PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF RESPONSE TIME AND COMMUNITY SECURITY IN A RURAL ENVIRONMENT

Max L. Bromley
University of South Florida

Michael Hensley
Hernando County Sheriff's Office

William R. Blount
University of South Florida

INTRODUCTION

Generally, little attention has been focused on rural crime, law enforcement response, or associated issues in our country. Recently, however, Weisheit, et al. (1996) noted that there may be differences between the rural and urban environment with respect to crime and police activity. These differences may become more important as further knowledge is developed regarding the distinctions. A better understanding of rural crime and police response can be developed once additional information is obtained and analyzed.

Rural v. Urban Crime

In addition to the higher rate of crime in urban areas, other differences exist as well. Freudenburg and Jones (1991) note, for example, that crime in rural areas has increased more rapidly than population growth. Weisheit, et al. (1994) compared urban and rural data between 1980 and 1990 and found as expected that while crime increased in both areas, crime remained more prevalent in large city areas. The 1993 National Crime Survey report shows that the rate of personal victimization’s of persons age 12 and older in rural areas is 43.4 as compared to 73.4 in urban areas and 47.5 in suburban areas. Likewise, the property victimization rates in rural areas are 250.9 per 1,000 as compared to urban areas with 410.4 per 1000 and suburban areas with 304.4 per 1000 (U.S. Department of Justice, 1994).

Further differences can be seen in clearance rates. 1993 UCR data shows that there was little variation when comparing the percent of property crimes cleared by arrest in urban, suburban, or rural areas (17.6%, 18.3%, and 18.3%, respectively). There was, however, a distinct difference in the percent of violent crimes cleared by arrest. In rural areas 60.7% of the violent crimes committed were cleared by arrest as compared to only 42.5% in urban areas and 51% in suburban areas (FBI, 1993).

Rural Policing: Sheriff's Departments

Historically, in many rural areas of our country, the primary police service provider has been the sheriff’s department. According to Kirkham and Wollan (1980) the first sheriff appeared on the American scene around 1634 in the colony of Virginia. In the southern colonies where great importance was placed on agriculture as a means of livelihood, the sheriff emerged as the primary form of law enforcement. Territo, et al. (1995) and Inciardi (1990) have noted that today the sheriff in many southern states remains the most powerful law enforcement official. Further importance is given to the office of the sheriff since in most states the sheriff is an elected official with wide ranging responsibilities (Folley, 1980). For example, sheriff’s departments in many southern states not only enforce laws but also execute civil documents and maintain the county jail.
According to Reaves (1992), almost 18% of all law enforcement agencies in the United States are sheriff's departments. Unlike their municipal counterparts, many sheriff's departments that serve small rural areas perform a variety of duties beyond criminal and traffic law enforcement. For example, functions such as civil defense, animal control, emergency medical services, and fire control are performed by many of the sheriff's departments serving populations of less than 25,000 persons (Reaves, 1992). It has also been noted that while rural police generally deal with smaller scale crime problems as compared to urban agencies, they also have fewer resources at their command (Bureau of Justice Assistance, 1994).

Public Perception of Police and Community Crime

In urban areas, Furstenberg and Wellford (1973) noted that both the public and the police benefited by allowing the citizens to periodically evaluate their police agency's performance. Parks (1976) and Percy (1980) examined the relationship between citizen evaluation of police response time to their calls for assistance and their overall satisfaction with police service. Generally these studies indicated the slower the perceived response, the less the public was satisfied with the police.

Research conducted by Thomas and Hyman (1977) examined citizen perceptions of crime in their communities, fear of victimization as well as an evaluation of the effectiveness of police agencies within a four city area. Among other findings, these researchers noted that the majority of respondents described their police as effective. Furthermore, their overall support did not appear to be linked to the level of citizen concern about crime or potential victimization. Other studies in urban areas of citizen attitudes toward their police departments with respect to their fear of crime have been the subject of additional research. For example, Benson (1981) found that citizen perceptions of an increase in crime influenced their opinions on the performance of their law enforcement agencies. Carter (1985) found that actual victimization of Hispanic citizens led to lower evaluations of local police.

In contrast to urban areas, Decker (1979), Marenin and Copus (1991), and Flanagan (1985) have noted that citizens in smaller communities tend to expect their police agencies to perform numerous services beyond traditional law enforcement activities and some researchers suggest that citizens in rural areas generally feel more positively about their police or sheriff's departments than their counterparts in urban settings. For example, these rural citizens are more satisfied with the speed of police response when compared to public perceptions in urban communities (Ostrom & Smith, 1976). Likewise, in a 1991 Gallup Poll, 61% of rural citizens as compared to 54% of urban citizens had a greater respect for their police (Gallup Poll Monthly, 1991). According to Seebach (1992), rural citizens generally rate their quality of life and police protection as high. The positive bond that exists between many rural citizens and their law enforcement officers was also noted by the International Association of Chiefs of Police (1990).

Finally, regarding public fear of crime, according to a series of Gallup public opinion polls, there has been a steady increase in the percentage of citizens who indicate they are afraid to walk alone at night - from 34% in 1965 to 43% in 1993 (Gallup Poll Monthly, 1993). However, the proportion of rural respondents who express similar fear in the 1993 Gallup poll was less than half of the percentage of urban citizens so responding, 61% urban versus 30% rural citizens (Gallup Poll Monthly, 1993).

The Current Study

Some research suggests that police response to crimes or calls for service may have little bearing on either police effectiveness or public satisfaction (Moore, et al 1988: Sparrow, 1988 and VanKirk, 1988). As reported earlier, Parks (1976) and Percy (1980) present evidence to the contrary. However, these studies were primarily concerned with urban or municipal settings, and there is reason to believe that important distinctions exist between crime and policing in rural versus urban environments, particularly concerning response time. For example, given the geographic distances involved in providing police services in rural areas and the relative isolation of many citizens, police response time to calls for assistance may be an important factor in judging police effectiveness. Likewise, citizen perceptions of their own safety is important in evaluating the rural community's level of security.

Therefore, the focus of this study was to obtain feedback from citizens in a rural community on their perceptions of response times by their sheriff's department and their feelings regarding community security. An analysis of perceptions produced directly by persons who have recently generated calls for police service would seem to bear...