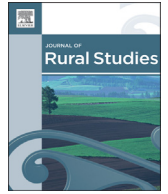


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The social organisation of the rural and crime in the United States: Conceptual considerations

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ABSTRACT

A hindrance to the advancement of rural criminological research in the U.S. is the dichotomous thinking about both rural versus urban communities and their relationship to crime which developed during the 20th century, especially under the influence of work associated with the Chicago School of Sociology, and the assumptions underlying social disorganisation theory and the theory of collective efficacy. This article reviews definitions of rural and of conditions in the rural U.S., and then proceeds to an examination of rural criminological research in two areas where a critical body of empirical work has been completed: community characteristics and crime, and rural adolescent substance use. In both strands of rural scholarship, a case can be made for why rural criminological scholarship has great potential to revise substantially mainstream criminological theories about place and crime. A starting point for the conceptual considerations of a new criminology of crime and place is a theoretically strong definition of the concept of community, with consideration of the role of place in a post-modern world.

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1. Introduction

A number of rural studies scholars have redefined rurality as a highly differentiated cultural, economic, and social space, a geography continuously transformed and restructured in response to globalised forces of change (Cloke, 2006; Halfacree, 2007; Pratt, 1996; Woods, 2005). As well, they note definitions in various academic communities consist of multiple and oft-times ambiguous, confusing and contradictory descriptors and conceptualisations for what rural means (Halfacree, 2007). Hence, there is a double contestation – of the empirical and of the theoretical.

Although debates have long waged in numerous disciplines – for example, anthropology, geography, and sociology – which study the rural and compare cultural, economic, geographic, and sociologic distinctions with the urban, the contest has only recently entered criminological discourse, especially in the United States.

In this article, I discuss criminological research in two areas with an eye toward building new ways of thinking about crime in the rural places of the United States. As the title of this article suggests, it is not about the disorganisation of rural places and crime, but about the opposite, that is, the organisation of contested rural

places and crime; and the core meaning of contest means anything but disorder.

I begin with a discourse on social disorganisation theory and its most recent spin-off, the theory of collective efficacy, in relation to rural criminology. In the two sections that follow, I describe key definitions of rural, and briefly review the general economic and social conditions of the rural United States today. Following this, I address rural crime scholarship in two areas, both of which represent a substantial body of research and conceptual development, namely, the rural community and crime, and rural adolescent substance use. I conclude with a discussion of new ways to think about place and crime in the rural context.

2. Social disorganisation, collective efficacy, and the rural idyll in criminology

Criminology in the United States is replete with highly sophisticated statistical analyses of crime. This body of work is frequently criticised, and often correctly so, as a set of nearly infinite expressions of “abstracted empiricism” (Young, 2011), that is, numbers answering research questions without much guidance from theory and without any advance to our understanding of crime and criminals. Nonetheless, criminology in the United States is also known for the development of theories used by criminological scholars across the globe, such as generalized strain theory (Agnew,

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2011), the theory of social learning (Akers, 1998), routine activities theory (Felson, 1998), and the theory of social control (Hirschi, 1969), among others.

Also very prominent in the criminologies of the United States, and many other countries as well, is a place or ecologically-based theory intimately connected to the Chicago School of Sociology. Its original name is social disorganisation theory, but has been revised under a new banner, called the theory of collective efficacy (Sampson, 2012). In short form, the theories, both old and new, emphasise the intersectionality of such factors as poverty and unemployment, population change or turnover, single parent families, and race/ethnic heterogeneity as breaking down social control within urban neighbourhoods, and by extension, increasing crime (Kubrin, 2009).

From both a conceptual and an empirical point of view, there are two sets of independent variables specified by social disorganisation theory (Kubrin, 2009). The first are antecedent variables that describe on an aggregate basis the social structural conditions of a place. Information about many of these structural features are available through a population census or analogous secondary sources of data, hence, making them highly attractive to empirical analyses, but also susceptible to Young's (2011) warning about abstracted empiricism.

The second set are more directly associated with aspects of social control within places, such as Bursik's (1988, p. 86) attempt to revise social disorganisation theory to consider "systemic" factors of "internal self-regulation" through three kinds of networks – private (intimate friends and family), parochial (less intimate friends and secondary group relationships within a community), and public (connections to groups and institutions beyond the local area). In regard to the systemic interpretation, Bursik (1988) indicated that it is:

"... fairly easy to derive measures of the ecological dynamics pertinent to the social disorganization model ... from published census materials ... This is not the case for social disorganization itself ... The collection of relevant data would entail a very intensive series of interviews, surveys, and/or fieldwork within each of the local neighborhoods in the urban system." (p 531)

Sampson (2012) extended and revised the systemic model through his presentation of "eco-metrics" and the theory of collective efficacy. Almost as if it was a direct response to meeting Bursik's challenge, Sampson (2012) extensively examined the neighbourhoods of Chicago by census, survey, police, and other data sources in order to measure the ways collective efficacy, as a place-based characteristic, is related to crime. For him, the fundamental conceptual point is that collective efficacy, defined as shared or collective expectations of social control derived from forms of social cohesion, influence the occurrence of crime by controlling the behaviours of its residents. Hence, where collective efficacy is higher, crime is supposed to be lower (Sampson, 2012). Despite his attempt to go beyond antecedent or proxy measures of disorganisation, Sampson (2012) mostly reports measures of collective efficacy which are citizen perceptions, rather than actual behaviours which represent collective expressions of social control.

The roots of social disorganisation and collective efficacy theories go back, in part, to the theorising of Durkheim and Tönnies (Lenski, 1994), whose taxonomies of *gemeinschaft-gesellschaft* and mechanical solidity-organic solidarity, respectively, were interpreted by many scholars to represent transitions of society from rural and agrarian to urban and industrial. Hence, as the United States reached a tipping point sometime between the censuses of 1910 and 1920, becoming one of the first urban-majority societies in the world, a focus on the city and crime became the

overwhelming concern of criminology in America (Donnermeyer and DeKeseredy, 2014; Hogg and Carrington, 2006; Weisheit et al., 2006). Rural was ignored as a location for serious criminological scholarship and in its place a kind of rural idyll (Halfacree, 1993) was constructed in which the heterogeneity of the city was contrasted to an assumed homogeneity of the rural.

With rare exception, the contemporary criminological image of the rural United States was no longer a wild west of violence and lawlessness, but a presumed haven of safety and civility where residents did not feel a need to lock their doors (Weisheit et al., 2006). Associated with the diversity found inside and across urban places was crime, while the rural was relegated to a residual category to be mostly ignored, hence, establishing a place-based dichotomy whereby rural = *gemeinschaft* = cohesion and social control = less crime, versus urban = *gesellschaft* = social disorganisation and less control = more crime. For many decades, this firmly set dichotomy of place hindered the development of rural criminology and the understanding of crime in the rural places of the United States. For example, consider the influential article on by Sampson and Groves (1989, pp. 781–782) who switch from data sources available in the United States to the British Crime Survey to test the systemic version of social disorganisation theory: "Although Shaw and McKay (1942) were primarily concerned with intracity patterns of delinquency, their theoretical framework is consistent with the generally accepted idea in criminology that urban communities have a decreased capacity for social control, compared with suburban and rural areas." In other words, the presumption is that rural places have more cohesion and therefore, less crime, as apparently do suburban localities.

A second dichotomy also has worked against an understanding of crime in the rural context, and it too has links to the Chicago School of Sociology. This one is more suitably described as a time-based dichotomy by which rural represents pre-industrial, agrarian, small, "folk" oriented groups with mechanical solidarity, while urban depicts industrial/post-industrial social structures and large-scale forms of social organisation typified by organic solidarity. Wirth's (1938) still oft-cited article on "Urbanism as a Way of Life" helped frame this dualism, hence, crime in the rural context was best understood as a loss of its *gemeinschaft* character (Weisheit et al., 2006).

Both dichotomies hamstring rural criminology through most of the 20th century, and I contend the allure of simple, one dimensional thinking about place still bedevils criminological thought today. However, the emergence of rural criminology may help foster new ways of thinking about crime and place in general by first erasing erroneous images of the rural as idyllic locations with little crime, and secondly, by considering conceptually how forms of organisation and collective efficacy facilitate crime as much as constrain it.

3. Defining rural

Perhaps another contributor to the comparatively slow development of rural scholarship in criminology within the United States is the difficulty in defining and specifying what constitutes rural. For example, a recent Washington Post (2013) article identified 15 distinctive federal government-based definitions of rural, including 11 within the United States Department of Agriculture alone. However, there are two commonly accepted and frequently used rural-urban taxonomies for empirical studies of the rural. The first is an older census definition of rural as any place with less than 2500 people that is not contiguous to a larger, urban locality. This definition can be used to trace the incredible transformation of the American population from predominately rural (nearly 95%) at the time of

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