Depictions of youth homicide: Films set in rural environments

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ABSTRACT

This paper, Depictions of Youth Homicide: Films Set in Rural Environments, reviews portrayals of youth homicide within six films that are set in rural environs. It examines depictions concerning the environment or setting of the film, including how media may explore notions of formal and informal social control as a means by which to explain some aspects of rural crime. The findings suggest that though films that depict youth homicide in rural settings encompass stereotypes often associated with rural crime, such as perceived police incompetence and the importance of informal social control in regard to community ties. However, there are still some instances in which rural homicide was framed in a realistic light, for example, the fact that rural firearm use for their actual purpose is common and firearm accidents are common, but firearms as a means of homicide are rare.

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1. Introduction

Rural is often stereotypically associated with ideas of social order, safety, and low crime communities (Donnermeyer et al., 2013). Bell (as cited in Donnermeyer et al., 2013, p.70) argues that the rural idyll is a symbolic landscape where meanings of rurality are condensed and where "idyllisation" produces stylized representations of the countryside rendering some aspects of rurality invisible. Romanticized images of rurality neglect the existence of "other rurals" and divert attention from those who live amongst rural communities and are vulnerable to harassment, violence, and other forms of harm (Carrington et al., 2014). Rural communities are not necessarily less criminogenic than urban centres, in fact rural crime rates may be higher than urban crime rates in particular rural areas and for particular types of crime (Donnermeyer and DeKeseredy, 2008).

The media's focus is skewed toward particular environs as being representative of where crime takes place. The context and environment in which a crime is committed is equally as important as the crime itself. Urban crime is seemingly the central focus of policy initiatives in part perhaps because of public presumptions that the majority of crime occurs within urban centres. Rural areas may appear to be a low priority when it comes to policy initiatives that focus on the specific needs of rural communities (Falcone et al.,

2002). Many rural areas utilize preventative and reactive law enforcement methods designed by, and for, their urban counterparts despite the unique needs of smaller communities (Falcone et al., 2002). The general assumption of the public is that all rural communities are homogeneous; therefore, what is good for one is good for all (Ball, 2001). The reality of rural communities is that each varies in its needs.

Young offenders are assumed to be urban males, with little recognition or exploration of gender differences, and little consideration of urban/rural settings (Meek, 2006). Interestingly, *within* rural communities youth are often constructed as worrisome and "seen to introduce disquiet, crime and immorality" (Meek, 2006: 91). Youth in rural areas are unique in regards to their exposure to crime, including crimes of violence, crimes that include weapons, and the general context of crime. The public perception of youth crime in rural communities (if discussed at all) is often created by media and dramatized for the purpose of consumption rather than modeled after accurate realities. Scott and Borin (as cited in Carrington et al., 2014) argue that cultural representations of rurality are important to contest because they reproduce urban-centric constructions of rural and this may have significant ramifications for the way in which crime and violence within a rural context are framed.

The last few decades have witnessed the growth of scholarly work, particularly theory, on rural crime. One important contribution to the theoretical work on rural crime has been theory that has focused on how gender and rural masculinities are implicated in sustaining cultures of violence in rural spaces, particularly in

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regard to intimate partner violence (Carrington et al., 2014). Though rural men are often associated in popular culture with images of strength, physicality, courage, and power research into rural communities are indicating a different image of rural masculinity (Hogg and Carrington as cited in Donnermeyer et al., 2013). One of the most contentious issues regarding theory on rural crime is the debate surrounding assumptions of social disorganization and its applicability to the study of rural crime (Donnermeyer and DeKeseredy, 2014). According to Donnermeyer and DeKeseredy (2014: 10), there is no such thing as disorganization "only varieties of social structure that facilitate or constrain actions that are defined as either law abiding or criminal". Social disorganization (as applied to rural crime) is based on an assumption that crime in rural communities occurs because of a lack of cohesion or solidarity as opposed to different kinds of social and normative structures (Donnermeyer and DeKeseredy, 2008). Doucet and Lee (2014) argue that the strength, nature, and density of social networks and relationships may be more useful in explaining rural violence than standard measures of social disorganization. Donnermeyer et al. (2013) argue the best way to measure rural crime is to measure informal social control as a condition of localized social structure. In rural areas, closer social ties are more likely, and rural police, more frequently know their suspects, victims, and their families personally (Cebulak, 2004). There is evidence that rural areas are more likely to be governed by informal social control than urban areas, and that social bonding was more important in protecting against rural than urban delinquency (Weisheit and Donnermeyer, 2000). Given the nature of social ties in rural areas, the focus of this article on youth homicide, and an emerging argument that social control may be the best theoretical model for many aspects of rural crime, informal and formal social control will provide the theoretical framework for the analysis which follows.

According to Yar (2010: 77) crime films are sites "where the meanings of crime and criminality are simultaneously articulated, explored, and negotiated". Welsh et al. (2011) suggest that crime films reflect current tensions and attitudes in society. They argue that crime films provide insight into shared meanings regarding crime and justice (Welsh et al., 2011). Films of rural life have a tradition of celebrating the purity and innocence of country living, a harmonious, idyllic world, set against the corruption of urban life (Barron, 2006). Bell (1997: 92) however suggests that there are films that offer a critique of this vision of rural life, or place rural living, "in a place far, far, from idyllic". Bell argues that increasingly there are films that portray the countryside as sites of contestation and decay, often embodied in the bodies of people living there (Bell, 1997). The motifs of disintegration and disintegration are expressed in the main characters' loss of control (Levy as cited in Bell, 1997). Popular films therefore may act as useful source of study for modern sensibilities regarding rural life and rural crime.

This paper will review depictions of youth homicide within films that are set in rural environs. It will explore whether these representations are supported by what the research literature suggests regarding rural crime, or whether the films appear to be biased toward urban centred data. It will examine depictions regarding the environment or setting of the film, including how media may explore notions of formal and informal social control as a means by which to explain some aspects of rural crime. Finally, it will review specific forms of violence that appear throughout the film.

2. Literature review

2.1. Definitions of rural and the rural/urban gap

According to Meek (2006) researchers and policy workers continue to use different definitions of rurality in their work drawing on a range of indices and failing to clearly define what constitutes "rural". Most studies of rural crime do not provide an operational definition of the term (Weisheit and Donnermeyer, 2000). Rural has been used to describe villages, small towns, townships, and counties (Weisheit and Donnermeyer, 2000). Definitions of rural have been based on settlement size, population density, or employment in certain rural activities such as agriculture (Meek, 2006). Rural can also be defined as places with populations below 10,000 and that exist outside of the main commuting zone of large urban area (Kulig et al., 2005). However, the concept of rural from a sociological perspective now exists on the rural-urban continuum, which suggests that rural is only of interest when it is compared to urban (Weisheit and Wells, 1996).

Views on rurality and the occurrences of rural communities are socially constructed (Woods, 2010). "The ways in which the materialities and meanings of rural space are reproduced, consolidated and contested … can also be considered by examining how rurality is staged …" especially in outlets such as media (Edensor, 2006: 484). Social constructionism contends that reality is a product of interaction, and that this interaction sets parameters around what is considered normative and expected behaviour, versus deviant behaviour that violates these expectations (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). As such, views of rurality socially constructed outside of rural communities themselves (e.g., by and through the media) may lack dimensions of inclusiveness of individuals working, living, and playing in rural areas (Woods, 2010). The socially perceived stereotype of rural serenity and rurality in general, may act as a barrier in relation to programming, policy, and research (Slovak and Singer, 2001).

2.2. Perspectives on police and formal social control

Law enforcement of any nature can be viewed in a positive or negative light depending on an individual's interactions with them and the community's perspective on them. Often, respect is given to rural police on the basis that they wear a badge, whereas urban police are commonly disrespected for that same reason (Weisheit et al., 1994). In a study done my Weisheit et al. (1994), 54% of urban residents reported respecting the police whereas 61% of rural residents interviewed stated that they respected the police. Hurst (2007) found that 90–95% of rural, adult residents trusted the police; however, only half of the youth respondents stated they liked the police, and only 43% stated they found them competent at their jobs. It is often assumed that nothing in rural policing can be used in an urban model; therefore, all rural policing methods are based on urban models (Falcone et al., 2002).

Rural police find themselves in a role conflict between maintaining community ties and being professional with community members (Falcone et al., 2002). In an investigation or criminal encounter rural police are more inclined to consider the presence of victims, home situation, age, use of alcohol and drugs, and victim/offender relationship as active factors (Schulenberg, 2009). Urban officers are more likely to consider the demeanor of the offender, and any gang relation of event as active factors (Schulenberg, 2009). Despite the amiable light cast on rural police, the rural residents are more likely to rely on informal social controls to handle community problems (Hurst, 2007). Urban residents, who have less respect and trust for the police, are more inclined to rely on crime control done by the police to handle issues (Hurst, 2007). Still, despite relying on informal social control, rural residents report wanting police involvement in social, medical, and emergency services (Ball, 2001). In regards to crime, rural police officers indicate hidden crimes are more important than visible crimes to members of the public (Ball, 2001). Many of the crime focuses of rural and urban