

Rural Crime in Missouri

A Case Study of Four Missouri Counties with Suggestions for Crime Prevention Measures

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Introduction: The Rural Crime Problem

Crime is a major concern for all Americans and seems to be increasing at an alarming rate. Yet crime is often considered to be only an urban problem. However, crime is not solely an urban issue for data collected by the Federal Bureau of Investigation show that the rate of crime in rural areas has increased more rapidly since 1968 than the rate in urban areas. The rural crime rate as reported by the FBI from its Uniform Crime Report data provided by law enforcement agencies was 779 per 100,000 population in 1968 (Justice Department, p. 58). In just ten years by 1978, this had increased nearly three-fold to 1,997 per

100,000 population (Justice Department, p. 38). In contrast, the rate of crime in urban areas approximately doubled during this period.

There are several likely reasons why crime in rural areas is increasing so rapidly. The post World War II mechanization of agriculture has resulted in larger farms and fewer farm families. Where farm people once lived in close proximity and knew each other well, they are now more dispersed. Many farmers work land far removed from their farmstead and machinery is often left in open fields. And in some families in rural areas both the husband and wife

work in town and no one is at home during the day. Moreover, patterns of association no longer center on the rural neighborhood as they once did but are more likely to be tied to special interest groups. Many people living in rural areas no longer know each other as well as they once did. Also those committing a crime can enter and leave the area using modern paved roads. And once they cross the county line, apprehension and prosecution is often difficult. Finally rural areas do not have the sophisticated means of investigation possessed by urban areas, such as highly specialized investigative manpower and facilities.

Other Victimization Studies

Over the past decade, numerous studies of criminal victimization have been conducted in the United States. In such surveys, respondents are typically asked if they or anyone living in their home have been the victim of any crime during the preceding twelve months. These studies invariably find a massive underreporting of crime of all types in the official police records.

They also demonstrate that much of this under-reporting is a consequence of citizen failure to report crimes to the police. Although a number of these studies have been conducted, most have involved specific large cities or have used large national samples (U.S. Department of Justice, 1974a, 1974b, 1975, 1977; Biderman *et al.*, 1967). In the latter case any unique crime victimization

patterns in rural areas are not emphasized given the results of data from a national sample. Some study of rural crime victimization in other states has been conducted, but there is no evidence that information from the other areas can be generalized to Missouri (Phillips *et al.*, 1976). Therefore, at least a pilot study of criminal victimization in rural Missouri seemed essential.

Sample Design

Four counties from different regions of Missouri were selected for study: one from the northwest part of the state (Holt), one from the northeast (Knox), one from the Bootheel (Stoddard), and one from the south central part (Morgan). The last was selected to obtain data from a county close to a large recreation area with a large number of lake cottages to determine the effect of absenteeism of residents in the off-season. In each county, ten businesses and approximately 100 households were randomly selected, and one person 16 or older was interviewed in each sampled location. Households in both the open country and in the largest community* in the county were sam-

pled, and the samples were weighted according to the relative sizes of the open country and small town populations. The business sample also was randomly selected from the largest community in the county.

Highway Department county maps showing the square mile section lines were used for drawing the samples of rural residents. After the sections were numbered consecutively, random numbers were used to select those sections where the interviews would be carried out. In the small towns the lots on city maps were numbered consecutively and random numbers were used to draw the samples of households. For the business interviews in each

county, a systematic random sample was drawn from a complete list of all businesses. The interviews were conducted from February to June of 1980 and were conducted by members of local Homemaker Clubs and other local citizens specially trained for this task by University of Missouri sociologists and Community Development Specialists.

*The single exception to this pattern is found in Stoddard County where Bloomfield was selected even though it is not the largest community in the county. The largest community in Stoddard County is Dexter which is much larger than the other sampled communities making comparisons of little value.



Results

Crime Occurring in Rural Missouri Households. In the total sample of 411 households, 96 or 23% had experienced some crime victimization during the year preceding the interviews. This demonstrates that approximately one of four rural Missouri residents in the sample areas have their lives touched by crime every year. These victimized households experienced a total of 129 crimes, of which only 49 or 38% were reported to the local police. The typical reasons given for not reporting the crimes were that the crimes were too minor (n=20), or that nothing would be done about it (n=27), or that the victim was sometimes responsible for his/her victimization (n=8).

These patterns of amount of crime victimization do not vary greatly from those found in similar studies of urban areas (see, for example, U.S. Department of Justice, 1975:72, 107). Moreover, the reasons given for failure to report crimes to the police, as well as the frequency of failure to report crimes, are in general similar to patterns found in urban areas (U.S.

Department of Justice, 1975:36). As one might expect, the percentage of crimes reported to the police increases with the dollar amount lost in the crimes. Among crimes involving less than a \$25 loss, only 29% of the incidents were reported; while among crimes involving \$100-\$500 loss, 51% were reported; and among crimes involving over \$500 loss, 77% were reported. This pattern suggests that the collection of insurance may influence crime reporting. Only 38% of all crimes were reported.

The incidence of all types of crime victimization in open country was compared with that found in the

small towns surveyed. Among the 310 households in the open country sample, 74 or 24% were victimized during the year preceding the interviewing. In small towns, out of 101 households, only 21 or 21% were victimized.

When considering only thefts, we found that, among the 411 households sampled, 60 or 15% had experienced some crime of this type during the preceding year. These 60 households experienced 73 thefts, of which only 27 or 37% were reported to the local police. Theft occurred among 49 or 16% of the 310 open country households sampled. These 49 open country house-

Table 1. Dollar Loss from Crime Victimization and Percentage of Reporting to Local Police

Dollar Loss from Crime	Number of Crimes	Number Reported	Percentage of Crimes Reported
0 - 25	38	11	29%
26 - 100	31	6	19%
101 - 500	35	18	51%
over 500	14	10	71%
	118	45	38% (average)

holds experienced 60 thefts, of which only 23 or 38% were reported. Among the 101 households in small towns sampled, 11 or 11% had been victims of 13 thefts during the preceding year, and 4 or 31% of these incidents were reported to the police. The rates of theft from households in all four open country areas and adjacent small towns are found in Table 2.

vandalism during the preceding year and 4 or 44% reported this crime to the police. The rates of vandalism in all four open country areas and adjacent small towns are found in Table 3.

These patterns suggest that vandalism is a very minor problem in all small towns and in all open country areas with the possible exception of Knox County which has the

greatest number of vandalism cases while having the least amount of theft among the counties studied (see Table 2). Respondents in only two households reported more than one incident of vandalism during the preceding year. Very few cases of crime other than theft and vandalism were reported. In the total sample of 411 households, only 20 or 4% of the households reported other crimes. These crimes included personal assaults and bad checks.

The total amount of crime victimization of all types in each of the open country areas and adjacent small towns is found in Table 4.

Perhaps the most interesting pattern found in this table is that the lowest rate of victimization among the small towns is in Bloomfield, which is in Stoddard County which has the highest rate of open country victimization. This demonstrates that there is no necessary correla-

Table 2. Theft Victimization in Various Areas of Missouri

	Number of Households	Number of Homes Having Thefts	Percentage of Households Victimized
<i>Small Towns</i>			
Mound City	27	3	11
Edina	22	2	9
Versailles	26	3	12
Bloomfield	26	3	12
<i>Open Country</i>			
Holt	76	13	17
Knox	74	8	11
Morgan	81	12	15
Stoddard	79	16	20

Notice that in the small towns the amount of theft is less than in any open country area and that there is little variation among the small towns. Among the open country areas, there is generally both a higher percentage of theft victimization and greater variation in the number of thefts reported in the four counties. Knox County reported the fewest open country thefts, while Stoddard County reported the most. Respondents in only 9 households reported more than one incident of theft during the preceding year.

When considering only vandalism among the 411 households sampled, 33 or 8% had experienced this type of crime during the year preceding the interviews. These 33 households experienced 36 cases of vandalism of which only 15 or 42% were reported to the local police. In the sample of 310 open country households, we found 24 or 8% of these households had been victims of vandalism. These 24 households experienced 27 cases of vandalism of which only 11 or 41% were reported to the local police. Among the 101 households in small towns sampled, 9 or 9% were victims of

Table 3. Vandalism Victimization in Various Areas of Missouri

	Number of Households Sampled	Number of Homes Having Vandalism	Percentage of Households Victimized
<i>Small Towns</i>			
Mound City	27	5	19
Edina	22	3	14
Versailles	26	1	4
Bloomfield	26	0	0
<i>Open Country</i>			
Holt	76	5	7
Knox	74	9	12
Morgan	81	5	6
Stoddard	79	5	6

Table 4. Crime Victimization in Various Areas in Missouri

	Number of Households Sampled	Number of Homes Having Criminal Victimization	Percentage of Households Victimized
<i>Small Towns</i>			
Mound City	27	7	26
Edina	22	4	18
Versailles	26	6	23
Bloomfield	26	4	15
<i>Open Country</i>			
Holt	76	19	25
Knox	74	18	24
Morgan	81	22	27
Stoddard	79	23	29

tion between victimization rates in small towns and adjacent open country areas.

Combining the amount of crime victimization in small towns and open country areas, we arrived at

the county totals in Table 5.

Such combined totals for each county suggest little significant variation in total criminal victimization across these different counties in various regions of the state.

Table 5. Crime Victimization in Various Missouri Counties

County	Number of Households Sampled	Number of Homes Having Criminal Victimization	Percentage of Households Victimized
Holt	103	26	25
Knox	96	22	23
Morgan	107	28	26
Stoddard	105	27	26

Comparison with FBI Data

Approximately one-fourth of rural Missouri households sampled acknowledged they had been victims of crime during the preceding year. The annual Federal Bureau of Investigation *Uniform Crime Reports* (U.S. Department of Justice, 1978:51), which is based on police information, estimates that in 1978 there were 13,479 serious crimes among the 1,237,806 rural Missouri residents. This provides a picture of one serious crime for approximately every 92 rural Missouri citizens. This FBI recording of serious crime includes robbery, assault, burglary, theft, rape, and murder, but excludes vandalism. This FBI exclusion explains part of the differences in our findings of a higher rate of crime. Also household victimization studies maximize the amount of crime since the question is not whether an individual has been the victim but rather whether they or anyone in their house has been a crime victim. Perhaps most of the differences can be accounted for by the massive underreporting to the police by crime victims. The underreporting is especially likely when the dollar value of the loss is under \$100. Citizens simply do not feel a police report is worth the effort. A major question is whether it is sound policy to encourage greater citizen reporting of minor

property crime. The cost of such increased reporting would be great in terms of the consumption of law enforcement officers' time in receiving calls, visiting crime scenes, investigating, and completing reports.

Crime Against Businesses. The small number of businesses included in the sample make generalization very hazardous. This disclaimer must be kept in mind as the data are presented. Among the total of 40 business places, 20 or 50% were victims of some crime during the preceding year. The crimes involved 11 thefts, six bad check cases, and three cases of vandalism. Of these 20 crimes, 15 were reported to the local police while only five went unreported. The small number of cases makes comparisons among the various small towns very risky however great the apparent variation. Yet this small

data set clearly shows fewer crimes against businesses in Edina and the most in Versailles, with Bloomfield and Mound city between the extremes. Table 6 shows the figures for each community.

Precautions Taken to Prevent Crime in Households. Tables 7 and 8 clearly show that the most frequently taken precautions against crime are generally the same and generally are given the same priorities in small town and in open country households. Moreover, little internal variation exists among the small town and open country areas in the various regions of the state. The most significant discrepancy is the greater importance attached to gun ownership in open country households than in small towns. Understandably, yard lights are also used more in open country while neighborhood associations

Table 6. Crimes Against Businesses in Four Small Towns in Missouri

Community	Number of Crimes	Types of Crime
Versailles	8	3 Thefts, 5 Bad Checks
Bloomfield	6	6 Thefts
Mound City	4	1 Theft, 3 Vandalism
Edina	1	1 Theft, 1 Bad Check

Table 7. Ten Most Frequent Crime Prevention Precautions Taken in Small Towns Among Households That Have Been and Have Not Been Victims of Crime.

Precautions	Nonvictims (N=80)		Crime Victims (N=21)		Total (N=101)	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Lock house at night	73	91	21	100	94	93
Notify someone when leaving for more than one day	70	88	21	100	91	90
Insurance coverage for home theft	72	90	18	86	90	89
Lock house when gone	59	74	21	100	80	79
Remove keys from cars and trucks	58	73	16	76	74	73
Keep valuables in safety deposit box	54	68	17	81	71	70
Own pistol, rifle, or shotgun	44	55	12	57	56	55
Leave lights on when gone	41	51	13	62	54	53
Neighborhood association for crime prevention	37	46	11	52	48	48
Watchdog	37	46	11	52	48	48

Table 8. Ten Most Frequent Crime Prevention Precautions Taken in Open Country Areas Among Households That Have Been and Have Not Been Victims of Crime

Precautions	Nonvictims (N=234)		Crime Victims (N=76)		Total (N=310)	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Own pistol, rifle, or shotgun	211	90	66	87	277	89
Insurance coverage for home theft	200	85	65	86	265	85
Notify someone when leaving for more than one day	192	82	66	87	258	83
Lock house at night	195	83	60	79	255	82
Watchdog	168	72	61	80	229	74
Remove keys from cars and trucks	171	73	50	66	221	71
Lock house when gone	166	71	50	66	216	70
Leave lights on when gone	153	65	52	68	205	66
Use yard lights at night	149	64	49	64	198	64
Keep valuables in safety deposit box	149	64	43	57	192	62

were mentioned more often by those in small towns. While victims of crime in small towns are more likely to have taken each precaution (except securing home insurance)

than nonvictims, this is not true in open country areas. Prior victims of crime in open country areas are in general no more likely to report the precautions than nonvictims.

Conclusions and Policy Implications

This study of rural crime victimization reflects rates of victimization similar to those found in urban areas and is contrary to the slight amount of rural crime indicated in the annual FBI reports. The problem of rural crime appears most pronounced in open country areas, where thefts in particular are more likely to occur, than in small towns. Unlike these results, a similar study in rural Ohio (Phillips *et al.*, 1976) found more vandalism victimization (approximately 15%) than either theft (approximately 7%) or burglary (approximately 4%). A central problem uncovered by this research is that most of the crime is never reported to the police, precluding any prospect of apprehending those responsible for the crimes or of recovering any stolen property. Those open country residents who have been victims of crime are surprisingly no more likely to take precautions to prevent crime than those open country residents who have not been victims of crime. Clearly these patterns of infrequent reporting and neglect of precautions suggest the need for citizen education programs. Finally, further study of the victimization of businesses seems essential, given the wide variation in the small data set presented in this report. However, even this small sample of businesses suggests that crime reporting among businesses is more adequate than among households.

Crime Prevention Measures in Rural Areas

The first step in dealing with any problem is to make an assessment of the situation. While the pilot study provides information on the extent of crime in four rural areas of the state, this does not mean that the same situation exists in other rural counties. Thus, residents of rural counties who feel that crime is a problem requiring attention may first wish to determine the nature and extent of rural crime. The University of Missouri through its Extension Division and Departments of Sociology, Rural Sociology and Community Development can provide assistance in developing questionnaires, training interviewers, analyzing and tabulating data, and providing a report of the findings. Requests for such assistance should be directed to the local University Extension Center.

One of the most effective measures to combat crime in both urban and rural areas is the organization of "Neighborhood Crime Watches." These have become in-

creasingly popular in recent years and have proved to be very effective. Neighborhood crime watches stem from the old American tradition of neighbors helping each other. Residents of a neighborhood simply band together to watch each other's property, report suspicious activity to law enforcement officers and to each other, noting the location and license number of questionable vehicles, and letting it be known that a crime watch is in existence. Some households have a sticker on their doors indicating their participation in such programs.

One county in Central Missouri which was experiencing a wave of rural crime organized rural neighborhood groups throughout the county. As a result, the local crime rate dropped dramatically. Moreover, the organization of rural neighborhood groups often leads to dealing with other local concerns in an effective volunteer manner. And volunteerism does not add any

costs to the government or the taxpayers. Extension Community Development Specialists can assist in the organization of rural neighborhood groups. Contact your local Extension Service Office if you wish such assistance.

Experience has shown that three steps can drastically reduce crime in rural areas. They are: organization of neighborhood crime watches, reporting suspicious and criminal activity, and marking property so that it can be identified (List, 1979). Many counties have equipment which can be borrowed for permanently marking property for ready identification. Check with your local sheriff's office about the availability of such equipment, how to use it, and how to record identification numbers.

The following additional steps to protect rural property are recommended by the Institute of Public Safety, University of Missouri, Columbia (List, 1979).



Security Steps for Rural Residents

Animals

1. Avoid penning or enclosing animals for long periods of time.
 2. Remove loading chutes from accessible loading sites.
 3. Check fences periodically to make sure they have not been cut or rewired.
 4. Report strange vehicles and strangers on your land.
 5. Avoid head counting animals at routine times.
 6. Brand animals if possible.
 7. Maintain a record of any animal scars, deformities, peculiarities, marks and characteristics for identification purposes.
 8. Report animal losses immediately to the sheriff.
 9. Avoid accepting without verification, checks from strangers for the sale of animals.
3. Request identification from salesmen, repair and service personnel who are unfamiliar to you.
 4. Never provide personal information to unknown callers over the telephone.
 5. Never provide entrance into your home to strangers.
 6. Remove family keepsakes and valuables to a home of a friend prior to vacation trips.
 7. When leaving home for an extended period of time let a friend know how long you will be gone and where you can be reached in an emergency. Don't publicize your trip.
 8. Keep nonreplaceable valuables in a safe-deposit box.
 9. Keep a watchdog.

Equipment

1. Check field equipment regularly whether it is in the field or stored in a barn.
2. Never leave machinery standing in the field for long periods of time.
3. Remove keys from unattended machinery.
4. Chain unattended machinery to a barrier, tree or pole by passing a log chain through a wheel or around an axle and securing it with a case hardened lock.
5. When advertising machinery for sale be alert for thieves who might respond to the ad.

Self-Help Measures

1. Maintain a list of emergency numbers.
2. Engrave portable valuables with identification numbers.

Outbuildings

1. Close and lock all doors on outbuildings.
2. Light outbuildings at night if possible.

Home

1. Use dead-bolt locks on all entrance doors.
2. Provide good lighting around your home.
3. Trim or cut shrubbery from around windows and doors.
4. Keep your home looking occupied by: Cutting grass, raking leaves, picking up newspapers and mail, and shoveling snow from driveways.
5. If more than one car is driven in the family, park the undriven vehicle in the driveway.
6. Use timers for lights and radios when away overnight.

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