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## Editorial

## Rural crime and community safety



In many industrialized nations, rural areas are seen as a retreat from the problems of urban living, where people reside closer to nature, in cohesive communities, and where safety is an inherent part of this idyllic image. Perhaps these areas are a retreat, but the imposition of a single template does not do justice to what these places have to offer. As in large urban centers, rural areas are encompassing a number of changes often dictated by forces far beyond those local realities (e. g. [Donnermeyer and DeKeseredy, 2013](#); [Shortall and Warner, 2012](#); [Woods, 2011](#)). Crime and community safety have become just the tip of the iceberg of the transformations that happen at different paces and at various scales around the rural world. Understanding rural crime requires understanding factors that make rural life distinct from urban life, including geography and culture ([Weisheit and Donnermeyer, 2000](#)). Thus, far from being a homogeneous entity, 'rural areas' are considered here as a diverse set of communities with different characteristics and needs but that share a number of qualities and challenges.

This Special Issue assembles a unique set of international scholars to illustrate different paradigmatic perspectives on social change and community safety in rural areas - a commonly neglected subject area in both research and policy. The Special Issue contains high quality articles written by experts relying on knowledge stemming from geography, sociology, criminology, geography, economy, gender studies, policing and regional planning, just to name a few. Some of the articles are theoretical in nature whilst the large majority reports on empirical analyses of particular cases. The articles also utilize a wide range of qualitative and quantitative methods (e.g. from discourse analysis to modeling) devoted to the analysis of different facets of crime and safety in rural contexts. Most of the current research is dominated by North American and British studies; therefore this Special Issue has attempted to provide a glimpse of other contexts, namely from Scandinavia, Canada and Australia and, without being too extensive, of safety issues faced in rural areas in the Global South (Brazil).

Why should one care about crime and safety in rural areas? This was a question that came up frequently during the process of orchestrating this Special Issue. It is submitted here that there are several reasons why crime and safety are relevant and worthy issues in rural contexts.

### 1. Crime is not exclusively an urban problem

Far too often, lower crime rates in rural areas are taken for granted as a 'sign' that there is no problem ([Yarwood, 2001](#), p. 206). The drawback of this assumption is that it disregards the effects of particular crime events in small communities, as opposed to large cities where such events may go unnoticed. Crime in small

communities can have a long-term effect on people's perceptions of risk and their own quality of life. This calls for a more sensitive view of crime and perceived safety in rural areas, beyond stereotypes of 'big city problems' and with theories that are able to capture the nature of the social organization of rural communities. In this Special Issue, [Donnermeyer \(2015\)](#) makes a contribution to theory building by suggesting new ways of thinking about crime in rural places. He states that the very same form of social organization in a place can simultaneously constrain and enable expressions of crime and deviance – thereby, Donnermeyer contests the very core principle of social disorganization theory ([Kornhauser, 1978](#); [Shaw and McKay, 1942](#)) commonly accepted as reference in environmental criminology for both urban and rural contexts.

### 2. Rural areas are not homogenous entities

Instead, rural areas constitute a diverse set of communities with different characteristics and needs and that, in certain contexts, may share a number of qualities and challenges. However, the search for a singular definition of rural, as suggested by [Halfacree \(1993\)](#), is an illusion. Rural and rurality are complex phenomena, and dynamic both in time and space. The study of the rural has focused on the romantic, homogenous images of the countryside. These images, as is argued by several articles in this Special Issue, compress the richness of rurality into a homogenizing model and neglect the existence of 'other rurals' that embody different, but tangible elements of the rural, and perhaps imaginary ones as well. The articles by John Scott and Russell Hogg ([Scott and Hogg, 2015](#)) and by Santi Owen and Kerry Carrington ([Owen and Carrington, 2015](#)) on Australia are examples of the need for recognition of other alternative realities within the rural.

As far as crime is concerned, it is therefore a mistake to assume that patterns of crime are homogeneous across rural areas ([Barclay et al., 2007](#); [Carrington, 2007](#); [Ceccato, 2015](#); [Kaylen and Pridemore, 2013](#); [Weisheit et al., 2006](#)). Some of the articles in this Special Issue illustrate the differentiated patterns for other countries. Crime, as portrayed in some of the articles, has become just the tip of the iceberg of the transformations that happen at different paces and at various scales around the rural world. For instance, Erica Von Essen and colleagues use Sweden and Finland as a case study to indicate how the perceived exclusion of hunters in public debate has led to an increase of illegal hunting as a form of resistance ([von Essen et al., 2015](#)). On the other side of the globe, the analysis by Marcelo Justus and colleagues in Brazil shows examples of how the organization of rural areas can take diverse shapes and differently affect crime levels ([Scorzafave et al., 2015](#)). This complexity calls for a more plural rural that considers rural areas not as isolated systems, but rather as places overcoming a number

of changes that may be dictated by forces far beyond those local realities.

### 3. Rurality affects the nature of crime

Although one can hardly claim that there is something in particular about rural areas that explains why people commit crime, there are reasons to assume that there are features of rural areas that differently affect the situational conditions of crime (Barton et al., 2011; Carrington et al., 2011; Ceccato and Uittenbogaard, 2013; Donnermeyer et al., 2006). For instance, geographical and social isolation are part of the dynamic of crime in rural areas. Mawby's (2015) article adds to our understanding of where and why offences are committed in rural areas by analyzing location data of offenders and victims. The studies on rural crime that are presented in this Special Issue also show a clear commonality: that crime detection imposes a number of challenges. In isolated spots, crime goes unnoticed (see Barclay and Bartel's (2015) article on environmental crime in Australia). The same applies to the difficulty in detecting drug production sites in Scandinavia or elsewhere. The article by Kaylen and Pridemore (2015) touches upon the issue of the limitations of measuring victimization using official statistics in rural areas and assesses potential alternatives.

Social isolation also affects one's decision to avoid contact with the police and report a crime (Rennison et al., 2013). DeKeseredy's (2015) article illustrates those in rural areas who fear being ostracized if they speak out about male violence. The so-called 'cohesive community values' strengthen rural communities but may also have the unintended effect of 'enabling' crime (domestic violence) to occur. Similarly, Peter Sommerville and colleagues exemplify how community culture accommodates illegal activities (Somerville et al., 2015). Against the picture of rural idyll, the authors analyze five stories of illegal rural enterprise in the UK countryside. Such issues call for better knowledge of the nature and dynamics of crime in rural areas.

### 4. Policing in rural areas has changed

Another important development in rural areas that is worth noting is the changes in policing, particularly community policing. During recent decades, policing has been opened up to other actors, citizens, and NGOs. Yet, as suggested by Wooff (2015), rural policing, with a few exceptions, has been largely absent from the criminology literature. Adding to this literature, Wooff characterizes policing practices against anti-social behavior in rural Scotland. He concludes by arguing that the rural needs to be re-conceptualized as a distinct policing environment, with particular contextual factors, worth consideration in its own right. Along the same line of thought, the study by Yarwood (2015) shows how the boundaries of traditional policing are constantly challenged as new forms of work are put in place. His study uses a relational approach to re-conceptualize rural policing as a networked activity that involves various actors to produce different forms of policing in different places. In order to illustrate the potential of this approach, Yarwood analyses how various agencies (including non-human) are drawn into searches for missing persons in the English countryside.

In Sweden, a different trend in policing has been noticed as the private security sector is expanding and taking over some of traditional police duties in rural municipalities. What is worrying is that this development seems to go hand in hand with a policy of distribution of policing resources that follows the concentration of crime, in other words, in urban areas. You will learn more about this process in the study presented by Lindström (2015). As safety is becoming more and more a commodity (and as such, it may not be attained by all), this development in policing puts into

question the very nature of safety as an individual right. The article by Wilhelmsson and Ceccato (2015) illustrates that just as in the Swedish capital, in small municipalities in Sweden buyers are willing to pay extra for a property that is located in a neighborhood with lower crime rates.

### 5. One should care about rural areas!

If one aims to achieve a sustainable future, rural areas should be seen as an integral part of the social system. From a knowledge building perspective, for this to happen, developments in research and practice must extend beyond the borders of disciplines and theoretical approaches; developments that make crime and safety important dimensions of social, economic and environmental sustainability of rural areas.

One may still be far from achieving this goal, but the hope is that with this Special Issue, one takes a step forward in this direction by illustrating the current innovative research on rural crime and community safety through the lens of 14 articles. Enjoy!

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