

Rural Girls in Conflict with the Law: A Review of the North American Literature and Recommendations for Future Empirical Work

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Abstract

Less than a handful of researchers have examined rural girls' pathways to crime. Most of the extant literature on youth in conflict with the law, in fact, centers on socially and economically marginalized urban boys, which sidelines the experiences of girls residing in rural and remote communities characterized by patriarchal norms, values, and beliefs. The main objective of this article is to describe the current state of social scientific knowledge about North American rural girls' criminal conduct and to suggest new empirical directions in understanding this problem.

Keywords: girls; crime; social control; geographic variations

Introduction

Rural criminology is no longer in its infancy and is now a distinct field (Harkness et al., 2023a). It continues to expand globally and has moved well beyond carping about the urban bias in criminology and challenging myths about rural and remote places. Rural criminologists today embrace a broad range of methodological and theoretical approaches and examine complex issues like natural resource extraction, regional and international variations in crime, law and social control, rural policing, violence against women, climate change, constructions of rural crime victims, and Indigenous justice (Bowden & Harkness, 2022a; Bowden & Mesko, 2025; Hale & Harkness, 2023; Harkness et al., 2023b; Weisheit et al., 2022). Still, one topic that continues to receive short shrift is rural girls in conflict with the law (Terry et al., 2023a). Note, too, that most criminologists who study juvenile delinquency in more densely populated places also ignore girls. Why this is the case is an empirical question that can only be answered empirically, and it is beyond the scope of this article to speculate about such selective inattention. Instead, the main objective is twofold: (1) to chronicle the extant North American social scientific empirical and theoretical work on rural girls' criminal activities; and (2) to suggest new directions in research.

The North American Rural Girl Population

Rural North American populations are older than their urban and suburban counterparts, and while aging is common in rural places, the causes are not uniform. For example, in some areas, population aging is driven by high out-migration and low in-migration among young adults (Slack & Monnat, 2024). Then, in other places, rural communities are experiencing increases in migration among older, retirement-age populations (Slack & Monnat, 2024). Moreover, it is challenging to determine the precise percentage of rural girls living in the U.S. However, it is estimated that 20% of the female U.S. population lives in rural areas, and 10% of the total U.S. population, or roughly 30.7 million girls, may live in rural areas (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2025).

Women and girls comprise just over half of Canada's population, with over two-thirds living in "easily accessible areas" (Leclerc, 2021). Nearly three million women live in rural Canada, and another 176,000 reside in remote places. This accounts for almost 18% of the total female population, and only 2% live on farms (UFCW, 2025). If we assume that "girls" refers to those under the age of 18, then approximately 670,000 might live in rural areas. Also note that Indigenous women and girls account for nearly one-third of the Canadian female population living in remote communities, but only constitute roughly 5% of the total Canadian population (Bleakney & Melvin, 2022).¹ The exact number of Indigenous girls is not available. Yet, it is well known that Indigenous women and girls in Canada are overrepresented as victims of violence and as those accused of crime (Statistics Canada, 2024).

¹ This study used Statistics Canada's remoteness index classification and data from the 2016 Census of Population to determine the socioeconomic characteristics of Indigenous women and girls living in remote communities.

What is the Extent and Distribution of Girls' Crime in North American Rural Places?

The exact number of rural girls in conflict with the law across North America is not yet available. A review of the extant literature on rural crime and social control reveals that male violence against women research constitutes the bulk of rural feminist criminological scholarship (DeKeseredy, 2021), and there are no large-scale self-report surveys of potential girl offenders. In fact, most quantitative data on girl offenders are found in arrest and prison statistics. There is, though, a salient exception and that is Rennison and DeKeseredy's (2018) analysis of 1992-2015 National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) data. They examined urban, suburban, and rural differences in girls' violent offenses and found significant differences in rates of offending across geographic places. When considering offending rates for an aggregation of rape, sexual violence, robbery, aggravated assault and sexual assault, their results indicate the highest rates of juvenile offending are in urban areas. The lowest juvenile female offending rates are found in rural areas. When excluding simple assault from the analysis, juvenile female offending rates are highest in urban areas, but are similar in suburban and rural places.

Rennison and DeKeseredy's study, though dated, helps fill a vacuum in the literature on geographic variations in female juvenile violent offending. Further, their work answers the call to go beyond using census and official arrest data to examine youth violence and other crimes that occur in rural places (DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2009; Donnermeyer & DeKeseredy, 2014; Osgood & Chambers, 2000). This point is important, considering that most of the research on rural youth violence uses law enforcement data or school report statistics (Donnermeyer, 2022; Glosser, 2016; Weisheit & Wells, 2001). Nevertheless, Rennison and DeKeseredy are correct noting that their findings should be read with caution for several reasons, one of which is the composition of the NCVS sample. For example, though the NCVS is an extensive national study, it only captures a small amount of data from each part of the U.S. While Rennison and DeKeseredy aggregated the rural, suburban, and rural data over time and can make generalizations about crime victimization in these three places, since the NCVS is a national survey, it is unable to offer detailed information about the incidence, prevalence, and consequences of crime in particular communities (H.O.R.U., 1984).

To again be briefly discussed later in this article is the need for studies of specific rural places that are heavily informed by local crime surveys crafted by *left realists* (e.g., Jones et al., 1986). Left realism was traditionally associated with critical criminological examinations of urban predatory crime (Windle, 2023), but it now informs the work of a small but growing cadre of rural criminologists (e.g., DeKeseredy, 2021; Donnermeyer, 2022; Donnermeyer & DeKeseredy, 2014). Left realism was born in the mid-1980s in the U.S. and the U.K., and it points to the criminogenic outcomes of broader social forces like patriarchy and capitalism. Left realists also draw on the writings of *strain theorists* Merton (1938) and Cohen (1955), as well as on feminist ways of thinking critically about crime (e.g., Renzetti, 2013, 2018). The central premise of left realism is that those who, decades ago, were labelled *radical criminologists* (who left realists term *left idealists*) ignored victimization within the

working class in favor of studying the crimes of politicians and corporate executives and occasionally romanticizing the working-class criminal. Still to this day, left realists call for a recognition that predatory public crimes like mugging are “real” and not moral panics fabricated by elite opinion makers. The lack of progressive socialist and feminist alternatives, left realists argue, allows right-wing politicians to use the “law and order” issue to obtain ideological support for a social order detrimental to the disenfranchised and the construction of a much more progressive society (DeKeseredy, 2022; DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2018).

Theoretically and empirically, left realism is a useful means of understanding crime, law, and social control in rural communities. Hopefully, rural criminologists will draw from it in their future work on justice-involved girls. It should be noted that the call for rural left realism is not new and dates to a paper written by Darryl Wood (1990). He then observed that:

Not only can left realism aid the study of rural crime, but the study of rural crime can also support the foundation of left realism. That rural areas can also be impacted by working-class crime provides much to the left realist argument that the study of such behavior must go beyond the perspectives which have been fed scholars for a long time now. And when we consider that the political economic situations of both inner-city citizen and rural citizens are similar, left realism is provided with further justification for trying to provide a socialist response to working-class criminality (p. 14).

Left realists assert that most predatory crimes are intra-racial and inter-class in nature (DeKeseredy, 2022; DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2018), and while there is a substantial amount of data collected from men and boys showing that this is the case, there is no evidence indicating whether this is the case with rural girls. For instance, to the best of our knowledge, there are no statistical survey data identifying the race/ethnicity and social class of the people targeted by rural girls, and little is known about the influence of race-based identities on rural girls’ involvement with the justice system (Krupa et al., 2022). Moreover, as stated earlier, there are no accurate self-report survey statistics on the extent, distribution, sources, and outcomes of rural girls’ offenses. This is not to say, however, that data on key *risk factors* associated with girls’ crimes are unavailable. Yet, the bulk of the data collected so far are qualitative and are gathered from justice-involved girls, such as those in detention centers (Terry et al., 2023a), teen court programs (Smokowski et al., 2017), and in out-of-home placements (Terry et al., 2023b). It is to what these studies uncovered that we turn to first.

Risk Factors

What is to be done about rural girls in conflict with the law? Survey data on the extent of their involvement in crime and the justice system are not enough. Before scholars, activists, and practitioners committed to both helping rural at-risk girls avoid committing crimes and to helping them lead satisfying, healthy lives can adequately answer this important question, it is first necessary to identify the key sources or risk factors associated

with the crimes these girls commit. Risk factors are typically defined in the social scientific literature as characteristics, conditions, or behaviors that are associated with an increased probability of engaging in deviant or criminal activities (DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 1998; Hotaling & Sugarman, 1986; Rutter, 1985). They may be causes, cooccurrences, or consequences of criminal behavior (Smith, 1990). Rather than simply reproduce findings from every study of justice-involved girls, the section that follows synthesizes the relevant literature and weaves together key findings.²

Like their urban and suburban counterparts, for rural girls, their pathways toward crime and justice system involvement are, as best described by Lopez et al. (2024), among others (e.g., Terry, 2022):

multifaceted and complex, entailing different relationships, many layers of enthrallment into drugs and delinquency, socialization to these behaviors beginning in early adolescence, criminalized survival and coping strategies, and varying degrees of police, family court, and criminal justice system intervention... Often the dynamics of their family involved growing up in severely distressed and marginalized households, where lack of adequate employment, drug trafficking, sexual exploitation, and violence are common... Within such chaotic living conditions, girls often experience childhood neglect, victimization, and trauma... Girls' troubled relationships with significant others, particularly in early life, can lead to feelings of hopelessness, depression, and impaired self-worth... To cope with emotional pain and trauma, some girls run away, use drugs, and engage in other risky behaviors.... (p. 310).

Other risk factors for rural girls include:

- The fact that “troubled girls” are often deemed as outsiders in non-metropolitan areas (Terry, 2020; Terry & Williams, 2019).
- Rural communities often have less tolerance for “bad girls” (Terry et al., 2023b, p. 33; Williams & Craig-Moreland, 2005).
- The lack of adequate social support resources (e.g., physicians, mental health professionals, and community-based services (Health Resources and Service Administration, 2019; Krupa et al., 2022; Terry et al., 2023b).
- Justice-involved rural girls have disproportionately high sexually transmitted infection rates (Krupa et al., 2022).
- Rural girls are more likely to have contact with the juvenile justice system than those in metropolitan areas (Blackmon et al., 2016).

In sum, often, rural girls' criminal behaviors “are not rooted in criminal intent, but rather, a product of their responses to chaotic environments” (Terry 2022, p. 414). As stated

² See Blackmon et al. (2016), Evans et al. (2016), Krupa et al. (2022), Lopez et al. (2024), Ruiz et al., (2005), Smokowski et al. (2017), Staton et al. (2020), Terry (2022), and Terry et al. (2023a; 2023b) for more in-depth information on the risk factors briefly examined in this section.

repeatedly in the extant literature, many rural girls who end up in the juvenile justice system live in under-resourced places with social support systems that are “woefully inadequate to care for rural girls and their needs” (Terry et al., 2023b, p. 40).

The Current State of Theoretical Knowledge

Virtually all studies of justice-involved rural girls and all types of girls in conflict with the law, for that matter, are informed by theoretical approaches that emphasize the concepts of *pathways*, *patriarchy*, and *intersectionality*. Pathways perspectives contend that it is not girls’ individual pathologies that lead them to crime but rather their *gendered adverse childhood experiences* such as those listed above (Lopez et al., 2024). As Sherman and Balck (2015) correctly point out, “[T]he literature is clear that girls in the justice system have experienced violence, adversity, and deprivation across many of the domains in their lives – family, peers, intimate partners, and community” (p. 3). These pathways often lead girls to run away, use drugs, or engage in *crimes of survival* like theft or sex work (Belknap, 2021; Lopez, 2017; Ptacek, 2023; Tavcer et al., 2018).

Feminist research on girls in conflict with the law typically finds that their offenses are “responses to patriarchal conditions” (Irwin & Umemoto, 2016, p. 11). The definition of patriarchy is passionately debated within feminist circles. However, it is still widely used because it keeps the focus directed toward broader social contexts rather than toward individual men who are motivated to dominate and abuse women and girls (Hunnicut, 2009). Contemporary feminist scholars also identify varieties of patriarchy (DeKeseredy, 2022; Ozaki & Otis, 2017). Following Renzetti (2013), patriarchy is conceptualized here as “a gender structure in which men dominate women and what is considered masculine is more highly valued than what is considered feminine” (p. 8). All the same, feminists recognize that not all men benefit equally in patriarchal societies and that some women have more privilege than others (DeKeseredy et al., 2021; Renzetti, 2018).

Drawing from Dobash and Dobash (1979), patriarchy consists of two key elements: a *structure* and an *ideology*. Structurally, as stated above by Renzetti (2013), patriarchy is a hierarchical organization of social institutions and relationships that allows men to maintain power, privilege, and leadership positions in society. As an ideology, the patriarchy rationalizes itself. This means that it provides ways of creating acceptance of subordination not only by those who benefit from such actions but also by those placed in such subordinate positions in society (Gramsci, 1971).

Patriarchy contributes to girls’ crime by creating environments of inequality, violence, and restricted employment and educational choices (Belknap, 2021; Chesney-Lind & Pasko, 2013; DeKeseredy, 2000). For example, as Chesney-Lind (1997) puts it:

Young women, a large number who are on the run from sexual abuse and parental neglect, are forced by the very statutes designed to protect them into the lives of escaped convicts. Unable to enroll in school or take a job to support themselves

because they fear detection, young female runaways are forced into the streets. Here they engage in panhandling, petty theft, and occasional prostitution to survive. Young women in conflict with their parents (often for legitimate reasons) may actually be forced by present [patriarchal] laws into petty criminal activity, prostitution, and drug use (pp. 28-29).

Walby (1990) is a member of a broader scholarly community that rightfully states that patriarchy cannot be thoroughly comprehended without attention to class and racial inequalities. This is why many contemporary feminist criminologists, including some who study rural justice-involved girls (e.g., Terry, 2022), emphasize the importance of focusing on how *intersectionality* shapes girls' pathways to crime. Intersectionality addresses "the manner in which racism, patriarchy, class oppression, and other discriminatory systems create background inequalities that structure the relative positions of women, races, ethnicities and the like" (Crenshaw, 2000, p. 8). Intersectionality is front and center in the North American feminist criminological literature on the lives of inner-city African-American girls and women (e.g., Potter, 2015) and is now guiding some feminist scholarship on rural crime and social control (Carrington et al., 2014), including, as stated above, research on girls.

For instance, intersectionality is an integral part of Irwin and Umemoto's (2016) examination of the lives of violent rural Hawaiian Pacific Islander girls.³ One particularly striking feature of their work is their theory of *colonial patriarchy*. Irwin and Umemoto demonstrate that research on girls' violence needs to examine how patriarchy intersects with many other sources of oppression, such as *collective trauma* caused by U.S. expansion into Hawaii and other Pacific regions. Youths interviewed for their study make explicit that gender-related factors alone cannot account for why Pacific Islander youth engage in violent conduct. They have a deep-rooted understanding of what happened to their families in the past, and their violence is very much influenced by "attempts to survive the damaging legacies of the past as they strive for basic dignity, respect, and independence as adolescents in exciting but uncertain times" (p. 23).

What Carrabine (2016) stated 10 years ago still holds: "Criminology is among the last of the social sciences to seize the narrative moment" (p. 1). *Narrative criminology* is a relatively new theoretical direction in critical criminology, one that builds on older perspectives like symbolic interactionism and cultural criminology (Muzzatti & Smith, 2018; Presser & Sandberg, 2015). In addition to being informed by intersectionality, Irwin and Umemoto are among a growing cohort of progressive criminologists prioritizing narratives, and the voices of the youth they interviewed are deeply moving and highly informative. Young people's voices are notably lacking, and it is rare to read or hear about the troubles of young Pacific Islanders. Their voices should be heard to develop effective means of preventing them from becoming justice-involved. Further, their voices challenge orthodox media stereotypes of paradisaical Hawaii. Though beautiful, this state has many social problems spawned, in part, by colonization, economic inequality, and racism.

³ Their research also examined the lives of violent urban Hawaiian girls.

While the above theoretical offerings are helpful, the study of rural girls in conflict with the law needs what Donnermeyer (2019) refers to as a “firmer theoretical base than is currently displayed in the literature” (p. 116). For example, there is a conspicuous absence of theory testing using quantitative data. Such work is necessary for the following reasons: empirical validation and theory refinement (Akers, 2017); replicability (Bachman & Schutt, 2020); generalizability (Maxfield & Babbie, 2017); theory comparison (Tittle, 1995); and effective policy development (Sherman, 1998). The last reason is the most important. Unfortunately, most North American crime control policies are not based on sound sociological perspectives that focus on the major factors propelling women and girls into crime. Ample evidence shows that “get tough” approaches do little, if anything to prevent many girls from coming into conflict with the law (Belknap, 2021; Lopez et al., 2024). Leading experts in the field fully recognize that “reducing crime is about getting smart, not about getting tough” (Miller, 1998, p. xxiii). Sadly, politicians continue to ignore that “One of the major obstacles in the search for sensible crime policies is that there are many bad ideas” (Walker, 1998, p. 5), one of which is going down the well-worn path of incarceration.

New Directions in Research

The suggestions offered here are not new, and some readers might argue that we recommend putting old wine into new bottles. This section, however, is much more than a nostalgic trip down memory lane or a weak attempt to repackage old ideas. The empirical approaches advanced here are proven to be useful and should not be abandoned. They have been used repeatedly in other fields of inquiry (e.g., violence against women) and are reliable, effective, and trustworthy (DeKeseredy, 2025). From a rural critical criminological standpoint, they facilitate the development of rigorous research that offers “the counter-voice” to abstract empirical work that individualizes girls’ experiences (Young, 2011).

Though large-scale investigations like the Centers for Disease Control’s Youth Risk Behavior Survey (2025) or the Monitoring the Future study (University of Michigan Institute for Social Research, 2025) include rural girls, the samples are not large enough and are not specifically designed to draw accurate conclusions about rural girls. In other words, they combine rural and non-rural populations, which makes it difficult to isolate the experiences of rural girls. Thus, as stated earlier, a series of local self-report surveys of potential rural girl offenders informed by left realism are essential. Also necessary are prospective and longitudinal studies because cross-sectional surveys only “capture one moment in time” (Terry, 2022, p. 407), which makes it challenging to identify risk and protective factors related to perpetration (DeKeseredy, 2021; Edwards, 2015). This is not to say that longitudinal studies of rural youth are non-existent. There are a few, but they only examine system-involved youth. For example, The North Carolina Youth Violence Prevention Center conducted a five-year panel study of more than 7,000 students from 28 public middle schools and 12 public high schools in two rural, economically disadvantaged North Carolina counties (Evans et al., 2016; Smokowski et al., 2017). Still, this project was restricted to examining first-time adolescent offenders who participated in Teen Court, and no data specifically about girls are reported. Hence, it is time to move beyond only studying system-involved rural girls

and glean data from national and state-wide representative samples of the general rural girl population.

Also missing are representative sample self-report surveys of Canadian and Mexican rural girls. Almost all the work done on these populations involves analyses of official crime statistics on institutionalized girls (e.g., Alvarez et al., 2024; Department of Justice Canada, 2021). Hence, if the U.S. research on rural girls is incomplete, it is even more so in Canada and Mexico.

There is now a large feminist literature on male violence against women “at the margins” (Sokoloff, 2005), including those who are lesbian, transwomen, and women of color. Even so, except for a few studies (e.g., Krupa et al., 2021; Terry, 2024), justice-involved rural girls in these and other marginalized social groups have thus far been overlooked. This selective inattention needs to be remedied shortly because, as noted by Gilfus et al. (1999), when we are crafting rural research projects, “we should always be conscious of who is not there and that we are not hearing their perspectives” (p. 930).

The “digital divide” between North American rural and urban areas is slowly and unevenly shrinking (Federal Communications Commission, 2025; Rhinesmith & Prasad, 2025). Will this translate into an increase in rural girls’ commission of technology-facilitated assaults like cyberbullying? This will probably happen because rural youth report higher rates of non-digital forms of bullying than their urban counterparts (Midgett et al., 2022), and smartphones are now abundant in rural and remote places (Weisheit, 2022), which also increases the probability of increases in rural cybercrimes. Still, until more rigorous research is conducted, it is unclear whether this claim made by Mathew (2022) is valid: “Cyberbullying can be an issue for any community but for rural communities, the perceived anonymity of cyberbullying has greater impact. Rural and remote communities have closer-knit relationships and so teenagers may find themselves turning to social media to voice their opinions without recognition” (p. 1). We also need research on how new technologies, such as artificial intelligence, can protect rural girls from being victimized by online and offline crimes (Harris, 2023).

The above new research trajectories are not exhaustive. Undoubtedly, many readers can probably think of more that can enhance a rich sociological understanding of rural girls’ pathways to crime. New ways of studying rural girls’ legal norm violations are always required because their transgressions are likely to be, in this high-tech era, “never-ending and constantly evolving issues” (Ledwitz-Rigby, 1993, p. 3). Even so, Weisheit (2022) directs us to the fact that there is one thing that will never change in future research, and that is:

having a good understanding of the particular rural area under study before undertaking the research. This requires knowing about the area’s geography, culture, and history. Contrary to the popular saying, the data don’t speak for themselves but must be interpreted. Interpretation is a skill, not a mechanical process (p. 230).

Conclusion

Returning to the wisdom of pioneering rural criminologist Ralph Weisheit (2022), we could not agree more with his observation that “This is, in many ways, a golden age for research on rural crime and justice. Never before have so many undertaken this research, and never before have the issues been so diverse” (p. 230). At the same time, there is much more empirical and theoretical work to be done, especially on the experiences of rural girls in conflict with the law. On top of doing the work suggested in the previous section, to achieve substantial advancement in research on girls, there must be “collaboration across disciplines” (Weisheit, 2022), and the study of girls’ experiences with crime, deviance, and social control should be truly *transnational*. This involves “the growing connectivity of individuals, groups and institutions across multiple national contexts” (Giulianotti & Brownell, 2012, p. 200). We are, though, seeing more rural criminologists seeking to understand girls’ troubles in broader social and cultural contexts (e.g., Irwin & Umemoto, 2016). Nonetheless, like many other types of criminologists, they work in isolation and are the only persons in their field in their institutions of higher learning. For example, now that Meda Chesney-Lind has retired, Katherine Irwin is the only one who studies rural girls in conflict with the law in the University of Hawaii at Manoa’s Department of Sociology. What, then, is to be done to make the study of rural girls more transnational and to expand the pool of scholars in this field to enhance research and innovation?

One approach is following the lead of the American Society of Criminology’s Division on Rural Criminology (DRC). This association and its journal have made what Coakley (2021) refers to as a “formal commitment to inclusion, identity, and diversity in the field” (p. 298). The same can be said about critical criminological associations and journals. For example, the journal *Critical Criminology* always publishes the work of an international cadre of progressive thinkers. This, however, is not enough to fully develop a transnational cohort of rural criminologists who examine the plight of girls and to avoid the hegemony of Global Northern Scholarship. The DRC should also create policies and practices that increase access to empirical and theoretical work produced in diverse languages (Foldesi, 2015). Following Coakley’s (2021) advice about conquering “Western Hegemony” in the sociology of sport, the *International Journal of Rural Criminology* could use translational software so that it can publish works written by those who do not speak English. The entire field of criminology, in fact, should do this and use other techniques of being more inclusive of scholars across the globe. Undoubtedly, the DRC will soon be more linguistically diverse because rural criminologists are deeply committed to creating “an inclusive and dynamic space for research, scholarship and practice” (Bowden & Harkness, 2022b). Complex undertakings require patience and perseverance, two of the DRC’s key traits.

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