Editors' Introduction
Rural Crime, Justice and Disaster: Impacts, Response and Recovery

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Introduction

This special issue of the International Journal of Rural Criminology (IJRC) is a product of the symposium held at the University of New England (UNE) in Armidale, titled *Rural Crime, Justice and Disaster: Impacts, Response and Recovery* (29 November 2023). As the frequency and severity of disasters escalate globally, the purpose of this gathering was to engage, discuss and find ways to respond to an urgent and often under-examined question: how do disasters disturb social order and create conditions conducive to crime and injustice in rural communities?

Co-hosted by the Centre for Rural Criminology (UNE), the International Society for the Study of Rural Crime, UNE's Australian Centre for Agriculture and Law, and supported by the Australian and New Zealand Society of Criminology, the symposium reflected a rich tapestry of collaborative, interdisciplinary, and cross-sector engagement. The symposium brought together an internationally distinguished group of academics, police, community practitioners and other thought leaders to scrutinise the less visible, but highly impactful implications that emerge in disaster contexts, from shifts in policing practices, to surges in domestic and family violence, emerging environmental and ideological conflicts, and the deterioration of access to justice.

Key contributions included a keynote by Deputy Commissioner (Emergency Management) Peter Thurtell (NSW Police Force) who highlighted operational challenges from an emergency-management standpoint; Emeritus Professor Joseph F. Donnermeyer (Ohio State University and UNE Adjunct) on the erosion of justice access in disaster-affected regions; Associate Professor Bridget Harris (Monash University) on intersecting rural geographies, family violence, and animal cruelty; Distinguished Professor Rob White (University of Tasmania and UNE Adjunct) on the multifaceted crossover crimes spawned by crises; and Centre for Rural Criminology co-directors (UNE), Kyle Mulrooney and Alistair Harkness, who introduced the concept of "rural green policing", reflecting on ideological conflict, environmentalism, and sustainability tensions in rural areas.

Other presenters include Susanne Karstedt, Neil Argent, Marg Camilleri, Chloe Keel, Laura Bedford, Cassie Pedersen, Andrew Lawson and Andrew Groves. Tarah Hodgkinson travelled to the event from Canada, and Jessica Peterson and Joe Donnermeyer travelled from the United States.

The framing of the event was one of urgency and action, hence the subtitle of *Impacts, Response and Recovery*. Central to this was the active involvement of police practitioners, with nearly 100 officers from across Australia (and representatives from New Zealand Police) in attendance. Their engagement underscored the importance of bridging scholarly insight with experience and practice, and the need to anticipate and prevent rural vulnerabilities by recognising how disasters intersect with crime and how these dynamics shape broader concerns of resilience and wellbeing in rural communities.

Taken together, the symposium highlighted the complex entanglements between disaster, crime, and justice in rural contexts. The starting point here was the recognition that disasters do not simply disrupt the physical environment. Rather, they destabilise social

relations, strain institutional capacity, and expose structural vulnerabilities that are often magnified outside metropolitan centres and in rural communities. For rural criminology, this raises important conceptual challenges, including how we come to understand disaster as both a catalyst for specific forms of crime and as a broader condition that reshapes patterns of harm, justice, and resilience. For police practice, it underscores the pressing need to balance immediate crisis response with longer-term strategies of prevention, adaptation, and community engagement, ensuring that rural policing remains responsive to the distinct vulnerabilities and strengths of disaster-affected communities.

It is against this backdrop that the need arises to step back and consider more closely the broader theoretical and conceptual terrain of rural disaster. In what follows, we will briefly examine how disaster has been framed and understood in the extant literature, the ways it intersects with crime and justice, and the particular vulnerabilities and capacities that shape experiences of disaster in rural communities.

Understanding Disaster in Rural Contexts

Framing Disaster

Disasters have been explored and understood in various ways across the social sciences. Early approaches, primarily focused on geography, emphasised the physical event (e.g., fires, floods, storms etc.) of disasters as extreme natural hazards. Overtime, the social sciences have emphasised the 'human' element of disasters, noting that disasters are of course a sudden and often extreme physical event but also too that they can be a product of social and political conditions and that the 'implications' of disasters may also rest, in part, on these. For example, a significant critique, aimed at both the causes and consequences of disaster, have been levied against the framing of disasters as 'natural'. In terms of causation, for instance, some have advanced a focus on the wider 'human-made' ecological and environment harms (e.g., urbanisation, deforestation etc.) which contribute to increasingly unpredictable weather and subsequent disaster (United Nations University – Institute for Environment and Human Security, 2024). With respect to consequences, others have pointed to the wider social context, suggesting that pre-existing vulnerabilities, including poverty or weak infrastructure, significantly limits the community capacity to cope with disaster, leading to greater harms (see Kelman, 2020). From this perspective, disaster is framed as a social vulnerability and the accumulation of risk and mismanagement prior to any event.

Flowing from this, the concept of disaster resilience has gained prominence, focusing on the capacity of community to prepare, withstand and recover from adverse events (Natural Hazards Center, 2020). Other influential frameworks include political ecology, which examines how power, politics, and economic structures may produce unequal exposure to disasters. Critical disaster scholars have taken this a step further, suggesting that defining a community as being 'at risk' or 'resilient' can serve political ends and that answers to the 'how' of disasters unfolding need to examine chronic structural conditions, not simply as isolated and sudden events (Remes & Horowitz, 2021). Taken together, the dominant view of disasters is that they are, in part, socially constructed processes, combining an exposure to hazardous events with a need to understand how social vulnerability relates to the

precipitation and 'impacts' of these events, with the concept of resilience and community adaptation as key to reducing harm.

For its part, criminology has only recently begun to engage with disaster. For example, Frailing and Harper (2017) have argued that, as disaster has traditionally been in the domain of sociology and disasters studies, human behaviour was a central focus, but crime and anti-social behaviour was often overlooked and, in fact, deemed as rare. By contrast, much classic disaster research documented the prosocial behaviours which arise in the context of disaster, focused on the role of social solidarity rather than the anomic conditions it may breed and the crime it therefore facilitates. The authors offer events such as Hurricane Hugo (1989) and Hurricane Katrina (2005), noting the crime that occurred during these storms (e.g., looting, violence) requires a shift away from sociological explanations of behaviour to criminological explanations which can account for the 'darker side' of disaster wherein anti-social and criminal behaviour emerges alongside solidarity and altruism. To this end, 'disaster criminology' as a sub-field has begun applying criminological theory to help us understand crime in disaster contexts. For example, social disorganisation theory may provide insight into how the collapse of community solidarity and local institutions can focus crime, while routine activity theory may explain how disasters create opportunities for crime when guardianship is low (Frailing & Harper, 2017).

Despite recent developments, the engagement of criminology remains rather limited and comprehensive theoretical integrations remains elusive, especially with the added dimension of rurality. Yet, important new work is beginning to fill this gap. Namely, research on disaster policing has seen significant interest, exploring how law enforcement roles expand and adapt in disaster contexts (see Matczak, 2025). Emerging scholarship in rural criminology has also started to foreground the vulnerabilities and strengths of rural communities when confronted by disaster (see Mulrooney et al, 2025). These developments signal a growing recognition that disasters are not peripheral to criminological inquiry but central to understanding how crime, justice, and security function under extreme conditions. Building on this foundation, it is crucial to examine more directly the ways disasters intersect with crime and criminal justice. The next section considers how disasters not only reshape the physical and social environment but also create new opportunities for offending and pose significant challenges for policing, justice access, and community order.

The Intersections Between Crime, Justice and Disaster

When a major disaster occurs, the normal functioning of society may be disrupted or, indeed, altogether suspended. It is in this disruption that opportunities for crime and anti-social behaviour may flourish. The breakdown of routine and expected order, coupled with a strain on resources during a disaster may catalyse certain new forms of crime or even exacerbate existing ones. Studies and post-disaster reports have identified several recurrent patterns as they relate to crime, harmful behaviour and disaster:

Perhaps the crime which has received the most attention in the context of disaster is 'looting' or the theft of goods from businesses, public facilities and personal homes, as well as associated damage to property. While media portrayals of looting during disasters often

sensationalise – and widespread looting may not be as significant as commonly believed – such crimes have been evidenced under certain conditions (Guarino, 2015). For example, when properties are left vacant and police and security services are stretched thin and focused on disaster response, opportunity for looting may arise. While reports of lawlessness and looting in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina were deemed to be misleading and, indeed, contributing to the crisis, there were verified instances of property crime, including stores being broken into and cars stolen, amidst the evacuation efforts. Here, however, it is important to understand the context in which such offences may occur and, as such, to distinguish between looting for survival and opportunistic theft. From the perspective of victims, access to justice is especially important as, for example, those who have items stolen during disaster may not have a chance of recovery/justice when cameras are down, police are elsewhere, etc.

Disasters often provide fertile conditions for exploitation and subsequent economic crimes and frauds. For example, we can consider the inflation of prices on essential goods (e.g., housing; electricity; fuel, building material, water) in the wake of disasters. For example, during the early days of COVID-19 in 2020, essential items, including masks, sanitizers, and toilet paper became prime targets for price gouging. In Australia, dominant supermarket chains faced criticism for similar opportunistic pricing in low-competition areas. Still, not all such behaviour is illegal but rather it is exploitative and nevertheless harmful. For example, in the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy, Uber's fare 'surge pricing' doubled ride costs in NYC limiting capacity for travel. Fraudulent schemes may also proliferate in such conditions from fake charities soliciting donations to aid those impacted by disaster to contractors or suppliers advertising and selling goods they had no intent to provide. For example, following the 2010 Haiti earthquake, international aid agencies and local governments had to combat scams seeking to profit from foreign aid (Buss, 2013). Another example comes from Australia where, during an extreme drought (2017-2020), Stephen John was found guilty of defrauding farmers of $80,000 in a scam where he promised to supply feed for animals (Herron & Davies, 2020).

A less visible harm which can be exasperated in times of disaster is that of domestic and family violence. Indeed, the conditions of disaster, including high stress, trauma, the loss of housing and unemployment can contribute to significantly heightened interpersonal tensions where women and children are disproportionately affected by violence. For example, Schumacher et al., (2010) highlighted a 98 percent increase in physical victimisation of women after Hurricane Katrina. Likewise, in Australia, Parkinson (2019) provided evidence of both increased and new domestic violence following the 2009 Black Saturday bushfires in the State of Victoria. Another study, this time focused on India, Nepal and Pakistan, found an increase in intimate partner violence wherein a 1° Celsius increase in the annual mean temperature was associated with a 4.5 percent increase (Zhu et al., 2023). Notably, such context can not only 'amplify' existing abuse but also lead to new abuse which was not previously enacted by perpetrators. Further, in disaster context, legal and community responses may also be lacklustre, or all together absent as such services are preoccupied with response and recovery to the physical fall out to the environment and infrastructure.

Disasters can also lead to or enable crimes against the environment. For example, as debris management post-disaster is often costly and regulated, individuals or companies responsible for clean-up may see an opportunity to illegally dump debris or hazardous waste. The New South Wales Environment Protection Authority (2023) in Australia notes a reported rise in new illegal dump sites after natural disasters. Looking beyond the individual and to white collar or corporate crime, another area of corporate negligence or malfeasance. Here much attention has been given to the precipitation or cause of disasters as well as their subsequent implications. For instance, responsible for the 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill, BP was found to be 'grossly negligent' in the lead up to this disaster. In 2012, BP reached an agreement with the US Department of Justice, pleading guilty to 14 criminal charges, violations of the Clean Water and Migratory Bird Treaty acts, leading to the biggest criminal fine in US history of $4.5bn (U.S. Department of Justice, 2013; E.D. La., 2014).).

While limited, these various forms of crime illustrate how disasters can contribute to a criminogenic environment and lead to crime and associated harms. However, a key component to this environment is the policing and governance, or the lack thereof, in disasters contexts. Disasters can profoundly impact the criminal justice system in multiple ways. Policing is perhaps the area most acutely affected, especially in the response phase of disaster as forces find both their roles and resources stretched to the limit. Indeed, in disaster scenarios the police often find themselves assuming and reconciling dual and, at times, competing roles. On the one hand, officers must continue to uphold and enforce the law. On the other, they may be required to perform more emergency oriented functions, including evacuations and rescue efforts through to water and food delivery. The dynamic becomes all the more complex for policing agencies when we consider that disaster management is a multi-agency effort, with authority shared across various organisations from other government actors, non-government organisations, volunteers and private actors.

As outlined above, tensions may arise, as officers balance emergency response with law enforcement, with the former, at times, requiring the suspension of rigid enforcement and a recognition of the shifting context of disaster. As with much of what we have covered to now, much of the impact of response rests on pre-disaster contexts. For example, empirical evidence from Australia supports the concept of 'resilience policing' wherein community trust and adaptive protocols can transform police into effective crisis managers (Blaustein et al, 2023). By contrast, when forces become overwhelmed, disorder occurs, coordination collapses, and intervention by military or private agents can undermine both governance and accountability (Matczak et al, 2021). This suggests that strong community-police relationships, along with the right protocols can allow the police to be a resilient force multiplier. Conversely, in communities where community-police relationships are strained or fractured, the crisis may magnify the inherent distrust and subsequently the disaster itself. Together, the conditions of disaster can therefore strengthen police legitimacy or further undermine it.

Thinking of the criminal justice system more broadly, we must consider governance and the concept of access to justice in the context of disaster (see, for instance, Hale, Stewart-North & Harkness, 2021). Here we can consider how the disaster context places increased

strain on the justice system as systems are disrupted, including courts and prisons. For example, during Hurricane Katrina, the New Orleans city jail was not evacuated, despite being within the mandatory evacuation zone. As a result, some of those incarcerated adults were left to manage significant flood water and without access to food, water or medical care (see Dixon et al, 2024). Another 'justice' issue in these contexts is the use of special emergency legal measures and opportunities for misuse and abuse. Here, for instance, we can consider a curfew, mandated to prevent looting, yet if enforced in an unreasonable or heavy-handed way, might result in unnecessary arrests or conflict between the police and citizens.

Recent work in rural criminology has noted that, in rural communities, governance issues may be magnified by limited institutional capacity and sometimes by wider ideological clashes which are the core of debates around disasters. For example, Mulrooney et al (2025) note that as climate-related disasters increase, police may find themselves mediating new forms of social conflict, including ideological clashes over issues like climate change and renewable energy. A devastating bushfire may be blamed (in-part) on climate change and enflame tensions between those seeking climate action and those defending traditional industries that are seen to be contributing to climate change (e.g., agriculture). The justice system, especially the police, may be drawn into protests or disputes (e.g., land-use) that have a wider 'justice' dimension as it relates to disaster. This suggests that disasters are not simply moments of acute crisis, response and recovery but also may be social flashpoints for debates around justice and associated policy to pursue this.

Yet the impacts of disaster are not evenly distributed. Rural communities face unique challenges shaped by geography, infrastructure, economic and socio-cultural conditions. To understand the full criminological significance of disaster, it is therefore necessary to consider the distinctive vulnerabilities of rural contexts and how certain aspects such as remoteness, resource scarcity, and structural disadvantage may compound the risk of disaster in these spaces and how these vulnerabilities intersect with crime and justice.

Rural Vulnerabilities in Disaster Contexts

Rural communities often bear the brunt of disasters in ways that differ markedly from their urban counterparts. Several factors, related to the dynamics of 'place and space', make rural areas particularly vulnerable and can compound the impacts of disasters on local communities. Of course, the most obvious of these is geographic isolation. Rural community and farms are often in remote areas and a significant physical distance from key infrastructure and services. For instance, a rural community struck by floods may be physically cut off from resourcing for extended periods of time. Remoteness may also have implication on evacuation efforts as residents must travel long distances to reach safety, and the transportation infrastructure may not allow for rapid travel. Formal disaster assistance itself may take time to respond to remote areas due the distance and a lack of accessibility. For instance, during Hurricane Irma (2017) in Forida, assistance did not arrive in rural areas in a timely manner, leaving these communities waiting longer for support than densely populated urban areas (Natural Hazards Center, 2020).

As indicated above, distance and remoteness are often compounded by lack of infrastructure and resource deficits more broadly. Such infrastructure, including hospitals, robust power grids or communication systems, and resources, such as specialised response equipment, dedicated fire or policing services may be present, but in a limited capacity, severally limiting the ability to respond to sudden events. Furthermore, many rural areas rely on a small number of local institutions such as a single school that may double as a shelter or one police station with limited staffing, or one grocery store for supplies. These 'single points of failure' mean that if they are impacted, the community has little recourse for response. These infrastructure gaps significantly impede disaster response and recovery in rural areas and make communities more vulnerable to prolonged hardship. For example, in August of 2025, unprecedented snowfall in the Northern Tablelands of Australia left over 27,000 homes without power, thousands of these for days, with hundreds of vehicles stuck and significant damage to infrastructure (Nivison, 2025). With major highways and airports closed, along with power being affected by fallen trees in difficult to reach areas, energy providers struggled to respond.

Rural areas also often have distinct demographic and economic profiles which can increase vulnerability. For example, rural communities often have high rates of poverty and low-income households. Related to this, rural communities may have smaller tax bases lead to financial constraints for response resources or less funding for prevention and mitigation projects. Aging populations may be especially at-risk during disasters, requiring rapid assistance, while the prevalence of substandard infrastructure or housing may be more susceptible to damage, increasing risk of harm for occupants. One analysis notes that rural communities often consist of "low-cost homes (such as mobile homes), individuals with lower incomes and education levels, relatively older populations, and people whose livelihoods depend on resource-focused occupations" (Natural Hazards Center, 2020). This combination of factors means both higher disaster impacts but also a slower recovery.

Indeed, considering peoples livelihoods, a strong dependence on local mono-economies or natural resources further pronounces this rural vulnerability. For example, in NSW Australia, farmers have recently faced severe hardship from a cycle of disasters, including drought, bushfires and floods, compounded by a devastating mouse plague (White et al, 2024), greatly impacting their livelihoods and the farming industry more broadly. Likewise, cut off by landslips and flood damage, made worse by a depreciating road infrastructure, the small town of Walcha, NSW faced not only significant isolation but financial strain as major roads were cut off, significantly limiting travel and associated economic activity.

These vulnerabilities also may contribute to exacerbating existing criminogenic risks or even create new opportunities for crime. For example, physical isolation and limited police presence may reduce deterrence, leading to "would-be offenders" who "might exploit this vacuum… with impunity" (Donnermeyer, 2022). Indeed, such disasters may erode existing community cohesion and collective efficacy that may typically aid in restraining such behaviour. Additionally, the stress and trauma associated with the experience of disasters, combined with pre-existing rural social challenges such as domestic

violence, substance abuse (see Thomas et al, 2019), and mental health crises may intensify, while stretched justice systems and medical systems reduces access to assistance for victims. The geographic and institutional isolation also means rural disasters attract less media attention, and experience delayed external support, leaving opportunity for crimes, for example scams targeted at the elderly, and leaving such crime unmonitored or unresolved (see Peterson, 2024; Ceccato & Abraham, 2022). These vulnerabilities to disaster and disaster related crime are compounded by changes in climate and weather. Indeed, more frequent exposure to rural disasters can lead to a cumulative erosion of social cohesion, local institutions and infrastructure and overall resilience, culminating in a wicked mix of depopulation, the loss of local economies, crime and community decline.

Rural Resilience and the Capacity to Adapt

Understanding disaster in rural spaces, and its bearing on crime and disorder, should not overlook the strengths of rural communities to adapt and be resilient. For example, a recent systematic review, examining how social capital may facilitate community disaster resilience noted five critical mechanisms, including: (i) social learning; (ii) collective action; (iii) disaster preparedness; (iv) information communication; and (v) moral or civic responsibility (see Zhao et al, 2024). Considering this, despite their vulnerabilities, rural communities may enable resilience in the face of disaster, driven, in part by strong social capital, local knowledge, informal networks, and adaptive institutions.

With respect to social learning, we can consider how generational or place-based knowledge, developed from a collective memory and associated cultural narrative, passed down by local elders, farmers or long-term residents, can provide important information and wisdom related to environmental risks and how to respond and, indeed, survive. For example, case studies from communities, including rural Chile, Fiji, and Indonesia, suggest that social learning emanating from local practices enables people to prepare for or respond to disasters effectively (Zhao et al, 2024). In terms of collective action, rural residents may also mobilise more collectively and, subsequently, effectively due to established social bonds. For instance, Partelow (2021) highlights bonding, bridging, and linking social capital facilitated critical collective assistance in recovery in response to an earthquake Gili Trawangan, Indonesia (see also Ulubasoglu et al, 2024). While lacking in resources and infrastructure, with this front of mind, rural communities may also maintain informal preparedness and readiness for disaster. For example, studies in rural China, Australia, and Japan show how norms, trust, and networks foster behaviours including bushfire readiness, flood preparation, and disaster drills (see Madsen and O'Mullan, 2016; Zhao et al, 2024). This may also extend institutionally. As outlined above, the example of police in the East Gippsland fires demonstrated how a rural policing environment where officers personally knew residents and local leaders allowed for quick, flexible emergency response integrated with the community (Blaustein et al, 2023).

Table 1

Mechanisms and rural community expression and evidence

Mechanisms (Zhao et al, 2024)	Rural Community Expression & Evidence
Social Learning	Intergenerational and place-based sharing of survival knowledge
Collective Action	Local self-organisation in rescue, rebuilding, resource-sharing
Disaster Preparedness	Informal drills, resource stockpiling, equipment readiness
Information Communication	Trusted, localised dissemination by neighbours and volunteers
Moral / Civic Responsibility	Community norms driving voluntary mutual aid

With regard to information communication, while communication infrastructure may be limited, trusted local networks, including neighbours, church groups, or local leaders, may function as reliable sources for coordination, filling gaps where formal channels may fail or be absent. For example, Ulubasoglu et al. (2024) advance 'the power of community', emphasising how strong social bonds can facilitate faster and more trustworthy sharing of disaster-related information. Finally, considering rural manifestation of 'civic community', trust and communal solidarity shape disaster response behaviours by motivating individuals to act above or beyond self-interest in times of crisis. Notably, rural spaces often exhibit embedded norms related to reciprocity, volunteerism and community solidarity more broadly (Lee & Thomas, 2009).

Together, these mechanisms, shaped by rurality suggest that far from rural fragility or a stand-alone rural risk-environment for disaster, rural residents may be proactive agents of response and recovery, whose unique socio-cultural dynamics, related to place and space, are critical assets of disaster resilience. At the same time, however, this raises important theoretical and empirical questions for criminology and, indeed, rural criminology to understand and capture the ways in which rurality can at once inform an environment of disaster and crime that is harmful yet resilient, vulnerable yet capable.

Conceptual and Theoretical Debates in Criminology

The intersection of disaster and rurality raises several conceptual and theoretical debates in criminology. Yet, as noted by Frailing and Harper (2017), the disaster crime nexus is vastly underdeveloped, and we would add that this is especially so in rural and regional environments. To this end, the need for integrated theory is apparent, drawing from areas such as rural criminology, green criminology, classical theories of crime and more. As we have seen, Routine Activity Theory may help us to understand opportunistic crimes in disasters, while social disorganisation theory and civic community theory provides insights into the post-disaster breakdown of institutions and community and/or its resilience capacity.

There are also significant debates on the very definition of crime and harm in disaster contexts with some calling for a move beyond traditional definitions of crime, as prescribed by the breaking of black letter law, to an approach which takes a social harm perspective and broadens the lens. This requires us to look beyond individual offenders committing crime in the midst of opportunity to, for example, consider the legal yet harmful behaviour of corporations to the in-action of institutions and government.

Beyond these moral and analytical debates surrounding the boundaries of criminology, criminological engagement with disaster offers us a number of perspectives which can provide productive insights to the disaster/crime nexus, especially in rural contexts. Green Criminology, for example, offers perspectives to map climate and crime linkages, diagnosing causation, by treating environmental harm and its implications as central to questions of justice. White (2018) argues that criminology should treat climate-driven harms and state or corporate environmental misconduct issues of justice. Connected to this we can consider how 'disasters' may be considerably amplified by human (in)actions and how crime may intensify during extreme weather events (see White, 2020). This is particularly apparent in rural spaces where such harms may greatly impact rural land, species and livelihoods.

Looking to policing and the maintenance of order during disaster, we can consider procedural justice research (Mazerolle et al, 2013; Sunshine & Tyler, 2003). In the context of disaster, legitimacy is an especially important resource as capacity is often stretched thin and information is imperfect. Here strong community relationships and the establishment of fair processes and prepared responses which prioritise voice, respect and neutrality are particularly apparent for success in public compliance, whether for evacuations, roadblocks or the reporting of crime and harm (McAdam, 2022; Blaustein et al, 2023). Cultural criminology, with its attention to symbols, narrative and myth, can help us better understand the framing of disaster which shapes response (Ferrell et al, 2015). For instance, where overstated, a media driven focus on widespread looting and lawlessness can legitimate powerful legal responses while distracting from structural contributions and failings (Tierney et al, 2006). By contrast, evidenced-based understanding and messaging can prevent the unnecessary misuse of power and associated stigmatisation, supporting proportionate policing and safeguarding civil liberties.

Rural criminology provides critical insights into how crime, justice, and social order manifest in sparsely populated and resource-constrained contexts (Hogg & Scott, 2017; Donnermeyer, 2017). Its contribution lies primarily in reframing the crime/disaster nexus to account for the distinctive social, spatial, and institutional dynamics of rurality. To this end, rural criminology insists that rural contexts produce qualitatively different conditions of vulnerability, resilience, social control, and governance which, in context, produce a unique criminogenic environment and resilient adaptation (Weisheit et al, 2006; Hogg et al, 2017).

In terms of integrated theory, we could also consider a three-part model which incorporates an understanding of how structural conditions, cultural norms and institutional legitimacy combine to produce a context of disaster in which domestic and family violence may flourish in rural spaces. Rural settings are defined not only by geographic isolation and

resource scarcity but also by distinctive social structures which can simultaneously promote solidarity and reinforce harmful behaviour (Barclay, et al, 2004). For instance, limited access to resources and services along with the symbolic framing of rural life as resilient, stoic, and self-reliant can discourage disclosure of abuse and mask its occurrences. Disasters intensify these pressures, as a combination of displacement, financial hardship, and trauma elevate the risk of violence, while institutional responses are diverted to managing immediate physical threats. Added to this, male peer support theory (DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2013) provides an important cultural and gendered dimension. This framework argues that violence against women is not simply the product of individual pathology but is reinforced within networks of male peers who may legitimate, excuse, or even encourage abusive behaviour. In rural communities, where peer networks are especially dense and often overlap with work, sport, or social groups, male peer support can be a powerful force shaping norms of masculinity and associated violence (Mulrooney et al, 2025). During disasters, when stress, uncertainty, and economic disruption heighten insecurities, peer groups can amplify these attitudes, normalising violence as an outlet.

Finally, an institutional dimension of this considers police–community relationships which mediate both the accessibility and legitimacy of justice in rural disaster contexts. For example, some rural residents report negative attitudes with policing, citing issues such as slow response times, limited presence, or perceptions of bias (Mulrooney et al, year). In the context of disaster, these tensions are magnified as the attention of police is redirected emergency response and public order, leaving domestic violence issues hidden or unattended. In communities where trust in law enforcement is already fragile, victims may also be reluctant to report abuse, fearing disbelief or inaction (DeKeseredy, 2021). This silence may also be compounded by the 'disaster myth' that community solidarity is universal in rural crises, which further obscures the gendered harms occurring in the privacy of the home. Subsequently, poor police–community relations may not only reduce reporting but also undermine the potential for procedural justice, leaving justice inaccessible to victims and offenders emboldened.

This brief foray into criminological concepts and theory in the context of disaster has merely scratched the surface. Yet, it does make evident that disasters must be understood not simply as random physical events, but as processes connected to wider phenomenon, including social vulnerability, resilience, governance, and justice. Criminology, and rural criminology in particular, is only beginning to grapple with these complexities. This issue, we hope, provides an important step in advancing this research agenda, bringing together scholars who interrogate the disaster/crime nexus from diverse theoretical, empirical, and methodological perspectives.

Rural Crime, Justice and Disaster: Impacts, Response and Recovery

Volume 9, Issue 2 is opened by Joseph F. Donnermeyer's reflection on the central role of place in rural criminology, urging a reversal of the pre-dominant urban-centric logic by putting community and rural dynamics at the heart of disaster and crime analysis. Building on this, Neil Argent explores the multifunctional countryside with attention to how socio-political and environmental transformations, particularly in the context of climate change,

work to reshape the regulation of rural life, producing new opportunities for deviance and conflict. Legal and governance perspectives are brought to the fore in Andrew Lawson's analysis of environmental law, which contrasts the "fast track" of immediate disaster response with the slower but equally vital track of reforming law and governance to mitigate disasters. His discussion of duties of care and rights of nature highlights the preventive, justice-oriented dimensions of disaster.

Complementing this, Rob White's contribution addresses how climate change transforms law enforcement paradigms, arguing for innovative policing and emergency management strategies as climate-induced migration, resource conflicts, and environmental crimes reshape rural justice challenges. The human–animal nexus in disasters is examined by Cassie Pedersen, who critiques the rural idyll and argues for an anti-speciesist rural criminology of disaster. This article reframes farm animals not merely as property but as victims, positioning speciesism alongside other structural oppressions that contribute to disaster and harm. Extending the exploration of non-traditional crime and harm, Jenny Wise examines disaster (dark) tourism in rural contexts, showing how post-disaster tourist flows can both support communities and generate new risks, deviance, and justice dilemmas. The last disaster-themed article is from Emilia Jurgielewicz-Delegacz who, based on extensive surveying of residents of rural Areas in Poland, explores sentiments about natural disasaters as a threat against their communities.

Together, these contributions extend and diversify the criminological gaze into disaster. They demonstrate how disasters implicate issues of place, governance, policing, law, environment, animals, and culture and, in doing so, challenge us to rethink the boundaries of crime and justice and its place in studies of disaster. Indeed, together, the articles in this special issue move the disaster/crime nexus forward by embedding it in the spatial realities of rural life and by insisting that both vulnerability and resilience, both harm and adaptation, must be central to our collective analyses. In so doing, this issue not only enriches the field of disaster criminology but also re-affirms the value of rural criminology in broadening our understanding of justice in times of crisis, underscoring that disasters are critical sites of contestation, resilience, and transformation in rural communities.

Other Inclusions in this Issue

This issue is also accompanied by a non-rural disaster themed paper, but one which we are excited to publish. Carlos Alvarez and Daniel Walter Scott, both from Texas A&M International University in Texas, have collected a wealth of original data in the form of police investigative reports. They use this data to analyse and evaluate the activity of organised crime gangs along the Texas-México border. This important work will no doubt influence policy and practice going forward.

Willie Clack has reviewed the most recent contribution to the ever-growing volume of rural criminology books, this one being Joe Donnermeyer's *Farm Crime: An International Perspective* published by Routledge. A reminder to readers here that we are always happy to receive reviews of books which are rural criminological in nature.

Immediately following this introduction are two in-memoriams. It is with very deep sadness that we have lost two terrific rural criminological scholars – and great friends to many. Alistair Harkness, Kyle Mulrooney and Karen Bullock pay homage to the legacy of the late Christian Mouhanna, and Joe Donnermeyer provides a personal tribute to the memory of the late Rob Smith.

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