CROSSROADS OF RURAL CRIME

EDITED BY

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Crossroads of Rural Crime

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Crossroads of Rural Crime: Representations and Realities of Transgression in the Australian Countryside

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An inter-disciplinary social sciences workshop – *Understanding Crime and Rural Communities: Theory, Policy and Practice* – was hosted by Federation University on 7 and 8 February 2019. Held at Churchill in the Gippsland region of Victoria, the event included 21 scholars from 12 different universities across four Australian states and one international rural criminologist.

We gratefully acknowledge the generous sponsorship of the *Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia* for fostering this 'meeting of the minds' through their workshop grants scheme. The workshop also generated the present volume.

Accepting the Academy's challenge to intellectually exchange ideas, explore connections between research and policy, support early career researchers and establish and develop ongoing collaborations for research, the workshop convenors – Alistair Harkness, Naomi Smith, Bec Strating and Rob White – crafted a workshop programme to unpack an array of issues around rural crime, communities and criminology in a non-urban Australian context.

One participant, Lisa Waller, observed in the closing session of the workshop the emergence of the notion of 'roads' and 'crossroads' which was, as it inadvertently happened, woven throughout each panel session. This was an astute and welcome observation, as 'crossroads' serve as a metaphor for networks and intersections, overlaps and trajectories: this is outlined in Chapter 1 and drawn upon throughout the book.

Seven of the papers presented at the Workshop were selected for inclusion in a special edition of the *International Journal of Rural Criminology* (Volume 5, Issue 1) published in November 2019. The remaining Workshop papers have been carefully themed and curated for this edited collection.

We would very much like to thank all the participants in the workshop: David Baker; Marg Camilleri; Chris Cunneen; Nick Economou; Erik Eklund; Andrew Groves; Bridget Harris; Russell Hogg; Rob Hulls; Belinda Morrissey; Kyle Mulrooney; Nick Osbaldiston; Gillian Paxton; John Scott; Naomi Smith; Lisa Waller and Megan Williams. Particular thanks to Joseph F. Donnermeyer from the Ohio State University for his visit to Australia to join the workshop and for sharing his considerable rural criminology expertise. Special thanks, too, goes to Melina Stewart-North for her organisational skills and sheer hard work.

Finally, many thanks to Jules Willan for commissioning this volume and to Hazel Goodes for ensuring its smooth production. We are grateful for their ongoing support and guidance throughout.

Alistair Harkness and Rob White

Chapter 1

Rural Crime at the Crossroads

Alistair Harkness and Rob White

Abstract

'Crossroads' serves as a metaphor for networks and intersections, overlaps and trajectories, and is used throughout this book to denote how criminal transgressions and the representations of crime circulate in and out of rural spaces in the Australian countryside. This chapter provides an introduction and overview of key concepts and approaches to rural criminology informed by a 'crossroads' metaphor. It discusses the complexities of rurality and how these, in turn, point to significant turning points and strategic directions – not only for research and scholarship but also for understanding, communicating and responding to rural crime and deviance as it presently manifests in countries such as Australia. Along this journey, a number of issues are identified, and practical concerns signalled.

Keywords: Rural crime; rural criminology; mobility; social change; transgression; representation

Introduction

'Crossroads' serves as a metaphor for networks and intersections, overlaps and trajectories, and is used throughout this book to denote how criminal transgressions and the representations of crime circulate in and out of rural spaces in the Australian countryside. This chapter provides an introduction and overview of key concepts and approaches to rural criminology informed by this metaphor. It discusses the complexities of rurality and how these, in turn, point to significant turning points and strategic directions – not only for research and scholarship but also for understanding, communicating and responding to rural crime and deviance as it presently manifests in countries such as Australia. Along this journey, a number of issues are identified, and practical concerns signalled.

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Setting the Scene

The notion of 'crossroads' provides a unique lens through which to examine and interpret the images and realities of rural crime. It implies a dynamic understanding and appreciation of the nature and complexities of rural life and how transgression manifests itself in the context of a presumed countryside–city divide. This book challenges common myths and assumptions regarding rural crime by exploring its diverse and multiple dimensions. It does this from a central conceptual focal point – the many roads that lead into and out of rural spaces, literal, virtual and figurative.

Rural-oriented scholarship worldwide is growing as a sub-discipline of criminology and criminal justice studies (see for instance, Donnermeyer's edited *Routledge Handbook of Rural Criminology*, 2016). In large part, this boom has been motivated by governmental, community and academic recognition that, despite stereotypes and images of the 'rural idyll' (Bell, 2006), crime is an evident and significant problem in the rural landscape. Myths about peaceful, crime-free areas beyond the cityscape persist, but there is increasing recognition that rural crime is, in fact, multi-faceted and has consequences well beyond the countryside (Harris & Harkness, 2016).

There is also a 'deviant' side to the rural, which likewise is evident in the phenomenon of 'dark tourism' (for example, sites of massacre and penal institutions) through to cinematic portrayals of abnormal people engaging in strange rituals, rites and abysmal activities in isolated places and/or with 'backward' locals (for example, the film 'Deliverance' has a lot to answer for, as does the Australian horror movie 'Wolf Creek'). Again, such portrayals distort and pervert the realities of life in the outback and the bush, the coastal retreat and the highland getaway.

And, so, there does exist, then, a clash between depictions and mythologies of the rural. On one hand, the 'rural' is perceived as home to paradisal peacefulness; a place for metropolitan people to escape from the city to. For others, there is the notion of the rural and its inhabitants as simple, hard and intransigent, a place to avoid. In an American context, Haydon (2020) explores these contrasting portrayals of the rural heartland – this manufactured dichotomy of peaceful rustic and rural primitive (Haydon, 2020).

Existing monographs and collections on rural crime in Australia and elsewhere (Barclay, Donnermeyer, Scott, & Hogg, 2007; Donnermeyer, 2016; Harkness, Harris, & Baker, 2016) are primarily written by and for criminologists. *Crossroads of Rural Crime* brings together a themed collection of chapters with a distinct cross-disciplinary approach: in addition to criminology and criminal justice, the book encompasses contributions from politics and political sciences, sociology, Indigenous studies, literature and writing, journalism and anthropology. This multi-disciplinary collection is the first substantive edited collection to focus on notions of the mobility of crime within, to and from rural spaces. It stands at the crossroads of disciplines in order to better explore the nature of transgression and representation.

One intention of the book is to demonstrate how the notions of both static place and increased mobility can assist with our understandings of rurality, rural

society and crime using the metaphor of 'roads' as a unifying central theme. These roads crisscross and complicate simple understandings of crime in a rural context. While based primarily upon Australian scholarship, the ideas and approaches have universal application, and, as such, we hope that it will resonate with readers across the globe.

The Rural

The concept 'rural' is multilayered, contested and ambiguous (Baker, 2016; Hodgkinson & Harkness, 2020). It is used to describe the 'non-urban', and in this sense, refers to smaller communities on the periphery of larger urban conglomerations and small communities in remote areas of the planet. The key criteria here is usually population size, density and distance from larger metropolitan centres. Yet, this is likewise variable in nature. For instance, Australia's rural areas are characterised by a low density of population that makes them very different from the rural communities of Europe, North America or almost any industrialised country. This feature also differentiates Australia from other, less industrialised but highly populated countries (White, Wyn, & Robards, 2017).

Today, the population of Australia is overwhelmingly concentrated into its coastal capital cities – Adelaide, Brisbane, Darwin, Hobart, Melbourne, Perth and Sydney (and, particularly, the eastern seaboard). Given this, it has been suggested that regional areas also need to be included in a definition of rural (White et al., 2017). That is, a more useful definition of 'rural', at least in the Australian context, is to consider rural and regional areas, which are those areas in which people are living outside of the major cities.

The term rural is also used to describe an 'imagined' space, a place where certain cultures, values, communal relationships and pastimes dominate that are somehow different to what occurs in the 'urban'. Yet, with this definition, there are also variations and contestations. For example, what for the non-Indigenous may be construed as inhospitable due to remoteness and harshness of environment (e.g., deserts, tundra) may be experienced as 'country' by Indigenous peoples who may have thrived in these particular landscapes for thousands of years. Moreover, it is not 'remote', but at the very 'centre' of life, in this conception and experience of place. What is wilderness to some is home to others.

Reflecting on an observation from Chris Cunneen at the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia's rural crime workshop held in February 2019, Joe Donnermeyer (2019) noted that:

> …from the perspective of people living in localities far from the shadows of skyscrapers, the word 'remote' is the city itself; yet, we assume without thinking about it, that the opposite is true and that the city is the point of reference for all things criminological.

Perspective, therefore, lies as much as anything in the location of the beholder.

Across both these definitional parameters, it is the contrast between 'rural' and 'urban' that counts, and these, too, may be real or imagined. One thing that we do know for certain is that

> [t]he reality is that there is no such thing as a single rural sector within a country anywhere in the world, but rather a wide and varied collection of localities with smaller populations and population densities. (Donnermeyer, 2020, p. 19)

These localities are differentiated in a number of ways. Life in provincial towns is very different from life in remote or isolated areas, and each region of Australia has its own unique characteristics. For example, it has been noted (White et al., 2017, pp. 137–138) that rural Australia includes:

> …mining towns in the centre of Australia, landlocked and dominated by a single industry; coastal towns based on fishing that service a local farming region; regional centres that were based on a once-viable wool industry and are now struggling to find a sustainable economic base; and Indigenous communities that are engaged in a process of self-determination. Immigration to some rural areas has increased the proportions of the population who were born overseas, thereby increasing the ethnic heterogeneity of rural populations.

Rural and regional communities are not static but, rather, are continually changing as the economy shifts, communications improve (via satellite connections) or erode (such as when train links are severed), and as populations shrink, grow and transform (due to phenomena such as 'tree change' and 'sea change' involving the drift of people away from the metropolitan centres). The creation of a boomtown brought about by rapid growth and industrialisation of a rural community (such as with the oil and gas industries) can lead to a spike in offending and victimisation rates brought about by a lack of community cohesiveness and identification with the locality. Equally negative social effects can be experienced when the population rapidly decreases and a bust-town is created (see, for example, Ruddell, 2017; Ruddell & Donnelly, 2020).

Rural communities are also dynamic from the point of view of movements of people on a day-to-day basis. Farmers experiencing drought may work as nurses or labourers in nearby towns and cities; miners living in major cities hop on planes and buses and undertake their jobs on a fly-in, fly-out (FIFO) basis. They work remotely but live permanently in cities. And where they work may be outside of the local rural community of which they will never really be a part (Carrington, Hogg, & McIntosh, 2011).

For others, transience is experienced as episodic. There is annual migration from rural areas to regional towns and metropolitan areas by young people for study and work. The same happens in reverse for seasonal harvesting and sheep shearing. There is considerable mobility and interpenetration of the rural and

urban across many lived dimensions. Both communities and people are constantly changing and on the move in one respect or another.

Rural Life and Social Change

The single most significant theme to emerge from discussion of the social, economic and cultural characteristics of Australia's rural, regional and remote populations is that of diversity. It is a diversity marked by significant differences in occupations and industries, land uses, river and water accessibility, distributions of older and younger populations, Indigenous and multicultural demographics, access to essential services, experiences of drought and flood, and the dynamics of victimisation, vulnerability and resilience.

Around Australia, there are clear pockets of heightened social advantage as well as evidence of quite extreme disadvantage. Sometimes, this is due to the normal ebbs and flows of industry (such as the mining and resource sector) and sometimes contingent upon climatic conditions and weather patterns (such as agriculture and the pastoral industries). Whether a region is 'up' or 'down' is frequently reliant upon factors internal to the economic lifeblood of the community and/or ecologically extrinsic to human purposes as such. The transfer of wealth to the countryside is evident in some high-income coastal areas, as the economically well off move to greener pastures and quieter suburbs. For other regions, the state of play depends upon the intersection of highly fluctuating economic and social factors and geophysical forces such as drought and flood.

Sometimes, disadvantage is more structural in nature and degree, particularly with regards to Indigenous communities due to the legacies and ongoing harms of colonialism. It is entrenched and manifest over many generations. Not all are affected the same way, but all are affected in some way. Government decision-making and policy setting can be highly impactful, as Cunneen (2016, p. 63) observes:

> The very fabric of rural and urban life in Australia has been spatially patterned though the processes of colonising strategies, policies and practices… Place and community for Indigenous people have also been affected by colonial policies of removing and concentrating different tribal and language groups.

Social structure and social change are manifest in other ways as well. Out-migration of young people and children has seen considerable demographic changes in some rural and remote communities. Going to school and finding paid employment has necessitated, for some, the movement to the city. For others, such as the elderly, out-migration may be necessitated by the requirements of adequate health care, hospitals and leisure outlets. Or simply, exposure to weather that is kinder to old bones. A critical mass of people is needed to sustain local amenities and service infrastructure. When people leave, services leave. When

services leave, people leave. This is the trap from which some rural communities are presently finding it hard to extricate.

Yet, some communities are rebuilding themselves, including their notions of community and inclusion, through the intentional addition of migrants – not just from the cities but from countries offshore near and far, familiar and foreign. Asylum seekers and refugees who suffer disadvantage elsewhere may well find security and belonging in their new abodes and, for them, what might be novel physical settings. The rural in this instance constitutes a location for opportunity.

Nonetheless, according to various social indicators, people living in rural areas generally tend to be less well off than their urban counterparts (White et al., 2017). For example, they tend to have lower levels of household income and greater difficulties in obtaining paid work. In most country regions, unemployment levels are higher than in the capital cities, although there are regional differences in unemployment rates.

In many respects, young people growing up in rural communities face these issues more sharply than their urban counterparts because structural changes to the rural economy have dramatically affected the very fabric of their communities (White et al., 2017). Young Indigenous people continue to struggle to come to terms with the effects of the destruction of their traditional ways of life, and the struggle for political and cultural recognition continues apace. Non-Indigenous youth in many rural areas are growing up in a time of dramatic changes to traditional rural lifestyles, as evidenced by the drift of the young to the cities in pursuit of education and employment.

The nature of crime and deviancy in the countryside has been changing as well. Traditionally problematic activities such as domestic violence and suicide still feature highly in rural communities, particularly those under economic stress and those subjected to interventionist colonialist rule. But new crimes, harms and challenges are also emerging. The production of 'meth' has moved to small town Australia, where production costs are lower, detection rates are negligible compared to larger cities (which have great numbers of police and access to new technologies) and a ready market of disadvantaged clients are at hand. Environmental crimes, such as water theft and wildlife trafficking, are increasingly coming to the notice of relevant authorities. In many cases, these are 'old' crimes re-emerging to meet demand in new ways and for different constituencies.

Yet, continuities remain as well. Perceptions of right and wrong are influenced by local history and community tradition, and also by city-based news and Internet facility. The rural setting, like the urban setting, is also a site where blatant harms can be disguised or ignored due to immediate self-interest and denial. In regions where jobs are tight and money hard to come by, it is easier to ignore the ravages posed by fracking to land and water, to forsake the hurt and suffering of a few from lead poisoning in favour of the smelter or mining operation, and to dispute the potential harms of climate change when coal provides income in the here and now. Techniques of neutralisation have their own specific genesis, character and resonance in the rural and remote setting. This is especially

so under conditions where state support is constrained by tyranny of distance or tightness of the fiscal wallet. Availability of services, jobs and welfare support frame the possible as well as the impossible.

Who we are is typically shaped by with those with whom we share our company. A peculiar sort of differential association is that which is constructed around 'folk crime'. This refers to activities that may be illegal or even criminal, but which are nonetheless considered legitimate in the eyes of local folk. Hunting and fishing, for example, may be guided by local informal cultural norms not formal laws. This can incorporate unspoken 'rules' that also have communal ramifications – such as 'take only what you need' and 'don't hunt in mating season' (see for example, Jacoby, 2001).

Less reliance on formal criminal justice institutions is a noteworthy factor in rural setting, not only because of sparser resources available and the tyranny of distance (such as to a police station or court) but also because of the close-knit nature of many communities and a tendency towards rural stoicism and self-sufficiency (see, for example, Harkness & Larkins, 2019).

Rurality is, thus, not only about physical place but also about culturally and socially constructed spaces. Behaviour deemed appropriate and inappropriate is not only that which is subject to the law of the land. The changing composition of communities due to wider social changes can introduce uncertainty and ambiguity into formerly stable relationships and understandings. Not everyone may be quite on 'the same page' when those doing the writing are changing in number and influence.

Meanwhile, on another front, city-based vegan activists are travelling to farms outside of cities in order to protest against the harvesting of animals for food. This is facilitated by new endeavours in cyberspace, such as the mapping of farming operations across many different sectors and the posting of these on the Internet (Barnes & White, 2020). Physical distances are collapsing under the gaze of new surveillance and communication technologies (that point you to where you want to go), and the building of road infrastructures that ensure quick passage from city to country to city again (thus allowing you go to where you wish to go with relative ease).

City dwellers are travelling to the country for other reasons as well. The clean air, lack of traffic congestion, perceived friendliness and just the chance to 'get away' are attractive and definitely pull-factors. In conditions of Covid-19, the rural is increasingly seen as providing a number of healthy advantages, regardless of the actual realities. But the truck driver and the caravan puller may both transmit the very thing that they strive most to avoid. Relief and release for some may add burden, unintended or otherwise, to the other. Tourism can be a double-sided sword.

There is a lot going on in rural and regional areas, just as there is in our larger cities and towns. And much of this is impacting upon what happens in local communities, neighbourhoods and suburbs regardless of location. Yet, specificity is essential is we are to capture and acknowledge the distinctiveness of the 'rural', including as this applies to the study of crime, harm, deviancy and criminal justice.

At the Crossroads

Much of the canon of rural criminological scholarship (and indeed criminology more generally) considers crime in specific, static places – such as farms, villages, forests and so on. This book focuses on the *mobility* of crime in, and to, and from rural spaces.

Scholarship on mobility has hitherto focused predominantly on the crossing of international borders, with a paucity of attention given to internal mobility within countries and within regions. This is notwithstanding the increasing occurrence of internal mobility brought about by faster transport connections (improved road infrastructure and public transport options) and changing lifestyle practices (such as 'seachangers' and 'treechangers' who opt for a rural lifestyle while deriving income from urban-based employment).

The central theme of crossroads accentuates the notion of internal criminal mobility and the rapid circulation of images and ideas surrounding transgression. Roads can be considered literally – but, importantly, also and figuratively. For example, they serve as networks of mobility, with crime occurring in and out of spaces rather than solely occurring in one place.

Crossroads present as a political issue: literally as to their necessity, funding and location; and figuratively as a metaphor for political decision-making. Roads, in general, serve as facilitators of crime (allowing ease of access to and egress from rural communities); as confining (roads or the lack of them prevent escape for victims of violence); and as sites of offending (road rage). Where to site roads, how to join them and how to ensure they are safe are all ongoing public issues of concern.

The notion of crossroads denotes both static and dynamic conceptions of place and movement. For instance, a crossroad is an 'intersection', a place that points in four directions. In this sense, it is where disparate elements or spaces join up and come together in one specific location. A crossroad is also a point of and for 'choice'. It provides potential options for movement – backward and forward, or sidewise to the left and right. In this sense, it is an indicator of possible futures.

Crossroads can also exist in the real world or in the imaginary, in physical space or cyberspace. They exist as cultural representations and as materially bounded geographical markers. They are made up of both intersections and interconnections.

From a scholastic viewpoint, crossroads also provide a meeting point for disciplines, fields and topics. An illustration of this is the interdisciplinary of the present book. In these pages are incorporated contributions from criminology, criminal justice, sociology, politics and political science, Indigenous studies, literature and writing, and journalism. This interdisciplinary approach allows for various perspectives to coalesce around the central theme of rural crime.

The methods applied in each chapter – whether qualitative or quantitative, using thematic analysis, a case study–based approach, and so on – are all well-established approaches across the social sciences disciplines collectively. They are applied by scholars from a range of backgrounds, interests and fields, offering cross-disciplinary perspectives and insights on crime and place and providing