

# The Central Role of Place in Rural Criminological Studies

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### Abstract

Even though place-based theories are plentiful in criminology, their origins are predominately urban. Hence, their application to rural crime and criminal justice issues is limited. However, there is a second limitation, at least equal to if not an even bigger shortcoming. It is that criminological theories of place are constructed to explain variations in criminal offenses across various types of urban neighborhoods, or to examine the dynamics of crime within a single or a few localities. The issue is one of faculty logic – defining various crime issues before, or *a priori*, the framing of the community dynamics that may be salient causative factors. The purpose of this article is to argue for a reversal of the logic: that is, putting place first. Literatures from many decades ago are combined with more recent scholarship to help define the concept of community, and then to describe how community can advance rural crime and criminal justice studies. The article itself is an extension of some previously made argumentations by the author.

**Keywords:** community; criminological imagination; community functions; criminological theory

### The central role of place in rural criminological studies

Is the word “place” the same as the word “community”? For the purposes of this article, and to avoid mostly useless rhetorical, hair-splitting exhibitions of exaggerated scholarly acumen, these two words convey the same essential meaning. In other words, they are synonyms that reflect a basic idea in a similar manner, which is that people interact with each other within specific spaces, and the product of these social exchanges is the emergence of a sense of community (or, sense of place) – however weak or strong, and however short or long-term – this sense of community may be. As well, the word “locality” means about the same as place and community. Even though a healthy disputation of the connotative nuances conveyed by these words would be both entertaining and informative, perhaps at a roundtable of a professional society meeting or the conference bar, this article will address other issues. These issues include what is meant by the concept of community/place/locality and how it can prove to be a useful theoretical heuristic for the future of rural criminological scholarship.

Despite the ever-growing role that social media plays in the everyday lives of people around the world, face-to-face sociability remains an essential human trait. Television commercials from over 50 years ago touted the benefits of long-distance telephone calls with the advertising slogan “It’s the next best thing to being there”. Its truth applies as well today to zoom, What’s App, and every other way of communicating across large distances. These forms of communications create their own communities, with some scholars already recognizing the transformative role of electronic communications decades ago, referring to it as “community without propinquity”, that is, without physical proximity (Webber, 1963). Yet, community in its physical-social sense, designating a particular place from which both cultural patterns and a collective sense of psychological identity are created and sustained, remains important for a scientific understanding of crime and criminal justice issues. Bumps on the head and the shapes of faces were long ago debunked for their scientific value to criminology, even though a steady stream of serious, more scientific scholarly attempts to link biology to criminal behavior remain today (Posick & McBride, 2017). So, too, community as a physical space with a plethora of human-based cultural and sociological patterns will always be a necessary perspective for criminological scholarship.

Perhaps more so than any other subfield, rural criminology leans hard on the concept of community for its scholarship. As far back as 1839, Rawson wrote an article for the *Journal of the Statistical Society of London* about the similarities and differences in the occurrence of crime in agricultural, mining, manufacturing, and metropolitan counties. As he observed, using police data which he himself admitted was subject to many forms of inaccuracies and biases:

Malicious offences against property are nearly 60 per cent above the average in the agricultural districts, and somewhat greater in the counties surrounding the metropolis... The agricultural counties exhibit the exact average as regards murder. In assaults and manslaughter, they are below the average, and only slightly above it in attempts to maim and murder... In the next class of offences, thefts without violence... the agricultural counties are 5 per cent below the average... housebreaking

is exactly equal in the agricultural and manufacturing districts... With regard to violent robberies the proportion is greatest, and exceeds the average by 19 per cent, in the agricultural districts. (Rawson, 1839, p. 340-341)

Rawson (1839) concludes about burglary that:

There is evidence either of the effect of a well-organized and efficient police in preventing this crime in a crowded city, or of the greater temptation and superior facilities which present themselves for its commission in the outskirts of a city. (p. 341)

Writing long before there existed criminological theories that go beyond the supposed causal role of individual traits, one can read into Rawson's (1839) narrative the seeds of place-based theories, in particular routine activities theory (Lilly et al., 2015) and deterrence theory (Brisman & Carrabine, 2017). It required, however, over a century and a half before viable rural-focused criminological perspectives emerged. For most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, rural crime studies were mired in a scattered state, with little theory and no synergy, dominated by urban biases and ignored by mainstream criminology. With publication of the first edition of the Weisheit et al. (1996) book, and various developments at the turn of the century, rural criminology began to develop into a viable subfield of criminology, both in North America and around the world (Donnermeyer, 2016; 2019).

Although appearing to be ironic, it can be claimed that rural criminology emerged in large part thanks to various forms of social media that did not depend on physical proximity (i.e., community without propinquity) – email, zoom, Teams, Facebook, and so many more. Prior to those helpful communication modes, a scholar interested in rural crime and criminal justice issues was likely the only scholar within her/his academic unit with a non-urban focus. To use an animal analogy, that person was a “lone wolf”. Connections via these new-fangled (at the time of their appearance) technologies greatly helped rural criminology emerge as scholars began to talk to each other across country borders and oceans about common scholarly interests (Ceccato, 2025). The infrastructure of rural criminology began to build. Consider, for example, the following developments (which is hardly a full accounting)<sup>1</sup>:

2011	founding of the <i>International Journal of Rural Criminology</i>
2014	publication of <i>Rural Criminology</i> in the Routledge New Directions in Critical Criminology series (Donnermeyer & DeKeseredy)
2016	publication of the <i>Routledge International Handbook of Rural Criminology</i> (Routledge; Donnermeyer) and <i>Locating Crime in Context and Place</i> (Federation Press; Harkness, Harris, & Baker, Eds.)
2017	publication of <i>Oil, gas, &amp; crime: The dark side of the boomtown</i> (Palgrave Macmillan; Ruddell)
2018	start-up of the Division of Rural Criminology, American Society of Criminology

<sup>1</sup> See Donnermeyer, J. F. (2023). “A baker’s dozen significant books about rural criminology in the twenty-first century”, *International Journal of Rural Criminology*, 8(1).

2019	formation of the Working Group on Rural Criminology, European Society of Criminology and launch of the Centre for Rural Criminology, University of New England, New South Wales, Australia, and publication of <i>Outlaw women: Prison, rural violence, and poverty in the America West</i> (New York University Press; Dewey et al.)
2020	establishment of both the Routledge Studies in Rural Criminology and the Bristol University Press Research in Rural Crime series <sup>2</sup> and publication of <i>Policing the frontier: An Ethnography of two worlds in Niger</i> (Cornell University Press; Göpfert) and <i>Water, governance, and crime issues</i> (Springer, Eman et al.)
2022	publication of <i>Crime and safety in the rural. Lessons from research</i> (Springer; Ceccato & Abraham)
2023	publication of <i>The Encyclopedia of Rural Crime</i> (Bristol, Harkness et al.)
2025	publication of <i>Rural Criminology in Global Perspective: State of the Art on the World's Continents</i> (Bristol University Press; Bowden & Meško), <i>Farm Crime: An International Perspective</i> (Routledge; Donnermeyer), and establishment of the “Rural Criminology Network Newsletter” (4-8 issues per year)
2026 – 2029	Here are some likely events through the remainder of the decade: (1) publication of <i>Natural resource extraction and violence against women in rural places: Drilling down on patriarchy</i> (Routledge; Walter DeKeresedy, Joseph Donnermeyer & Jayne Mooney, 2026); (2) 2 <sup>nd</sup> edition of <i>Rural Criminology</i> (Routledge; Joseph Donnermeyer & Walter DeKeresedy, 2026); (3) <i>Rural Crime in Africa</i> (Palgrave Macmillan; Emmanuel Bunei & Willem Clack, Eds., 2026); (4) publication of a special issue on “New Empirical and Theoretical Directions in Rural Criminology”, <i>Archivum Kryminologii (Archives of Criminology)</i> , the leading Polish journal of criminology (Walter DeKeresedy, Joseph Donnermeyer, Gorazd Meško, and Emilia Jurgielewicz-Delegacz (Eds); and (5) three upcoming special issues in the <i>International Journal of Rural Criminology</i> , based papers from: first, papers from the 2025 “Criminological Society of Africa” (CRIMSA) conference (Willem Clack, Ed.); second, “Contemporary Perspectives on Violence against Women in Rural Canada” (Wendy Aujla, Walter DeKeresedy, Crystal Giesbrecht, Eds.); and third, “Characteristics and Challenges of Criminal Justice Systems in Rural Locales in the Global South” (Wendell Wallace, Ed.).

The purpose of this article is to both discuss and promote the concept of community as a primary energizer for future scholarly developments in rural criminology. It may not turn out to be the only or even the most central concept and theoretical perspective to be found in rural criminology over the coming decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but it is unimaginable that the field will advance without its guiding influence. Clearly, rural criminology is now at a point

<sup>2</sup> For a list of the Bristol University Press series in Research in Rural Crime, go to <https://bristoluniversitypress.co.uk/research-in-rural-crime-series>. For a list of the Routledge Studies in Rural Criminology, go to <https://www.routledge.com/Routledge-Studies-in-Rural-Criminology/book-series/RRC>.

that its continued maturation will be on theory development, so long as they have clear links that advancing rural research.

The following narrative is divided into two parts. Part One is a discussion of the concept of community, mostly divorced of any considerations about rural crime and criminal justice issues, except for an occasional mention. Part Two is a presentation of the utility of community to the advancement of rural criminology. It is hoped that this article walks the reader through a partial chronology of the concept of community and how it is applied to criminological scholarship in general, and rural criminology specifically. The article itself is an extension of some previously made argumentations by the author<sup>3</sup>.

### Community

One of my main criticisms of criminological theories of space and place – from social disorganization theory to various environmental criminological theories, like routine activities theory (Andresen, 2017) – is that they start for the most part by considering the occurrence of crime, and follow up by developing a framework of locality-based characteristics to explain those occurrences (Donnermeyer, 2019). This is akin to reverse engineering: that is, fitting a theory of place to the crime itself. It works to a certain extent, but has its drawbacks because it encourages a piecemeal rendition of community. Not every place displays every type of crime, and at the same rate. This can be seen in Rawson's (1939) research of long ago, and it remains true today. There is variability in the characteristics of communities, variability in the kinds of crime and the extent of each one within communities, there is variability in the degree to which the traits of a community are correlated with crime, and there is variability over time in the relationship of community characteristics and crime. Hence, it is better to start with a concept of a community and then examine issues related to crime.

The concept of community has a very long history within the various social sciences. For example, Cassirer (1951) used a symbolic interactionist approach to examine how human relationships create a sense of collective consciousness which in turn defines the essential beliefs, values and norms of a human group, which we know as culture. As with so many other social science scholars both now and in the past, theorists like Ferdinand Tönnies and Emile Durkheim examined the transition of societies, especially in Europe, from rural and agricultural to urban and industrial (Martindale, 1960; McKinney, 1966). By doing so, both Durkheim and Tönnies informed the early development of crime and criminal justice scholarship and today can be considered foundational to a number of criminological perspectives. From Durkheim's (1947) *Division of Labor in Society*, there is the evolution of societies from a mechanical form of solidarity whereby the population of a society is relatively homogenous and so is its cultural system, to a more organic type of solidarity in which the population of a society is more diverse, along with its cultural expressions. From Tönnies (1957) there is an even more influential impact on criminological thinking with his

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Donnermeyer (2015), Donnermeyer (2019), Donnermeyer (2022), and Donnermeyer and DeKeseredy (2014)

distinction of the human will (*wesenwille* versus *kürwille*) and its influence on human interaction. Whereas *gemeinschaft* is based on *wesenwille*, which describes a condition of like-minded people with high levels of cooperation, *gesellschaft* derives from *kürwille* and refers to interactions among people with diverse traits and a culture manifesting greater individualism.

Unfortunately, Tönnies' (1957) thoughtful binary morphed into the idea that *gemeinschaft*-like human groups exhibit less crime, while *gesellschaft*-like human groups display more, which is a very large misinterpretation. Worse yet, *gemeinschaft* became fallaciously associated with smaller, rural communities, and *gesellschaft* with more urbanized gatherings of people (Donnermeyer, 2015). The fact of the matter is that communities with smaller populations and localities with larger populations are both places where crime occurs, but perhaps with different types and levels of crime, that is, their crime profiles are distinctive, as Rawson (1839) observed so long ago.

So – what is a community? In simple terms, it is a delimited geographic area or space where people interact, hence, creating a place with shared interests, including a shared identity (Bell & Newby, 1973; Brown & Schafft, 2011). Most often, these places have spatial boundaries and legal designations as defined by the constitutions of their societies – city, town, township, borough, shire, parish, hamlet, etc. This often means that various services, such as law enforcement, are provided within legally-defined jurisdictions, and these may also have the power to levy taxes to pay for these services. Nearly all have place names. To say Moncton, New Brunswick (Canada), Białystok, Podlaskie (Poland), Pretoria, Gautang (South Africa) and Armidale, New South Wales (Australia) is to convey on behalf of all four both a geographic and a socio-cultural reference in regard to the people who live in these places.

In his classic book, *The Community in America*, Warren (1963) described five fundamental “locality-relevant” functions of any community, small or large. These functions remain important today. They are: (1) production-distribution-consumption – every community has an economy that produces something, such as agriculture, manufacturing, financial services etc.; displays a distribution of income and wealth that can be spread out evenly or concentrated and highly unequal; and purchases of food and various consumer items for consumption, which often forms the focus of marketing research; (2) socialization – every community is a place where people directly experience and continuously learn about the beliefs, values and norms of the greater society, and many communities display a collective variation, such as being known as political conservative or politically liberal; (3) social control – every community and various groups within influence the behavior of its residents either informally, such as through neighbors, for example, or more formally via local police and courts, among others; (4) social participation – every community provides opportunities for its members to be involved in civic, religious and other voluntary associations; and (5) mutual support – every community displays varying degrees to which its members come together to provide assistance to each other, from the mundane task of

shoveling snow for an elderly neighbor to the headline gathering heroics of a resident saving someone during flooding, severe weather and other disasters.

To this list must be added a sixth function, one that was written about by Mills (1959) over a half-century ago, but can account today for the every-growing influence of social media and its ability to form “communities without propinquity”. Mills (1959) wrote in his classic work, *The Sociological Imagination*, about the link between “public issues” (i.e., broad, macro level changes and conditions) and “personal troubles” (i.e., problems at the individual level, which can include perceived vulnerability and victimization to crime). His work was foundational for the critical criminologist, Young (2011), who published *The Criminological Imagination*, which was both a critique of mainstream criminology and an attempt to redefine and revise a critical approach as a way to view the link between broader, contextual issues and the nature of crime and justice as it affects people.

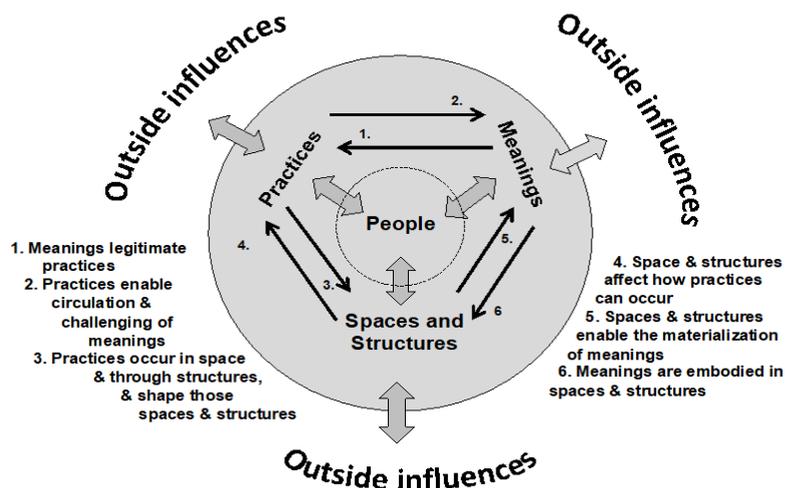
To take the discussion back out away from any consideration of criminology (until later in this article), both imaginations are useful for updating the concept of community by positing a sixth function to the five already listed. It is in this: (6) filter – every community functions as an intermediate form of human organization between individuals and the greater society, mediating how change differentially affects them at the places where they live. Hence, if a large company like Boeing goes bankrupt, it affects negatively the welfare of people living in certain communities more so than others. Or, to state it more personally, all of us dream of winning the lottery, then buying a remote island with a steadily warm climate and white sandy beaches, and forgetting about all the troubles of the world while sipping a high quality bourbon and munching on freshly prepared shrimp by our private chef. Yet, even at this imaginary Shangri-la, larger trends and events will eventually catch up with us wannabee isolates.

One of the most advanced, contemporary definitions of a community was written by the New Zealand scholar, Liepins (2000). It was purposively written for a consideration of rural studies and has great relevance to the study of rural crime and criminal justice issues. In her article, she succinctly defines all communities as exhibiting “temporally and locationally specific terrains of power and discourse”. She accounts for outside influences (i.e., the sixth function of a community) as potentially modifying six types of relationships between three community elements within, which are (1) practices, (2) meanings, and (3) space and structures. In essence, the elements are reciprocally related. First, meanings legitimate the practices of people (#1), and practices enable the circulation and challenging of meanings by people (#2). Perhaps as crime rates go up, people may no longer define their community as safe, and take actions to increase their security. They may give leadership to a neighborhood watch program, or join demonstrations proclaiming the need for elected officials to increase resources for security. In the United States, the opposite can occur when people protest police brutality and discriminatory practices by local law enforcement against minorities who live there. Second, practices occur in space and through the structures located within (#3), and in turn, spaces and structures affect how practices can occur (#4). In criminology, hot spot theory attempts to deal with determining specific micro places where particular crimes occur

(Wilcox et al., 2018), while CPTED (crime prevention through environmental design) focuses on ways that modifications of spaces and structures deter crime and increase a sense of security (Pease, 2017). Third, spaces and structures enable the materialization of meanings (#5), and meanings are embodied in spaces and structures (#6). Neighborhood Watch signs and closed-circuit television cameras (CCTV) represent attempts to increase security, and signage proclaiming their presence is intended to act as a deterrence to possible criminal behavior.

A second, and perhaps more significant conceptualization of community by Liepins (2000) is her view of the agency of actors. To quote Liepins (2000): "...a rigorous approach to 'community' must determine a way in which the population can be treated as a set of heterogenous figures who constantly locate themselves in multiple positions and groups." (p. 30)

**Figure 1: Liepins' (2000) schematic for the fundamental elements of places<sup>4</sup>**



Without purposively meaning to do it, Liepins (2000) destroys Tönnies' (1957) concept of *gemeinschaft*, or at least how it is naively interpreted by so many criminologist and other social scientists. People can be law-abiding in one situation or with one network, but not another. There is no holistic, one-dimensional community (no matter how small it is by population size), but instead, a single place contains a plethora of networks which are interrelated. Consider, for example, revelations about the abuses of clergy against children, and against women as well. The offenders are involved in multiple networks and present themselves in different ways to people in the various networks to which they belong. In the pulpit, they behave one way, and in more private networks, perhaps an online site with child pornography or children at the church-sponsored school, they behave a different way. So, for example, Liepins (2000) focuses on networks as "particularly valuable" in understanding multiple positionality and agency when she observes: "... people will be simultaneously

<sup>4</sup> Adopted from Liepins' (2000, p. 30) schematic (Figure 1) of the essential elements of a community as reconstructed by Donnermeyer (2019, p. 9)

participating in one 'community', as a local network of interaction... whilst also being located in networks and 'stretched-out communities' of many other kinds." (p. 30)

In a sense, what Liepins (2000) has done is to resurrect a conceptualization of community that was used to conduct one of the first studies in the field of rural sociology over 100 years ago. Titled *The Social Anatomy of an Agricultural Community* by Galpin (1913), who was a professor at the University of Wisconsin, it was a meticulous study of the social watershed composed largely of farm households who travel to small market towns for various services. His research question is the same as the one we ask today in a multitude of different ways: "Is there such a thing as a rural community?" (Galpin, 1913, p. 1). He used land maps to identify his respondents and then developed a survey which was distributed to over 600 farms about to which villages and towns these farmers and their families travel. The data was collected and the maps were made. Galpin (1913) observed, after completion of the map-making based on the survey answers that:

Surrounding each village... is an area or zone of land including farm homes that trade regularly at the center. This zone is irregular in shape, due to such factors as irregular roads, lakes, marshes and varying distances of the trade centers to one another... The trade areas of adjacent centers have a tendency to overlap a little, producing a belt from one to two miles in width, of neutral or common trading territory... These trade zone lines run, moreover, without regard to the political lines of the township, county, and state. (p. 6)

The Galpin (1913) approach, even though very geographic-oriented, was essentially the same as Liepins (2000), which in turn was quite similar to Mills (1959), Warren (1967) and for that matter, Cassirer (1951), Durkheim (1947), Rawson (1839), and Tönnies (1957). Simply, patterns of human interaction in a delimited geographic space creates community and the ways a community carries out its six functions and expresses "terrains" of power, and by extension, inequality, discrimination and a host of other social structural issues that frame what criminologists, those both rural- and urban-oriented, study.

Nearly 50 years after Galpin, Kaufman (1959) tapped into the same definitional tenor of community when he proposed an interactional approach to its definition. To quote Kaufman (1959): "... one may visualize the community field as a stage with the particular ethos of the local society determining the players and the plays" (p. 10). Furthermore, Kaufman (1959) observes: "The community field consists of an organization of actions carried on by persons working through various association or groups" (p. 10-11). If this reminds the reader of the systemic model of social disorganization theory by Bursik (1999), that is because there is indeed a great deal of similarity. Bursik (1999) proposed three kinds of networks that influence the community function of social control, which in turn, influences occurrences of crime. These are private networks of friendship, and kinship or family relations, parochial networks related to the 'what' is described in this article as the function of social participation, and the public networks, which are largely connections to groups outside

the community (if smaller) or the neighborhood (if the community is much larger in number of residents)<sup>5</sup>.

Community conceptualizations are not solely about definitional debates. Some are empirical tests of what makes up a community<sup>6</sup>. In the mid-1970s, what I consider to be one of the most influential articles for the development of place-based theories of criminology in contemporary times was published by Kasarda and Janowitz (1974). The article itself has nothing directly to do with crime (in fact, a keyword search of the article turns up the word “crime” zero times), but does develop its competing hypotheses from the work of various scholars associated with the “Chicago school of urban sociology” (Kasarda & Janowitz, 1974, p. 328), where both authors worked. What they do is develop two alternative views of community attachment. The first is by Tönnies (1957) and Wirth (1938), which Kasarda and Janowitz (1974) refer to as the linear model. In the linear model, population size and population density are considered predictive of attachment, which is measured primarily by the number of friends and participation in various formal associations. The competing model is called the “systemic model” (Kasarda & Janowitz, 1974, p. 329), the same label as Bursik (1999) later gave to his interpretation of social disorganization theory. As Kasarda and Janowitz (1974) assert:

In the systemic model, community organization is treated as an essential aspect of mass society. It is a structure which has ecological, institutional, and normative dimensions. The local community is viewed as a complex system of friendship and kinship networks and formal and informal associational ties rooted in family life and on-going socialization processes. (p. 329)

The reader can see in this quote the view of community by Liepins’ (2000) wherein meanings, practices and spaces and structures are reciprocally related, and in which members of the community are simultaneously participating in multiple networks. Kasarda and Janowitz (1974) operationalize indicators for both points of view, and then subject them to multiple regression analysis. The result is that one variable associated with the systemic model stood out as predictive of attachment. It was length of residence, not population size or population density. For them, the systemic model won the race. They conclude:

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<sup>5</sup> Bursik (1999), however, repeated the same flaws of other social disorganization advocates, both now and in the past. He assumed that local or neighborhood networks influenced human in a one-way direction. “In sum, the systemic model argues that rapid residential turnover and population heterogeneity make it difficult to establish relational network structures that can serve as the sources of effective social control” (Bursik, 1999, p. 87). This same type of one-way illogic continues in Sampson’s (2013, p. 20) presidential address when he refers to refers to neighborhood-level norms that constrain residents from calling the police as a form of “anti-collective efficacy”. He never considers that the same expressions of collective efficacy can constrain reporting of some kinds of crimes by residents, even as they encourage reporting of other kinds of crime. It is analogous to a physicist stuck on the Newtonian model of the universe without considering the jump forward made by Einstein’s theories of special and general relativity, or the various advances made by quantum mechanics physicists.

<sup>6</sup> It should be mentioned that Bursik’s (1999) article in *Sociological Focus* was also a conceptualization which identified measurable indicators that were then part of a multivariate analysis of the results.

First, location in communities of increased size and density does not weaken bonds of kinship and friendship... Second, location in communities of increased size and density does not result in a substitution of secondary for primary and informal contacts... Third, increased population size and density does not significantly weaken local community sentiments. (Kasarda & Janowitz, 1974, p. 338)

### **Applying community to rural crime and criminal justice studies**

None of the narrative up to this point has any value unless it can make the case that the concept of community can be applied to significant advancements of scholarship in rural criminology. Otherwise, it would be, to quote myself from the first paragraph of this article, nothing more than a set of “useless rhetorical, hair-splitting exhibitions of exaggerated scholarly acumen”. This section addresses eight advantageous applications for examining rural crime and criminal justice studies from a community or place-based point of view. They are:

- 1) Defining a rural community
- 2) Debunking rural stereotypes
- 3) Understanding rural diversity
- 4) Community as a template for comparative syntheses of various literatures
- 5) Analyzing and interpreting data
- 6) Developing rural-focused theories
- 7) Community as a cause in a nexus of factors
- 8) Putting a human face on rural crime and criminal justice issues

### ***Defining a rural community***

There are now so many attempts to define what is rural and what it is not rural that it would not be inaccurate to claim that several hundred efforts to tackle the issue and create clarity have been made, and that defining rural alone would make for quite a thick monograph. Some examples rely on quantitative criteria, while others rely on more qualitative indicators. Some definitions focus on population size and density in the same way that Kasarda and Janowitz (1974) described the linear hypothesis in their community study. Other scholars insist on various descriptors, such as economic indicators – farming, mining, and other types of largely non-urban jobs, as Rawson (1839) did in his study of nearly two centuries ago. Perhaps a cultural approach would work, such as positing that rural communities are more politically conservative, or maybe a sociological approach defining rural communities as possessing a greater density of acquaintanceship (Freudenburg, 1986) and more *gemeinschaft* (Tönnies, 1957) would be the best.

Why does defining rural matter? The answer is that it just may change the results of either a quantitative or qualitative analysis. Consider, for example, Dubois et al.'s (2019) approach to what is a rural community, using US census data and information from the Department of Justice. They pose their research by observing that:

... the conditions uncovered in the ethnographies of rural women do not seem to have translated into higher IPV rates... While it could be the case that IPV is largely the same regardless of settlement types, it is also possible that the usual method utilized to categorize places as urban, suburban, or rural is inadequate to the task... (Dubois et al., 2019, p. 828)

The US Office of Management and Budget (OMB), Dubois et al. (2019) claim, never intended their designation of a metropolitan county based on population size and designating adjacent counties to it as economically connected to be a way of dividing the US population into urban, suburban and rural categories. At best it is a roughshod but frequently used set of empirical indicators. By combining measures of urban, suburban and rural from OMB and the Bureau of Justice Statistics and then comparing rates of intimate partner violence, Dubois et al. (2019) found that rates for women living in small towns was highest. A small town was defined as a smaller place within a nonmetropolitan-designated county, hence, demonstrating that defining what constitutes a rural community influences the results, especially of statistical studies. Furthermore, the authors avoided a dichotomous form of thinking because a small town was not seen as urban, but as only one particular type of rural.

I argue that the most appropriate way to define what is a rural community is to focus solely on population size and population density. They are necessary and sufficient for defining rural. All other factors – economic, social and cultural – are variable features of rural places, a variability that speaks to the diversity of rural communities around the world. In other words, size matters and to impose any other variable risks the dangers of a bias based on the locality of the author, the author's place of employment, the author's own background, and the author's own incorrect and narrow perspective, etc. As Kasarda and Janowitz (1974) found, population size and population density have less to do with community attachment when they are subjected to a multivariate analysis than other economic, social and cultural factors. Hence, they are less likely to impose characteristics that may not be found in every community. They are more universal, and less variable.

Without a doubt, the debate over what is a rural community will continue and likely never be resolved. For example, a Roundtable on "What is Rural" is scheduled for the 2025 annual meeting of the American Society of Criminology. It should be a lively debate!<sup>7</sup>

### ***Debunking rural stereotypes***

In the 1990s, and through most of the first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, much was written by various rural criminologists, including me, about the urban bias of criminology, which can also be referred to as urban-normative (Hayden, 2023). On the one hand, perhaps as a community of scholars, rural criminologists have now dwelled too much and far too long on the so-called subordinate status of rural crime and criminal justice studies. On the other hand, there still lurk dangers in allowing stereotypes of rurality to continue in academic

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<sup>7</sup> With any luck, the roundtable debate will continue later at the conference bar.

circles because those over-generalizations influence how rural communities are viewed for the purposes of research, theory and policy.

DeKeseredy et al. (2014) and Hayden (2014) have written about the ways that both social media and movies can depict rural communities as places of inbreeding, sexual perversion, and hyper-violence. As DeKeseredy et al. (2014) described the pornification and horrification of the rural: "... porn generates huge profits and so do rural slasher films" (p. 191). Hayden (2023) emphasizes that any "... amplification of labelled behaviour – an embracing of the label" (p. 24) has consequences for societal views about crimes, offenders and punishment. Similarly, positive stereotypes of rural communities as places of tranquility where everyone knows everyone else, and everyone helps everyone else, and when a crime does occur, it a shocking departure from the normal, are equally damaging. Fake Shangri-la's and false horrors are equal expressions of a bad criminological science.

Using the concept of the community helps maintain a more scientific perspective what rural crime scholarship should be about, and why it is important to study. As Durkheim (1950) reminds us, crime is a normal function of any society, and this basic assumption is not reserved solely for city environments. Hence, using a model of community as explicated by Liepins (2000) shows the normalcy of crime in a multitude of environments, but especially those that are rural.

### *Understanding rural diversity*

Dimou (2021) observes that:

Among the colonial legacies perpetuated by criminology has been its active engagement in silencing and downplaying non-Western knowledges... Such different ways of knowing and being would not only enable criminological scholarship to split from its colonial and Eurocentric underpinnings, but also provide alternative possibilities of justice... (p. 432)

Yet, Dimou (2021) also observes that southern criminology is dominated by scholars who do not deviate from the paradigms of the global north, as exemplified by facile renditions of southern criminology narratives coming from scholars in Australia.

This is where the concept of community may provide a useful conceptual tool for avoiding a northern (and western bias) in theory development and research design, and incorporating the knowledge of peoples and cultures from the global south, and for that matter, of indigenous peoples anywhere in the world, people living in rural communities with sustained poverty, rural localities where groups are discriminated against by their race, ethnicity and other minority statuses, and rural peoples who live alternative lifestyles. (p. 433)

Rural communities are highly diverse. Hence, utilizing the concept of community by Liepins (2000) and other scholars offers great potential for taking into account diverse cultural, economic and social characteristics of places, especially as study sites, before

imposing any specific criminological theory, especially those related to place. In particular, it avoids a priori assumptions about rural places as localities that are safe and secure until some form of external change creates so-called social disorganization (DeKeseredy et al., 2026), or regions where extreme danger pervades the peoples and their cultures (Hayden, 2014). The definition of rural, based only on population size and population density, is a nominal definition that I believe better avoids pre-conceived notions of the rural, avoids at least to some extent a northern/western criminological bias, and is relevant for addressing crime and criminal justice issues of the global south.

### *Community as a template for comparative syntheses of various literatures*

Perhaps no other form of scholarship has helped galvanize rural criminology than syntheses of the literature. Two excellent examples are Ceccato and Abraham (2022) and Weisheit et al. (1996). For example, the over-all objective of the book by Ceccato and Abraham (2022)<sup>8</sup> is straightforward:

... this book provides a comprehensive overview of relevant topics that can serve both as a catalyst for new research in this area and as a reference for practitioners concerned with conditions of people and places on the rural-urban continuum. Most importantly, the book offers a quick introduction to issues of crime and safety in the rural for undergraduate and graduate students, in particular from criminology, geography and rural studies. (p. 2)

The advantage of applying the concept of community to the synthesis of rural crime scholarship is three-fold. First, a synthesis of the literature can be focused on a single or narrow range of issues, incorporating the scholarship of studies from a variety of locations. I contend that this would help keep rural criminological literature de-colonialized and promote a larger, international perspective. For example, my recently published monograph on farm crime (Donnermeyer, 2025) includes over 140 specific studies from over three dozen countries, located on four continents. Found valuable in each of the various studies was the context in which farms in different regions of the world linked up to bigger issues that affect their victimization, from climate change to smuggling networks to inter-ethnic/tribal warfare. The book may not include everywhere in the world that a study has been undertaken about farmers as the victims, but it does take (in my humble opinion) a large step in that direction. A recent monograph edited by Ceccato and Harkness (2025) does the same, with scholars who wrote about perspectives on rural crime and safety from 19 different countries recognizing that rural places are the same yet different from regions around the world<sup>9</sup>.

Second, as mentioned earlier in this article, the literature prior to the Weisheit et al. (1996) synthesis was scattered, especially across time. As the first half of this article also

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<sup>8</sup> The Ceccato and Abraham monograph is open-access and available from Springer online. Go to: <https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-3-030-98290-4>. This is a must read for all rural criminologists.

<sup>9</sup> Chapters from the Ceccato and Harkness (2025) edited book are available for free download. Go to: <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/edit/10.4324/9781003395522/crime-peoples-places-vania-ceccato-alistair-harkness>, then scroll down to the full list of chapters.

mentioned, there is a great deal of early literature relevant to rural crime and criminal justice issues that potentially can inform contemporary scholarship. Some of it can be found online, but some of it cannot. Hence, those engaged in archival work can be assisted in both discovering and organizing early literature around the idea of a community, which can in turn, help integrate this scholarship with more contemporary scholarship. That is precisely why the work of Rawson (1839) was discussed. It has much greater significance than just being an old, fuddy-duddy study from bygone days.

Third, as mentioned by Ceccato and Abraham (2022), their book was written in part for students. It is not likely that literature which delves on the particulars of beta coefficients, or weaves complex sentences of theory filled with hifalutin words, would be adopted for an assigned reading in a college level course. It is more likely that a cohesive synthesis of the literature, tied together by the concept of community, would show up on the syllabus of a criminology course that includes in part a focus on rural crime and criminal justice studies.

### *Analyzing and interpreting data*

The three elements and the six functions of a community are critical for defining the socio-cultural and economic contexts of communities. But, it is not enough. The simple assertion by Liepins (2000) that community members can participate simultaneously in multiple networks must be considered also. In essence, as so many community theorists of the past and today have asserted, a community is a field of action. Hence, community context provides a way of both analyzing data and interpreting the results of crime and arrest data.

One rural -focused theory that relies on census statistics and official crime data is Civic Community theory by Lee (2008). Although Lee's (2008) work is very statistical, it is his conceptual framework that is of significance here. He takes care to observe that his theory is "distinguished from other, more crime-specific theories, such as the systemic social disorganization model..." (Lee, 2008, p. 449). His argument is that rural communities that display strong civility have lower rates of violence. In turn, a civic community is one characterized by locality-oriented businesses and other key institutions that foster civic engagement, which in turn guided his selection of such variables for analysis, including percent of locally-owned businesses, percent of workers who are self-employed, percent of church membership, and voter turnout, among other factors. In essence, a concept of community that is not tailored specifically to considerations of crime, as advocated in this article, allowed Lee (2008) to more deftly select variables for his statistical modeling of variability in violent crime among rural localities.

On the other side of any research is analysis. This is where community can also guide scholarship. This time, the two examples are qualitative. Both deal with the impact of rural substance use through ethnographic studies in West Virginia (Garriott, 2011) and Oklahoma (Shukla, 2016). What is startlingly similar about both studies is how much they reveal the principle of "multiple positions and groups" (Liepins, 2000, p. 30), but this time with respect to drug abusers and drug dealers who operate in a rural context. A drug culture may be a distinctive subculture within a community, but it is not totally separate. Those in the network

have their own hierarchy of statuses, like a mini-community within a larger community, and the boundaries between the various multiple networks at the same locality are porous, not rigid. A careful reader of these studies and others as well, could use the concept of community to construct new and innovative theories about drug networks.

### **Developing rural-focused theories**

Given the diversity of communities around the world, theorizing through a community lens is one way to develop rural-focused framework, either by finding fault with current criminological theories and rebuilding them in improved ways, or starting practically from scratch and then applying them to an analysis of crime and offending. The latter is represented by the scholarship of Lee (2000), while the former can be seen in the work of DeKeseredy (2021) and his construction of a theory which he calls “male peer support model of separation and divorce sexual assault”. The model is based on qualitative research in an Appalachian area of Ohio from which a framework can be constructed for how patriarchal men learn about coercive control over women and are reinforced in these beliefs by ways to control their partners through violence. The plight of abused women who find it difficult to seek assistance and find little sympathy from family members living in the area, as well as from local clergy, law enforcement and other local groups, illustrates how the three elements of a community as defined by Liepins – meanings, practices, and spaces and structures – are the community context for understanding violence against rural women. First published by DeKeseredy and Schwartz (2009), their logic is similar to Lee’s (2000), even though their styles of research are quite different. What unifies them is the way they frame their research with a community lens, focusing on community as a field of interaction among its members.

### ***Community as a cause in a nexus of factors***

Community can do more than be a tool for understanding rural diversity, debunking rural stereotypes, synthesizing literature, framing new theories, criticizing old theories, and interpreting data. Community in itself can be considered a causative factor, especially when combined with other variables in a multivariate analysis (both quantitative and qualitative). Ceccato and Dolmen (2011) provide a framework for considering community as a cause. Their study was focused on crime in rural Sweden, with possible factors divided into three sets: causal factors; criminogenic conditions; and offence outcomes. We have already seen, at least to some extent, how community is useful for describing and understanding offence outcomes in a rural context, such as levels of theft, violence including violence against women, drug use and trafficking, perceptions of safety, and many more. It is the other two – causal factors to some extent, but especially criminogenic factors that show community-level dimensions of crime.

Causal factors are directly linked to what Ceccato and Dolmen (2011) refer to as global and regional trends, which can be expressed by such social forces as local shifts in population size and characteristics of community members, poverty and unemployment, accessibility to rural communities and consumption patterns. In essence, they begin their framework with the sixth function of a community, which allows them to bring in the

criminological imagination as Young (2011) described it because they discuss criminogenic conditions as more specific contextual expressions for how broader changes influence people living in rural area (see examples from their Figure 2 diagram found in Ceccato and Dolmen, 2011, p. 122). Unfortunately, their article was published in the same year as Young's (2011) now-classic monograph, hence, the timing was not right for them to call their causal diagram as example of the criminology imagination.

Criminogenic conditions in the Ceccato and Dolmen (2011) schematic were mostly about the cultural, economic and social contexts of communities, which I previously argued should not be essential or universal parts of a definition of rural precisely because they vary. However, because they do vary, they are indeed causes of offence outcomes, to use the Ceccato and Dolman (2011) phrase for the far right side of their diagram. Criminogenic conditions include such factors as less (or more) social control, more (or less) guardianship, exclusion of certain individuals and groups, attractiveness of targets, and even transportation systems that allow "quick exit from the scene of the crime". So many of these criminogenic conditions fit with routine activity theory (Andresen & Ha, 2017), but are now combined with larger, macro changes in societies. Hence, community is the filter, mediating change between public issues and personal troubles (Mills, 1959).

### ***Putting a face on rural crime and criminal justice issues***

Perhaps the greatest untapped potential of community for rural criminology is its ability to put a face on the impacts of rural crime, that is, showing how crime affects the ways of living and welfare of rural peoples. These are matters of justice and access to justice (Camilleri, 2019). Consider, for example, farm crime (Donnermeyer, 2025), especially examples from Africa. From Nigeria on the west side of the continent to Kenya on the east side, cattle theft and other crimes can be rampant due to a host of factors, such as climate change, inter-ethnic conflicts, and limited police resources. Yet, only one or a few cattle may be stolen in a single incident, so, why is farm crime a problem (the kind of question that would be asked by someone with a from a northern/western-centric bias)? The reason is that from the point of view of the food producers who live in the agricultural regions of either country, these are significant criminal events that impact their perceptions of safety to the extent that they may consider giving up on agriculture as a way to make a living altogether. Cattle are both a source of wealth and cattle ownership is a form of social status. Even the theft of a single head of cattle to a subsistence farmer has serious economic, psychological and sociological consequences. Considering these impacts as criminologically significant also means that if community-level studies are useful for putting a human face on rural crime, they also help avoid forms of colonial criminology. Hence, the concept of community can identify the human consequences of crime in rural settings, and has the potential to address issues of policy and practice in multiple ways.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this article was to extol the advantages of applying the concept of community to rural crime and criminal justice studies. By nature, rural criminology is more inherently international than many other sub-fields of criminology because it is obliged to account for the vast diversity of rural peoples and rural places (Ceccato & Harkness, 2025).

One question that was never answered in this article is as follows: is there a clear numerical value for population size or population density that separates rural from non-rural localities? If readers of this article are ever asked a question like this, I encourage an answer like this: with a firm shrug of the shoulder, respond to the interrogator in an exclamatory tone with the following:

What a dumb question! Thresholds can create dichotomies and dichotomies can create stereotypes, exactly the kind of thing rural criminology must avoid, which so much of criminology did not do in the past, which was to the detriment for the development of rural crime studies in earlier time. When theorizing and researching about crime, it is the obligation of each scholar to define the rural localities that form the focus of their scholarship.

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