



Sexual Assault In Rural Communities

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With contributions from Ellen Reed

When sexually assaulted in a rural community, victims often find that opportunities for medical, legal or emotional services are very limited, or even non-existent. Their economic situation and geographic isolation may further limit their options. Strong community ties in rural areas mean that a victim is more likely to be acquainted with the perpetrator than in urban settings. Finally, rural culture tends to be close-knit, self-contained, often conservative and unlikely to turn to “outsiders” for assistance. Together these characteristics result in low rates of reporting, limited opportunities for victim services, and difficulties for service providers. In other words, a victim of sexual violence in a rural community is not likely to report to police or to locate or access services.

Most service providers and researchers have not written on the topic of sexual violence in rural communities. Investigators who regularly study questions of sexual assault have generally disregarded “rurality” as a factor requiring special consideration. The documentation that does exist falls roughly into two categories; those written statements by practitioners that reflect mostly first-hand experiences and insight, and those documents by researchers that focus on the question of prevalence. Both types of resources are extremely limited.

This document presents some compelling issues concerning this largely underserved population and reviews the literature of practitioners and researchers. Finally, this summary discusses the impact of these studies on service providers and implications for further research.

Growing Attention To Rural Populations

Recent years have witnessed a growing focus on the unique needs of rural populations in the related areas of community and health services. Rural mental health programs, social work policymakers, and women’s health providers are increasingly viewing cultural and economic characteristics in rural areas as unique, and as having significant impact on service delivery.

In particular, anti-domestic violence researchers have been investigating issues of rural advocacy, but virtually none of these studies pay significant attention to the specific needs of the sexually assaulted, or to the particular set of problems facing sexual assault advocates in rural areas (Edleson & Frank, 1991; Monsey, Owen, Zierman, Lambert, & Vincent, 1995; Websdale, 1998; Murty & Schechter, 1999; Correia, 1999). A natural intersection does exist between the work of domestic violence and sexual assault advocates, with many providers serving both types of victims, and serving victims who experience both types of abuse. Although these documents provide little specific insight regarding rural sexual abuse, they do address some shared problems. For example, service providers in rural areas face many similar challenges, such as difficulty with transportation and isolation. Rural domestic violence research, however, lacks clear focus on the particular difficulties facing both rural sexual assault victims and rural sexual assault service providers.

The Meaning Of Rural

In general, low population density makes an area, county, or region rural. Beyond that, the term rural defies a simple, concise definition. Organizations and researchers concerned with measuring “rurality” use a variety of definitions. For example, the US Census demarks rural as “places with less than 2,500 and not in places incorporated or in census designated places and rural portions of extended cities” (US Census, 1995). Researchers use other definitions that may include social and demographic characteristics such as the male population under age 25 (Ruback & Menard, 2001).

Rural regions tend to have low population density and high acquaintance density, or in other words, a close network of familiarity among rural residents. In general poverty levels are higher in rural areas (Nord, 1997), but rural places display great differences in demographic, economic, and social characteristics. This wide variety of living configurations with unique cultural traits has led some researchers to see rurality more as a concept than as a specific condition. For example, Sims (1998) suggests that, “(p)erhaps rurality exists more as a state of mind and attitude than as an area on a map or a ratio of persons per square mile. Rurality may be best defined subjectively” (p. 21). Weisheit, Wells & Falcone, (1994) assert, “(t)hus a rural area is not simply a physical place but a social place as well” (p. 564).

Victim-Offender Relationship and Reporting

The vast majority of sexual assaults in this country are non-stranger sexual assaults, and for rural communities this is particularly true. For the nation, Rennison (1999) reports that 7 in 10 rape and sexual assault victims knew their assailants. In rural areas, where there is generally less anonymity, or as Ruback and Menard (2001) explain, where there is high acquaintance density, the likelihood of knowing the perpetrator is even greater. Furthermore, studies quite consistently point to the importance of the victim-offender relationship in predicting

reporting (Ruback 1993; Pollard, 1995; Ruback & Menard, 2001). “The closer the relationship between victim and assailant, the less likely the woman is to report the crime” (Hunter, Burns-Smith, Walsh, 1996).

Rural culture tends to offer particular difficulties and barriers to reporting sexual assault. A major barrier stems from the high degree of familiarity (Royses, 1999; Ruback & Menard 2001). The rural network of relationships means that most people have little anonymity. The lower population density in rural areas means a person is more easily noticed. There is an increased likelihood that the victim, or a friend or family member of the victim, may be acquainted with or related to the perpetrator. Additionally, the victim may re-encounter the perpetrator, perhaps on a regular basis. Even rural law enforcement is likely to be part of the social network (Sims, 1998; Weisheit, Wells & Falcone, 1994). Sims (1998) explains that for police in rural areas, personal interaction occurs in two arenas, within the police department and within the community “because the two groups appear more integrated as one than segregated as two” (p.13). Thus in rural areas where anonymity is rare, sexual assault victims may be especially concerned with a lack of confidentiality.

Sexual Assault Practitioners Write About Rural Challenges

Most rural practitioners know, even without research, how very difficult it is to work in rural areas. Through their work experience, they have come to understand the many unique characteristics of rural sexual assault. The picture that has emerged of the characteristics and difficulties of sexual assault in rural areas underscores many of the problems faced by service providers and victims. They include situations of victim isolation from services, traveling long distances, long deserted often unpaved and unlit roads, lack of medical facilities, and dealing with rural law enforcement that is sometimes quite conservative, unsympathetic, and untrained with

respect to sexual assaults.

A few practitioners and staff of organizations have begun to write about the subject (Royse, 1999; Levy 2002; "Stopping the stigma," 2001; Lewis 2003). These documents illustrate the problem of confidentiality for rural victims, isolation, and many other barriers to reporting and services. They point to cultural attitudes such as a frequent distrust of outside help that makes the work of rural sexual assault advocates particularly difficult. The two following examples of documents penned by rural practitioners provide a credible view of the many challenges in responding to sexual assaults in rural area

A fairly broad but brief sketch of sexual assault in rural areas grew out of a presentation made to the National Non-Stranger Sexual Assault Symposium, in 1999 (Royse, 1999). The report of the symposium proceedings provides a broad view of the rural realities for both victim and service provider. It discusses virtually all of the rural characteristics that make service delivery difficult. Royse touches upon obstacles in reporting, the lack of anonymity, conservative cultural values that affect perceptions of sexual assault, problems faced by rural responders, and characteristics of rural law enforcement in processing sexual assault cases. So many of these characteristics carry great implications for the victim's willingness to report. For example, even if the victim wants to report an assault and has the transportation to a local rape crisis center, just parking her car in the vicinity of the services will compromise her anonymity. Or, in visiting a local clinic or hospital, the nurse may be a neighbor or even a relative of the victim or the perpetrator. Royse (1999) explains, "Even seeking support and assistance from clergy, a neighbor or friend can run into the individual and societal prejudices that made it difficult to report" (p. 48).

Additionally, Royse (1999) asserts that, "(i)t is obvious that the most frequently occurring sexual assault, non-stranger sexual assault, is not only occurring in rural America, but may be a hidden and unidentified epidemic" (p. 47). This assertion of a rural epidemic is the only known written statement by a practitioner that attests to a high prevalence of

sexual assault in rural communities. The strength of her insight into the rural realities begins to shed light on the magnitude of rural sexual assault and the possibility that there is a "hidden and unidentified epidemic."

Another service provider, a staff psychologist at the University of Tennessee at Martin, writes and speaks on the difficulties encountered by students on rural campuses in dealing with sexual assault, as well as the challenges facing rural institutions in preventing and responding to sexual assaults (Levy, 2002). Levy provides a compelling example of a college freshman at a rural university who struggled with reporting a sexual assault. "She confides in a friend, who encourages her to report the crime. However, the sheriff is a fishing buddy of her father's" (p. 1).

The student was, of course, afraid her father would find out. Levy's emphasis focuses on the effect that a tightly woven social network, *i.e.*, the rural community, has on confidentiality and reporting, availability of services, options for victims, and burnout problems for advocates.

Although these accounts offer important insight, they do not distinguish among various rural characteristics and their relative impact. That is, without specifically designed research into the wide variety of rural communities, it is extremely difficult to differentiate or prioritize the various factors. For example, can we say that lack of anonymity, conservative law enforcement or lack of transportation accounts for low reporting in most rural areas? Clearly that depends on the situation and the particular case. Without more investigation into specific types of rural configurations and the multitude of factors that may impact rural sexual victimization, there can be little to say beyond the general.

Investigations into the Prevalence of Rural Sexual Assault

A strong logic dictates a serious examination of the issue of prevalence of sexual assault in rural areas as compared to urban and suburban areas. It adds to our understanding of criminal victimization, it sheds light on cultural, social, and demographic characteristics, and ultimately helps justify all other

investigations into rural sexual assault issues. Over the last decade, several focused investigations have begun to address issues of rural sexual assault through larger scale research. While these documents have differing foci and apply varied methodologies, several of them address the question of the relative prevalence of sexual assault in rural areas.

The two earliest investigations that tangentially discuss the subject of rural sexual assault are reports by the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS). These reports did not result from specific investigations into the topic, but were reports of survey data from the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS), which were collected to shed light on criminal victimization in this country. Furthermore, these data were not collected specifically to evaluate rural characteristics, but represent some of many findings of a broad-based national survey. Using NCVS data, BJS promulgated two special reports in 1992 and 2000 that compared criminal victimization in urban, suburban, and rural areas (Bachman, 1992; Duhart, 2000). Each addresses rape and/or sexual assault as part of their review of criminal victimization, but neither provides much analysis or discussion of the findings or implications as they relate to rural sexual assault.

These reports examined longitudinal data; one covers 1973 to 1989 and the other, 1993 to 1998. In general, both indicate lower rape and sexual assault rates in rural areas for most years, although 1998 data indicated that rape and sexual assault were similar across all areas. These reports reflect some inherent methodological survey limitations that render them unrevealing and not very credible with respect to sexual assault figures and most particularly, with respect to rural sexual assault data.

In 1989, the National Women's Study, a telephone survey that sampled 4008 adult women age 18 and older, reported 12.65 percent completed rapes over the lifetime of the responders. The methodology included screening questions and follow-up interviews. Although not initially reported with the survey findings, the data set did include location information on 4002 responses (Lewis, 2003). Recently the researchers involved in this survey analyzed this location data and found that

rural completed rape figure at 10.1 percent compared with an urban/suburban figure of 13.6 percent (de Arellano, Ruggiero, Kilpatrick, 2002). Lewis (2003) explains that even using this more sensitive methodology, there are important aspects of rural sexual assault that are not easily captured or measured by various national surveys. She suggests that the rural propensity to distrust outsiders and agencies may figure prominently as an unwillingness to participate in such surveys (Lewis, 2003).

The credibility of the lower rural rates of sexual assault as indicated by national surveys has been challenged by two recent investigations into the relative prevalence of sexual assault in rural areas. These studies analyzed various data sets of sexual assault victimization in Pennsylvania (Ruback & Menard, 2001; Menard & Ruback, in press). One study focuses primarily on adult sexual victimization and the other on child sexual abuse. Both studies considered how the type of information or records examined (data sets) affect the resulting prevalence rate of sexual victimization and reporting. They also considered how various other factors affected outcomes; one factor that related both to prevalence and reporting was "rurality." The findings of both studies reveal that although the absolute number of sexual victimization cases reported to rape crisis centers was higher in urban areas, the *rate* of sexual assaults in rural areas was higher.

In the adult sexual victimization study (Ruback & Menard, 2001), the researchers performed various statistical analyses on Uniform Crime Report (UCR) data and rape crisis center data as provided by the Pennsylvania Coalition Against Rape (PCAR). Data regarding sexual victimization and reporting in the state's 67 counties came from PCAR records of Pennsylvania's 52 rape crisis centers' reports. The researchers analyzed aggregate monthly data by counties for the period from July 1, 1994 through June 30, 1998. They also used UCR data, by county, for the same time period (Ruback and Menard, 2001). They found that sexual assault rates were significantly associated with county type (urban vs. rural) according to PCAR; sexual assault rates were significantly higher in rural counties compared with urban counties; they

found no such relationship with UCR data. In the child sexual assault study, the researchers employed a similar methodology, but compared PCAR data with a data set from the Pennsylvania Office of Children, Youth and Families (CYS). This study found that rural counties had higher rates of sexual abuse according to both sets of data.

Although the most noteworthy finding in these studies reveals that sexual assault rates were higher in rural counties, both studies also offer other important findings on related issues such as victim offender-relationship, reporting and funding. For example, these studies confirm the important role victim-offender relationship has on reporting; they argue that lower reporting rates in rural areas is due to closeness of victim-offender relationship. That is, they found that rural counties had higher rates of sexual victimization, but urban counties had higher rates of reporting (Ruback & Menard, 2001).

Both studies provide relevant, credible insight into the prevalence of rural sexual assault and underscore the importance of victim-offender relationship in reporting. The rigorous statistical analyses and sound methodological approach of these studies assure their importance among the literature on sexual assault. Despite their strengths, the two studies do have some limitations, mostly regarding weakness inherent in the data sets and most especially because these investigations examined Pennsylvania data and therefore describe the situation for Pennsylvania only, and may not be true for other populations.

As part of an investigation into rural sexual assault, Lewis (2003) also considered the issue of prevalence. In particular, she investigated rural rates of sexual assault in four states, Pennsylvania, Oklahoma, Alaska and Texas. She did not compare the same types of data from each state but rather presented characteristics and data from each state that provided illustration that rural rates of sexual assault were often not lower, and indeed even higher, than urban rates. For example, in the state of Alaska, she presented information on sexual assaults in five rural detachment areas, finding that the highest rates were associated with the most rural of the detachments.

Research Related to Rural Service Delivery

Researchers of rural sexual assault have also investigated some issues relating to outreach and advocacy. The California Coalition Against Sexual Assault (“Stopping the stigma,” 2001) suggests the notion of accessing community components in an effort to deal with rural difficulties and stigma. The Coalition asserts, “A small power network in rural communities also can be an asset.” The importance of this idea was echoed by many of the rural advocates interviewed by Lewis (2003) in *Unspoken Crimes: Sexual Assault in Rural America*. These advocates also contend that difficulties facing victims in rural areas require specifically trained sexual assault service providers and better-trained rural law enforcement. The National Center for Rural Law Enforcement developed a training curriculum for police, specifically to address sexual assault in rural communities. This resource includes a discussion of rural sexual assault by Royses, but most of the manual provides general sexual assault police training with little specificity to rural law enforcement. This training product is currently under revision (National Center For Rural Law Enforcement, 2000).

Many rural advocates struggle with funding issues; they argue that they are being judged in comparison to urban caseloads. That is, the time and resources required to travel long distances to assist a few victims is compared with urban centers that have walk-ins and more stranger rapes. In other words, the time and money required to process a rural case tend to be higher. The research of Ruback and Menard (2001) included VOCA (Victims of Crime Act) funding as a variable; they found that in Pennsylvania, the funding was related to absolute numbers and not rates of sexual assault; thus, urban counties received more funding. These researchers also found that emergency services funding was higher in urban counties. No investigators have examined the impact that more funding might have on rural sexual assault reporting or service delivery.

Implications for Service Providers and Investigators

What we *do not know* about rural sexual assault far outweighs what we know. Sexual assault advocates have presented us with a rather consistent picture of how rural culture is largely regulated by informal social controls, is resistant to outside help, and has low levels of anonymity and reporting. They also point to the difficulties confronting advocates that include, being sensitive to rural culture, dealing with rural law enforcement, struggling with inadequate funding, and facing difficulties in travel, communications, and harsh rural geography. Unfortunately there has been little written on differentiating these difficulties or suggesting how they would best be addressed.

The research that does exist looks at the question of the prevalence of rural sexual assault. The previously accepted notion that rural sexual assault is low has now been called into question by several studies (Ruback and Menard 2001; Lewis, 2003). The implications of this research juxtaposed against the difficulties associated with rural service delivery suggest that thoughtful research must be conducted in many areas. Building a foundation of understanding must be the concern of researchers and practitioners.

First, the issue of rural sexual assault prevalence must continue to be examined. Attention to rural areas in victimization surveys may be a promising mechanism to examine this question. We have a fairly strong understanding of the importance of the victim-offender relationship, but now we must begin to investigate and understand how close and embedded these relationships may be in rural areas. If as Royse (1999) suggests, there is really a “hidden epidemic” of rural sexual assault, we must begin to understand the real nature of that epidemic before we can confront it in a positive way.

Even while we try to struggle with tough research questions, the implication of the existing picture for service providers is already compelling. Rural communities have cultural characteristics that require understanding and sensitivity. Both victims and advocates face a difficult set of circumstances.

The anti-sexual violence movement can begin by recognizing the unique set of problems and by working to promote culturally sensitive training of sexual assault advocates and rural police officers.

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A Resource for Practitioners

The National Sexual Violence Resource Center (NSVRC) has produced a comprehensive booklet for service providers on sexual assault in rural communities (Lewis, 2003). Designed to provide information based on previous research and new findings, the document also includes primary source material from several states and information based on interviews with rural advocates. For a copy of *Unspoken Crimes: Sexual Assault in Rural America* contact the NSVRC at 877-739-3895 or www.nsvrc.org.

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In Brief:
Sexual Assault in Rural Communities

This article addresses our current level of understanding of sexual assault in rural areas as it affects both victims and rural service providers. It recognizes that sexually victimized rural populations are largely underserved, understudied and often overlooked. This can partly be explained by a reticence to report sexual assaults in rural areas. In turn, low reporting promotes a general impression that sexual assault is not a large problem for rural populations. That said, however, this article suggests that this impression may be wrong and that rural sexual assault is, indeed, a larger problem than has been, heretofore, recognized.

This document reviews literature by practitioners, researchers, and others who wish to provide assistance. It proceeds from the recognition that there is a general dearth of materials on this underserved population and attempts to distill from the existing work salient characteristics, concerns, and findings.

The article points to a few descriptive statements by practitioners. They are of a general nature and usually discuss the close-knit nature of rural populations and the resulting lack of anonymity and confidentiality. They also describe various barriers to reporting such as transportation problems, isolation, and a lack of facilities, to name a few. The article also summarizes some of the findings of a few researchers who have investigated the question of the prevalence of rural sexual assaults. It points to research that now calls into question the notion that sexual assault is occurring at a lower rate in rural areas. Finally, this document highlights other work on the subject that should prove to be useful for rural advocates looking for insight and practices that relate to community involvement, training and funding concerns.

In summation, the article recognizes the need for additional research regarding the question of prevalence, and the need to focus attention and perspective on a wide variety of rural configurations and cultural characteristics. The author asserts that what we do not know about rural sexual assault far outweighs what we know. In order to increase our understanding and better serve rural populations research must be conducted at all levels; building a foundation of understanding must be the concern of researchers and practitioners alike.