

A review of
Farm Crime: An International Perspective
by Joseph F. Donnermeyer

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Abstract

This review critically evaluates *Farm Crime: An International Perspective* by Joseph F. Donnermeyer, a groundbreaking monograph that expands the scope of criminological inquiry into the often-overlooked domain of rural and agricultural crime. Drawing on international case studies and a robust theoretical framework, Donnermeyer explores the complex social, economic, and environmental dimensions of crimes affecting farming communities worldwide. The review highlights the book's contributions to rural criminology, its innovative use of grey literature, and its call for context-specific policy and policing responses. While acknowledging limitations in regional representation and intersectional analysis, the review affirms the monograph's value as a foundational text for scholars, practitioners, and policymakers addressing crime in rural settings.

Keywords: Rural criminology; farm crime; agricultural policy; criminology theories; rural policing

Introduction

The moment I heard about this monograph, I was eager to get my hands on a copy. Criminological research has historically concentrated on urban environments, examining street crime, organised criminal networks, and white-collar offences. In contrast, rural crime – particularly in the agricultural sector—has largely been neglected in academic literature and public policy. In *Farm Crime: An International Perspective*, Joseph F. Donnermeyer shifts the focus to this often-overlooked area, offering a systematic exploration of the nature, causes, and consequences of criminal activities within farming communities worldwide. He challenges the prevailing rhetoric that rural and farm crimes are peripheral issues.

As a prominent scholar in rural criminology, Donnermeyer provides a comprehensive and empirically grounded analysis that redefines farm crime as a vital area of rural criminological inquiry. Drawing on international case studies and cross-cultural comparisons, the monograph delves into various crimes – including livestock and machinery theft, environmental violations, biosecurity breaches, and interpersonal violence—that profoundly affect farmers' livelihoods and well-being. His work goes beyond merely cataloguing incidents; it offers a nuanced understanding of how structural inequalities, weak rural policing, and global economic pressures contribute to criminal activities in agricultural contexts.

This review critically examines *Farm Crime: An International Perspective*, considering its scholarly contributions, methodological rigour, and practical relevance. The aim is to highlight its significance for criminology, rural sociology, and agricultural policy, while also addressing its limitations and the future research directions it suggests for this emerging field.

Thematic Summary and Critical Analysis

In *Farm Crime: An International Perspective*, Donnermeyer explores criminal activity in rural agricultural settings, emphasising the ways in which such crimes impact the lives of farmers and the broader agricultural industry. A central theme is the underappreciated scope and severity of farm crime. He argues that rural crime has long been overshadowed by urban-centric criminological research, resulting in a lack of resources, awareness, and policy attention directed at the unique challenges facing agricultural communities. The monograph demonstrates how crimes such as livestock theft, vandalism of equipment, and environmental violations can devastate farmers, their families, and rural economies.

Types of Farm Crime

Donnermeyer categorises a broad spectrum of criminal activities affecting farms globally, including:

Property crimes: Theft of livestock and machinery, often driven by economic pressures and global trade practices. The type of farming operation often determines the susceptibility to such thefts.

Environmental crimes: Illegal pesticide use, pollution, and improper waste disposal, frequently overlooked, pose serious environmental and health risks.

Biosecurity breaches: Illegal animal movement, crop contamination, and the introduction of invasive species threaten global food security and public health.

Violence and interpersonal crimes: Domestic abuse, labour exploitation, and neighbour disputes, often underreported in rural settings due to isolation and power imbalances.

By expanding the definition of farm crime to include environmental and social harms, Donnermeyer provides a more comprehensive and multidimensional view of criminal activities in farming communities.

Theoretical Framework and Rural Criminology

The monograph's theoretical framework is a notable strength. Donnermeyer challenges the urban-focused nature of mainstream criminology by advocating for a distinct rural criminological perspective that considers the unique socio-economic, political, and cultural realities of agricultural communities. Rather than viewing farm crime merely as a reflection of broader societal trends, he situates it within the dynamics of rural life, characterised by geographic isolation, economic vulnerability, and a deeply ingrained relationship between farmers and their land.

A significant contribution of this work is the assertion that rural crime is shaped by unique factors not adequately addressed by traditional criminological theories. Weak rural policing, limited visibility of crime, and informal justice systems complicate enforcement efforts. He also analyses how global agricultural policies, market instability, and persistent rural poverty create environments conducive to crime. This theoretical approach allows for a deeper understanding of farm crime as a complex, multifaceted phenomenon requiring tailored responses.

Methodology

Donnermeyer's methodological approach blends traditional academic research with informal sources, particularly media reports – what he refers to as “grey literature”. Though often dismissed for lacking scientific rigour, he argues that such sources can provide valuable insight into crime patterns, much like data from key informants, surveys, or official statistics. He advocates for the responsible use of grey literature as a legitimate and often necessary tool in contexts where formal research is sparse.

A compelling example is South Africa, where researching “farm murders” has become increasingly difficult within academic circles. In this context, newspapers and activist organisation websites are among the few available sources of data. Donnermeyer does not ignore the methodological limitations of grey literature but insists that it can serve as a meaningful foundation for further empirical and theoretical development.

The monograph is organised into seven chapters. The first introduces the concept, followed by four chapters summarising peer-reviewed studies from different global regions –

beginning with North America and extending to Australia, Europe, and Africa. While most studies are based in the United States, the inclusion of research from the Caribbean – especially on praedial larceny – adds valuable depth. The scarcity of peer-reviewed research from Asia and South America limits the global coverage but also signals areas for future investigation.

Chapter Six is dedicated to research methods and theoretical frameworks, including tools such as surveys, interviews, official data, and theories like social disorganisation and routine activity theory. The final chapter offers a forward-looking synthesis and proposes future directions for the field.

Regional Perspectives

North America

This chapter distinguishes between two waves of farm crime research in the United States – an earlier one led by agricultural sociologists and a later phase dominated by criminologists integrating theoretical analysis. The studies consistently reveal underreporting, a high cost of farm crime, and scepticism regarding police efficacy. In contrast, research from the Caribbean focuses on praedial larceny, showing how theft of crops and livestock leads to economic and social disruption, including school absenteeism and violent retaliation. In both contexts, the informal economy and community justice systems emerge as key themes.

Australia

Australia's chapter is a rich synthesis of empirical data and theoretical engagement. It draws on foundational work by Elaine Barclay and more recent contributions from the Centre for Rural Criminology at the University of New England. Through qualitative and quantitative analyses, the chapter identifies challenges posed by rural stoicism, underreporting, and property dispersal. Harkness's use of Situational Crime Prevention Theory and Hedayati's statistical investigations into vehicle theft offer compelling insights. Notable innovations such as the Ceres Tag and specialist rural crime units exemplify practical responses grounded in criminological theory.

Europe

This chapter adopts a comparative lens, focusing on Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland, Sweden, and Italy. It demonstrates how different political, cultural, and policing contexts shape the prevalence and perception of farm crime. In Ireland, a mix of historical and contemporary studies exposes ongoing issues such as cross-border livestock theft and informal community policing. In Sweden, fuel theft and fraud are increasingly facilitated by technology. Italy provides the most dramatic case, linking farm crime to organised criminal networks and illegal waste dumping, reframing farm crime as both economic and environmental violence.

Africa

The African chapter stands out for its nuanced examination of farm crime within a context shaped by colonial legacies, structural inequality, and political instability. Drawing

on often-overlooked scholarship, the chapter situates farm crime in relation to ethnic tensions, economic disparities, and rural victimisation. The psychological and social costs of crime – including trauma and social stigma – are discussed in detail. While technological interventions such as livestock ID systems offer potential solutions, their effectiveness is limited by resource constraints and policing capacity. The chapter effectively incorporates theoretical and practical insights into an often-neglected region in rural criminology.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Beyond its theoretical and methodological contributions, *Farm Crime* presents compelling implications for policy and practice. Donnermeyer calls for increased awareness, specialised rural policing units, and improved reporting mechanisms tailored to agricultural communities. He also critiques current agricultural policies for failing to consider vulnerability to crime. His proposed holistic approach integrates crime prevention into broader rural development strategies, which could enhance resilience in farming communities.

Strength of the Monograph

Perhaps the most significant contribution lies in the monograph's treatment of criminological theory. Donnermeyer challenges the dominance of urban-biased frameworks, calling for a more inclusive criminology that addresses the realities of rural life. He applies Social Disorganisation Theory to rural contexts, showing that poverty, isolation, and inequality can destabilise rural cohesion just as they do urban communities. Routine Activity Theory is similarly adapted to examine how farm structure, location, and visibility influence crime risk. He also incorporates critical perspectives addressing land dispossession, class, and power, especially relevant in postcolonial and agrarian societies.

Critical Evaluation

While Donnermeyer's work is groundbreaking, it is not without limitations. A more intersectional analysis – incorporating the roles of gender, race, and class—would have enriched the narrative. Female farmers and minority communities may face distinct threats or experiences of crime, and these dimensions remain underexplored. Although the monograph aspires to global coverage, limited engagement with certain regions of the Global South means some conclusions may not fully apply across diverse contexts. However, the chapter on Africa does represent a commendable attempt to address this gap.

Additionally, the call for better crime data and reporting mechanisms is timely, but implementation remains difficult in remote areas with limited infrastructure. Tensions between increasing surveillance and preserving rural autonomy must also be considered when designing policy interventions.

Conclusion

Joseph Donnermeyer's *Farm Crime: An International Perspective* is a pioneering and deeply insightful monograph that significantly advances the field of rural criminology. It offers a theoretically sophisticated, empirically rich, and methodologically innovative

exploration of farm crime across diverse global contexts. While further research is needed – particularly in underrepresented regions and through intersectional lenses – this work provides a critical foundation for future scholarship and policy. It is an essential text for academics, practitioners, and policymakers committed to understanding and addressing the unique challenges of crime in rural agricultural communities.