

Revisiting Rural Crime: The Contributions of Labor Markets and Interdependency

Ph.D. Dissertation

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Abstract

Although rural communities – which are home to nearly 20 percent of the U.S. – have experienced disruptive labor market restructuring, few studies examine how such events influence rural crime. Moreover, general methodological approaches to rural crime treat rural places as isolated and unaffected by the broader labor market conditions around them, despite a growing body of sociological literature which suggests that urban and rural communities have varying degrees of interdependence. Drawing from urban crime theories emphasizing the importance of place and systemic relations, this dissertation explores how shifting labor market conditions and extra-local labor market opportunities influenced crime in rural U.S. counties in the years following the Great Recession.

Using county-level crime data from the FBI Uniform Crime Report and an array of variables capturing change in structural and labor market characteristics, I assess whether changes in key labor market measures (i.e. unemployment, under employment, and industry-specific employment rates) are linked to property and violent crimes. Results suggest that residual change in unemployment is related to increases in the expected count of both violent and property crimes, holding constant prior crime levels. While urban commuting appears to depress crime counts, it also recontours the unemployment-crime and manufacturing-crime relationships, suggesting that interdependency contributes to crime in some contexts while being ameliorative in others.

This study offers a renewed interest in the application of traditional theories to the rural context. Furthermore, the findings suggest that methods addressing spatial influences can improve our understanding of rural communities and the broader economies from which they are embedded. Policy implications are framed around two main observations. First, the finding that labor market shifts shape crime encourages a consideration of local and regional policies that strengthen employment prospects for rural workers. Furthermore, prevailing criminal justice policies often take the view that jurisdictions are best funded and managed independently. Yet, interdependency presents an opportunity to reflect on the distribution of criminal justice resources across the rural-urban divide. Inasmuch as boundaries represent fluid spaces that individuals routinely navigate between, some areas may benefit from a partnership between proximate criminal justice agencies.