of rural growth can be based on a variety of factors, such as tourism, retirement communities, industry, natural resources, or government services.<sup>48</sup> Each type of growth presents its own crime and law enforcement problems.

**Social climate.** Precisely measuring and describing a local culture is extremely difficult. There are, however, several features of rural culture that distinguish it from urban culture and that have implications for rural policing and rural crime.

Among these features of rural culture are informal control, a mistrust of government, a mistrust of outsiders, and a reluctance to share internal problems.

Rural areas are more governed by informal social control than are urban areas. One study found that in rural areas shoplifting and employee theft were rarely reported to the police. Instead, most cases were handled informally. One rural criminal justice official said, “I simply can’t get people to tell me things. I hear about them 2 or 3 weeks later, and when I ask them why they didn’t come to me about it, they say, ‘Oh, I took care of it myself.’ We simply can’t get people to take advantage of the services of this office.”<sup>49</sup>

A focus on informal control should not be confused with a tolerance of crime in rural areas. To the contrary, rural areas are often less tolerant of crime and of deviance in general.<sup>50</sup>

Informal control is facilitated by the fact that many residents of rural communities, including the local police, know each other socially. One factor that contributes to this is the relative stability of the local population. Rural citizens less frequently change addresses, often staying in the same county or even the same house for several generations.<sup>51</sup> The low levels of mobility and low population density mean that rural law enforcement officers, such as sheriffs, are likely to personally know most offenders and their families. If a victim can identify a thief, for example, the sheriff is likely to know where to find the offender and to already know quite a bit about the offender and his or her family.

A greater reliance on informal social control is also consistent with a greater suspicion of government, particularly Federal and State governments, which are seen as insensitive to local needs. This suspicion of a strong central government is also reflected by the attitudes of rural residents, who are generally less supportive than urban residents of government programs that provide welfare,

housing, unemployment benefits, higher education, and medicaid.<sup>52</sup> Similar concerns have been expressed by rural sheriffs. In California, for example, a contingent of 200 army soldiers, national guardsmen, and Federal agents spent 2 weeks clearing out marijuana growing operations in the King Range National Conservation Area in northern California. As a result of their efforts 1,200 plants were destroyed, but not everyone was satisfied.

Rural sheriffs believe that if the Federal Government has the funds to keep a rural operation like the one above going for a few days, then it should just give the funds to local law enforcement officials who can more efficiently break up such growing operations.<sup>53</sup>

This does not mean that local authorities cannot work effectively with Federal and State police agencies. The rise of multi-jurisdictional task forces demonstrate that local authorities can work effectively with others.<sup>54</sup> The larger point is that Federal and State authorities need to appreciate rural culture to make these relationships work effectively.

One problem with studying rural areas and gaining insights into rural crime and criminal justice is the tendency in some rural communities to keep community problems to themselves. This attitude, combined with a greater reliance on informal control, also sets the stage for a greater mistrust of government. In a study of marijuana growers, a rural police officer observed that people in rural areas tend to be more conservative and do not want government coming in, or an outsider coming in, or foreigners coming in. They are the same people who will ostracize members of their society who get caught growing marijuana.<sup>55</sup>

Informal control, keeping things in, and showing a greater suspicion of government may also help account for rural-urban differences in the willingness of local communities to fully cooperate with reporting to the Federal Bureau of Investigation’s (FBI’s) UCR. It is not surprising that for 1990, reporting to the



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UCR program differed by population density, with reports covering 98 percent of citizens living in metropolitan statistical areas but only 89 percent of those living in rural areas.<sup>56</sup> Similarly, another survey found that while the likelihood of reporting crime to the police was similar for rural and urban residents, urban citizens failed to report because they thought nothing could be done, while rural citizens failed to report because they considered the crime a private concern, even when the offender was a stranger.<sup>57</sup>

## Rural police

As noted above, the issues of rural crime and rural justice have received little attention. For example, the distinction between rural and urban policing is acknowledged in a brief one-page section in the International City Management Association's (ICMA's) 447-page book *Local Government Police Management*.<sup>58</sup> Many consider this book the definitive reference on municipal police administration. The distinctions between urban and rural policing are considered nominal and are rapidly disappearing. This implies that rural policing is fundamentally the same as urban policing. It is reasonable to seriously question this assumption. Further, the one-page acknowledgement cited in the 1982 edition is totally absent in the latest edition of ICMA's book. Clearly, there is an urban emphasis in research efforts concerning police organizations, management, operations, and methods in America.

Further evidence of the overall lack of knowledge about police agencies (especially rural departments) in the United States has been revealed in the apparent inability to calculate the precise number of agencies. This issue has been a matter of controversy for many years. For instance, the 1967 President's Commission on Law Enforcement estimated that the United States had approximately 40,000 separate police agencies.<sup>59</sup> By the early 1980's, the estimated number of police

agencies was greatly reduced; one scholar placed the number at 19,691.<sup>60</sup> In the early 1990's, that same scholar placed that estimate at approximately 15,000,<sup>61</sup> while the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) estimated the number of police agencies at approximately 17,000.<sup>62</sup>

How do we account for this disparity? It is likely that the confusion results from the numerous special policing districts/agencies and the many, small rural police departments that sometimes have no full-time officers. How should these agencies be counted and who should keep records of their existence? State criminal justice information authorities have only recently come into existence, much less developed the ability to gather data.

Those who would study rural policing must not only decide what is rural, but what is a rural police agency. The stereotypical rural police agency is a small sheriff's office similar to the fictional television program "The Andy Griffith Show." This stereotype ignores other agencies involved in rural policing, such as State police, rural municipal departments, State-level conservation departments, the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), park rangers, the railroad police, or tribal police who operate on Indian reservations. Sheriffs may be the most visible of rural police, but the stereotype falsely minimizes the professionalism of many contemporary departments and the complexity of their tasks. In addition to basic law enforcement, sheriffs are responsible for the local jail, court security, prisoner transport, and process serving.<sup>63</sup> As will be seen below, citizens expect rural police in general to take on a wider range of tasks than are expected of urban police.

## Department size

Nationally, most local police departments are small; approximately half of the Nation's local departments employ fewer than 10 commissioned officers. Ninety-one percent of all local police agencies maintain fewer than 50 sworn

officers, and 90 percent of the Nation's police departments serve a population of under 25,000.<sup>64</sup> Illinois, for example, has nearly 35,000 combined State and local officers in approximately 785 separate and distinct police agencies. Most Illinois police departments have fewer than five full-time officers (59 percent), and approximately 32 percent have no full-time officers (i.e., only part-time officers). Further, relatively few Illinois municipalities (only 17 percent) have police departments with more than 20 officers.<sup>65</sup>

Precisely what is meant by a "small" department? The truth is that there are no classifications of police departments by size, and there is no common definition of small town and rural police.<sup>66</sup> One could forcefully argue that classifying police departments by size (manpower allocation) is not reasonable, given that different contextual considerations might account for those numerical differences.

In a study of the organizational structure of police departments, researchers found that it was misleading to assume that small police departments were rural or that rural departments were necessarily small.<sup>67</sup> A rural county, a bedroom community, and an industrial community, each with the same sized population, may each have different manpower requirements,<sup>68</sup> and even departments of the same size may have different missions. To complicate matters, some agencies policing rural America are not necessarily located in rural areas. Included in this category are investigative agencies at both the Federal and State levels. The potential for conflicts between local citizens and "outsiders" who enforce the law is substantial, as described in other parts of this report.

Another reality for rural policing, especially for rural sheriffs' offices, is that along with shrinking populations and attendant resources, these agencies are responsible for dealing with generalized police services for a given and non-shrinkable geographic area. Current budgetary realities, along with the fact



that many of the Nation's worst roads exist in rural areas, present special problems for rural sheriffs. In 1992, it was reported that 80 percent of Missouri's fatal vehicular accidents happened on rural roadways—often policed by sheriffs' offices and augmented by the State Highway Patrol.<sup>69</sup> In rural Alaska, where all types of social services are scarce, traditional law enforcement is a relatively small part of the service police are expected to perform. They are also expected to fight fires, provide emergency medical services, and perform rescue operations.<sup>70</sup>

The combined loss of population and taxing base is crucial for local rural police agencies, both municipal and county levels. BJS has estimated that the per officer expenditure for police agencies serving populations of fewer than 2,500 is \$31,500, while in urban areas it is nearly double that at \$62,600 per officer. Similarly, departments serving a population of under 2,500 (the smallest they cited) spent approximately \$95 per resident a year for local police expenditures, compared with \$144 per resident per year in areas of one million citizens or more.<sup>71</sup>

In the past, national and State commissions, among others, have operated under the presumption that the size of a police department is related to the quality of its performance. In particular, it has been presumed that departments with 10 or fewer officers are less efficient, less forward thinking, are poorly organized, and are staffed by officers who are poorly trained. In evaluating the trend toward civilianization in medium and small police departments, one researcher noted that rural agencies were civilianizing at nearly two times the rate of large urban departments.<sup>72</sup> These findings appear to contradict common perceptions that rural agencies are seldom in the vanguard of change.

One proposed solution to the "inefficiency" of small departments has been to consolidate small programs. The 1973

report by the National Advisory Commission on Criminal Justice Standards and Goals, for example, recommended that departments with 10 or fewer officers be consolidated. However, researchers have noted that these assumptions and the policy recommendations that have been drawn from them are generally without empirical foundation. Their study, based on interviews with police officials, police activity reports, and a survey of 4,000 residents in 29 jurisdictions of varying sizes, reached very different conclusions. The study found that citizens in the jurisdiction of small departments reported less victimization, fewer citizens who thought crime was rising, and more positive police-community relations. In a variety of other areas, differences were small or nonexistent. Small departments fared less well than medium-sized departments in the speed with which they responded to citizen complaints, but small departments still outperformed large departments in this regard. The study concluded that consolidation made sense for some small departments, but was ill-advised as a blanket policy. It seems likely that many problems facing small departments can be better handled through cooperation with other agencies, rather than formal consolidation.<sup>73</sup>

Expanding on this study, police jurisdictions of varying sizes in Maryland were examined, with a focus on investigative effectiveness. It was found that neither police agency size nor the size of the jurisdiction were among the most important determinants of investigative effectiveness. Instead, it was concluded that "regional scale and community complexity" were more important, with greater investigative effectiveness in the more rural departments—that is, departments with the least complex community structures.<sup>74</sup>

Studies of agency size and police performance show that small departments can be quite effective and that small and rural are not interchangeable terms when describing police departments.

### **Complexity and Size of Police Departments**

Consider two small police departments, one located in a rural area and the other in a metropolitan area. Although the residential populations served by the two agencies may be the same size, the investigators in the rural departments have some natural advantages. They actually know, by name, by sight, and/or by reputation, a much greater proportion of the people in their jurisdiction and its surrounding area than the metropolitan agency investigators know of theirs. The witnesses that they deal with are much more likely to have recognized suspects they observed. Also, the rural investigator has only a few neighboring jurisdictions to keep in contact with, whereas the metropolitan investigator may have a dizzying array of other police departments in close proximity.<sup>75</sup>

### **Styles of policing in rural areas**

Given the differences between rural and urban crime and culture, it should be expected that police in rural and urban areas would approach police work differently. In a study of tasks regularly performed by police in 249 municipal agencies of differing sizes, small agencies were found to be more concerned with crime prevention, medium-sized agencies showed the greatest concern for providing noncrime services, and large agencies focused on enforcing criminal laws and controlling crime through arrests.<sup>76</sup> Similarly, another researcher examined public opinion data about the police role and found that the larger the community the more likely citizens were to believe that police should limit their role to enforcing criminal laws.<sup>77</sup> Conversely, people from smaller communities were more likely to want police to perform a wide variety of functions. In many rural areas, police must provide a wide range of services because other social services are either nonexistent or are more remote than the police.



Logan County, Ohio, Sheriff's Deputies Milt Watts, Carl May, and Tony Robinson among some of the 7,500 marijuana plants that the sheriff's office has seized during the past 5 years.

Styles of policing are partly a reflection of the relationship between police and the community. In interviews with officers from one rural department and several urban departments, researchers found that officers in rural and urban departments had many similar concerns, but differed in several interesting respects. Urban officers thought they were less respected by citizens. At the same time, police in rural communities felt more public support for being tough, particularly with juveniles. Consistent with the greater informality of rural areas, rural and urban officers believed they were given public respect for different reasons. In urban areas, respect went to the position, and it was believed that a good way to improve public respect was through professionalizing the department. In contrast, respect was thought to be given to rural officers as individuals, who had to prove that respect was deserved. This was often done by establishing a reputation for toughness early in their career.<sup>78</sup>

Given the nature of rural culture and of social interactions in rural areas, it can also be speculated that police-community relations will be very different in rural and urban departments. In rural areas officers are likely to know the offenders and their families, just as the officer and his family will be known by the community. Rural officers are also more likely to know and appreciate the history and culture of an area and to use that information in their work. An example of police-community relations differing in rural and urban police departments can be found in a study of marijuana growers in which a rural officer described his arrest procedure in one case:

"You can't act overly high and mighty with them, you won't get any cooperation. . . . This summer I went down and there was a guy with maybe 200 plants spread out over a small farm. I was fairly confident it was there and I pull up in his driveway. He was unloading wood. I'm in the pickup truck, and obviously he knows who I am. I walked up and told

him what I was doing there. I said 'I've come to get your marijuana and we're going to be doing an open field search. . . . I've just come up here to tell you what I'm doing.' I helped him unload his wood and then I said, "I'm going down by the pond and look at this marijuana. I'll be back in a minute." I went down, looked at it and came back up. I said, 'well, your marijuana is down there,' and then I went ahead and helped him unload some more wood and talked about it. He went to jail with no problem. I think this was the kind of guy who would have liked to have fought you. But because of the way I handled it, he wasn't going to fight anybody. Because, I didn't go in there and say 'you're a marijuana grower and you're worthless.' A lot of times if you're dealing with people in these rural areas, they don't have a problem with you coming in and arresting them. They just want to be treated like human beings."<sup>79</sup>

Given the closer social ties between police and their community, it should be expected that rural officers will use policing styles that are more responsive to citizens in their area and that, in turn, local residents would be more supportive of the police. In fact, a 1991 Gallup survey found substantial rural-urban differences in the support that citizens showed for the local police. In urban areas, 54 percent of the citizens reported having a great deal of respect for the local police, whereas 61 percent of rural citizens reported this. The differences were much more pronounced when asked about police brutality, where 59 percent of urban residents thought there was police brutality in their area, but only 20 percent of rural residents believed this.<sup>80</sup>

The same features of rural policing that compel officers to be more responsive to the public also mean that rural police have relatively less discretion. An explanation for the high degree of police discretion found in urban areas compared to rural areas is the low visibility of police actions. The actions of police officers in

smaller communities are known to most of the population because of the effective informal communication networks that are more highly visible. Small town police enjoy less latitude in deviating from dominant community values as a result.<sup>81</sup>

Organizational and community factors were found to have a different impact on the adoption of a legalistic police style in rural and urban areas. In urban areas characteristics of the police organization, such as the number of ranks or the ratio of administrators to sworn officers, were better predictors of police style than were characteristics of the community, such as percent minority or level of economic distress. In rural areas, the relationships were reversed, with community factors being more important than organizational factors. As might be expected, data suggest that rural departments are more responsive to the local community, whereas urban departments may be more sensitive to the dynamics of the police organization. In addition, sheriffs, as elected officials, are under particular pressure to be responsive to the community.<sup>82</sup>

The less formal nature of rural life, along with the small size of many rural departments, makes complex bureaucratic procedures less necessary for day-to-day operations. Thus, rural departments are less likely to have detailed written policies in a variety of areas, a situation that can place them in legal limbo when problems arise. For example, in a study of police vehicle pursuits, substantial rural-urban differences were observed in both the number of pursuits and in whether departments had written policies regarding pursuits. Pursuit policies in small departments are important because, for example, approximately one third of Illinois police departments have fewer than one full-time police officer. The officers working in these small departments are not assisted by policy and have the highest per officer pursuit ratios. Officers in small agencies comprised of 1 to 10 officers had an average pursuit



ratio of more than two times that of larger agencies and close to three times that of the next sized agency of 11 to 50 officers.<sup>83</sup>

A large number of other issues are of pressing concern to rural police as well as those mentioned here, and there is a clear need to identify these areas and initiate a systematic examination of how they might best be addressed.

### **Jail**

Operating the county jail is among the primary duties of the local sheriff. While research has focused on urban jails, most jails are in rural areas. According to the 1988 National Jail Census, two thirds of the jails in the United States had a daily population of less than 50 inmates.<sup>84</sup> While urban jails have tended to be seriously overcrowded, rural jails have been more likely to operate under their rated capacity.<sup>85</sup> The economic plight of some rural areas has led local sheriffs to raise money by housing jail inmates from other jurisdictions, or for the Federal Government.

Rural jails are often older than urban jails and more poorly staffed. Because the fixed costs of running a jail exist

apart from whether the cells are full or empty, the per-inmate cost of running jails in rural areas has been about double that of urban areas. Further, the lack of staff and programming have meant that rural inmates less often separated by age and less often supervised, which may partly account for their substantially higher rates of homicide, suicide, and death from illness and natural causes. In rural areas, the fiscal conservatism that leads to small budgets for jail structures and jail services may create problems for local sheriffs, who can still be held individually liable for the safety and welfare of inmates.<sup>86</sup>

Sheriffs in rural areas may also have fewer support services available to quickly process inmates and move them out of the jail. For example, limited probation services may leave fewer alternatives to jail for misdemeanants, and the rural practice of relying on part-time judges may have a direct impact on the jail, resulting in less-than-timely dispositions in bail hearings, preliminary hearings, trials, and others requiring a judge.<sup>87</sup>

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## Special problems

While rural and urban policing may share a variety of concerns, there are also problems that are either unique to the rural setting or are made more complicated by the rural environment. For example, many small municipalities are strapped for funds, which not only makes staffing difficult, but may make it impractical for their departments to tap into statewide systems for records checks or vehicle registrations. Even a nominal hook-up fee may be more than the department can afford. Further, the more self-contained nature of rural communities may make it more difficult to generate support for training, equipment, or services that would increase the routine interactions between the local agency and State or national enforcement groups. In addition, the distances covered by some rural officers may also complicate radio communication.

Rural officers are more likely to find themselves physically isolated but socially under a microscope. This situation is the inverse of that for many inner-city officers. Perhaps the best example of this can be found among conservation officers, whose work is often done alone in remote areas, with backup some distance away. In small departments, as well as among conservation officers, this isolation is compounded by the fact that there are fewer colleagues with whom they can socialize when off duty. At the same time officers in small rural departments are isolated, they also have less privacy and more difficulty in separating their professional and personal roles. Conservation officers again provide a good illustration of this problem:

“. . . conservation officers are highly visible members of the community they serve and are in fact never off duty. The officer's homes are their offices, with the game commission logo prominently displayed outside their houses as well as on their vehicles. Their telephone numbers are published statewide. The officers and their families are under constant observation because they are members of

the communities where they enforce the law. Thus, they can never develop personal identities other than their official roles. They cannot, like their urban counterparts, disengage from this role, seek comfort in their occupational peer group, and find relief from anxiety privately. Because they lack peer companionship, their families play a very important and sensitive role. However, even then, the officers must be guarded lest confidential case information becomes a source of rural gossip.”<sup>88</sup>

What is true of conservation officers is true of many rural police. Thus, the same familiarity with citizens that facilitates investigations by rural police also takes away from the rural officer's privacy.

## Summary

This brief overview of the issues on rural crime and rural policing suggests that the issues are complex and that a more careful study of rural crime can be important for serving the rural community and for understanding crime in general. There is enough information, however, to suggest important dimensions of the topic. A sample of these includes:

- Compared with urban areas, little is known about rural crime or rural policing. It appears, however, that crime is less frequent in rural areas, and that “community policing,” to which many urban departments now aspire, has been a long-standing practice in rural police agencies.
- While the terms “rural” and “urban” are used frequently in everyday language, there are no precise meanings of these terms upon which everyone can agree. Despite this, it is clear that the idea of rural is useful.
- Differences between rural and urban cultures have implications for rural crime and rural policing. For example, both rural and urban areas have pockets of extreme poverty, but the effects of poverty on crime are different in the two areas.
- Differences across rural areas are large and vary by region of the country,

across counties within a State, and sometimes even within a county. For example, illegal immigrants may be a concern in the Southwest, vandalism in the Midwest, and the smuggling of tobacco and liquor in areas along the Canadian border. Thus, national policies uniformly covering rural areas may be a mistake, unless those policies can be tailored to fit local needs.

- There are contradictions across studies that need to be explained. For example, some authors report that homicide is higher in rural areas, while others (including UCR data) suggest the opposite. It is unclear whether these differences are the product of sampling, the definitions used, or regional variations.

Studying these issues across rural areas and between urban and rural areas is useful in the same way that studies of crime across countries tell us much about larger patterns and suggest what works and what does not work in policing and crime prevention.

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Neglecting rural policing and rural crime might be justifiable if there is nothing about policing, crime, or the community in rural environments that precludes directly applying knowledge from urban areas. It is evident, however, that rural environments are distinct from urban environments in ways that affect policing, crime, and public policy. The following discussion examines what is known about rural crime, rural policing, and how they are shaped by the rural environment. It is obvious that rural policing is shaped by the nature of rural crime and the features that distinguish rural cul