

# **Rural Crime Investigations: Not Just Anyone Can Steal a Cow, Not Just Anyone Can Steal a Tree, Not Just Anyone Can Investigate Cattle Rustling, Not Just Anyone Can Investigate Timber Theft**

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### Abstract

This research note explores rural crime investigations through an ethnographic study of the Oklahoma Department of Agriculture, Food and Forestry (ODAFF) Special Investigations Unit. While rural and urban law enforcement often address similar crime types, rural areas present unique challenges such as livestock theft, timber theft, and heavy equipment theft, necessitating substantive knowledge and technical skills. This study details the researchers' journey from a drug-focused project to a broader examination of rural policing, highlighting the critical role of ODAFF agents in assisting local law enforcement. Through in-depth interviews, ride-alongs, and observational data from a training class, the research examines the types of crimes ODAFF investigates and the significance of their work. The findings align with international research emphasizing the need for unique responses to rural crime and underscore the importance of ethnographic methods in understanding rural cultures and policing. This research reveals that ODAFF agents, with their insider knowledge and specialized training, play an integral role in addressing rural crime, emphasizing the necessity of tailored law enforcement approaches in geographically distinct areas.

**Keywords:** rural law enforcement; rural crime investigation; livestock theft; heavy equipment theft; timber theft

## Introduction

Many of the types of crime law enforcement face are not unique to certain locations; similarities in crime types often cross geographical jurisdictions. Rural law enforcement responds to much of the same crime as urban law enforcement, e.g., property offenses, drug-related crimes, domestic violence, and assault (DeKeseredy, 2020). In this context, training protocols and law enforcement styles have much overlap from one setting to another, or one agency to another. However, to the extent that rural law enforcement are tasked with investigating and responding to crimes that may be unique to specific, rural geographical and physical locations (e.g., livestock theft, timber theft etc.), specialized training, knowledge, and skill sets may be required for investigative responses.

This research note focuses on the experience of researching the Oklahoma Department of Agriculture, Food and Forestry (ODAFF) Special Investigations Unit. Details on how researchers became connected with and studied the work of the rural crime investigators are described. Information on who these law enforcement officials are, what they do, and why they are important for understanding rural crime and policing is discussed. Specifically, this research note discusses how this research project evolved from a drug focus to a broader examination of crimes in rural areas. It also describes the types of crimes ODAFF Special Agents investigate. As one ODAFF Special Agent remarked, “not just anyone can steal a cow, not just anyone can steal a tree.” Just as specialization can apply to offending, it can also matter when it comes to law enforcement responses to crime. Not just any officer can investigate cattle rustling, not just any officer can investigate heavy equipment theft, and not just any officer can investigate timber theft and wildfire arson. Thorough investigations require esoteric insights, training, and knowledge—a truly unique skill set. Without such, law enforcement may be hindered with regard to evidence collection, identifying and catching offenders, property recovery efforts, and building prosecutable cases.

The research presented here aligns with the research being conducted in other countries, specifically Australia and Africa (Aerni-Flessner, et al., 2021; Barclay, 2018; Harkness & Larkins, 2019; Onwuzuruiglo, 2021). It takes certain knowledge and skills to commit cattle theft, heavy equipment theft, timber theft, and other forms of rural crime (Harkness, 2015; Nunns et al., 2022). This research and the research conducted by others (e.g., Donnermeyer & DeKeseredy, 2014; Donnermeyer, 2016; Mulrooney & Harkness, 2023; Weisheit, et al., 2022) exemplifies the need to conduct ethnographic research in rural areas with all types of insiders who serve as first responders to rural crime (e.g., task forces).

While often perceived as safer, rural areas can face significant challenges with crime. According to Johnston (2024), property crime is sometimes higher in specific rural areas or cities than in large cities, with burglary and theft being particularly prevalent (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2024). Violent crime is generally lower in rural areas, but isolated homes can be more vulnerable to home invasions. Substance abuse, particularly the opioid epidemic, has hit rural communities harder than urban ones. Factors such as limited mental health resources and economic hardship are contributing to high substance abuse rates and related

crimes. In a journalistic brief titled *The Hidden Crisis: How Poverty Drives Crime in Rural Oklahoma*, Olson (n.d.) discusses the connection between poverty and crime in rural Oklahoma. It highlights that rural areas, despite the common perception of being safer, experience higher rates of poverty than urban areas, and that this poverty is a significant driver of crime. Olson also indicates that in smaller communities, violent crime is more likely to involve family members and occur in the home, as opposed to larger cities where violence tends to involve strangers; this creates an issue of underreporting of violent crime in rural areas.

### Types of Farm Crime

Farm crime encompasses a variety of offenses that target rural areas in many different types of agricultural settings. Farm crime is often unique to rural settings because targets of various forms of farm crime tend to be located in rural settings where farming, livestock, and other agricultural activities are more prevalent. It is important to understand different types of farm crime because each type necessitates a different investigative response from law enforcement. Common types include livestock theft (typically cattle rustling) (Abbas et al., 2014; Aerni-Flessner, 2021; Anonguku et al., 2008; Asanovich & Junusovich, 2018; Ben, et al., 2018; Bello & Abdullashi, 2021; Bunei, 2018; Clack, 2013, 2015a, 2015b; Clack & Minnaar 2018; Clack, 2024; Greiner, 2013), heavy equipment theft (Osborne, 2015; Osborne & Swartz, 2021), crop theft—such as hay (Nicholson, 2021) but has involved crops such as avocados (Flannery, 2017; Logan, 2017; Roy, 2017)—and timber theft or poaching (Bourgon, 2022; Goldfarb, 2017). Other types of rural crime include wildlife trafficking or smuggling (Ceccato & Uittenbogaard, 2013), wildfires that are arson-related (Prestemon & Butry, 2010), domestic violence (DeKeseredy, 2020), property crimes (Barclay & Donnermeyer, 2002; Barclay, Donnermeyer, & Jobes, 2004), poaching and other hunting crimes (see Lemieux, 2014), and livestock raiding (Fleisher, 1998; Fleisher, 1999; Gray, et al., 2003; Schilling, et al., 2012).

### Livestock Theft

Livestock theft is one of the most widely studied types of farm crime, with scholars from several countries studying this area of crime (e.g., Africa, Australia, United States) (Abbas et al., 2014; Aerni-Flessner, 2021; Anonguku et al., 2008; Asanovich & Junusovich, 2018; Ben, et al., 2018; Bello & Abdullashi, 2021; Bunei, 2018; Clack, 2013; Clack, 2015b, 2024 Clack & Minnaar, 2018; Greiner, 2013). Studies often examine types of livestock thefts, ranging from opportunistic crimes to organized operations (Doorewaard, et al., 2015; Khisa, 2018; Kimani & Masagi, 2020).

Research on livestock theft encompasses a wide range of areas, including strategies and techniques to combat this crime. These strategies vary from traditional investigative methods to the implementation of new technologies (Eke & Egbono, 2017; Coleman, 2024). Furthermore, scholars have examined the impact of livestock theft on farmers and rural communities, including financial losses (Mochan, 2018) and emotional distress (Likko, et al., 2018; Neubacher, et al., 2024; Pasiwe, et al., 2021; Peterson, et al., 2024). Mulroney and

Harkness (2023) studied it in a unique capacity by examining the Ceres Tag livestock tagging and tracking system in Australia. Ceres Tag is an Australian livestock tagging and tracking system that uses a smart ear tag with a unique, one-life application to provide global, continuous monitoring of animals. The tag, which is designed to be tamper-proof, uses satellite technology to send data directly to a cloud-based platform, eliminating the need for on-farm infrastructure like towers. Aiyzhy et al. (2021) examined the history and contemporary legal aspects of livestock theft in Tuva by interviewing 63 employees from five inter-municipal departments, including 28 investigators involved in the investigations of livestock theft. These diverse studies underscore the multifaceted nature of livestock theft and the need for highly crime specific solutions.

### **Heavy Equipment Theft**

Heavy equipment theft is a significant problem in rural areas, impacting farmers, construction companies, and other types of landowners. While this is not a widely researched area, a simple internet search of “heavy equipment theft” will result in a number of news stories and other sources of information about this form of crime. According to a 2025 write up by U.S. Assure:

While no definitive numbers are available, the National Insurance Crime Bureau (NICB) and National Equipment Register (NER) estimate the theft of heavy construction equipment costs between \$300 million and \$1 billion every year, not including the theft of tools or property damage that may occur during a theft. (U.S. Assure, 2025: para. 1).

Tractors, excavators, combines, and other large machinery used for farming and construction are expensive and criminals can easily sell or strip them for parts to sell (Express, 2014). In rural areas, there are often fewer officers, limiting the capability for frequent patrols and surveillance of areas. This may lead to a higher likelihood of theft in rural areas.

In some cases heavy equipment theft is linked to organized crime (Souza, 2024), whereas other times it is individuals stealing heavy equipment for independent gain. Adam (2017) described a farm equipment theft in Saskatchewan in which a rancher stole \$1.2 million in farm equipment over a five-year period. Heavy equipment thefts are typically not such large-scale operations, but have certainly been a widespread problem in rural areas in many countries.

### **Arson-Related Wildfires**

Arson-related wildfires are another form of crime that can occur in rural settings. While not exclusively a type of farm crime, arson-related wildfires are addressed as part of the rural crime response. Research on arson-related wildfires is multifaceted and includes the motivations to commit arson, but also the environment and economic consequences, and the specific burn patterns that happen in wildfires (Parker & Barbrauskas, 2024). Studies have shown that wildfire arsonists often have diverse motives ranging from misguided attempts to

improve forest health to the desire to be included in fire-fighting efforts (Lovreglio et al., 2010).

### **Crop Theft and Timber Theft**

Crop theft refers to any type of theft that involves stealing the product of farmwork (Chiwona-Karlton, et al., 2017; Fafchamps & Minten, 2006; Logan, 2017), while timber theft refers exclusively to the theft of trees. This type of crime is difficult to deter and appears to continue in areas even after law enforcement increases efforts to combat it (Fafchamps & Minten, 2006). While crime correlates across many types of offenses are elusive and often unpredictable across time, this type of crime seems to be heavily related to increases in transitory poverty (Fafchamps & Minten, 2006).

Timber theft can severely impact individuals and the larger scale timber or logging industry. Financially, timber theft may result in thousands of dollars in loss for individuals or businesses. From an environmental standpoint, timber theft can lead to unsustainable harvesting practices. Whereas most individuals and logging companies adhere to environmental guidelines on replanting trees after cutting trees down, some illicit industries (e.g., marijuana grows) do not adhere to such guidelines (Bourgon, 2022). For individuals, this type of theft causes both monetary loss and the psychological impact of personal victimization.

### **Other Types of Rural Crimes**

While farm crime primarily refers to livestock theft, heavy equipment theft, and crop theft, the types of crime that occur are diverse. Different communities have different landscapes, different cultures, and different agricultural industries, all of which potentially impact opportunities for crime. Other types of crime that frequently occur in rural areas include wildlife smuggling (Ceccato & Uittenbogaard, 2013), domestic violence (DeKeseredy, 2020), property crime (Barclay & Donnermeyer, 2002; Barclay, et al., 2004), poaching and other hunting crimes (Lemieux, 2014; Murphy, 1999; Sollund, 2020; Travers, et al. 2019), and livestock raiding (Agade, 2010; Bamidele, 2018; Fleisher, 1998; Fleisher, 1999; Gray, et al., 2003; Schilling, et al., 2012). To the extent that crime is ever-evolving, rural crime is not limited to those types of crimes outlined in the academic and grey literature.

### **Addressing Crime in Rural Areas**

While the majority of crime prevention efforts have been widely studied and applied in urban areas, such efforts also have applicability in rural communities. To address crime in rural environments, prevention strategies should account for inherent challenges, such as geographical vastness, sparse populations, and limited resources. The diverse nature of crime in rural areas, as outlined by Weisheit et al. (2006), calls for creative law enforcement solutions. Their work illustrates the broad range of issues faced by rural police, from relatively uncommon occurrences like cult-related crime to more frequent offenses such as

agricultural theft. Understanding the unique factors that contribute to and cause crime in rural areas is crucial for addressing crime in rural communities (Whiteside et al., 2023).

Rural areas, with their lower population densities, present challenges for capable guardianship. Guardianship, rooted in Routine Activities Theory (Cohen & Felson, 1979), has been found to have applicability in rural areas (see Hollis & Hankhouse, 2019). Unlike in urban neighborhoods, where neighbors often have a clear view of surrounding homes, rural residents may have less awareness of activity at neighboring properties, potentially increasing vulnerability. Harkness (2016) interviewed police in rural Australia about property theft and found that improved capable guardianship could decrease farm crime. Bunei et al. (2014) had similar findings on capable guardianship, noting that increased guardianship was utilized more frequently than target hardening in combating rural crime. This is a technique that is easily employed in urban settings, but takes specific strategies in rural areas.

Studies exploring perceptions of crime and crime prevention in rural areas offer valuable insights. Barclay et al. (2004), for example, examined 18 types of property crime in rural Australia, including livestock, timber, and equipment theft, through surveys of rural residents. Their unique contribution lies in their exploration of why individuals choose not to report crime, highlighting the importance of positive police-community relations. This theme is echoed in Mulrooney and colleagues' (2022) study of farmer-police relationships in rural Australia. They found that farmers who were aware of farm crime police units reported reduced fear of victimization and increased satisfaction with police.

Through interviews with police officers in rural England and Wales, Nunns et al. (2022) explored farm crime prevention strategies, their effectiveness, and the future of farm crime prevention. Their study shed light on the importance of prevention over enforcement. Successful initiatives included proactive operations (e.g., regular patrols, patrols of high-risk areas) and prevention initiatives (e.g., digging trenches, property marking, community education efforts). Similarly, O'Brien and Windle (2022) examined attitudes of farm crime prevention in Ireland and found that cost and time constraints were reported as major barriers to implementing crime prevention measures for farmers. Indeed, across several studies, obstacles to crime prevention appear to be similar in rural areas internationally (Barclay & Bartel, 2015; Barclay et al. 2001).

Livestock theft prevention and investigation has been the focus of a great deal of research (Maluleke, 2018, 2021; Maluleke, Obioha & Mofokeng, 2014). The limited law enforcement presence and resources characteristic of rural areas necessitate unique crime-fighting solutions. Mulrooney and Harkness (2023), for example, found the Ceres Tag system effective in reducing livestock theft in Australia, demonstrating how technology can address challenges posed by limited police presence.

From the inherent difficulties posed by lower population densities and limited resources to the diverse nature of rural crime itself, traditional urban law enforcement approaches are often inadequate in rural areas. Rural criminologists have consistently emphasized the importance of capable guardianship, positive police-community relations,

and law enforcement units tailored to rural needs. Innovative solutions, like the Ceres Tag system (Mulroney and Harkness, 2023), demonstrate the potential of technology to overcome limitations and enhance crime prevention and investigation in these unique environments. However, traditional investigative techniques and community policing cannot be overlooked in the conversation on policing and addressing crime in rural areas.

### **The Current Project**

The research described here was gathered as part of a broader ethnographic study initially focused on examining the methamphetamine epidemic in Oklahoma (see Shukla, 2016). The current ethnography employed a multifaceted approach that included field visits, qualitative exploratory interviews, ride-alongs, and observations. The importance of rural crime as it related to the methamphetamine problem was highlighted following the research encounters with ODAFF. Over time, and in line with the flexibility inherent in qualitative methodology, the project evolved into one focused on rural policing and rural crime. This research note focuses on a specific subsample of the law enforcement data collected in the broader project — data from the ODAFF rural crime investigators.

A purposive chain-referral sampling strategy (Creswell, 2014; Patton, 2002) was utilized to identify participants for both the broader project and the more narrow scope of the ODAFF project. This was an adequate sample size when considering the total population of this group was nine. Additionally, according to Lynn, Osborne, and Edwards (2023) approximately 100 investigators with the special skills being studied exist in the U.S. Data were gathered through in-depth interviews and in some cases, ride-alongs with over 30 police chiefs, sheriffs, undersheriffs, and narcotics agents/detectives across the state. Formal interviews and ride-alongs included written documentation of conversations, photographic documentation, and thematically focused dialogues that were audio-recorded. The goal of ride-alongs was to provide researchers with insights about the nuances of rural policing and crime. The research was partially supported by internal university funding. IRB approval was obtained from the University of Central Oklahoma Office of Research Compliance.

The initial contact with ODAFF occurred when one of the co-investigators encountered a student researching cattle rustling in her class at a rural based university. The student, employed as an agent at the time, agreed to participate in an interview on methamphetamine for the broader project. In the midst of his interview, it became apparent that the work he conducted was a missing link between our understanding of drugs and rural crime. He became a gatekeeper for other investigators in the agency. Researchers were provided with contacts to another agent in Southeastern Oklahoma and the Chief of the Agricultural Investigative Services Unit.

In total, in-depth, exploratory, qualitative interviews were conducted with 5 ODAFF agents. Though limited in number, more than half of all ODAFF rural crime investigators employed at the time of this project participated in the study. All but one of these interviews were conducted in rural communities; three were conducted in an office setting and two in trucks during extended ride-along field visits that lasted longer than five hours each. During

the extended ride-alongs, multiple stops were made during the course of the day so researchers could observe locations being discussed, historical sites, artifacts, and other settings pertinent to day-to-day rural law enforcement operations. Additional data were gathered via nonparticipant observation of a rural crime investigations training tailored to meet the needs of rural law enforcement. The invitation to attend the training class was extended by the Chief of the ODAFF rural investigations division during the in-person interview with him. Researchers offered to conduct a survey of the rural crime investigations training class participants; the survey examined the types of rural crime participants faced in their rural communities, victims of rural crimes, the link between rural crimes and the drug problem, and the challenges faced by first responders. Survey findings were later shared with the Chief.

The observational experiences proved to be insightful opportunities to learn about the importance of thorough and detailed investigations. Immersion in the two-day training experience provided researchers with the opportunity to personally observe the vast amounts of detailed information that rural crime investigations required. Disseminating this information to local law enforcement officials who would be the first responders to various types of rural crimes in the field was of critical importance. Key details about specific types of rural crimes and on the importance of evidence collection and the techniques for conducting strong and thorough investigations were covered extensively.

### *Who They Are*

ODAFF investigators are law enforcement officials with technical expertise in rural crimes and their enforcement and investigations. The agents are housed within the Specialized Rural Crime Investigative Division of the agency, a unit established in 2007 by state statute; the unit was created in addition to the more traditional criminal investigators already employed within the department for years. According to the Chief, the unit came into existence following a realization by the Secretary of Agriculture at the time, that there was a need for a law enforcement unit focused on crimes where farmers and ranchers are victims.

### *What They Do*

ODAFF agents are state level law enforcement officials who have statewide jurisdiction. Their main efforts include assisting local law enforcement officials in their investigations of and responses to rural crimes across the state. In addition, they serve an important role providing expert training on rural crime investigations as observed during the two-day CLEET class.

The information collected through contacts with ODAFF focused on a few key topics; all were directly linked specifically to rural crime. The main topics discussed and presented align with the daily tasks and activities that serve as the focus of their work. The discussion of rural crimes that follow are presented in the order in which they were addressed during the course of the research.

### *Cattle Rustling*

Though cattle rustling initially sounded like something from the past, it is still a real threat and form of crime in modern day society. Cattle rustling, or cattle theft, is a crime that happens in rural settings where cattle are more often present as potential targets (e.g., farms etc.). The importance and widespread nature of cattle rustling as part of the rural crime problem in modern times was a key takeaway from the initial interview.

Cattle represent a valuable target for those interested in stealing them for the purposes of selling them for the cash value they hold. Unlike other products, cattle serve as an attractive target for offenders as they can often be sold for full commodity value. While other stolen goods and products are often sold for lower dollar amounts, cattle can be sold at their full value. As one agent explained “it’s not like me going into your house and stealing a TV, and I’m going to take that TV down here to the pawn shop or somebody and sell it for fifty dollars. Whenever you go in and steal a cow and take it down to the sale barn, you are going to get dollar-for-dollar value exactly what it’s worth.” While this is not something likely to be common knowledge to outsiders to this industry, it is a reality that contributes to the occurrence of this specific type of rural crime. Additionally, the herd nature of cattle can facilitate their theft in multiple numbers.

An in person visit to a working sale barn, or livestock auction where cattle are bought and sold, highlighted the challenges associated with cattle theft-related investigations. The specific sale barn visited still utilized paper log books to record transactions. The agent manually flipped through hundreds of pages of the large sale barn log book in his search for information and evidence. Knowing what to look for – and where – were of critical importance to the investigation. To the extent that investigations can require visits to sale barns to examine paper log books, expertise about cattle can be crucial in these labor-intensive investigations. Being able to identify key information about cattle (e.g., type, brand, age, pairings etc.) based on reported information and visual observations could potentially make or break a case. Without such knowledge, investigators risk missing key evidence. Understanding methods for handling and moving cattle, recognizing types of cow breeds and cow-calf pairings, and knowing what to look for in stolen cattle cases are all important components of the investigative process. Fitting in within the sale barn setting further facilitates investigations by allowing investigators to conduct their work without standing out or being noticed.

Another theme that emerged from the interviews was the link between cattle rustling and the illicit drug problem. As one agent declared, “Most of them are drug-related. That one that I told you about with [name] was all methamphetamine.” Given the monetary value cattle hold, stolen cattle provide offenders with an additional means of obtaining money for drugs.

### *Fire Investigations: Wildfires & Arson*

Fires pose a serious threat to rural communities. While responding to fires is not unique in rural areas, fires in rural areas can engulf large swaths of land and quickly become uncontrolled. As with other types of crime, ODAFF agents assist local first responders with fire investigations as needed and as schedules permit. Fire investigations were discussed by the two agents considered to be fire experts. One was primarily responsible for the northwestern part of the state that had been plagued by wildfires; in recent years, nearly 40% of a specific county had burned. The other was responsible for the southeastern part of the state where the majority of timber land was located.

The field visits to the northwestern and southeastern parts were important for understanding the challenges of responding to and investigating wildfires. Riding through rural counties with the ODAFF agents provided a first-hand understanding of the vast tracts of land over which fires occur. Fires can expand quickly, causing vast amounts of damage over expansive acreages. The importance of an informed first response were emphasized within the interviews, during field visits, and in the training class.

While not all wildfires are the result of criminal activity, the first steps taken by responders to fire scenes are of critical importance. In the words of one agent, “generally speaking, when you investigate a structure fire you go to [start investigation] the area of most damage...in a wild land fire, it’s just the opposite. You go to [start investigation] the area with the least amount of damage.” Emphasis should be placed on determining fire origins and documenting evidence to allow for making distinctions between wildfires and arson. The importance of the early stages of investigations for establishing if fires are or may be criminal in nature cannot be underestimated. First responders play a critical role in documenting evidence, which includes taking photographs of fundamental aspects of the scene. Determining origin and cause, understanding diverse motives for arson, and detailed investigation reports are all important for first responders. As noted by an agent, “the reasons for arsonist or fire setters to start a fire is...it can be...with structure fire it can be revenge, financial gain, for insurance purposes. Wildland fire, not so much as far as financial gain. It can be for revenge. It can be to get back at somebody.”

### *Timber Theft*

Attention was brought to timber theft as another unique form of rural crime during the visit to Southeast Oklahoma. While sometimes referred to as timber poaching (Bourgon, 2022; Goldfarb, 2017), this terminology was not utilized during the course of our interactions with ODAFF. Timber theft was a topic primarily relegated to the southeastern part of the state, which is unique with regard to the presence of large acreages of timber.

Timber theft was discussed less frequently during the field visits and the training class than other forms of rural crime. However, understanding it and having the detailed knowledge for responses and investigations remained important. Knowledge about diverse types of trees, timber-related activity patterns, and how logged timber is processed and sold is

important for first responders. Insights gained included details on diverse types of timber theft, offending patterns, information on different types of trees and their associated purposes and values, and knowledge about the timber industry, including rules and regulations. The lucrative nature of timber theft was exemplified by the Chief when he explained, “We also investigate timber theft...people steal those giant trees. Some of those trees are valued at \$15,000 a piece, depending on what they are, how big they are, and what kind of tree it is.” This also demonstrates the impact of geographic and agricultural differences on rural crime. As multiple agents explained, timber theft was predominantly a problem in the southeastern part of the state where the timber industry is most prominent.

### ***Heavy Equipment Theft***

Heavy equipment theft can include construction equipment and farming equipment, among other types. Farms in rural communities contain numerous valuable products that can be attractive to offenders looking to steal things to sell or trade for money or other goods. Heavy equipment worth thousands of dollars in value is often left largely unsecured in open areas. Such forms of equipment can be relatively easy to steal for individuals with some knowledge of how to operate or move it. The lack of supervision, along with the high dollar values of diverse forms of heavy equipment left unsupervised in open spaces, make them attractive targets for offenders. The volume and high dollar value of stolen heavy equipment such as tractors, trailers, and skid steer loaders accounted for a large part of ODAFF’s work. “It’s constantly what we do, is recover stolen property...tractors, trailers, all kinds of stuff. I know for me, I’ll recover probably close to half a million dollars a year.”

Because all of the special agents were experienced in agriculture, they had experience and knowledge about farming and ranching equipment. Insights on equipment knowledge, industry-specific insider information critical for investigations and reports, and familiarity with traffic routes were among the topics discussed. The importance of the experiential knowledge held by the special investigators cannot be underestimated.

Heavy equipment theft was one of the most thoroughly discussed topics during the rural crime investigations training course. A great deal of time was spent educating law enforcement officials about diverse types of equipment and the specific types of information needed to identify and recover stolen property. Insider details included how and where to locate identifying characteristics of various forms of equipment and equipment-specific technologies (e.g., standardized keys) that can facilitate or hinder theft and subsequent recovery efforts.

## **Discussion**

### ***Ethnography and Understanding Rural Cultures***

The current study demonstrates the value of ethnographic approaches for the study of rural crime and understanding rural cultures. The information obtained through the field visits, qualitative interviews, training class observation, and ride-alongs provided a great deal

of insight into the unique types of crimes and challenges faced by the rural investigators who participated in this study. The ethnographic methods employed in this study were critical for understanding the intricacies and nuances of rural crime and the approaches required for responding to it. It is evident from this project that ethnography plays a critical role in acquiring the deep level of insights necessary for outsiders, such as researchers and scholars, to truly understand the technical details and specialized nature of rural crime and policing.

The methodological approach utilized in this study aligns with the types of methods others have previously employed in their attempt to gain insights into crimes in rural settings. In a study very similar to the current one, Lynn et al. (2023) interviewed eleven agricultural crime investigators across six different states about referrals of cases, how cases are processed, and information about victimization in agricultural crime. Others have taken the approach of interviewing farmers to get perspectives about crime in rural areas (see Barclay & Bartel, 2015; Barclay, et al., 2004; Harkness & Larkins, 2019, Peterson, et al., 2024). Harkness (2017) utilized a combined approach and collected data from both law enforcement and farmers. The differing perspectives provide unique data and explanations for crime occurrences and related issues in rural areas.

There is a growing body of research that highlights the importance of ethnography for the study of rural crime and culture. Examples of this are presented in Donnermeyer's (2016) edited book, in which a majority of studies utilized ethnographic approaches. In one of the most extensive collections on rural crime and criminology to date, Donnermeyer's (2016) edited book delved into the research and writings on rural issues from an international perspective. It covered a significant portion of the research landscape within rural criminology at the time. Ethnography provides a methodology that allows for researchers to gain insights from varying insider perspectives, such as community members, farmers, and law enforcement points of view.

This project enhanced the researchers' knowledge about specific rural crimes and their links to other crime problems in the state. Traveling to different parts of the state, stark differences in geographical regions and the unique types of issues faced by law enforcement became apparent. Such insights become illuminated via methodological approaches that involve "going the distance" (see Shukla & Inglis, 2023) to visit rural communities in diverse areas. To the extent that these types of approaches are labor-intensive, and involve extensive time commitments, planning, resources, and financial costs, such methods of studying rural crime can be difficult and inaccessible to some. Access may also be difficult for those without gatekeepers who can facilitate connections to outsiders.

### ***Limitations***

While the findings presented here are based on data from a small sample, more than half of all ODAFF rural investigators participated in the study. Small sample size is a limitation, however compared to similar studies, the sample is sufficient and surpassed sample size in other studies. Lynn, Osborne, and Edwards (2023), for example, interviewed 11 agricultural investigators, which accounted for approximately 10% of such officers in the

United States. Researchers interviewed and visited agents from diverse parts of the state, however, not all parts of the state were covered. As a result, data that was collected focused on information about specific parts of the state. For example, southeastern Oklahoma primarily faces timber crime, whereas central Oklahoma primarily faces cattle theft cases. Further, the data presented here was gathered during a specific period of time and do not account for any changes to personnel or locations that may have occurred.

### ***Conclusion: Why They Are Important***

Within Oklahoma, ODAFF investigators are a critical presence for responding to rural crimes. Their experience working and residing in rural communities uniquely positions them to be effective first responders to rural crimes. These law enforcement officials are more than just law enforcement officers. They are also insiders with insider industry knowledge who support local law enforcement, often operating with limited staff, resources, and time. ODAFF presence at “crime scenes” and during phases of initial investigations cannot be underestimated. The knowledge agents bring to the scene of crimes and the training of others is pivotal for identifying and tracking offenders, assisting victims with recovery efforts, and gathering evidence to support the building of strong cases for prosecution. The field encounters with the rural investigators illuminated the unique role these agents play in responses to rural crimes. They provide essential training and support to local law enforcement and serve as front-line investigators of rural crimes across the state. Assisting victimized farmers and ranchers and working alongside local law enforcement defines who they are and what they do.

As with any crime scene response, initial actions of first responders can make or break cases. With regards to rural crimes, officers and those with limited agricultural knowledge may miss important details or key evidence in initial responses. This was emphasized and reiterated during the interviews, field visits, and training class. Like other law enforcement officials charged with conducting field investigations, the unique attire worn by ODAFF agents is intentional and purposeful. Their cowboy-themed “uniforms” play an important instrumental role in allowing agents to blend in with the people and settings within which they operate; they further play a symbolic role in establishing an external presentation of “who they are.” The Chief expanded on this during his interview, stating:

“This is what we wear. Jeans and boots and starched shirt, and a hat... We don’t present ourselves as anything other than what we truly are... There was a need for someone who knew where they [farmers and ranchers] were coming from.”

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