Rural Crime and Justice: Implications for Theory and Research

Ralph A. Weisheit
L. Edward Wells

Theories of crime and research on crime and justice have usually been based on an urban model of social organization. Applying these theories and methods to rural settings provides an opportunity to understand them better and to make clear the assumptions upon which they are based. This article assesses current theories and methods regarding their ability to account for crime and justice in rural areas.

INTRODUCTION

Rural crime has received little attention in the research literature beyond occasional descriptive glimpses. This oversight would be understandable if the concept of *rural* had little relevance in contemporary American society, being only of historical interest. Ignoring rural crime might also be justified if the concept of rural was of no theoretical or methodological significance. The discussion that follows addresses each of these conditions, arguing that the rural setting as a concept has contemporary theoretical and methodological importance, which is relevant to policy making.

The tendency has been for theories and methods to be developed for urban crime problems and then to assume that they have universal application, a perspective that has been called "urban ethnocentrism" (Weisheit 1993).

RALPH A. WEISHEIT: Professor, Department of Criminal Justice Sciences, Illinois State University, Normal, IL. **L. EDWARD WELLS**: Professor, Department of Criminal Justice Sciences, Illinois State University, Normal, IL.

This manuscript was prepared with support from the National Institute of Justice (Grant No. 92-IJ-CX-K012). The views presented here are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the National Institute of Justice. An earlier version of this article was presented to the annual meeting of the American Society of Criminology in Boston on November 17, 1995. We would like to thank Don C. Gibbons, editor of *Crime & Delinquency*, for his many helpful comments on the manuscript.

CRIME & DELINQUENCY, Vol. 42 No. 3, July 1996 379-397

However, even a brief consideration of rural crime raises questions about the stereotypical images of crime based on an urban example. Consider the illustrations provided by drugs, guns, and poverty.

Illegal Drugs

Drug use is a problem in both rural and urban settings. There is evidence that drug use rates are comparable across urban and rural settings, although the types of drugs used may be different (Donnermeyer 1992; General Accounting Office 1990; Tabs 1991). For example, rural residents tend to use less crack and more inhalants. Although drug use rates are comparable across rural and urban areas, crime associated with drug use is much lower in rural communities than it is in cities. Understanding why drug-related crime rates differ in light of comparable drug use rates would be a useful step toward unraveling the links among drugs, crime, and the criminal justice system.

Guns

Gun ownership is far more prevalent in rural than in urban areas, perhaps three times as frequent. Even so, there is evidence that in rural areas guns are less likely to be used in the commission of a crime. Rapes, for example, are three times more likely to involve a handgun in cities than in rural areas (see Weisheit, Falcone, and Wells 1996). Clearly, guns have different social meanings in rural and urban areas. The failure to recognize that a distinct rural perspective exists makes it difficult for urban-based policy makers to understand the passionate opposition of rural residents to government restrictions on the possession and sale of guns.

Poverty

Much research and policy debate has been based on the assumption that poverty is strongly associated with crime, particularly when poverty is a permanent feature of an area to the degree that young people growing up in the community have little hope that the future will be better than the past. Although this view is almost entirely based on an analysis of urban poverty, some of the deepest "pockets of poverty" in the United States are in rural areas. A study using U.S. census data found that among the 159 American counties with the highest poverty rates, only 6 contained a community of 25,000 or more people (Weinberg 1987). In many cases this is a feature of the area that has spanned generations and for which little relief is in sight. As

an added twist, in rapidly growing rural communities the crime rate increases three to four times the rate at which the population increases (Freudenberg and Jones 1991). That is, rural crime may go up as economic conditions improve and countywide poverty is reduced, a reversal of the usual urban pattern. Moreover, traditional labor market models of poverty do not fit the development of rural poverty, since traditional models are based on the dynamics and conditions in heterogeneous urban labor markets. In rural communities—where the labor market is substantially more homogeneous and skilled workers may have limited options for marketing their skills—conditions are quite different (Rural Sociological Society 1993).

The above points do not deny the relevance of guns, drugs, or poverty in the development of crime, but argue against assuming rural-urban homogeneity. Generalizing from urban results, the three factors in combination should lead to high levels of rural crime—but most forms of crime are less frequent in rural areas. It is likely that drugs, guns, and poverty may have different social meanings in rural and urban areas. Theoretical models should take these differences into account, but most do not. Rural-urban variations may also highlight the importance of other factors in the etiology of crime, particularly the role of community and social networks.

The concept of rural has many dimensions and can be operationalized in a variety of ways (see Weisheit et al. 1996). The following discussion focuses on two dimensions that are particularly relevant to theoretical and methodological concerns: the influences of geography and culture in making rural America both distinct and of scientific interest. Before addressing either theory or method, we first discuss whether rural remains a viable concept in modern America.

RURAL AS AN ANACHRONISM

There is abundant direct and indirect evidence that the concept of rural has been deemed irrelevant in modern American society. It is treated as an anachronism, an idea that was useful when America was a predominantly agrarian society, but now seems out of place. Rural areas are now assumed to lack a unique culture and, instead, American society has been homogenized by television, fast food, national chains of groceries, department stores, specialty shops, and even a national newspaper through a process that Fischer has called "massification" (Fischer 1980). Similarly, it has been assumed that population growth into what were formerly rural areas, modern telecommunications, an elaborate system of highways, and the expansion of air travel

have markedly reduced the geographic isolation that once was characteristic of rural areas. We argue, however, that in terms of both geography and culture, the concept of rural remains important.

Geography

Conceptions of rural are often based on geography, particularly the ideas of low population density and of economies based on farming and other extractive industries. Low population density has typically meant relative *physical* isolation. During this century, the population of the United States has grown tremendously. In 1900, for example, the total population of the United States was 76,094,000; whereas by November 1995, the Census Bureau estimated that figure had risen to almost 264,000,000. Because of such growth, combined with an improved transportation system linking many parts of America, it is easy to see how the uninitiated (i.e., urban) citizen might believe that rural is no longer a viable theoretical or analytical category.

The facts about rural, however, speak otherwise. Approximately one quarter of the U.S. population lives in nonmetropolitan areas, a figure larger than that for nearly any minority group in America. Further, although most *people* live in nonrural areas, most *places* in America are rural. For example, of the 3,146 counties in the United States, 2,387 of them (76%) are nonmetropolitan counties (i.e., counties with fewer than 50,000 people). Although not all small communities are in rural areas, 88% of the incorporated communities in America have fewer than 10,000 residents.

Perhaps the most important aspect of geography as it relates to rural is the fact that the vast majority of research institutions, policy-making bodies, and the national media are located in urban areas. Even when a major university is located in a small city surrounded by rural areas, the university is typically an insular community. The research that is done there is almost entirely unaffected by the surrounding rural setting. Similarly, most national- and state-level policy is set from urban centers, often with little appreciation for the realities of rural life. Finally, the national media have a strong urban bias. News networks are always centered in urban areas, and the distances that must be traveled to cover a single story in a rural setting often make the costs of covering rural issues prohibitive. If rural America has been ignored by researchers, policy makers, and the media, it is small wonder that some might consider rural a concept that is no longer relevant. Although there may be a perception that ruralism has disappeared, the empirical evidence suggests it is very much alive as a quantifiable geographic fact. But, is there still a distinct rural culture?

Culture

Some might argue that even if rural still exists as a geographic reality, it has long disappeared as a distinct cultural segment of America. Perhaps the most direct statement of the idea that a separate rural culture no longer exists can be found in the 1994 edition of the *Dictionary of Sociology*, in which the term rural is not defined separately but is discussed under "rural-urban continuum." By focusing on a continuum, the authors implicitly suggest that the idea of rural is only of interest or use when contrasted with the urban concept. Their assessment of the rural-urban continuum is more explicitly dismissive of rural culture as a viable entity. The authors state,

> The notion of the rural-urban continuum has recently passed out of use, mainly because there no longer seem to be significant differences between urban and rural ways of life. What differences in ways of life that do exist between communities or social groups are mostly attributable to such factors as social class and not geographic location. (Abercrombie, Hill, and Turner 1994, p. 364)

This perspective is clearly counter to that of contemporary researchers who have actually spent time observing rural culture (e.g., Martinez-Brawley 1990; Websdale 1995; Gagne 1992; Toomey, First, Greenlee, and Cummins 1993; Weisheit et al. 1996).

If there is a distinct rural culture, what are its key features? One feature of rural culture is what Freudenberg (1986) has called "density of acquaintanceships," or the extent to which people in a community know each other personally. In general, smaller communities have higher density of acquaintanceships. The close interconnections among citizens provide a sense of common identity and of belonging to a group. This personal face-to-face interaction is important, and it has not been replaced by television or other forms of mass communication. Close personal interactions also lead rural citizens to be more watchful of crime and unusual goings on in their communities.

With social life dependent on these close connections, residents of rural communities are often characterized as unreceptive to outsiders and hesitant to share internal problems with them. Rural citizens also place a greater emphasis on self-reliance, and their mistrust of outsiders seems particularly strong concerning the federal government. Many of the militia movements and antitax organizations work out of rural areas (see Weisheit et al. 1996). Similarly, when the federal government attempted to compel local police to follow national guidelines for the registration of guns, five rural sheriffs took the government to court to protest the government's actions. Rural citizens

are also less supportive than are urban residents of government programs that provide welfare, housing, unemployment benefits, higher education, and Medicaid (Swanson, Cohen, and Swanson 1979).

In some respects, the issues of geography and density of acquaintanceship are reversed in urban and rural settings. In urban America, the typical citizen is usually within close physical proximity to others and thus his or her physical privacy is relatively low, while in contrast, he or she may have a relatively high level of social privacy. That is, although the urban dweller may be surrounded by others, those persons are unlikely to know (or care) much about the whole of that individual's social world. In contrast, the rural dweller has substantially more *physical privacy* but substantially less *social privacy*. The phrase "everybody knows everybody elses' business around here" is common in rural communities. Whether the close social scrutiny so characteristic of rural life is a protective cocoon or a smothering blanket depends on one's perspective, but it clearly has implications for crime and justice in the rural setting, and for theories of crime and methods for studying it.

Not only is the notion of rural still alive, but it may be experiencing a new vitality. In recent years, automobile manufacturing plants and kindred organizations have moved into rural areas. In addition, the changing nature of work is enabling more people to be employed in their homes, which in turn frees them to live where they please. For example, computer programming requires only a home computer and a phone connection for the employee to work at home and send work to the office. Similarly, companies that provide on-line or telephone customer service or that conduct business by phone, fax, or modem can be located anywhere. Finally, concerns with pollution and congestion in some cities have led to the promotion of telecommuting. It is too early to write the obituary for rural America, and it is past time for criminological theories and methods to include the rural context.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THEORY

The earliest theories in American criminology were characterized by a distinctly nonurban perspective, reflecting the predominantly rural, small-town backgrounds of most of the pioneering theorists in sociology and criminology (Mills 1943; Laub 1983). Rural communities and towns implicitly were taken as the natural social form, providing the stable reference point from which the features and fluctuations of urban life could be analyzed as interesting deviations. Contemporary criminology has come full circle from those origins and has dramatically reversed this bias. Theory and research on

crime now show a decidedly urban frame of mind. In the decades since the 1950s, virtually all theory development and testing has concerned urban-based social dynamics and causal models. Little attention has been given to crime in rural settings or to the possibility that rural crime is a theoretically separate topic that may be important to criminology and criminal justice.

Several broad trends in recent criminological theory reveal this pattern of neglect. The most obvious and substantial trend has been the pervasive shift away from the macrosociological explanations that dominated into the 1970s toward social psychological models of criminality and individual criminal acts. Some familiar examples of this shift are rational choice theory (Cornish and Clarke 1986), integrated learning theories (Elliott, Huizinga, and Ageton 1985; Wilson and Herrnstein 1985), self-control theory (Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990), and life-course/developmental theory (Loeber and LeBlanc 1990). A key feature of such theories is that they explain crime as the result of individual traits and psychological choices that do not depend substantially on social or physical location. These theories propose universal models, reflecting general situational factors and behavioral dynamics that apply across all types of contexts, occasions, and locations.

In such person-centered, decontextualized models, locational variations and rural-urban differences represent analytical "noise" rather than theoretically meaningful patterns. The consequences of this generalized macro-to-micro shift in criminological theory have been profound. Indeed, many traditional structural theories of crime have been revised and reconceptualized as social-psychological models of learning or behavioral control—for example, power-control theory (Hagan 1989), revised strain theory (Agnew 1992), and left realist theory (Matthews and Young 1992).

A second trend has been the reemergence of an ecological perspective in criminology that focuses attention on disorganized places and criminogenic situations. Familiar examples include deviant places theory (Stark 1987), routine activities theory (Cohen and Felson 1979; Felson 1994), defensible space theory (Newman 1972), and situational crime prevention theory (Clarke 1992). These theories would seem to be well suited to address rural and urban differences in crime dynamics, since they are interested in locational differences and geographic variations. However, to date, explication of and research on these models have been restricted to urban settings and populations. No attempt has been made to explicitly incorporate nonurban settings or to address rural and urban differences.

To this point, we have noted that rural variations and processes in crime have been neglected by criminologists. This reflects a larger trend in the social sciences in which the city is implicitly taken as the locale "where the action

is," and events in the hinterland are viewed as curious and less informative deviations. (As an exception see Gibbons's 1972 description of crime in the hinterland.)

One final consideration in the lack of systematic attention to rural theory and research is a persistent uncertainty about how the concept rural should be operationalized (i.e., what the rural category includes and how this can be reliably measured). If the concept of rural once had meaningful content—for example, neatly identified with simple, traditional, sparsely populated, kinship-based, agricultural communities—that meaning has blurred considerably with recent demographic, technological, and social trends. As a result, the rural category tends to be defined by default as "nonurban" or "not quite so urban." Reliance on census categories to determine what is rural versus urban has effectively legitimated this negative, ill-defined version of the concept (Weisheit et al. 1996). Standardized reliance on such an amorphous leftover category tends to inhibit efforts to define it more meaningfully and makes it much more difficult to figure out exactly what should be studied.

Considering the difficulties outlined above, what kinds of theoretical development would be helpful in dealing more systematically with rural crime and social control? An obvious first need is for a more explicit evaluation of the current "general" theories of crime and delinquency regarding nonurban settings and populations. This evaluation should be both critical and based on empirical analyses of how the theories work in different settings and how they must be modified to fit other contexts. The presumption of current criminological theory that urban-based theories of criminality are equally valid in other settings is untested and largely unchallenged, being based on intuitive appeal and theoretical convenience. It is not a finding of actual research and may be incorrect for many areas of theoretical application. Existing theories of crime should be examined for their ability to account for what is known about crime in rural areas. A similar exercise has been undertaken to examine the utility of existing theories of crime for patterns of female crime (Harris 1977; Leonard 1982).

Several specific topics seem timely and especially relevant to the task of evaluating the assumption of rural-urban uniformity. One is the central theoretical role of the family in many causal models of juvenile delinquency, often as a precursor to adult crime. Such models presume that family dynamics and their causal impact on children's behavior are universal. In effect, families are presumed to operate as "autonomous modules of societal control"; they are causally distinct and independent from their environmental setting, providing an independent causal buffer between children and their immediate physical environment. That model may seem quite appropriate where families are mobile and where community structures are loose and

voluntaristic (i.e., in largely urban areas). However, that view would seem less appropriate in rural settings, especially in stable rural communities, where families generally extend well beyond single households and are more tightly embedded in the community networks of social control.

Another lively issue is the application of current theoretical models of youth gangs to small-town rural settings. Many gang researchers and law enforcement officials have noted the recent spread of urban street gangs to rural communities, suggesting that "no place is safe from criminal gangs anymore." The universal explanation for this trend involves mainly diffusion and imitation; the basic dynamics of rural gangs mimic those found in urban gangs, albeit in somewhat weaker form and on a smaller scale. In response, many small towns have begun consulting with urban gang experts to find out what is happening and how to deal with it. Again, the presumption of basic rural-urban uniformity is a plausible but untested assumption that is not based on any systematic research. It would be better addressed by reference to data and empirical comparisons.

The second broad task in making criminology more "rural-informed" should be the elaboration of those few current theories that already have built-in theoretical "hooks" for including rural-urban differences within them. For example, ecological theories of crime and delinquency are obvious choices for "ruralizing" theory. Such theories are particularly sensitive to the impact of "social space"—as a combination of physical settings and the social networks and arrangements that take place in those settings—on the operation of social control and regulation. Routine activities theory (Felson 1994) and Stark's (1987) theory of deviant places are especially promising, but other ecological models should be equally useful.

Another likely theoretical framework is the emergent communitarian theory of social control that seeks to re-embed criminology firmly in the sociology of organization and community. The most obvious and appealing example is the recent synthesis of social control theory, labeling theory, deterrence theory, and subcultural deviance theory by Braithwaite (1989), called reintegrative shaming theory. This theory asserts that the effectiveness of sanctions in controlling deviant/criminal behavior depends on the social networks, attachments, and settings within which the controls are administered, along with the contextual meaning of the sanctions for offenders as community members. These factors determine whether punishment is disintegrative or reintegrative, as well as which form of punishment will be more effective. The sanctioning/control processes that work one way in loosely connected urban settings, which are characterized by autonomy and anonymity, will work very differently in "communitarian" settings, which are characterized by a tighter fabric of interdependency and social obligations, as

found in many rural communities. Braithwaite's model, developed to explain large-scale social regulation of white-collar crime, was expanded to include predatory street crime. Its potential application to explain rural-urban differences in ordinary crime and delinquency is provocative.

IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH

We have argued that the nature of the rural environment tends to favor explanations that focus on social context, local community, and interpersonal networks. The omission of rural factors from recent theories is also a likely consequence of current research methodologies. In contrast to earlier reliance on detailed observational field studies of single communities, recent criminological theories have been based mostly upon the findings from survey research, along with secondary data from official records. These data are derived from national samples of predominantly urban populations or from samples within major metropolitan areas. Rural residents do not constitute a numerically significant share of such samples and have not been given separate attention. Insofar as rural enters into research, it does so only in the form of a crude rural-urban dichotomy, often drawn from census data, for use as a control variable. Obviously, such research does not direct attention to regional variations or rural-urban differences. As a result, the methodology minimizes local variations and emphasizes central tendencies and global patterns.

Survey research is an excellent tool for understanding how social phenomena are distributed in a population and for estimating broad patterns or tendencies. However, surveys can be misleading if they are based on faulty assumptions about shared understandings and shared meanings across various segments of the sample. In short, national surveys are unlikely to reveal local variations, either between urban and rural areas, or among rural areas. If we are to understand the rural setting through the use of national surveys, more than simply including more rural subjects in the sampling frame is required. Significant differences in rural and urban cultures and settings must be taken into account and built into the survey instruments before meaningful survey research can be conducted.

To illustrate some of the problems of conducting research in rural settings and to suggest directions for further study, we now turn to several specific areas in which the rural setting presents research problems. These include such methodological issues as identifying target populations, gaining access to subjects, and ethical issues.

Identifying Target Populations and Research Subjects

In many rural areas, it is difficult to identify target populations and research subjects. For example, Toomey et al. (1993, p. 26) noted the challenge of identifying and counting the homeless in rural areas. The urban practice of using counts from homeless shelters as a starting point is questionable in rural areas, where the number of homeless shelters is very small. They argued that even the concept of homeless is viewed differently in rural communities, where the term is primarily reserved for outsiders or transients:

> A local resident who has recently lost his farm and is temporarily living with relatives may not be perceived as homeless by his neighbors; he is just someone who has fallen on hard times. In contrast, a transient person moving through town may clearly be seen as a homeless person. In fact, both types of people may meet the operational definition of homelessness. (p. 26)

A similar problem affects efforts to study chronic addictive drug users. In urban locations, they can be meaningfully studied through "street samples" (e.g., Inciardi 1992), but rural areas lack such identifiable public populations upon which the research method depends.

Toomey et al. (1993) also noted that research using key informants in rural areas may require using different groups as informants than would be used in a city:

> Whereas urban key informants are often social service providers, rural key informants are likely to be mail carriers, health inspectors, laundromat attendees, hotel and motel desk clerks, park rangers, librarians, and convenience store clerks. (p. 26)

Compared with that of their urban counterparts, the knowledge of rural people in these positions is often substantial because they are more than simply officials; they are also citizens who live in the community. The rural mail carrier knows the citizens on his or her route both as postal customers and as individuals in a variety of other roles. The knowledge he or she has from his or her official capacity is only one source of information about the citizen. Citizens are also known from the church, the PTA, civic organizations, and the grocery store. It is easy to see how using such people as informants can be useful, but it can also raise significant questions about maintaining confidentiality, an issue to be addressed below.

In some cases, incidents that would be reported as crimes in urban areas may not even be discovered or considered as crimes in rural areas because of a lack of resources and because of rural culture. For example, there is evidence that a child's death less often results in an autopsy in rural areas than in cities (Lundstrom and Sharpe 1991; Unnithan 1994). Part of this

difference may be explained by the fact that urban areas are more likely to have medical examiners or forensic pathologists—trained medical professionals who exclusively focus on crime and who can conduct their own autopsies. In contrast, rural areas more often rely on elected coroners for whom no medical training is required. In many rural areas, coroners are part-time officials—often funeral directors but just as easily farmers or shopkeepers. The pay is often so low that the coroner must have another occupation:

> Missouri, for instance, pays its rural coroners an average of $1,200 a year to be on call 24 hours, seven days a week. At those wages it is often only the local funeral director who is eager to moonlight as a coroner—an arrangement that is good for business but potentially bad for autopsies. (Lundstrom and Sharpe 1991, p. 24)

Because of the close social confines of a rural community, and because the funeral director's business depends on good relationships with members of the community, a family's objections to an autopsy on their child may often be respected.

In jurisdictions covered by coroners with no experience in forensic pathology, conducting an autopsy may require sending the body to a medical examiner in another jurisdiction and paying a high price for the service, which can place a substantial hardship on a financially strapped rural county. This fact effectively discourages autopsies in cases where there is nothing immediately suspicious about a death. Thus the errors in using official records to identify child death cases may be distributed differently across rural and urban areas. Like homelessness, conclusions about the number of hidden cases based on studies of urban records may not be directly applied to rural settings.

Another example of crime that may go undetected in rural areas is arson. The response time to fires is often longer in rural areas, leading to a high percentage of them reaching the "total burn syndrome." Such fires burn so long and with such intensity that the structure is burned to the ground, and in the process, evidence of arson is destroyed (International Association of Fire Chiefs 1989).

The tendency of rural residents to handle problems informally can make it difficult to identify cases of criminal conduct, even if local officials recognize that a crime has been committed. Arson again provides a good illustration. Jackson's (1988) national survey of fire departments compared their reports of arson with those presented in the Uniform Crime Reports (UCR), to which local departments were supposed to have reported all cases of arson. Jackson found large rural-urban differences in the reporting of arson cases to the UCR. In communities with fewer than 25,000 people, less than

half (49.2%) were reported; while in communities with more than 70,000 people, 90.2% of the arsons were reported to the UCR. This finding is consistent with the fact that police departments in rural areas are less likely to report crime to the UCR than are those in cities. In 1994, for example, reports to the UCR covered 97% of citizens living in metropolitan statistical areas but only 88% of those living in rural areas (Federal Bureau of Investigation 1995).

Weisheit's study of marijuana growers (1992) originally planned to use local small-town newspapers to identify arrested growers in rural areas. However, this strategy proved to be of questionable value because small-town newspapers did not dedicate much coverage to crime issues, particularly if the offenders were local residents. Newspaper coverage of a local arrest was more likely to be reported by newspapers centered in larger communities in the region. As Weisheit (1993) noted in a quote from a rural police officer, the public sentiment about marijuana growing was that such misbehavior was a local concern and that it was not appropriate to draw it to the attention of outsiders:

> People in rural areas tend to be pretty conservative generally and don't want government coming in, or an outsider coming in, or foreigners coming in. They want the status quo and that's it. And when they develop a cancer from within they don't want it going out. They don't want people telling about it and they don't want people rocking the boat. They are the same people who will ostracize members of their society who get caught doing this [marijuana growing]. (p. 223)

In her research on marijuana growers in Kentucky, Hafley (1994) has also observed this tendency to keep bad news within the community:

> The rural central and eastern Kentucky resident relishes socializing with others and discussing activities within the community. However, they will not discuss [with outsiders] illegal activities occurring within the community. For an outsider it can be difficult to get the rural residents to even admit such activities occur in their community.
>
> Rural central and eastern Kentucky residents take pride in not divulging the community's business to outsiders. Other residents are aware of those within the community who are or have been participating in illegal activities. It is only the outsider who is deceived by protestations of moral outrage. (pp. 140-41)

Gaining Access to Subjects

After identifying who is to be studied, the next problem is gaining access to individual subjects. This problem, too, is shaped by both geography and culture. Regarding geography, one common problem in rural areas is that subjects are widely dispersed, and simply getting to them for observational

work and field interviews can be expensive and time consuming. It is no accident that so much of the "field" research on drug users has focused on urban street addicts. They are easily accessible, but the conclusions derived from such research may not fit rural drug users. In fact, conclusions about drug use and crime that derive from research on urban street addicts (e.g., Inciardi 1992; Johnson et al. 1985; Ball, Rosen, Flueck, and Nurco 1981; Goldstein 1981) may even be inappropriate for urban middle-class professional user-dealers. The cocaine users and dealers described by Waldorf, Reinarman, and Murphy (1991) were middle-class professionals for whom the drug-crime explanations, developed from street addict samples, appear to be largely irrelevant. Many of the methods used to locate and interview urban street addicts have no obvious counterpart in the rural setting. For example, setting up a storefront operation to draw local addicts to the researcher would make no sense in a rural setting. Similarly, the great success of snowball sampling by urban researchers (e.g., Biernacki and Waldorf 1981; Inciardi, Horowitz, and Pottieger 1993) was found by Weisheit (1992) to be completely unworkable in the rural setting where individuals were widely dispersed and where locals were hesitant to reveal sensitive information to outsiders. Hendin, Haas, Singer, Ellner, and Ulman (1987) conducted a study of daily marijuana users, locating subjects by running advertisements in newspapers, special-interest magazines, and journals in the New York City area. Similarly, Erickson used newspaper advertising in conjunction with snowball sampling to locate both cocaine (Erickson and Murray 1989) and regular marijuana users (Erickson 1989). It is hard to imagine such a technique working in rural areas where (1) it would be necessary to work with a number of very small newspapers, (2) subjects would be widely spread out and difficult to access, and (3) people who responded to the call may have justifiable concerns about their ability to take part in the study and remain anonymous.

One reason that field research on rural drug users has not been carried out is that such research is inconvenient and expensive for the researcher. Another reason is that such research requires entering unfamiliar social terrain for which the existing research literature provides little guidance. Rural culture not only influences the willingness of researchers to enter the setting, it also shapes access to subjects. Weisheit's (1993) observations of rural marijuana growers illustrates the difficulty an outsider may face in doing interviews in rural areas:

> A local sheriff was reluctant to be interviewed about growers in his area, agreeing only after a state trooper with whom he had worked had recommended him. The sheriff began the interview by vaguely describing a large case and casually throwing out questions to "test" the researcher. For example: "The

> grower was a sorghum farmer—but being from the city you wouldn't know what that is. Would you?" As it turned out I grew up in a rural community and knew something of sorghum farming. Having passed his "test" by answering a series of similar questions, the tone of the interview changed to openness and cooperation. The interview lasted for several hours and was very informative. . . . It was also my impression that a researcher with little knowledge of rural life would not have gotten very far in the interview, finding the sheriff polite but not very talkative. (p. 219)

It was also likely that someone with a thick New York accent, for example, would have had a very difficult time even getting in the door. Far worse than simply being an outsider, such an accent would have suggested an outsider from a large urban area. Perhaps what rural residents resent most is an outsider with an urban attitude that smacks of condescension and paternalism. This is speculation that we cannot document with available data, but it is consistent with observations we have made in the course of our study and with our own experiences in rural settings.

The rural setting may exacerbate a common research problem of whether the researcher should be an insider or an outsider. People may feel more comfortable speaking to an outsider, as long as they believe their remarks will not come back to haunt them (i.e., be leaked to other members of the community). If the researcher is from the local area, it may be difficult for subjects to separate the researcher as neutral observer from the researcher as active member of the community. The issue may be similar to someone trying to interview members of his or her own family about their involvement in crime.

Ethical Issues

Conducting research in rural areas also raises several ethical issues. In particular, the researcher who enters a closely knit rural community may have problems with both anonymity and confidentiality. These are particularly serious concerns when the behavior under study is illegal or is seen as improper by local residents.

Martinez-Brawley (1990) illustrates the problem of anonymity for social service providers in rural settings:

> A client in a large city might, on occasion, meet an agency worker on the streets or in the market, but relationships generally can remain anonymous, not because people do not recognize one another occasionally, but because when they do, people and names will seldom be put together in a way that is meaningful to anyone. In the small community, faces and names are always put together in more meaningful ways. . . . It is impossible for a person to remain anonymous in the small-town agency setting. The secretary who greets the client at a social agency will recognize individuals by name and attach the

act of coming to a social agency to a known person, not to an anonymous case. (p. 224)

The close-knit nature of rural society is also likely to pose problems in maintaining confidentiality. If the researcher sets up a work area in a small town, for example, and hires a local citizen to transcribe interviews, there is a potential problem of confidentiality being breached. Even if the transcriber is careful to never divulge information in the transcripts, the person being interviewed may feel that he or she is speaking to the transcriber as well as to the researcher. In such cases, he or she may hesitate to fully disclose things he or she has done.

Confidentiality may also be difficult to maintain if the researcher seeks to verify information obtained through interviews. Getting permission to examine official records, for example, can initiate a series of rumors about the interviewed subject.

Unfortunately, researchers entering the rural setting to study crime and justice will find the strategies used in urban research are often ineffective or inappropriate. They will also find the professional literature contains a paucity of examples of applying research methods to rural problems, examples that could serve as guides for their work. Perhaps the greatest challenge is to use methodologies sensitive to the unique circumstances of rural culture that, at the same time, allow for comparisons between rural and urban areas, and across very different rural communities.

CONCLUSION

Neither theory nor method in the study of crime and justice has adequately considered the rural setting. Such an oversight does not simply discourage an understanding of rural crime, but also discourages the development of theoretical models and methodology in general. Theories of crime that purport to be general theories are too often theories only of *urban* crime. Ignoring the rural setting in the development of these theories is analogous to ignoring differences across categories of gender, race, or age, or to ignoring differences across cultures. The rural population is large enough to justify attention on practical grounds. However, the utility of rural for theoretical purposes is not in the size of the rural population, but in the variation that rural introduces to patterns of crime.

The paucity of research and theory on rural crime and justice is unfortunate for academic purposes, but more importantly this gap in our knowledge also handicaps the development of comprehensive policies regarding crime and justice. In view of a continuing tendency to "federalize" crime control by

creating new categories of federal crime and by using federal funding for local criminal justice support, this is a serious limitation. The usefulness of national crime control policies will be limited if policy makers do not understand variations across jurisdictions, including rural-urban differences and variations across rural areas. Research that would facilitate the development of policies appropriate for rural settings is sorely needed, as is the development of theory that can guide rural research.

REFERENCES

Abercrombie, Nicholas, Stephen Hill, and Bryan S. Turner. 1994. *The Penguin Dictionary of Sociology*. 3rd ed. New York: Penguin Books.

Agnew, Robert. 1992. "Foundation for a General Strain Theory of Crime and Delinquency." *Criminology* 30:47-66.

Ball, John C., Lawrence Rosen, John A. Flueck, and David Nurco. 1981. "The Criminality of Heroin Addicts When Addicted and When Off Opiates." Pp. 39-65 in *The Drugs-Crime Connection*, edited by J. A. Inciardi. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Biernacki, Patrick and Dan Waldorf. 1981. "Snowball Sampling: Problems and Techniques of Chain Referral Sampling." *Sociological Methods and Research* 10:141-61.

Braithwaite, John. 1989. *Crime, Shame, and Reintegration*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Clarke, Ronald V., ed. 1992. *Situational Crime Prevention*. New York: Harrow and Heston.

Cohen, Lawrence E. and Marcus Felson. 1979. "Social Change and Crime Rate Trends: A Routine Activities Approach." *American Sociological Review* 44:588-608.

Cornish, Derek B. and Ronald V. Clarke, eds. 1986. *The Reasoning Criminal*. New York: Springer-Verlag.

Donnermeyer, Joseph F. 1992. "The Use of Alcohol, Marijuana, and Hard Drugs by Rural Adolescents: A Review of Recent Research." Pp. 31-75 in *Drug Use in Rural American Communities*, edited by R. W. Edwards. New York: Haworth.

Elliott, Delbert S., David Huizinga, and Suzanne S. Ageton. 1985. *Explaining Delinquency and Drug Use*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Erickson, Patricia G. 1989. "Living With Prohibition: Regular Cannabis Users, Legal Sanctions, and Informal Controls." *The International Journal of the Addictions* 24:175-88.

Erickson, Patricia G. and Glenn F. Murray. 1989. "The Undeterred Cocaine User: Intention to Quit and Its Relationship to Perceived Legal and Health Risks." *Contemporary Drug Problems* 16:141-56.

Federal Bureau of Investigation. 1995. *Uniform Crime Reports, 1994*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.

Felson, Marcus. 1994. *Crime and Everyday Life*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge.

Fischer, Claude S. 1980. "The Spread of Violent Crime From City to Countryside, 1955 to 1975." *Rural Sociology* 45:416-34.

Freudenberg, William R. 1986. "The Density of Acquaintanceship: An Overlooked Variable in Community Research." *American Journal of Sociology* 92:27-63.

Freudenberg, William R. and Robert Emmett Jones. 1991. "Criminal Behavior and Rapid Community Growth: Examining the Evidence." *Rural Sociology* 56:619-45.

Gagne, Patricia L. 1992. "Appalachian Women: Violence and Social Control." *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 20:387-415.

General Accounting Office. 1990. *Rural Drug Abuse*. Washington, DC: U.S. General Accounting Office.

Gibbons, Don C. 1972. "Crime in the Hinterland." *Criminology* 10:177-91.

Goldstein, Paul J. 1981. "Getting Over: Economic Alternatives to Predatory Crime Among Street Drug Users." Pp. 67-84 in *The Drugs-Crime Connection*, edited by J. A. Inciardi. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Gottfredson, Michael and Travis Hirschi. 1990. *A General Theory of Crime*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Hafley, Sandra Riggs. 1994. "Rural Organized Crime." Unpublished master's thesis, University of Louisville, Louisville, KY.

Hagan, John. 1989. *Structural Criminology*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Harris, Anthony R. 1977. "Sex and Theories of Deviance: Toward a Functional Theory of Deviant Type-Scripts." *American Sociological Review* 42:3-16.

Hendin, Herbert, Ann Pollinger Haas, Paul Singer, Melvin Ellner, and Richard Ulman. 1987. *Living High*. New York: Human Sciences Press.

Inciardi, James A. 1992. *The War on Drugs II*. Mountain View, CA: Mayfield.

Inciardi, James A., Ruth Horowitz, and Anee E. Pottieger. 1993. *Street Kids, Street Drugs, Street Crime*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

International Association of Fire Chiefs. 1989. *Rural Arson Control* (Report No. EMW-86-C-2080). Washington, DC: Federal Emergency Management Agency, United States Fire Administration.

Jackson, Patrick G. 1988. "Assessing the Validity of Official Data on Arson." *Criminology* 26:181-95.

Johnson, Bruce D., Paul J. Goldstein, Edward Preble, James Schmeidler, Douglas Lipton, Barry Spunt, and Thomas Miller. 1985. *Taking Care of Business*. Lexington, MA: Lexington Books.

Laub, John H. 1983. *Criminology in the Making*. Boston: Northeastern University Press.

Leonard, Eileen B. 1982. *Women, Crime, and Society*. New York: Longman.

Loeber, Rolf and Marc LeBlanc. 1990. "Toward a Developmental Criminology." Pp. 375-437 in *Crime and Justice*, Vol. 12, edited by M. Tonry & N. Morris. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Lundstrom, Marjie and Rochelle Sharpe. 1991. "Getting Away With Murder." *Public Welfare* 49:18-29.

Martinez-Brawley, Emilia E. 1990. *Perspectives on the Small Community*. Silver Spring, MD: National Association of Social Workers Press.

Matthews, Roger, and Jock Young, eds. 1992. *Rethinking Criminology*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Mills, C. Wright. 1943. "The Professional Ideology of Social Pathologists." *American Journal of Sociology* 49:165-80.

Newman, Oscar. 1972. *Defensible Space*. New York: Macmillan.

Rural Sociological Society. 1993. *Persistent Poverty in Rural America*. Boulder, CO: Westview.

Stark, Rodney. 1987. "Deviant Places: A Theory of the Ecology of Crime." *Criminology* 25:893-909.

Swanson, Bert E., Richard A. Cohen, and Edith P. Swanson. 1979. *Small Towns and Small Towners*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Tabs, E. D. 1991. *Teacher Survey on Safe, Disciplined, and Drug-Free Schools* (Report No. NCES 91-091). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement.

Toomey, Beverly G., Richard J. First, Richard Greenlee, and Linda K. Cummins. 1993. "Counting the Rural Homeless Population: Methodological Dilemmas." *Social Work Research and Abstracts* 29:23-27.

Unnithan, Prabha. 1994. "The Processing of Homicide Cases With Child Victims: Systematic and Situational Contingencies." *Journal of Criminal Justice* 22:41-50.

Waldorf, Dan, Craig Reinarman, and Sheigla Murphy. 1991. *Cocaine Changes*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Websdale, Neil. 1995. "An Ethnographic Assessment of the Policing of Domestic Violence in Rural Eastern Kentucky." *Social Justice* 22:102-22.

Weinberg, D. 1987. "Rural Pockets of Poverty." *Rural Sociology* 52:398-408.

Weisheit, Ralph. 1992. *Domestic Marijuana*. Westport, CT: Greenwood.

Weisheit, Ralph. 1993. "Studying Drugs in Rural Areas: Notes From the Field." *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency* 30:213-32.

Weisheit, Ralph, David N. Falcone, and L. Edward Wells. 1996. *Crime and Policing in Rural and Small-Town America*. Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland.

Wilson, James Q. and Richard J. Herrnstein. 1985. *Crime and Human Nature*. New York: Simon & Schuster.