Crime and the Countryside

Rural crime rates, though less than urban rates, now exceed the urban level of 20 years ago. Because the crime increase came at about the same time as renewed rural population growth, some blamed the growth itself. But incomplete or broken families (measured by the percentage of children not living with both parents) is a key link to rural crime—not poverty, race, or population growth.

After remaining fairly constant over several decades, crime rates rose dramatically in the 1960’s. While much of the attention focused on urban crime, crime rose in small towns and rural areas as well. By the mid-1970’s, reported crime in nonmetro areas exceeded the 1960 rates of metropolitan areas.

This article focuses on three questions relating to the increase in reported crime in small towns and rural areas.

- Does rural crime represent a spread of an urban problem to rural areas?
- Do large cities and small towns have different types of crime?
- Is crime associated with particular social and economic characteristics such as race or poverty?

Crime on the Rise All Over

Crime rates have been consistently higher in larger cities than in small towns and rural areas since the FBI began collecting such data in 1932. Rises and falls in crime rates have followed similar patterns in small and large towns.

The burglary rate in cities of 100,000–250,000 residents began to rise in the 1950’s, and tripled between 1960 and 1975 (fig. 1). After a brief drop, burglary rose to a new peak in 1980, then began a slight decline. This pattern over time is almost exactly the same as for towns of 10,000–25,000 residents. Burglary rose considerably in small towns during the 1960’s and early 1970’s, but the burglary rate in these towns was consistently 45–50 percent lower than in large cities.

The robbery rate has risen and fallen in a pattern almost identical to that of burglary. Again, small towns mirrored big city patterns. Robbery, a violent crime involving personal confrontation, often takes place in the street. It is more of an urban crime than burglary. Robbery rates since 1960 have been only 25–30 percent as high in small towns as in larger cities.

Other types of crime follow similar patterns. Although changes in the definition of particular crimes (rape, larceny) in the FBI’s reports preclude some long-term comparisons, there is little evidence that crime rises (or falls) first in large cities and then spreads to small towns. Large cities and small towns are affected almost simultaneously by national crime trends.

Statistics on nonmetro crime have been somewhat less reliable than metro data because reports covered only about 70 percent of the rural areas until the mid-1970’s. Furthermore, crime statistics showing metro-nonmetro comparisons have been available only since 1960.

According to these statistics, crime jumped in both metro and nonmetro areas from 1960–80 (table 1). With the exception of assault, violent crimes rose more quickly in metro areas, while property crimes rose more quickly in nonmetro areas. From 1980–83, however, reported crime rates fell in both
Table 1—Police blotter: Nonmetro crimes reported

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Offenses per 100,000 residents</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violent crime:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homicide</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>5.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rape</td>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>17.6</td>
<td>17.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robbery</td>
<td>15.8</td>
<td>40.1</td>
<td>30.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assault</td>
<td>53.0</td>
<td>189.0</td>
<td>171.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Property crime:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burglary</td>
<td>294.0</td>
<td>1,010.9</td>
<td>812.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Larceny</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>2,135.1</td>
<td>1,828.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motor vehicle theft</td>
<td></td>
<td>68.5</td>
<td>186.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (excluding larceny)</td>
<td>433</td>
<td>1,451</td>
<td>1,173</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Data unavailable.

metro and nonmetro areas, with robbery, burglary, and motor theft falling most rapidly in nonmetro areas. These declines may reflect greater protective measures taken by nonmetro residents and businesses as they became aware that they, like their urban cousins, are also subject to crime. Also, teenagers are involved in a high proportion of property crime. The postwar baby boom, which peaked in 1957-61, boosted the proportion of teenagers in the population during the 1970’s; this proportion has since declined.

Table 2—Household surveys show similarity in metro-nonmetro 1980 crime rates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of crime</th>
<th>Household survey¹</th>
<th>Offenses reported to police²</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nonmetro offenses per 100,000 residents³</td>
<td>Percent of metro rate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residents:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homicide</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forcible rape</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robbery</td>
<td>253</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aggravated assault</td>
<td>688</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal larceny</td>
<td>5,472</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With contact</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Without contact</td>
<td>5,386</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Households:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burglary</td>
<td>5,818</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forcible entry</td>
<td>1,578</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Without force</td>
<td>3,263</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Larceny</td>
<td>9,232</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vehicle theft</td>
<td>727</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Data unavailable.
³Age 12 and over.
⁴All larceny.

Metro, Nonmetro Areas Have Different Types of Crime

While both the victimization surveys (see box) and the FBI statistics on reported crime place nonmetro crime rates below those of metro areas, the differences are less in the victimization surveys. Nonmetro robbery rates in 1980, for instance, were only 13 percent as high as metro rates according to FBI statistics, but were about 33 percent as high as metro rates according to the victimization surveys (table 2).

Part of the difference is that nonmetro residents who are victimized in metro areas are counted as nonmetro victims by the surveys but as metro victims by local police. Also, for burglary and robbery at least, crimes involving businesses, and therefore counted only in UCR data, are probably more common in metro areas. Finally, nonmetro crimes may be reported to the police less often.

The data are consistent in showing that, compared with other crimes, rates of robbery and motor vehicle theft are relatively low in nonmetro areas. There are greater opportunities for those crimes, and crimes like purse-snatching (personal larceny with contact), in highly urban settings.

While the rate of household burglary involving break-ins is much lower in nonmetro than in metro areas, the rates are nearly comparable for household
burglary without forcible entry. This suggests that, at least in 1980, non-metro residents were taking fewer precautions against burglary than metro residents were.

**Counties with High Crime**

Crime is highest in areas where opportunities for crime are great, where poverty and income inequality are high, and where community and family ties are weak. These are typical links with crime in metropolitan areas. What about crime in the towns and rural areas of nonmetro America?

Nonmetro crime has some, but not all, of the demographic links of metro crime (fig. 2). Violent crime in nonmetro areas is linked with different characteristics from property crime. Of the 10 characteristics considered, the percentage of population under 18 not living with both parents (broken families) is most highly associated with violent crime (see box). About 20 percent of nonmetro youth lived with only one or no parents in 1980. In general, each percentage point higher (or lower) than this average meant a 20 percent higher (or lower) county violent crime rate, a large difference.

Other links with nonmetro violent crime are employment in nonfarm occupations, the proportion of blacks, and the size of the urban population (nonmetro towns may have up to 50,000 residents). Urban centers provide opportunities for crime, especially for street robbery. The link between violent crime and nonfarm employment reflects in part the fact that nonfarm employment is greater in more urban, crime-prone settings. It also reflects the especially low crime rates in the farming areas of the Midwest. Crime is relatively high in the South and West, regions of strong nonmetro population growth during the 1970's.

Perhaps most surprising is the only modest association between poverty and violent crime in nonmetro areas, especially since family weakness is high where poverty is high.

Nonmetro property crime, like violent crime, is higher in more urban areas and outside of farming counties. But property crime is not higher where family structure is weak or where the proportion of blacks in the population is high. Property crime is low, not high, where poverty is high, perhaps because there is less to steal, perhaps also because the poor tend not to report crimes to police. Property crime tends to be higher in nonmetro areas with a high proportion of young people, and where seasonally vacant housing in recreation areas provides opportunities. Property crime, like violent crime, is somewhat higher where population grew rapidly during the 1970's.

**Sources of Crime Data**

FBI statistics, based on Uniform Crime Reports (UCR) from local police agencies, have several drawbacks. Many crimes are not reported to the police. Victims may feel that the crime is too trivial; that the offender will not be caught or, especially in the case of rape, that reporting to the police will itself be traumatic.

A second drawback is that the rates do not always reflect the risk of crime. Crime is recorded according to place of occurrence, and rates are based on the number of residents. Victims, however, include businesses, visiting shoppers, commuters, and tourists as well as residents. This tends to raise the rates of large cities and recreation areas where the number of potential victims may be much larger than the residential population.

Finally, since local law enforcement agency reports to the FBI are voluntary, the FBI has had to estimate crime rates, particularly in rural areas. In 1983, 90 percent of the rural United States was covered, but until 1970, FBI estimates of rural crime were based on only 70 percent of rural areas.

To assess more directly the extent of personal and household victimization, the Department of Justice, in collaboration with the Bureau of Census, initiated an annual National Crime Survey (NCS) of households in 1973 to supplement the UCR series. Only the UCR includes crimes against businesses and is available in sufficient detail to assess crime levels for counties, cities, and States.

Household victimization surveys have consistently found that only a third of all crimes against persons or households are reported to the police. Those not reported tend to be less serious. For instance, the 1980 NCS found that 72 percent of thefts with losses of over $1,000 were reported, while only 29 percent with losses of $50–$99 were reported, and smaller losses were reported even less often.

During the 1970's, the NCS results were inconsistent with the FBI statistics on reported crime in two respects. First, the number of crimes said to have been reported to the police was higher than the number shown in the FBI's UCR statistics. Second, the NCS victimization studies showed no rise in crime reported over time, while the UCR showed substantial increases, except for the mid-1970's. Differences in coverage (only the UCR series includes businesses) in the basest used to calculate rates and in the ways that crime is counted can explain only part of the discrepancy in trends. If one accepts the victimization survey results as valid, then the rises in UCR-reported crime reflected improvements in data gathering rather than substantial increases in crime. However, the FBI's UCR statistics tended to correspond more closely than the NCS to a third set of data, number of homicides as compiled by the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) in its annual series on the causes of death. In fact, the data on causes of death, based on coroner's reports, showed a greater rise in homicides between 1960 and 1980 than did the FBI series. As it seems likely that rises and falls in homicide are accompanied by rises and falls in other types of crime, a substantial part of the rise in other crime recorded by the FBI in 1960–80 is probably real.
Family Structure Linked to Crime

Single-parent families and poverty are interrelated and tend to be particularly high in the black population. But the incidence of children in broken families, not poverty or proportion of blacks, seems to be the variable most directly linked to nonmetro violent crime (fig. 3).

The violent crime rate for counties with above average proportions of children in broken families is 2-2.5 times as high as it is where families are relatively cohesive, regardless of whether these counties have high or low proportions of poor or blacks in their population. Furthermore, the violent crime rate in areas with above average proportions of children in divided families is about the same (3.0 to 3.4 per 10,000 residents), regardless of whether the proportion of poor or blacks is high or low. Poverty and the percentage of blacks are related to violent crime only because they are related to divided families.

Family structure is linked to nonmetro property crime in two opposing ways. On the one hand, the propensity to steal is higher where children are in divided families. On the other hand, counties with a high proportion of children in divided families have high rates of poverty, so that opportunities for property crimes are low. Among nonmetro counties with roughly comparable opportunities—high (or low) rates of poverty—those with high proportions of children in divided families have higher property crime rates. Property crime rates are about the same in counties with high poverty (low opportunity) and high divided families (high propensity), as in counties with low poverty and undivided families.

Figure 2
Major influences in crime in nonmetro counties

Broken Families
Children not living with both natural parents or two step-parents may be living with one parent, foster parents, other relatives, or on their own. No single word covers all these situations. The measure is referred to here as broken or divided families, although in some cases parents may never have lived together.

The percentage of children living with only one or neither parent has increased substantially in the past 15 years. Although violent crime rose considerably in all counties, those with an above average increase in the proportions of children in divided families in 1970-80 had a much larger jump in violent crime (98 percent) than did counties where family structure was relatively stable (57 percent) (fig. 4). For counties with both above average proportions of children in broken families in 1970 and an above average increase in broken families from 1970-80, the violent crime rate for 1976-78 was more than triple the rate of counties with relatively low levels of, and low increases in, broken families.

Correlation coefficients reflect the strength of association between two measures. They indicate how well we can predict one when we know the other. Correlations are near 0 when there is little association and approach +1 or -1 as the strength of the positive or negative association increases. Correlations between the measures of social conditions and nonmetro county 1976-78 average crime rates were calculated separately for violent and property crime. Ten percent (249) of nonmetro counties and county equivalents were omitted because of incomplete crime data for this period.

Source: Crime data, Uniform Crime Reports, FBI, 1976-78.
Crime and Population Growth

Both violent and property crime rates are higher where population grew rapidly from 1970–80 (fig. 5). One reason is that nonmetro counties with initially higher crime rates tended to have higher growth rates as well during the 1970's. The low-crime farming counties of the Midwest grew slowly, if at all, while the relatively high-crime nonmetro counties of the South and West attracted newcomers.

Although nonmetro crime rates tend to be high where population growth was rapid, they did not rise faster in counties with high rates of population growth, except in the West, and even there only in the case of violent crime (fig. 5). Even in the West, growth probably did not cause the rise in violent crime. If it had, the counties that grew more than twice as fast as the national average should have had a larger jump in crime than counties that grew above average but less than twice as fast. Instead the difference was only marginal: 162 percent vs 153 percent.

If the high crime rates in the West were not due to rapid population growth, what were they due to? Again, we come back to family structure. Increases in incomplete or broken families were greater in the nonmetro West than in other nonmetro areas: 70 percent of the nonmetro western counties had above average proportions of children in divided families vs 50 percent in other nonmetro counties. Even so, that accounts for only some of the higher increase in violent crime in the West.

The rise in crime over the past 20 years was pervasive, affecting rural and urban areas alike. Residents of counties that experienced considerable growth or greater contact with urban living and lifestyles may feel that this change itself...
was responsible. That may be true in some cases, but the rise in crime generally was less a local phenomenon than a national phenomenon felt at the local level. Urban-rural differences have not diminished considerably.

Local crime rates depend to some extent on opportunities for crime. The more wealthy an area, the more there is to steal. The more houses are used seasonally, the easier they are to burglarize. To combat the rise in rural crime, State agencies have developed prevention education programs designed for small town and rural residents and businesses, and some States have undertaken research projects specifically focusing on rural residents (see box). While prevention programs may help reduce victimization by limiting opportunities for criminal behavior, the rise in crime in the past 20 years was not simply the result of increased opportunities. Ultimately, research and policy

![Figure 5](image_url)

**Figure 5**

Violent crime rose most in the nonmetro West for all levels of population growth.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Crime Curricula</th>
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<tr>
<td>The Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service has prepared a training notebook, <em>Rural Crime Prevention Programs</em>. It emphasizes farm security, neighborhood watch, home security, personal protection, fraud and con games, and vandalism. For a copy, write to Gary Holland, Community and Rural Development Specialist, Oklahoma State University, Cooperative Extension Service, Stillwater, Okla. 74078; telephone (405) 624-5400. And Texas A&amp;M University offers a rural crime prevention course designed for vocational agricultural high school students. For more information, write to Fred Cross, Texas Agricultural Extension Service, Texas A&amp;M University, Box 1177, Stephenville, Tex. 76401; telephone (817) 968-4144.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Another Perspective on Rural Crime**

Nearly 32 percent of those surveyed recently in 16 western North Dakota counties reported being victimized. Vandalism, larceny, and robbery were the most frequent types of crime. The high level of robbery found in that study differs from rural crime research in other States. James Larson, director of the Social Science Research Institute at the University of North Dakota, Grand Forks, speculates that the diversity of cultures and lifestyles in rural America creates local crime patterns unique to an area. Larson also found that older persons were less likely to be victims than younger persons, but expressed greater concern about being injured. For more information, write or call James Larson, Director, Social Science Research Center Institute, University of North Dakota, Grand Forks, ND 58202; telephone (701) 777-2187. |

**Crime Tips on Tape**

"Rural Crime: They’re Stealing the Farm" is an 18-minute film produced on behalf of the California Rural Crime Prevention Task Force. It includes information about property identification; how to reduce theft of equipment, livestock, and grain; and rural neighborhood watch programs. Rental fee is $25. Write to Aims Media, 6901 Woodley Ave., Van Nuys, Calif. 91406-4878; telephone (818) 785-4111.

must be directed toward the more difficult question of reducing people’s propensity to commit crime, even given the opportunity. Of the social characteristics considered in this study, by far the most important is broken families—the percentage of children not living with two parents. While crime increased substantially everywhere, rises in violent crime rates during the 1970’s were almost twice as high in nonmetro counties where this measure of family weakness grew more than average. The association between the decline in the traditional family structure and the rise in crime is not simply cause and effect; both may represent underlying problems of social and personal disorganization.

Preventing Rural Crime

The National Rural Crime Prevention Center at Ohio State University was founded in 1979 to develop crime prevention programs for rural communities and individuals. The center offers a series of 21 brochures on various aspects of crime prevention for farmers and other rural people. The “Home and Farm Security Series” covers topics like preventing timber theft, livestock security, and alarm systems. One brochure advises how to manage farm security the way retailers manage store security, including dividing the farm into four security zones.

Other publications are available too, including one that examines the extent to which belonging to a crime prevention program reduces fear of crime by older people.

Write to Joe Donnermeyer, National Rural Crime Prevention Center, 2120 Fyffe Road, Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio 43210; telephone (614) 422-1467.
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