

Rural Community Violence: An Untold Public Health Epidemic

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I. Introduction

Rural communities across the nation are quite often overlooked when it comes to analyzing crime and its impact on communities. But these vast regions are not immune to crime, and their isolation, geography and socioeconomic climate create unique challenges for victims, families, health care providers and criminal justice officials. This policy paper seeks to shine a public health light on the prevalence and nature of crime in rural areas across the nation. Surprisingly, there has been little research to-date on the history and evolution of crime and violence in rural areas, especially from a public health perspective. This paper contends that the lack of attention on the crime and violence issues plaguing rural communities is a result of a huge misperception that violence is either non-existent or less serious in rural communities in general.

While community violence is broadly defined as exposure to intentional acts of interpersonal violence committed in public areas by individuals who are not intimately related to the victims, this paper will focus on the untold story of rural community violence and the root causes thereof which plague individuals, families, communities and systems. Violence takes many shapes and forms, including assaults, abuse, homicides, thefts, robberies, suicide and bullying. Unfortunately, there are limited definitions specific to rural community violence as there has been limited research conducted on the issue.

II. Rural vs Urban Demographics

The December 2016 US Census Bureau's American Community Survey, revealed that 97 percent of the nation's land area is rural and home to 19.3 percent of the population (about 60 million people).² Of the 1 in 5 people in the nation living in rural areas, about 47 million of those are adults 18 years and older. While the majority of adults in rural areas owned their own homes (81.1 percent), they were more likely to live in single-family homes compared to those in urban areas (78.3 percent compared with 64.6 percent).³ Adults in rural areas tend to be older, with a median age of 51, compared with adults in urban areas with a median age of 45. Adult rural residents had lower rates of poverty (11.7 percent compared with 14.0 percent) but were less likely to have obtained a bachelor's degree or higher (19.5 percent compared with 29.0). Though children in rural areas had lower rates of poverty (18.9 percent compared with 22.3 percent) a greater percentage of them were uninsured (7.3 percent compared with 6.3 percent).⁴ Research also suggests that crime rates grow three to four times faster than the population in rapidly growing rural communities. These demographics provide a



foundation for understanding the assets and limitations in urban and rural communities and how each community must continuously adapt to meet the growing needs of its diverse populations.

III. Data Trends and the Prevalence of Violence in Rural America

There are general differences between rural and urban areas which in turn influence the types of crimes that are likely to occur in rural areas versus urban areas. For example, the geographically and socially isolated nature of rural communities tends to impact the types of crimes committed in these communities. Due to this isolation, rural areas are more likely to have problems with burglaries and thefts than with armed robberies and assaults.⁵ A study published in the journal JAMA Pediatrics in 2015, analyzed data on U.S. youth suicide rates between 1996 and 2010 and found that rates of suicides for young rural Americans ages 10 to 24 was almost double the rate as compared to youth in urban areas. The study attributed this stark difference to social isolation, greater availability of guns, and difficulty accessing healthcare in rural communities as compared to urban communities.⁶

Table 1

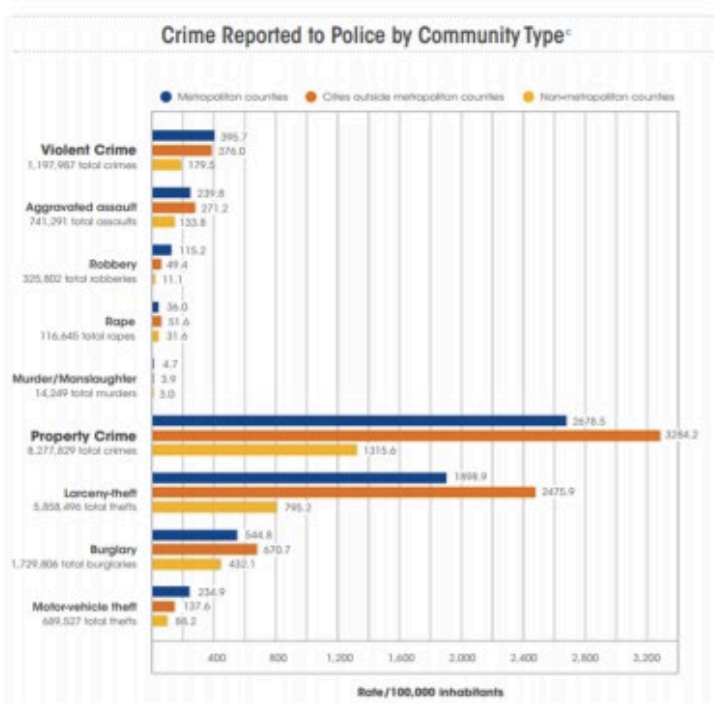
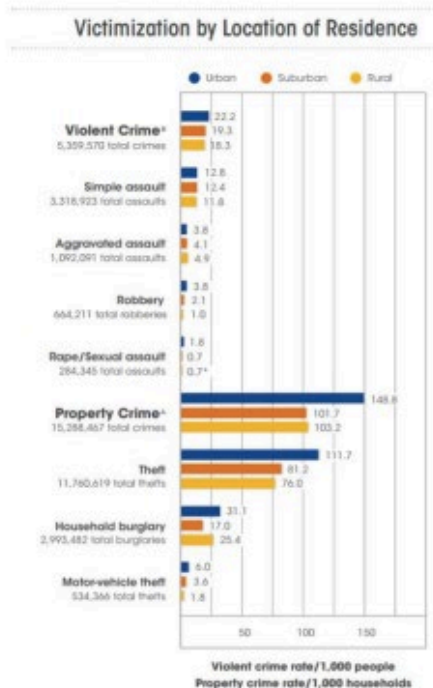


Table 2



According to the FBI's Annual Crime in the United States report, as of 2014 the violent and property crime rates have declined for the last 12 years. Yet, despite the overall downward trends in these rates over time, the percentage of rural Americans who are victimized by crime remains troubling. While urban areas generally have higher crime rates, it is quite notable that rural areas (non-metropolitan) have similarly high rates of



violent and property crime. In fact, the tables displayed below not only show how glaring the differences are between urban and rural crime rates but that while more serious crime rates such as violent crime, assaults and robberies remain steady, property crimes, thefts and burglaries are high across the urban and rural spectrum. However, as noted, earlier in this policy paper, rural communities are most vulnerable to property crimes, burglaries and thefts due to the socially isolated natures of their communities.

IV. Simple Economics: The Root Causes of Rural Community Violence

While we recognize that metropolitan and suburban communities experience varying degrees of economic growth and stability, it is equally as well known that rural communities have not experienced nearly as much economic growth as their urban counterparts. In fact, rural communities have historically experienced low rates of economic growth and high rates of unemployment and underemployment. vii The outgoing manufacturing and textile industries in rural America have led to the need for rural residents and communities to reinvent themselves to meet the technological advancement of the new day. Experience reveals that without the proper community support resources, including education, training and transportation, rural residents and communities are not able to keep up with the growing demands of a technologically savvy economy.⁸ All of these dynamics can lead to increasing crime in rural communities. Poverty can lead to high levels of stress that in turn may lead individuals to commit theft, robbery, or other violent acts. Moreover, poverty-stricken communities create an environment where there is less access to quality schools, jobs, therefore decreasing the opportunity costs of crime and increasing the likelihood that youth engage in negative acts.⁹

Rural residents face extreme economic, health and social challenges unlike their counterparts in urban areas. Rural Americans tend to have higher rates of poverty, lower rates of educational attainment, lower rates of health insurance coverage and less access to healthcare and human service providers. While urban areas are able to address some of these same conditions through the availability of an array of programs and services designed to meet the needs of vulnerable populations, rural communities are left behind. In fact, rural communities are less likely than urban or suburban communities to have job training programs, public transportation, or shelters for homeless people or abuse victims.¹⁰ These and other service limitations have enormous impact on crime victims and their families.

V. A Focus on the Impacts and Effects of Rural Community Violence

While there are decades of reports and studies on the prevalence and impact of urban violence, there are fewer that highlight the devastating impact of violence on individuals, families and systems within rural communities. Research and experience tells us that at the micro level, individuals and families experience great traumas both physically and emotionally as a result of community violence. This is a great public health concern as



victims and families are often burdened with substance abuse, poor mental health, stress, chronic disease and other ailments as a result of witnessing or experiencing traumas associated with community violence.

At the macro level, the institutions, systems and laws set to protect, alleviate and remedy the occurrence and impact of community violence are often strained in rural communities. Rural areas face significant economic, geographic, and human capital barriers that make it difficult to create, strengthen, or expand family support services. Law enforcement agencies, health departments, hospitals, clinics and other emergency services too often are limited in the services they can provide to victims and families when acts of violence occur. Many of these institutions are under-resourced and overburdened with the influx of high risk, high needs cases. Services are often fragmented, which result in crime victims not seeking services at all.

The human and systemic costs of crime alone in rural areas are often more debilitating than in urban areas. Although rural areas are often known for vast open land, serenity, strong ties to community, and strong family values, rural communities suffer many of the same negative dynamics that urban communities suffer and, in some cases, more severely. What the numerous facts outlined in this paper highlight is that the issue of rural community violence is complex, multi-layered, dynamic and requires an immediate response.

VI. Recommendations

While there are varying levels of solutions to address the issue of violence in rural America, one must first acknowledge the issue exists. There is a lack of media attention on the issue of rural community violence thus it goes unnoticed and the story untold. America is home to over 60 million rural residents, yet it is rare to hear or see any coverage of the devastating impact of violence on rural communities across the nation. It is clear that violence has detrimental results for victims and communities and thus requires a wholistic, rapid response to address the root causes in order to achieve long-term results. Any other response would be irresponsible on the part of those who choose to make a positive difference in rural America.

The following recommendations provide a diversity of solutions to address the multi-layered problem of rural community violence and its resultant impacts.

1. Increase knowledge and awareness of rural community violence at the local, state and national levels through mainstream media and social media outlets.
2. Promote the allocation of resources to convene multi-sector partnerships/task forces (policymakers, media, law enforcement, researchers, government officials, clinical service providers, advocacy organizations and communities) at the



community level to analyze, raise awareness and develop concrete approaches to address rural community violence as a public health issue.

3. Establish local, state and national funding partnerships to expand community and neighborhood resource centers that can help provide an array of services to meet the economic and social needs of individuals and families within proximity to their residences (i.e., employment training, counseling, vocational training, etc.).
4. Allocate sufficient local, state and national resources to expand the reach of local mediation/conflict resolution/management centers in local communities to address incidences of violence and mitigate reoccurrences.
5. Expand evidence-based, violence prevention programs in clinical care settings. Providing a continuum of on-site clinical services to curb the initial onset and resultant impacts of violence will lead to a more integrative approach to whole-person care.
6. Establish local community awareness campaigns that promote communitybased prevention and intervention programs and services that address the wholistic needs of crime victims and their families (i.e., counseling, housing, legal services, transportation, etc.).
7. Expand funding for school-based anti-bullying and mentoring programs for elementary and middle schools that focus on character education.



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