

Chapter 5

Safety Perceptions in Rural Areas



Rural areas are often associated with idyllic environments, and safety is an assumed part of these romanticized landscapes. Research around the world has long contested these simplistic views by showing evidence of the complexity of safety perceptions declared by those living on the rural-urban continuum. Anecdotal evidence indicates that people in rural areas with relatively little crime may express high levels of fear because of occasional crimes. To what degree does fear in rural areas reflect daily experiences, and which experiences are generating fear?

To start, we need to reflect upon the concepts of fear and fear of crime. According to Warr (2000, p. 453) fear is “an emotion, a feeling of alarm or dread caused by awareness of expectation of danger” while according to Ferraro (1995, p. 8), fear of crime is “an emotional reaction to dread or anxiety to crime or symbols that a person associates with crime.” The risk of being victimized (or the perceived signs of increased risk of victimization) can at least hypothetically negatively affect one’s perceived safety, although such a straightforward relationship is rarely found (Hale 1996), perhaps because this emotional reaction is situationally dependent. In other words, the reaction is determined by the particular setting at a specific point in time and space and may also be driven by memories and associations brought to the surface, which are, in turn, also influenced by individual and sociocultural contexts.

We adopt here the overarching concept of “safety” to bring together the meaning of fear (of crime) and the overall anxieties, as documented in the international literature, expressed by those living in areas on the rural-urban continuum. Thus, safety can be high when an individual feels safe or low when an individual declare feeling unsafe, that is, in fear or feeling worried. Safety is driven by overlapping factors: some are local, such as the experiences of the *rural environment*; others are *global contextual* such as those experienced through media; but both are mediated by *the individual characteristics* (or a combination of the individual characteristics) of those who express such feelings. How these factors take shape and interact in different rural contexts has been debated in criminology and other related disciplines over the past decades. Although victimization is influenced by gender and other individual characteristics, research has shown that it is the intersection of individual

characteristics that determines an individual's vulnerability to crime and fear of crime. This intersectionality, as a theory, is often used to assess how social and cultural categories interact (Crenshaw, 1989) and to interpret varied levels of safety perceptions (Gainey & Seyfrit, 2001).

The Rural Environment

Several studies have shown that rural areas generally seem to be linked to higher perceptions of safety among their residents compared to urban areas (Avery et al., 2019; Ball, 2001; Bankston et al., 1987; Belyea & Zingraff, 1988; Karakus et al., 2010; Menard, 1987; Rotarou, 2018). However, rural residents have in some cases reported greater worry of being alone at night and becoming victims of burglary compared to their urban counterparts (Mawby, 2007).

Rural-to-urban migrating residents have been declared feeling less safe when moving to urban areas than urban-to-urban migrants (Kennedy & Krahn, 1984). The safety perceptions of rural college and university students have also been observed in different contexts (De Angelis et al., 2017; Pritchard et al., 2015), and this included also the analysis of rural business perceptions of quietness and order (Mawby, 2004).

Overall, research on situational conditions of fear of crime in rural areas have not been paid as much attention as individual and social factors. Rural attributes such as remoteness and geographical isolation may have a positive impact on perceptions of safety (e.g., less accessibility for potential offenders), but open and less dense areas may increase worry as well (Panelli et al., 2005). So, while clearly defined, private space is necessary to improve perceptions of safety and barriers, and fortress-like structures can generate fear and suspicion also in rural areas. For example, on the former Australian frontier, historical, defensive architecture was considered as "physical manifestations of settler fear and aboriginal resistance" (Grguric, 2009).

Contextual Factors Affecting Safety

Poor safety perceptions can reflect "a condensation of broader concerns about crime, stability and social change" (Gray et al., 2008, p. 377). They have also been associated with structural and situational factors typical of rural environments, such as long-term unemployment or perceptions of exclusion from the local economy, combined with structural racism (Chakraborti & Garland, 2011; Crompton, 2008; Palmer, 1996).

There is growing evidence that people who do not fit into idealized constructions of rurality feel excluded from rural places (for several examples, see Yarwood (2010). Fear in this case, as suggested by Pain and Smith (2008), is central to the terrain of daily lived experience, rather than a straightforward relationship between

the individual and a variety of societal structures; that is, fear is embedded in a network of moral and political geographies. The international literature confirms that this process goes hand in hand with long-term social and economic exclusion and discrimination related to gender, ethnicity, and length of residence (Babacan, 2012; Chakraborti & Garland, 2011; Garland & Chakraborti, 2004; Jensen, 2012; Scott et al., 2012).

Rural crime has often been perceived as the result of an intrusion by urban influence and/or other groups of individuals that “do not belong”, for example, seasonal workers or local youth (Ceccato, 2015b, 2017; Little et al., 2005; Yarwood, 2010). This is also expressed in the case of “boomtowns,” that is, smaller towns experiencing rapid economic and population growth. Krannich et al. (1985) showed that while actual victimization experiences in boomtowns did not differ from non-boomtowns, perceived fear was significantly higher.

Moreover, there is the “outsider’s” perception of safety. Related research addressed topics of the victimization of domestic tourists in New Zealand (Buttle & Rodgers, 2014) and minority fears of genocide (Farrell et al., 1983). Chakraborti and Garland (2003) assessed attitudes toward crime and fear among migrants and minority groups in British rural areas, showing extensive victimization and fear, as well as mistrust of the criminal justice system because perceived lack of support.

Poor communication, lack of police response, and low conviction rates (Donnermeyer & Barclay, 2005; Smith, 2020) can leave individuals feeling like second-class citizens and neglected (Smith, 2020). One reason for the (feeling of) neglect is that the police, as well as those who devote their time to crime prevention, often work reactively, which requires an offense to be committed before any action can be taken. Unlike crime, safety is not typically considered a conventional policing matter and seems to be even less of an issue for those living in rural areas as in the public does not think it is important.

Farmers may develop activities that make them more exposed as crime target, not only in fairs but also via internet and various digital platforms. More recently, the publicness of certain activities (such as e-commerce for agri-foods) (Cristobal-Fransi et al., 2020; Mora-Rivera & García-Mora, 2021) has exacerbated differences between groups and fueled latent conflicts that then become a source of fear among those threatened on digital platforms – a problem that also challenges the capacity of local police forces.

Media consumption has also been shown to explain some fear of crime in rural areas, although the relationship was not significant in accounting for perceptions of disorder (Lytle et al., 2020). Norris and Reeves (2013) found that the link between fear of crime and rural residents who subscribe to authoritarian ideals is stronger when the “threat” is framed as “outsider” criminals compared to when it is framed as a local issue. Further studies have emphasized the social and cultural constructions of rural fear of crime, “cultural threat,” and fear of the “other” (Ceccato, 2015a; Scott et al., 2012; Scott & Hogg, 2015; Yarwood, 2001; Yarwood & Gardner, 2000).

Intersectionality of Safety

There are individual modifiers of safety perceptions. Among the various sociodemographic characteristics, gender and age seem to significantly influence fear. Other individual characteristics interact with gender and sexual orientation and affect both feelings of safety and the statistical probability of victimization. Victimization is influenced by the intersection of gender and other individual characteristics; research has shown that it is the intersection (Crenshaw, 1989) of individual characteristics that determines an individual's vulnerability to crime and fear of crime (Gainey & Seyfrit, 2001).

Among the individual factors, prior victimization (or awareness of others' victimization) is often considered one determinant of a person's perceived safety. Although one's previous victimization is often associated with poor safety perceptions, research has shown ambiguous links between victimization and fear of crime (Cates et al., 2003; Garofalo & Laub, 1979). One possible explanation is that it is unclear if (and how) fear varies by types of crime or by its seriousness (Jackson & Gouseti, 2012). However, witnessing someone else's victimization, in particular a friend or family member, can affect one's perceived safety (for a review, see, e.g., Skogan, 1987). Knowledge of someone else's victimization, especially someone geographically close, has also been linked with poor safety perceptions. Fear of "near repeat victimization" (Anderson & Pease, 1993) is associated with precautionary measures. For example, thefts of livestock from farms may mobilize neighboring farmers to be proactive out of the fear that something will also happen to their own livestock.

It has been found that both urban and rural women express greater fear than men, due to their higher vulnerability to sexual assault in conjunction with other victimization (Little et al., 2005; Pleggenkuhle & Schafer, 2018). The lack of perceived safety can have numerous inhibiting effects on the quality of life, especially in terms of women's mobility and physical activity (Timperio et al., 2015). Research on women's fear of crime have been dominated by accounts of urban women (Panelli et al., 2004), but although urban women may fear crime to a greater extent than rural women do (Timperio et al., 2015), it has also been found that rural areas have their own unique structures for triggering feelings of unsafety. Little et al. (2005) showed a study on New Zealand and the United Kingdom, in which the notion of rural space being safer than its urban counterpart was common even among rural women. In this case, it seems that fear may primarily be fear of strangers, which in turn may come at the cost of overlooking crime committed by local community members (Panelli et al., 2004).

It is perhaps even more important to reflect on the impact these feelings have on individuals living in rural areas, and how they can lead individuals to a "sense that they must always be on guard, vigilant and alert" (Gordon & Riger, 1989, p. 2). Such feelings have the power to modify behavior and affect daily activities (Jackson & Gray, 2010), including engaging in safety protection measures, particularly when local police stations have shut down or the act of reporting crime feels like "a waste

of time” as the reported crime is not taken seriously (Ceccato, 2015c). A lack of satisfaction with the police has also been associated with higher levels of fear (Lytle & Randa, 2015).

Fear can also be revealed by silence. Low rates of reported violence against women have been associated with a “code of silence” imposed by patriarchal community values and a fear of ostracism if the violence becomes public (DeKeseredy et al., 2012). Reported rates of violence against women have differed from region to region in Sweden, which has been interpreted as a sign of differences in gender contracts across the country (Ceccato, 2016; Ceccato, 2018). Similarly, Ceccato et al. (2021) showed that crimes against farmers are underreported because they think the police cannot help them or their victimization has been normalized by society.

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