



Locating crime in context and place: perspectives on regional, rural and remote Australia

Ralph Weisheit

To cite this article: Ralph Weisheit (2017) Locating crime in context and place: perspectives on regional, rural and remote Australia, *Rural Society*, 26:1, 102-106, DOI: [10.1080/10371656.2017.1283735](https://doi.org/10.1080/10371656.2017.1283735)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10371656.2017.1283735>



Published online: 06 Feb 2017.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 4



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

BOOK REVIEW

Locating crime in context and place: perspectives on regional, rural and remote Australia, edited by A. Harkness, B. Harris and D. Barker, Sydney, The Federation Press, 2016, 223 pp., \$31.43 (paperback), ISBN 978-1760020477

In many ways, Australia is a living laboratory for the study of rural crime. Physically, the country is enormous, but, as the book's introduction notes "... 90.5 per cent of the population resides on 0.22 percent of Australia's land area" (p. 6). As is true in the United States (US) and Canada, Australia's rural areas are also home to a substantial number of native/Aboriginal people who receive fewer social services than urban residents, but attract higher attention from criminal justice authorities. Although many issues raised in this book match research in other countries, particularly the US, Canada and Great Britain, several authors take pain to describe the importance of Australia's unique history and remind readers of differences among rural areas in Australia.

Each of the 20 authors or co-authors works in Australia and, as such, provide insights that might be missed by outsiders. Many of the authors they cite are also Australian. Thus, the book reminds the reader of the volume of research on rural crime in Australia and the number of individuals who have taken up the study of this subject. The book comes on the heels of three fine edited books on rural crime (Barclay, Donnermeyer, Scott, & Hogg, 2007; Donnermeyer, 2016; Mawby & Yarwood, 2011) which include chapters specifically focused on Australia, while Barclay et al. exclusively addresses rural crime and justice in Australia. One unique feature of the book is the closing section where criminal justice practitioners who have worked in rural Australia do a splendid job sharing observations about the challenges and unique opportunities afforded by rural settings and articulating issues, putting a human face on the broader issues described by academics in previous chapters.

The book is divided into three major sections. The first section "Locating Crime," includes four chapters that provide a context for understanding rural crime in Australia. These are the most general chapters covering rural crime. Chapter 1 tackles the difficult issue of defining "rural." While not providing a specific answer, the authors remind readers that "rural" is about more than simply population density. Rural is also about cultural identities and is a complex phenomenon. The chapter highlights, but does not detail, the kinds of issues that might not be familiar to those learning about rural crime, including the influence of population growth and mobility, domestic violence (DV), illicit drugs, race, environmental crimes and the treatment of outsiders. The authors situate these issues within Australian outback stereotypes, sometimes portraying rural Australia as bucolic and crime free, and sometimes emphasising the horror of rural as a "dark or alien environment." This chapter takes many concerns raised by rural researchers in other countries and places them within the historical, cultural and physical context of rural Australia. Though much of what is presented will be familiar to experienced rural crime researchers globally, the material lays the groundwork for chapters that follow.

Chapter 2 disabuses readers of the notion that rural areas are relatively crime free, noting crime rates vary from among areas and some types occur at higher rates in rural areas. Declines in crime rates reported in other western countries are limited primarily to property crime. Declines are also larger in cities than the countryside. The utility of various crime and crime prevention theories, including environmental design, rational choice and defensible space, are considered and application of urban-based theories to rural settings is noted to have limitations. For example, while some rural areas are experiencing population growth, others see population decline, and the link between population shifts and crime, as varying across jurisdictions. As the authors note, "... many of the taken-for-granted precepts of environmental criminology operate almost inversely in rural and regional localities" (p. 33). Further, such offences as internet fraud cross urban–rural boundaries and defy traditional images of crime and place.

Chapter 3 provides an historical context for contemporary rural crime issues. Beginning with the late 1700s, courts and police drew upon the British model of criminal justice that was applied first in more populated areas and only later in remote regions. Local governors could issue ordinances and local criminal justice officials had considerable legal authority. In some cases, judges also acted as prosecutors, with juries composed of military personnel rather than civilians. In some communities, policing was carried out by ex-convicts or military deserters and justice often was carried out by outsiders. In the most sparsely populated areas, police forces were small and faced hostility by local citizens. Local landowners often used the criminal justice system for their own benefit and early policing was directed against Indigenous Australians who resisted encroachment of colonial settlers on their land. Over time, the highly militarised approach to policing was replaced by a civilian force yet problems facing policing highly remote areas remained, including a shortage of criminal justice personnel. Hence, police who arrested individuals might also oversee their punishment, providing historical insight behind current challenges administering justice in rural Australia.

Commencing with Chapter 4, numerical data appear and are contextualised within criminological theories. Social disorganisation posits crime should be concentrated in areas of greatest disadvantage, residential instability and population heterogeneity. This link does not seem to hold for rural Australia, however, and is consistent with American findings social disorganisation theory helps explain homicide rates in urban areas, but is less useful for considering greater levels associated with rurality (Weisheit & Wells, 2005). The chapter also illustrates crime rate variability among small, rural cities and towns. The further one goes into detail, the more clear it becomes, "There is evidently no simple relationship between the size or remoteness of an area and the rates of crime" (p. 58) which is frustrating to anyone hoping traditional theories of crime and place will illuminate the workings of crime in rural areas.

The book's second major section, "Criminal Justice Issues and Responses" includes eight chapters addressing specific crime/justice issues in Australia, beginning with "The Place of Indigenous People." Given the high percentage of Indigenous people living in rural Australia and the criminal justice system's exertion of social control, this chapter continues illustrating the importance of historical context for framing our understanding of current circumstances. Indigenous communities have been, and continue to be, seen as places where crime is a problem that lacks resources to address. Indigenous rural communities in Australia provide yet another example of the failure of social disorganisation to explain rural crime as they have common social characteristics that should lead to low crime rates, according to the

theory. In reality, however, there is considerable variation in crime among Indigenous communities. Crime-control policies are argued to have been too often imposed on these communities by a colonial government. Programmes arising from and guided by the communities themselves are recommended as a solution although the author rightfully recognises the challenge of getting the government to abandon top-down responses and provide support for locally driven initiatives.

Chapter 6 addresses “family crime,” one of the most studied rural crime issues, drawing heavily on a study of violence against women by men in regional/rural Victoria (George & Harris, 2014) which has much in common with rural DV findings from other countries. Understanding and responding to DV is compounded by a lack of good data partially due to victims’ social and physical isolation. Available data suggest that DV may be a greater issue and more difficult to address in rural areas where authorities and abusers may be acquaintances, or even relatives, and where a mindset of self-sufficiency may make victims hesitant to turn to authorities than in large cities. With rural courts often having small waiting rooms and less security, victims pursuing legal channels may be in close proximity to offenders before trials. Further, rural courts often lack video conferencing which allows victims to appear before court from a safe location.

Chapter 7 addresses the lesser studied issue of “Policing of Protest in Rural and Regional Contexts.” As with the chapter on Indigenous peoples, it draws heavily on historical context to consider riots and other citizen uprisings. Chapter 8, “Farm Crime” summarises much of what is known about this well-studied topic described by Barclay (2016) as the quintessential rural crime. Much contemporary research about farm crime has been conducted in Australia, supported in part by periodic farm crime surveys, and crimes include: theft, vandalism, arson, illegal hunting, illegal dumping and drug production. Of these, most attention is given to livestock, equipment and commodity (included firearm theft by organised criminal groups) theft. Chapter 9 covers access to justice services in rural Australia, noting the social cost to communities already disadvantaged by income, basic health services and lower education levels. Problems with consolidating court and other services are discussed along with advantages/disadvantages of using communication technology.

Chapter 10 addresses journalism and regional courts, an important but understudied issue. Authors report their original research interviewing small-town/regional “... journalists, editors, victims of crime, police, defence lawyers and offenders who had received media coverage after committing a minor offence” (p. 121). The effects of newspaper coverage of relatively small offences, such as drinking in public or minor theft, highlights media’s power in rural areas to “name and shame” citizens. The chapter highlights competing pressures on local media, particularly an obligation to inform readers about community happenings and short supply of major crimes resulting in minor offences filling reporting gaps which also reinforces community norms against such behaviours. In cases where charges are dropped or expunged from official records, news coverage provides social sanctions (i.e. job loss, punishment to offenders’ family members) for the behaviour with consequences that can last for years.

Chapter 11 highlights rurality’s role in administration of punishment by the criminal justice system. In Australia, crime rates have either declined or stabilised since the 1990s, but imprisonment rates have continued to rise. With most Australian prisons located far from city centres, rural citizens often fear crime by outsiders who make up a substantial

proportion of the prison population. Consequently, there are concerns about prison escapes, prisoner families relocating, and the negative public image prisons bring to rural communities. Although rural land is relatively less expensive and rural poverty makes the possibility of prison employment appealing, rural areas provide the least access to social services, such as mental health treatment, that might benefit prisoners. Chapter 12 covers the challenges to crime prevention in rural communities and limitations of urban models of prevention, lamenting the limited research identifying evidence-based crime prevention practices. The author argues effective prevention strategies should be based on sound theories of rural crime. Echoing arguments in earlier chapters is recognition that effective crime prevention strategies might vary from among rural communities depending on contextual factors (industry nature, geographic isolation, population size, household income, unemployment, Indigenous population size and youth services availability). Effective crime prevention strategies, including random breath testing to reduce impaired driving, increased use of security devices to counter farm crime and encouraging police to be proactive rather than reactive to crime, are recommended and impediments to rural crime prevention (attracting qualified staff, scarce social services and community resistance to new programmes that siphon funds from existing programmes) are discussed. The final section, “Practitioner Perspectives,” brings the book to life with contributions by police, a lawyer providing legal services to Aboriginals, a magistrate in a bush court and a practicing lawyer who became a member of the Federal Parliament. Their impact is magnified by the abstract discussion in earlier chapters. It is unfortunate that each chapter is only a couple of pages because each practitioner has much to contribute and readers are likely to want to learn more, particularly since several practitioners have experience in urban and rural Australia.

Collectively, this book includes chapters on crime in rural Australia, with one specifically focused on rural crime. One might ask if we really need yet another such collection. I think the answer is “yes.” This collection reminds us why Australia is such a good place to study rural crime, the substantial number of scholars working in this area, and highlights the unique geographical and historical features shaping Australian crime. It is striking, however, how many observations parallel those made in England, Canada and the US. Perhaps the best way to advance our understanding of rural crime is to examine its form in a variety of social, geographical and political contexts, making collections such as this book an important contribution towards ultimately better understanding both rural and urban crime.

References

- Barclay, E. (2016). Farm victimization: The quintessential rural crime. In J. F. Donnermeyer (Ed.), *The Routledge international handbook of rural criminology* (pp. 107–115). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Barclay, E., Donnermeyer, J. F., Scott, J., & Hogg, R. (Eds.). (2007). *Crime in rural Australia*. Sydney: The Federation Press.
- Donnermeyer, J. F. (2016). *The Routledge international handbook of rural criminology*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- George, A., & Harris, B. (2014). *Landscapes of violence: Women surviving family violence in regional and rural Victoria*. Geelong: Centre for Rural and Regional Law and Justice, Deakin University.

Mawby, R. I., & Yarwood, R. (2011). *Rural policing and policing the rural*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate.

Weisheit, R. A., & Wells, L. E. (2005). Deadly violence in the heartland: Comparing homicide patterns in nonmetropolitan and metropolitan counties. *Homicide Studies*, 9(1), 55–80.

Ralph Weisheit

Illinois University, USA

raweish@ilstu.edu

© 2017, Ralph Weisheit

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10371656.2017.1283735>