CRIME IN RURAL NSW: A POLICE PERSPECTIVE

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INTRODUCTION

During the preceding three decades, Australia has witnessed the progressive marginalisation of its rural sector. With few exceptions, rural environments have been characterised by experiences of service contraction, depopulation, economic decline, erosion of infrastructure, poverty, displacement and youth suicide (eg. Tonts, 1996; Jones et al, 1995; Croce, 1994; King, 1994; McKenzie, 1994; Sorrenson et al, 1993; Rolley et al, 1993). In addition, the rural sector has had to contend with the vagaries of weather on which much of its community’s livelihood is staked. In 1994, for example, it was identified that the effects of drought conditions covering approximately 93% of the State of New South Wales contributed to enormous social and economic costs among the community (Standing Committee on Social Issues, 1994:11). The collective impact of these events has been one of devastation for many communities and individuals, straining the social fabric of the rural sector to the point of crisis (McKenzie, 1994; Lawrence et al, 1990).

On the face of it, recent trends in the recorded crime rates for rural communities also add to the view that much of the sector is disadvantaged. In spite of arcadian views that much of the rural sector is relatively free of crime (Gray et al, 1990), official statistics have recently shown rates for selected offences to be higher than that of the Sydney metropolitan region. This had led to a growing interest in the health and well being of rural societies along a number of fronts including government, media and academic institutions. The NSW Police Service is one such organisation that maintains an express interest in the phenomena that continues to unfold within the rural sector.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss how the NSW Police Service perceives and responds to the incidence of crime in rural NSW. It will discuss from a law enforcement perspective, the distinctive characteristics of rural communities and the impact these have on demand for service, recent trends in rural crime and corporate and localised responses to rural crime issues.

THE RURAL ENVIRONMENT

Perhaps the most striking contrast between the urban and rural operational environment is one of distance. In NSW, despite the rural environment accounting for approximately 98% of the State’s landmass, it encompasses only 38% of the population at a density of 2.9 persons per square kilometre (ABS, 1998). This compares with a Sydney metropolitan density of 308.2 persons per square kilometre. Subsequently, police in rural settings are often faced with servicing remote and isolated households. Combined with fewer staff, this factor can obviously impact on response times and the strength of that response. Unfortunately, the economic realities of service provision and resource allocation will ensure that the ‘tyranny’ of distance remains a fact of rural life.

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1 For the purposes of this paper, the rural environment includes all Statistical Divisions except Sydney
The physical distances that characterise the rural landscape can also impact upon the provision of centralised support services. Whilst great inroads have been made toward enhancing the communications and information exchange systems for remote police stations throughout NSW, distance can still impact upon decisions to supply centralised support functions to major incidences and investigations. A team of covert surveillance operatives for example, may provide greater utility to a metropolitan investigation where they could be inserted quickly and with high anonymity. This would obviously be more difficult in a rural setting characterised by strong social networks. Similarly, the State Protection Group or Bomb Squad may assist in the resolution of numerous incidents in a metropolitan setting in the same time it would take to respond to a single rural incident where extensive travel was required. This is not to say however, that centralised commands do not assist rural communities, but rather that a more global view is adopted in decisions to supply scarce resources efficiently. It may be more appropriate and efficient for central commands to provide support using other technologically advanced means.

Another substantial disparity between the operational environments of rural and metropolitan communities is the types of crimes encountered. Whilst, rural communities are often subject to the gamut of ‘standard’ crimes experienced by metropolitan regions, they also have to contend with crimes such as machinery damage and theft, stock theft, large scale drug importation and cultivation, illegal fishing and shooting, and other environmental crimes (Hillier, 1991). The impact on policing is that each of these crimes calls for a specific and often specialised response that may involve a number of external agencies. Invariably, it is often the local police officer who is required to mobilise and coordinate the collective multi-agency and multi-jurisdictional responses to specific criminal issues. This, as much as anything, is an indication of the broad ranging capabilities of rural police.

A particularly unique characteristic of rural communities is the multiple functions that both constituents and police often undertake. Whereas in metropolitan environments, individuals, and indeed police generally have specialist roles, a rural community may see a single person responsible for the delivery of multiple services. Similarly, it has been identified in the literature that rural police are often generalist, regularly participating in activities beyond their normal range of job functions (La Macchia, 1992; Dawson, 1992; Maquire et al, 1991). An outcome of this is that the level of police-community interaction will often be more intimate, with the local police officer being well known. Residents may know where the officer lives, what they do, and when they do it, and are likely to communicate this information to their peers.

The implications of a largely transparent existence by the rural police officer can be quite profound. Reputations can be developed quite easily, and unlike metropolitan environments, are likely to impact upon the successful resolution of incidents requiring police involvement (Strandburg, 1997). The flipside to this of course, is that an accomplished police officer can seamlessly integrate themselves into a rural community and develop an attendant affinity with the social networks operating in that community to their advantage.

In many ways, the interactions between the police and the rural communities they serve are a reflection of more orthodox programmes of community-based policing. Indeed, the relationship is often a natural extension of the unique sociological processes observed in rural communities. Institutions such as the family, schools, charity associations, religious groups and various committees have all been shown to be effective social controls in ostracising deviance (Gray et al, 1990). Indeed, even venerable small town traditions such as gossip and ridicule have helped to maintain social order (Bertrand, 1958). This is a distinguishable feature of rural landscapes as
metropolitan environments are often characterised by greater population transience and anonymity. As a result, the distinct social organisation observed in many rural communities calls for a particular sensitivity on the part of the police to ensure that the lasting ramifications of day-to-day decision making remain positive.

Police must also be sensitive to the unique characteristics of rural communities that can impact upon the fear of crime held by residents. Limited research suggests that fear of crime among rural constituents is less than that of their metropolitan counterparts (Donnerrmeyer et al, 1986; Boggs, 1971) however, evidence also shows that the fear of crime among rural communities can be disproportionately heightened when a crime occurs (Bankston et al, 1987). This appears to be due to the extraordinary and sensitive nature with which such incidents are viewed, particularly by people who are isolated. Whilst metropolitan residents may be desensitised to the proliferation of crime in their area because of its sheer volume, the impact of a crime on the psyche of rural residents can be significantly greater.

**RECENT TRENDS IN RURAL CRIME**

Officially recorded crime statistics published by the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research (1998) have been used to describe shifts in crime trends for selected offences throughout non-metropolitan NSW for the calendar years 1995 through 1997. The data is expressed by statistical division (SD) and it is recognised that issues of homogeneity are not fully addressed. Whilst it is not possible to account for the heterogenous distribution of crime throughout NSW in the space allowed here, an attempt has been made later in the paper to illustrate how crime can be experienced disproportionately across rural landscapes.

**Malicious Damage**

Figure 1 illustrates the shift in crime rates for malicious damage in NSW between 1995 and 1997. Rates for this offence appear to be at comparable levels across the State with few anomalies. The North Western and Far West divisions for instance, exhibited rates significantly higher than that of Sydney, with the Far West division in particular experiencing a significant rise since 1995. All statistical divisions experienced an increase in rates of malicious damage over the period though the shift has not always remained consistent. The Mid-North Coast, South Eastern and Murrumbidgee divisions actually saw declines on 1996 levels.
An important point needs to be made at this stage regarding the use of crime rates rather than number of crime incidents to facilitate a comparative understanding of rural crime problems. The distribution of the population throughout NSW effectively means that small changes in the number of offences or the population can lead to disproportionate changes in the reported crime rate. Taking the above offence as an example, the Far West division was shown to experience a significant increase in the rate of malicious damage to the point that in 1997 it was close to double the rate exhibited by Sydney. This is in spite of the fact that the number of incidents in the Far West division amounted to approximately 1.1% of that accounted for in Sydney. More importantly though, the 19.2% increase in the number of malicious damage incidents in the Far West division translated to a 31.7% increase in the rate. So whilst rates are seen as one of the few statistical options available to facilitate a comparative analysis, caution needs to be exercised in their interpretation, particularly where small numbers are involved.

**Break and Enter**

On an incident basis, break and enter is the most voluminous of crimes experienced throughout NSW. Only three of the eleven non-metropolitan SDs exhibited rates of break and enter above that in the Sydney division (figure 2). These were the Illawarra, North Western and Far West divisions. All SDs in NSW saw increases in the rate of break and enter offences since 1995 although some areas experienced declines since 1996. These included the Mid-North Coast and Far West divisions.

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**Figure 1: Malicious Damage, NSW Statistical Divisions, 1995-97**

The high rates of break and enter among parts of the rural sector is a curious phenomenon when one would argue that opportunities to offend would be significantly less compared to metropolitan environments. Unlike a metropolitan area, the cognitive understanding a potential offender has of his target area is likely to be less in areas characterised by great distances. Perhaps a more feasible rationale for relatively high break and enter rates in some rural communities is related to the level of fear of crime residents have. It is suggested that the low fear of crime and attendant complacency that may be prevalent could lead residents to be less vigilant. Residents may leave premises unsecured or may not bother to encode their household property with serial numbers. The absence of precautionary measures against criminal victimisation can not only increase opportunities to offend, but it may also reduce the chances of the investigation of a crime from being successful.

**Assault**

Reported rates of assault increased significantly between 1995 and 1997 for the majority of SDs in NSW (figure 3). The majority of non-metropolitan SDs consistently indicated rates of assault in excess of the Sydney SD. Indeed, all statistical divisions in NSW illustrated an increase in assault rates for the three-year period. Of particular note was that while the North Western and Far West divisions had comparable rates of assault with Sydney in 1995, they were exhibiting rates two and three times this level by 1997.
Figure 3: Assault, NSW Statistical Divisions, 1995-97

Another important point to note in relation to the discussion of aggregate crime rates is that they provide little indication of intra-jurisdictional variation. That is, they fail to provide an understanding of the contrasting experiences of crime that may be occurring within each statistical division. It is certainly the case that crimes in rural NSW are not distributed uniformly. Figure 4 illustrates this by mapping reported incidences of assault over a recent six-month period in the New England area. It is clear from the map that high levels of assault were concentrated in a few key areas and that in fact, the majority of suburbs in the area had no assaults reported. Furthermore, the areas where assaults tended to be high were characterised by urban attributes (ie. built up areas, multiple businesses, and residential concentrations). This disproportionate distribution of crime across space is a fairly common characteristic of police jurisdictions in the rural sector.

Sexual Assault

Patterns in the rate of sexual assaults in NSW tended to reflect those found for assault (figure 5). Again, many non-metropolitan SDs were reporting rates in excess of Sydney with the highest rates identified in the Far West and North West division. Of significance was that the SouthEastern Division reported a doubling in the rate of sexual assaults over the period.

In addition to issues such as the non-uniform distribution of crime and small area statistics described earlier, deficiencies in the accuracy of reported crime rates must also be addressed in any aggregate assessment (Devery, 1991). This is particularly true for offences such as sexual assault where a certain degree of
Figure 4: Distribution of Assaults, New England Local Area Command
sensitivity, guilt and shame may be attached. Whilst police in rural communities are noted for dealing with relatively minor offences outside of the law enforcement system (Ladbrook, 1988), it is probable that deflated rates of sexual assault are more an outcome of under reporting by victims. The implications of reporting a sexual assault, or any other offence of a sensitive nature, will indelibly be more acute amongst rural communities where both perpetrator and victim are likely to be known.

**Figure 5: Sexual Assault, NSW Statistical Divisions, 1995-97**

![Bar chart showing sexual assault rates in different statistical divisions of NSW, 1995-97.](image)


**Motor Vehicle Theft Offences**

Motor vehicle theft offences include both motor vehicle theft and steal from motor vehicle. Figure 6 illustrates that the category of motor vehicle theft offences was one of the few offences analysed where rates in metropolitan Sydney significantly exceeded all non-metropolitan SDs. Some non-metropolitan areas however, did see substantial gains in the rate of offending and these included the Illawarra and Hunter divisions (which include the populations of Wollongong and Newcastle respectively). For the remaining divisions, all but one (Murrumbidgee SD) illustrated an increase in rates over 1995 levels.

**Figure 6: Motor Vehicle Theft Offences, NSW Statistical Divisions, 1995-97**

![Bar chart showing motor vehicle theft rates in different statistical divisions of NSW, 1995-97.](image)

The higher rates of motor vehicle theft offences in the Sydney SD is likely to be a result of greater opportunities to offend. Where as in a metropolitan environment, drivers may park cars some distance from where they partake in activities (ie. work, shopping, etc) for substantial periods of time, this is less likely to be the case in a rural setting unless that setting had a range of metropolitan characteristics. This said, it is plausible that motor vehicle theft offences in the rural sector could be partly attributed to a lack of vigilance on the part of car owners to deter potential thieves. The other aspect relating to motor vehicle theft in a rural setting is that due to the distances and terrain that characterise the region, vehicles that are stolen may be difficult to recover. This has implications for the successful investigation of such crimes.

**Drug Offences**

Based on the officially recorded statistics, the lowest rates for total drug offences were in the Sydney SD with the majority of non-metropolitan divisions exhibiting rates significantly higher (figure 7). Rates in the Richmond-Tweed, Mid-North Coast and South Eastern coastal divisions were all quite high as at the end of 1997. An analysis of the compilation of these rates indicates that the majority of offences in these areas related to the possession, use and trafficking of cannabis. Despite the high levels observed, there have been few meaningful changes in the rates over the period.

**Figure 7: Drug Offences, NSW Statistical Divisions, 1995-97**

![Graph showing drug offences rates per 100,000 population for various NSW divisions from 1995 to 1997](image)


There is some obvious contention as to whether reported drug offences provide an accurate depiction of actual offences. Clearly, a sustained drug operation in a single location can directly influence the rate of drug offences by bolstering the level of reporting. This said, rural communities are prone to certain types of drug offences, and rural police must remain vigilant along a number of fronts. In particular, they must work to mitigate large-scale drug cultivation and drug importation, which may be prevalent in isolated regions. The successes of police in these areas can ultimately impact upon the availability of drugs in other locations, including Sydney.
Robbery

The highest rate for robbery offences in NSW was identified in the Sydney SD which also exhibited the greatest increase over the period (figure 8). All remaining non-metropolitan divisions had rates in 1997 at a third or less than that of Sydney. Despite this, a few divisions have shown significant rises over the period and these include the Hunter, Illawarra and NorthWestern divisions. This is obviously a concern for police as robberies are phenomenons that have in the past been largely absent from rural communities.

Many of the reasons for robbery being so high in the Sydney metropolitan region relate to the anonymity afforded to offenders. That is, offenders have many opportunities to commit an offence on an individual or business that does not know them. Whilst one would argue that the same level of anonymity is not prevalent throughout much of the rural sector, there are obviously places where population transience is going to be high. An example would include locations that had developed a significant trade in the tourism and therefore attracted many visitors throughout the year. Other reasons could include the purported relation between drug addiction and property offences. From this perspective, the NSW Police Service is maintaining a strategic focus on the offence category of robbery with regular support being offered from central commands.

Figure 8: Robbery Offences, NSW Statistical Divisions, 1995-97

As a final point on the recent crime trends experienced in the rural sector, it is perhaps appropriate to note that there may be an association with a declining level of informal social controls (Carter, 1982). Having mentioned the significant changes experienced by rural communities over the last three decades, it is feasible that the continued deterioration of the social fabric is facilitating more opportunities for crime to be committed. Whilst this situation is sad from a traditional perspective, it does alert us to the need for the responsibility of crime reduction and prevention to be situated across all spheres of administration, including the community.
POLICING RURAL COMMUNITIES

Since 1997, the NSW Police Service has operated under an organisational structure incorporating eleven Regions and eighty Local Area Commands (LAC). Each LAC is managed by a Police Commander at the rank of superintendent whose primary responsibility is to ensure a timely and effective operational response to the constituency. The management of these jurisdictions is largely autonomous and the organisation views them as the service delivery points for policing across the State.

The relevance of this structure to the capabilities of the service to mitigate rural crime is that it recognises that locations, in particular rural settings, are not homogenous. As the nature of problems and their causation can often be disparate across different communities, it is appropriate that local police managers have the flexibility to instigate programmes and practices that are based on an intimate understanding of local issues. This kind of focus could not be achieved if the decisions to provide daily operational services to the community were made within a centralised structure. Additionally, the decentralised organisational structure administered by the Service can generate a range of other positive externalities. For example, local police managers and their staff can personalise the interface between the organisation and residents, thereby eliciting greater community support for crime reduction efforts. The understanding that police at the LAC level have of their jurisdiction, in conjunction with the access they have to the communities they serve, has led to the development and implementation of some excellent initiatives throughout NSW. Some examples are provided below.

The Van Heythuysen Trust

An issue many police in the rural sector have to contend with is juvenile deviance. Police have identified that some young people, who may be disenchanted with a lack of employment prospects and access to cultural or recreational services have a propensity to become involved in activities that may lead to crimes being committed. Subsequently, a preventative approach has been adopted by a number of LACs to redirect the energies of such youth toward more constructive and legitimate activities.

One such programme is the Van Heythuysen Trust, administered by police in Bungendore in southeastern NSW. This trust, named after an officer who died in the area in the early 1990s, provides funds for a range of activities for local youth. Some of the opportunities afforded to youth to date have included trips to Australia’s Wonderland in Sydney, attendance to dance parties and ice-skating trips. The outcome of the programme has been that rural youth are developing meaningful relationships with police in the area. It is envisaged that the legacy of this investment will be one of good will between police and youth in the area contributing to the reduction of future juvenile deviance.

Other rural police commands are also actively involved in administering programmes designed to keep young people out of trouble. A vocational care and truancy programme is currently operating out of the Barwon LAC in Moree with good results as are initiatives such as the provision of youth with new release videos, collection of youth from the street at night and returning them home, and the operation of youth camps. A commonality that goes to the success of many of these programmes is their incorporation of multi-agency and community support.
The Abalone Industry

In relation to some of the more specialised crimes taking place in the rural sector, police are involving the expertise of other law enforcement agencies. In the southeastern coastal region for example, police are cooperating with the Department of Fisheries and business interests to reduce poaching within the $20 million abalone industry. This has been in response to intelligence suggesting links between the industry and organised crime. Under the new strategy an innovative user-pays plan has been developed for combined operations to reduce poaching in the industry and related crime.

Other examples of the police response to uniquely rural crimes include those from the Bathurst area where police regularly attend clearance sales and liaise with Stock Squad detectives to reduce the incidence of stock theft. Police in the Far South Coast LAC around the Bega Valley, have also developed responses to environmental crimes by establishing an inter-agency committee for law enforcement. This committee is comprised of police, State Forests, National Parks and Wildlife, Waterways, Department of Fisheries, Australian Customs Service and Shire Local Ordinance Officers and provides a cross border response capability.

Rural Information Packages

Beyond strategies designed to deliver a robust response to criminal activities, local police are also quite active in encouraging community participation in prevention measures. A large component of crime prevention in rural communities relates to education, as many people are without substantial social contact. By providing the community with information pertinent to the environment in which they live, police can encourage residents, particularly those who are isolated, to take precautionary measures against victimisation.

In the Darling River LAC, the Community Safety Officer with the cooperation of the Bourke Shire Council, has developed a substantial information package for rural residents. The package includes an introductory letter from the Local Area Commander in addition to information on around thirty crime-related topics. The subjects covered range in nature from stock theft to domestic violence to safety for the elderly. One thousand of these packages were developed and from November 1998 have been hand delivered by police with the more isolated rural property owners visited first. On delivery police not only establish a rapport with the community they serve, they also document information about the property for further reference. In this way, the local police can pin point who in future may require information, for example, on goat poaching.

Other examples of educational programmes include a website in the Far South Coast LAC which contains over 200 pages of open source information and is publicly available. This community can also contact its police directly using e-mail facilities, thereby encouraging greater reporting levels of crime and intelligence. Repeat victimisation is yet another area where rural police are providing educational services. Police in the Darling River and Barwon LACs respectively provide seminars and personal visits to persons who have been repeatedly victimised. The idea here is to provide such persons with the information and means necessary to prevent them from being victimised again.
Analysis of the Crime Environment (ACE)

Having described a few localised examples of crime reduction and prevention, it is important to note that rural crime in NSW is also being addressed from a corporate perspective. A project currently being developed by the Information and Intelligence Centre is seeking to provide local jurisdictions with an ‘off-the-shelf’ analytical framework to improve strategy development and evaluation. The project, known as the Analysis of the Crime Environment (ACE) draws on a combination of environmental scanning processes, crime pattern analysis, geographical analysis and intelligence analysis and focuses these into a primary objective of crime prevention. It is envisaged that once an ACE report is completed, local police managers will have an acute understanding of how the external environment impacts upon the demand for policing services, thereby eliciting even greater effectiveness from the crime reduction and prevention strategies they develop.

In addition to corporate projects such as ACE, central commands are also active in other areas that are or will prove beneficial to rural communities. The development of ‘Crime Stoppers Towns’ is one such example, where the phone-in infrastructure of the Crime Stoppers Unit is advertised with the assistance of the Local Chamber of Commerce and businesses. The instigation of this programme in Wagga Wagga has led to a substantial increase in criminal intelligence received from the public. Other corporate projects of a more technical nature include an intranet currently being developed by Information Technology Services which will facilitate a greater and more timely exchange of information, intelligence and support between police officers in NSW, irrespective of their location. Similarly, the introduction of a centralised pawn broker system will support police in their attempts to mitigate property theft and the subsequent sale of stolen goods across NSW.

CONCLUSION

The distinctive nature of the rural environment has many implications for policing. Having identified that much of rural Australia has been subject to a range of detrimental experiences, including crime, over the past three decades, never before has it been more necessary for the NSW Police Service to be sensitive to the needs of the rural population it services. The complex nature of processes that place strain on the social fabric of rural communities needs to be incorporated into attempts to mitigate crime and make rural residents feel safe. Whilst crime rates in selected offences have been shown to have increased between 1995 and 1997, it is important to address the context in which they have occurred. The willingness of the rural police to address problems whose causation is clearly beyond their control is reflected in the key role they play in mobilising multi-agency crime reduction efforts around the State.

Individual efforts to reduce crime in rural communities have been demonstrated across a number of jurisdictions in NSW. The strategies outlined here are only a snapshot of operations in a small number of locations and the list is by no means exhaustive. The autonomous responsibility afforded to local Commanders under the organisational structure of the NSW Police Service is assisting in the development of localised solutions to crime problems. Importantly though, these strategies are being developed in consultation with centralised commands and corporate guidelines. The continued efforts of rural police, in conjunction with support from centralised commands, will ensure that the policing of the NSW population remains equitable and that people living in rural communities can have the quality of their environments preserved.
REFERENCES


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