Editorial

Rural Criminology – A Challenge For the Future

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1 Introduction*

Donnermeyer (2016) states that nearly 50% of the world's population lives in rural areas, but historically, only a handful of criminological studies have focused on crime in rural settings. Wells and Weisheit (2012) found that the rurality of the study sites diminishes the appropriateness and validity of criminological theories for studying crime in urban environments. Hence, the more rural the locality, the less effective theory is in explaining crime. Consequently, a new branch of criminology has developed – rural criminology – which focuses on the study of crime in rural environments and the testing, verification, and revision of classical criminological theories in these environments (Donnermeyer & DeKeseredy, 2013). Moreover, studies show that differences in the perceptions of police vary by the population size of communities. Crime prevalence also differs between urban and rural environments, as well as ideas on how to counteract crime and disorder – from formal, to semi-formal to informal solutions (Meško, 2019).

Both urban and rural environments exhibit much diversity in regards to the volume of various crimes and the criminological factors that contribute to

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these crimes. However, generally speaking, rural areas are characterised by a higher degree of social cohesion and informal control, and there is also less physical disorder (Harkness, 2017). Generally, the main differences between the populations of urban and rural communities are most apparent in 1) interpersonal interactions (frequency and trust), 2) common interests, 3) feelings of belongingness, and 4) the knowledge of other inhabitants in the community. Unemployment, housing problems, and crime and cultural frictions are generally more pronounced in urban areas (Rebernik, 2008), and numerous differences between urban and rural communities are also reflected in the criminological literature. Although official data suggest a higher level of crime in urban environments, this does not reflect a realistic picture of the actual situation in diverse rural settings, and of the criminal justice and safety needs within these rural environments (Meško, 2019).

2 Crime and Fear of Crime

Studies show that in rural settings, fear of crime is increasing (Gilling, 2016), and specific forms of criminality are more frequent (e.g., drug and alcohol abuse, domestic violence, environmental crime). Moreover, large cities have seen a decline in violent crime in past decades, while this does not apply to rural environments where, for example, the number of serious violent crimes does not show a similar decline (Ceccato, 2016). Even though the most common forms of crime in rural environments are interpersonal conflict, drug and alcohol abuse, and domestic violence, the main problem is that the communities are often more tolerant of these problems and some are not taken seriously (Smith, 2010).

It is possible that in some rural communities, fear of crime is more serious than the actual crime itself and has a direct impact on the quality of life of the people who live there, which reflects a type of neighbourhood disorder, independent of levels of victimisation. Studies have shown that rates of crime and rates of fear of crime are, however, mostly higher in urban environments when compared to rural settings (Adams & Serpe, 2000; Meško, Šifrer & Vošnjak, 2012; Skogan 1987).

Again, even though there is great diversity across urban and rural communities, most studies show that residents of urban environments, when compared to those who live in rural localities, do not know each other well, have weaker social bonds, express less trust, do not share a sense of belongingness, and have fewer impersonal relations with each other. Rural environments are characterised by more informal social control, higher social cohesion, and a greater sense of belonging. Respondents associate fear of crime with perceptions of neighbourhood disorder as reflected in the presence of intoxicated people on

the streets, homeless people, beggars, youth deviance, and vandalism. Neighbourhood disorder more greatly influences fear of crime in urban environments while residents of rural environments do see disorderly behaviour as less problematic (Meško, Šifrer & Vošnjak, 2012).

3 Policing the Rural

Security challenges also require an appropriate response from local communities (and the state). Although it is far from being the most suitable for all challenges, police activity remains one of the leading tools for ensuring security and order in the community. In many countries, it is widely accepted that today, in light of the ever-changing security environment, an extensive network of organisations is established by the state and local authorities, companies, voluntary groups, individuals, etc. We have overcome the perception that it is the exclusive responsibility of the police for security in local communities and have introduced a hybrid approach to managing contemporary risks, challenges, and threats. But the question remains: to what extent is security a local responsibility as opposed to the responsibility of the police? Another persistent question is whether the police at the national and local levels also perceive this dilemma and should begin the process of adapting state and non-state institutions to new conditions, whereby police-community partnerships and cooperation gain a higher priority. In Slovenia, police activity is partially nationalised (police, financial administration, prison administration), partly in the hands of local authorities (municipal wardens, municipal inspection bodies), and partially privatised (private security, private detectives). In this respect, it is not irrelevant to consider how the development of non-traditional police organisations affects the work of the national police and what kind of relationships these organisations have with, and how they perceive each other. The boundaries between them (and their powers) can be both erased and sharpened. Since they all operate in a relatively small, but complex environment, an adequate level of cooperation and complementarity is essential. It affects their ability to form a network or integrated model of collaboration or to remain stuck in traditional hierarchical relationships embodied in the management model where the state police maintain its dominant role (Crawford, 2003). If the network model of police (co)operation is a popular approach in both rural and urban environments, there is also a risk of overlapping authority and responsibility assigned to various organisations (Sotlar, 2015). Structural changes within the family of security and control organisations are inevitably a consequence of the perception of contemporary security challenges, which must be understood currently as broadly as possible.

Especially in the rural environment, security provisions are associated with policing as well as with systems of civil protection and disaster relief (Meško et al., 2012). The system of civil protection and disaster relief is the least institutionally professionalised among all national security subsystems, which raises the issue of institutional capacity within local communities of various sizes. However, it is not known how interested and motivated state and local officials and services are, on one hand, and volunteers and NGOs on the other, to cooperate. Therefore, in the local rural community, there is an even greater need for a security coordinator, modelled on the idea of an urban security manager (Meško, Tominc & Sotlar, 2013). It should be emphasised that the latter notion is already quite present and developed in many urban settings around the world, while in rural communities, the idea of a security coordinator is still looking for its place under the sun.

Despite the abovementioned pluralisation of policing, within which the strengthening of local police organisations (municipal wardens) is particularly present, the engagement of national police in local communities remains crucial. Given the specific challenges that arise in the provision of safety and security in rural communities, policing in many respects differs from police activity in urbanised areas, and therefore requires environmentally tailored approaches and specific competencies of security service providers (Cebulak, 2004). Models of police work in rural communities should consider the distinctive social, geographical and cultural characteristics of the environment (Mawby, 2004). Smith (2010) points out that in less urbanised environments, different policing approaches must be used, while the professionalisation of the police, especially in terms of training, should include rural police work. Some authors believe that community policing in less urbanised settings is more applicable and efficient as compared to urban environments (Johnstone, 2016). According to Mouhanna (2016), the participation of the population and the effectiveness of the police in rural communities depend heavily on the integration of the police into the local environment. In the context of community policing, officers need to develop a high level of social responsibility and be responsive and open to the concerns and suggestions of residents (Lobnikar, Prislan & Modic, 2016). This integration is particularly important in rural environments, where contacts between the police and the population are closer because of the lower numbers of police officers per capita and more moderate fluctuation of the population (Cebulak, 2004). However, studies generally show that the perception of the quality of police work in rural communities depends on factors similar to those in urban localities. The satisfaction of residents depends on the authenticity of interpersonal contacts, while the presence of the police, or the lack thereof, influences their fear of crime (Lord, Kuhns & Friday, 2009). People from rural communities believe that police officers should be actively

involved in community activities, and professionalism and procedural justice of police officers are of great significance (Cebulak, 2004).

Prejudices and stereotypes among rural residents are often very strong, leading to numerous problems associated with intolerance, racism, fear of foreigners, and stigmatisation. These groups are, consequently, often victims of violence, harassment, and social isolation. This puts the police in a difficult situation where their response affects the satisfaction of the community and the associated degree of legitimacy of police work. When they sympathise with most of the population, other groups feel unfairly treated, and vice-versa. Because of the isolation and victimisation of these groups, they often do not stay in the community for very long, and police find it harder to establish genuine contacts with them. Thus, police work in multicultural and non-cohesive local communities is a current challenge for modern police organisations that requires specialised competencies and policing approaches (Lobnikar et al., 2016).

4 The Rural – From Idyllic to Real

Due to poor social circumstances (high levels of poverty, unemployment, neglect on the system level) and other influential factors (large conservativeness, low fluctuation of the population, slow development) (Donnermeyer, 2016), instead of an idyllic representation of rural areas, some professionals and researchers tend to use images of a deprived countryside. They describe many rural communities as isolated and systemically neglected environments in which people have limited chance of benefitting from economic, social and cultural development. Due to such neglect, there is often a lack of confidence in the public systems of government among residents, and a greater sense of uncertainty (Garland & Chakraborti, 2006). In this connection, the perception of crime in rural communities is influenced by the so-called “culture of silence” that is associated with non-reporting (Smith, 2010). Compared to urban environments, in rural areas social and informal control is much stronger, which can result in a lower willingness to report crimes. One of the most significant problems affecting willingness to work with the police is undoubtedly a poor organisation of victim assistance services. Results showed that the assistance available to residents in rural settings is often much less organised than in urban (aid institutions are usually not located in remote places, and victims are often non-mobile) areas, with fewer prevention programs available. Moreover, the police, due to closer links with rural residents, find it harder to protect the anonymity of applicants and victims from revenge by offenders (Cebulak, 2004). Victims also often feel ashamed and believe that the police will fail

to prove certain cases, or they will not deal with them seriously, which is primarily common for victims who are stigmatised by the community (Garland & Chakraborti, 2006). Police response is faced with other problems as well, because of the geographical distance between the places/persons and the challenges of accessibility in mountainous regions and other areas with difficult terrain, and the timeliness of dealing with reported events is affected. The response time of the police and rescue services is longer in rural settings, and people are more likely to be worried about the failure of first responders to respond promptly (Mawby & Yarwood, 2016). Other problems that police encounter when policing rural communities are related to the lack of qualified staff, lack of financial resources and appropriate, environmentally tailored prevention programs. The primary difference between police in urban and rural environments is that the latter must face safety and security issues with fewer resources for service agencies, ranging from hospital emergency rooms to drug rehabilitation services (Donnermeyer, DeKeseredy & Dragiewicz, 2011; Mawby, 2004).

Particular problems are also evident in the area of pluralised police activity, which is also essential in rural areas. Studies show that problems are similar but more persistent than in urban environments, and partnerships are very poorly organised, residents are unwilling to cooperate with formal institutions, and consequently, their involvement in security activities is low. In rural settings, volunteer groups (e.g. voluntary firefighters or even self-organised self-help groups) and alternative forms of assistance (e.g. non-governmental organisations) play a more significant role in the provision of safety and security (Mawby and Yarwood, 2016). Therefore, it is necessary to examine the implementation of various supervisory and preventive activities, and they must be understood by representatives of formal social control institutions, municipalities (especially local safety councils), and residents (Meško & Lobnikar). This is a serious problem in local rural communities, especially along the Schengen border (Meško, 2019). Donnermeyer and DeKeseredy (2008) warn about a misconception of the rural as safe and idyllic. A romantic perspective on the rural can be quickly disillusioned. This perspective is also discussed by Mouhanna (2016).

5 Contemporary Challenges

It is essential to analyse the connection and relationship between migration, crime, security, and control in a broad context. Intensified border control is implemented mostly at local (rural) levels, where the “green border” (especially the external Schengen border) is intensely monitored and influences

on the quality live of the residents (for example, the placement of razor wire fencing along the whole Slovenian border with Croatia). Local communities were heavily impacted by the refugee migration of almost 500,000 people who passed through Slovenia and into Austria and then into Germany. It was a phenomenon which appeared “in the backyard” of local communities, which were required to engage in problem-solving with the help of national agencies (mainly the Police, Slovenian army, Civil protection, etc.). Increased migration through Slovenia in 2015/2016 also represented an example for analysis of elements that influence (in)tolerance and solidarity at the local level. The reaction in local communities was sometimes diametric. On one side, people were accepted and later on included or integrated into local communities, whereas on the other, local populations petitioned and protested against immigration, using arguments similar to the German Pegida movement. Recently, the so-called Štajerska Varda, a group of self-proclaimed patriots and vigilantes, members of a movement ‘United Slovenia’, decided to additionally protect Slovenian citizens on the Schengen border because they believed that the police and the government were unable to provide sufficient security. Before that, they underwent a military-like training in the forests, threatened the government and caused a professional and political debate on the role of such groups. The members wear military uniforms, and their leader was convicted to eight months of imprisonments for incitement to violent change of the constitutional order. This case led to legislative initiatives and shows a thin line between the police calls for cooperation and security/safety partnership with citizens, the possible abuse of vigilante groups for radical political purposes, and the creation of additional feelings of insecurity. A philosophy of popular community (oriented) policing also requires a clearer legislative framework due to such cases (Meško, 2019).

Refugees, immigrants, the Roma, minorities and other marginalised groups are present both in rural and urban communities and mingle with the traditional majority population. Therefore, policing must be prepared to face specific problems and challenges that may arise as a result of the dynamics within such a diverse and stratified society. Although crime in rural communities is poorly documented when compared to crime in urban communities, it is known that in these settings, often due to a traditional mentality associated with patriotism and conservatism (authors call this a national romance or rural radicalisation), victimisation based on discrimination and racism is more frequent (Garland & Chakraborti, 2007).

If there is a space that is independent of the rural-urban dichotomy, it is undoubtedly cyberspace, which can reach any member of any community anywhere, due to its inherent characteristics, security challenges, and threats. Cybercrime is becoming an increasingly technologically-advanced, aggressive

crime, and one of the fastest growing types of crime as well. It represents a severe threat to cyberspace users, as well as to global economies and the security of all nation-states. Cybercrime is one of the most significant security challenges of the 21st century, and since it is a global problem, international communities and organisations are adopting various strategies aimed at improving the efficiency of regulatory provisions and preventing abuse in cyberspace. The common causes of cybercrime include poor awareness by citizens of the threats in cyberspace and insufficient self-protection measures (Al-Nemrat, Jahankhani & Preston, 2010). The users of cyberspace are thus unaware of all the threats and risks, and often are not technically qualified enough to adequately protect themselves. Even though there is an extensive range of technologies used in small communities, there is also insufficient knowledge and awareness of ways to defend against cybercrime. It is, therefore, necessary to analyse the relationship between the use of different technologies, social media and exposure to vicarious and actual victimisation in the broader context of security threats. Culturally speaking, not far away from post-modern urban neighbourhoods, perhaps only an hour or two car drive, one arrives in a village in the middle of nowhere where people still live as they have for a long time, but they have a cyber highway in their houses.

6 Concluding remarks

Contrary to popular belief, rural communities are not less criminogenic than urban areas. The prevalence of specific crimes, especially violence, is higher in rural areas, which is the case in the USA and Canada. Women get victimised more often after or during divorce, etc. (Donnermeyer & DeKeseredy, 2008). Analyses of rural crime and other forms of deviance should be studied carefully, utilising official crime statistics as well as other sources of data. Not to forget a European perspective, the entire Schengen border in Slovenia is in rural border municipalities. With the future possibility of the Schengen border moving to the South, a situation will not change as borders of Croatia with Bosnia and Herzegovina (Republic of Srpska), Montenegro and Serbia are also in rural settings. Cross border security, and police and prosecutorial cooperation require the cooperation of institutions on the state as well as local levels (Meško, Kozmelj & Lobnikar, 2019). Recent preliminary analyses of rural safety, threats to security, disorder, crime, criminality, social control and other perspectives have been studied (Bučar Ručman, 2019; Flander & Tičar, 2019; Hacin & Eman, 2019; Prislan & Lobnikar, 2019; Sotlar & Tominc, 2019).

Comprehensive publications on rural perspectives of crime and social control in Europe in English are currently still rare with some exceptions (Ceccato, 2016; Mawby & Yarwood, 2016), and a need for rural criminology is more than evident. A recent book, edited by Joseph Donnermeyer (2016) calls for additional research and debates about crime and rurality, its causality, and how to address the safety and security of rural peoples and communities. Finally, there is also a strong need for the development of comparative studies on rural crime, victimisation and responses to crime across the globe.

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