ISSUES IN POLICING RURAL AREAS: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE



ILLINOIS CRIMINAL JUSTICE INFORMATION AUTHORITY CENTER FOR JUSTICE RESEARCH AND EVALUATION

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Abstract: Criminal justice issues are typically studied in urban rather than rural areas. This represents an important deficit in the understanding of policing issues, as most police departments are in rural jurisdictions. Research indicates rural police departments often operate with fewer resources, lower staffing levels, and more inferior technology than their urban counterparts. Other research shows urban and rural officers experience different sources of job-related stress and its manifestations. As such, further research is needed to determine the extent of these differences so that solutions tailored to address the needs of small rural departments and their officers may be better implemented.

Introduction

The United States is estimated to consist of about 97% rural areas, though only about a fifth of the population resides in these areas.¹ According to the U.S. Census Bureau, rural areas are less dense, more sparsely populated areas.² Because rural areas are faced with unique challenges, police in rural areas may face complications and issues that police officers in urban areas do not. These problems can place a strain on rural police departments, making their jobs more difficult. For example, officers in rural police departments typically must travel longer distances and experience longer wait times for backup when responding to calls for service.³ Additionally, research has shown that smaller police departments, like those found in rural areas, spend less money per officer and resident, but have higher clearance rates than departments in urban areas.⁴ This article will discuss issues in rural policing such as recruiting, maintaining, and training officers, technology used by rural departments, community relations, bias-based policing, factors influencing stress among officers, and data illustrating rates of offenses reported to the police and rates of arrests in rural Illinois counties.

Police Personnel

In 2013, a majority of U.S. police departments (71%) served jurisdictions with fewer than 10,000 residents.⁵ Further, 39% of police departments served jurisdictions of fewer than 2,500 residents.⁶ Law enforcement employee data reported by the Federal Bureau of Investigation indicate that there are more officers per 1,000 citizens in nonmetropolitan counties (3.3 per 1,000 people) than metropolitan counties (2.6 per 1,000 people), although rural police chiefs have suggested that they often have a difficult time recruiting and retaining officers.⁷ Attendees of the 2009 National Small and Rural Law Enforcement Summit also reported that after just one or two years, many new rural officers leave for employment at larger departments which can offer higher pay.⁸ More recently, meetings scheduled by the Office of Community Oriented Policing with rural law enforcement professionals in 2019 discussed the issue of competing with urban police department recruiting, which suggests that the problem still remains for rural departments 10 years later.⁹ Smaller departments that struggle to retain officers are placed with a financial burden to carry out more frequent testing, vetting, hiring, and training of new officers. This problem can be exacerbated by smaller departments' lack of human resources departments and/or pre-screening experience.¹⁰

There are some notable differences in law enforcement demographics between rural and urban departments. Full-time law enforcement employee data collected by the FBI indicates that 14.1% of officers in metropolitan areas were women while 8.1% in nonmetropolitan areas were women.¹¹ Research suggests urban police officers have more formal education than their rural counterparts. A survey of officers found that 36% of urban officers have a bachelor's degree, compared to 12% of rural officers.¹² This disparity may exist because the percentage of adults in rural areas with bachelor's degrees is lower than in urban areas.¹³ In addition, few police departments require a college degree as a prerequisite to becoming a police officer, perhaps due to a lack of evidence suggesting that higher education results in more positive policing outcomes.¹⁴

Police Department Funding, Technology, and Training

Most police departments are funded through tax revenue managed and distributed by a governing agency or board, such as a city council. The governing board approves the budget for a department, which often includes operational and capital expenditures. Rural police departments tend to have smaller budgets to support training, travel, and equipment.¹⁵ Police departments may also receive funds through governmental and private grants;¹⁶ however, many officers from small and rural departments believe their departments receive fewer funding opportunities and fewer funding resources than urban departments.¹⁷

A national survey of small and rural police departments revealed rural departments may not utilize technology— such as global positioning systems, less-lethal weapons (e.g., rubber bullets, TASER guns), and digital fingerprinting—as frequently as their urban counterparts.¹⁸ This may be due to limited resources or the belief that newer technologies are not necessary to complete the duties of their jobs.¹⁹ While there is limited contemporary research on what forms of technology is used by rural police departments, older research suggests that rural departments have tended to lag behind their urban counterparts in terms of technology. A 2002 National Institute of Justice survey revealed just over 40% of small and rural agencies utilized crime analysis and less than a third of small and rural agencies used crime mapping.²⁰ However, survey data also indicated over 80% of small and rural agencies used a records management system, suggesting that a majority of rural departments have the capacity for data collection.²¹ Comparatively, another study from 2001 indicated that urban police departments were using advanced technology such as thermal imaging and remote satellite monitoring.²² More recent research such as a 2016 survey of local police departments found that 80% of departments with 500 or more full-time officers had body cameras, while only about 50% of departments with less than 25 officers had body cameras.²³ Additionally, another survey found that a greater proportion of larger police departments (policing more than 10,000 residents) had the capacity to electronically submit incident reports than smaller departments.²⁴

According to the International Association of Chiefs of Police, it may be difficult for rural police departments to assess the utility of available technology and acquire the funds to purchase the technology due to a lack of familiarity with newer technology.²⁵ In addition, rural areas may lack the infrastructure necessary to support certain technologies.²⁶ For example, one police survey revealed just 39% of rural agencies had a website and 23% reported information to the public via a website.²⁷ This may be due in part to a lack of access to high speed internet in rural areas. A national survey indicated that rural adults were less likely than their urban and suburban counterparts to use the internet, own a smartphone, and have home broadband as a result of limited technological infrastructure in rural communities.²⁸ This affects police departments in rural communities as well, as it impacts communication between patrol officers and their dispatchers, and limits wireless access to important police information.²⁹

Rural police departments may face difficulties providing officers specialized training in areas of interest or in areas that would help advance an officer's career. One barrier to training noted by rural police chiefs is the cost of backfilling a position when a police officer is on leave for training.³⁰

While research regarding the effectiveness of specialized police officer and department training is inconclusive, recent research suggests that training in strategies such as crisis intervention teams or human trafficking awareness initiatives can result in positive outcomes such as better knowledge of mental illnesses and treatment, de-escalation skills, and improved awareness of more obscure areas of law enforcement.³¹ Rural departments might be limiting their ability to conduct more effective police work without this specialized training.

Community Relations and Procedural Justice

Liederbach and Frank (2003) studied work routines of police officers in small and rural areas. They found that officers were more likely to encounter residents who live in their police department's jurisdiction; however, they interacted with citizens less frequently than urban police.³² This may be due to less crime in rural and smaller communities than in urban jurisdictions, requiring less police action and thus fewer interactions with civilians.³³ In addition, they found rural officers were expected to take on more diverse responsibilities (e.g., citizen transports, parade escorts, responding to littering). These findings also were supported in a study that compared the calls for service among urban and rural police departments. The study found rural police departments handled significantly more public-service calls than urban police departments.³⁴ An examination of the policing styles of rural police found that while community policing, which emphasizes community partnership and problem-solving,³⁵ occurred in rural areas, departments more often supported more traditional patrol activities (i.e., reactive, calls-for-service-based policing).³⁶ While the research on the effectiveness of community policing is largely inconclusive, some evidence indicates it may improve citizen satisfaction with police and decrease citizen fear of crime.³⁷

Citizen views of police have been found to be similar or slightly better in rural than urban areas. A 2016 national survey found 61% of rural residents reported a favorable view of police, compared to 60% of respondents living in cites.³⁸ Further, 59% of rural respondents reported believing the police treat all groups the same, compared to 47% of urban respondents.³⁹ Additionally, one study found that residents in rural areas with a local police department reported having more trust in police and their ability to protect them, compared to rural residents served by a county sheriff's department.⁴⁰

Officer Bias

Implicit officer bias refers to officers making associations between people based on subjective social perceptions or stereotypes, which can impact officer interactions with civilians.⁴¹ Most research available on police officer bias does not focus on differences between rural and urban officers, however there are a few studies that examine bias in rural and urban departments. A 2011 survey of rural police officers presented the officers with hypothetical crime situations (including the offenders' race) and asked them to indicate how harshly they would respond. The study did not reveal the levels of bias but found no differences in bias in terms of racial profiling by Black or White officers of Black suspects.⁴² Further, the authors found that officers with more years working as police officers were not any more or less likely to hold racial biases than officers with less experience.⁴³ In an officer survey, rural officers reported receiving less training on bias toward others and were less likely to report bias-based policing was an issue in their departments than their urban counterparts.⁴⁴ This discrepancy could be due to fewer interactions

with minorities in rural areas compared to urban areas, but the fact that more Black officers than White officers in rural departments indicated that bias-based policing is an issue (37% compared to 8%, respectively) suggest that White officers tend to underestimate the level of police bias.⁴⁵

Officer Wellness and Stress

Stress is defined as "a state of mental or emotional strain or tension resulting from adverse or demanding circumstances."⁴⁶ Possible sources of stress among police officers include workplace problems (e.g., poor coworker relations, negative feelings about career opportunities, and experience with harassment), lack of support networks at home and at work, minority status (i.e., status as a racial, ethnic, or gender minority within a department), and poor community conditions, such as high levels of poverty and high crime rates.⁴⁷ Positive work environments and support networks can help guard against post-traumatic stress disorder following officer exposure to traumatic or violent incidents.⁴⁸

Policing in rural locations may lead to specific types of officer stress. A 1998 study found that police in larger urban departments are more prone to administrative or workplace-related stress while police in smaller urban departments are more prone to emotional stress from exposure to suffering.⁴⁹ Other studies have also found that officers in larger departments among samples of small-town or rural departments have higher reported levels of stress.⁵⁰ Results from a 2018 study indicate that due to a lack of resources, rural police officers often feel understaffed and overworked, impacting their ability to effectively carry out their duties.⁵¹

Research also indicates:

- Rural officers reported longer backup times and feelings of isolation and had higher levels of stress than their urban counterparts.⁵² Further, rural county sheriff's deputies reported higher levels of stress than other officers, possibly because they must police larger geographies.⁵³
- Rural and small-town officers reported increased stress when there were administrative changes in the department and with media criticism of police.⁵⁴
- As police department size increases, so does stress stemming from unfavorable organizational environments (e.g., discriminatory environments, lack of leadership).⁵⁵
- The top three organizational stressors identified by rural officers were staff shortages, bureaucratic "red tape," and inconsistent leadership, while the top three operational stressors were fatigue, finding time to stay in good physical shape, and not enough time with family and friends.⁵⁶

Police stigma surrounding mental health and treatment may be a barrier to overcoming stress associated with their jobs—both for rural and urban police officers. A survey of police officers found that public stigma around mental health made officers less likely to seek help, and the respondents tended to believe that other officers were less open to seeking treatment for mental health issues than they actually were.⁵⁷ According to another study, officers who felt supported by their departments were more willing to actually seek help.⁵⁸ However, there is a general lack of research concerning the stigma surrounding mental health and treatment among rural law enforcement. Some research has found that access to mental health treatment centers is more

limited in rural locales. One study found rural police officers prefer speaking with fellow officers than professional therapists, though that may be more difficult in smaller departments with fewer coworkers.⁵⁹ An evaluation of a stress management training program for police officers in rural West Virginia areas found that anxiety and self-reported levels of stress declined with program participation.⁶⁰ The study also found, however, that stress increased again over time, suggesting more research is needed to determine when and to what degree stress management training should be implemented.⁶¹

Rural Law Enforcement Data in Illinois

According to the <u>U.S. Census Bureau</u>, 52 Illinois counties (51%) are either completely rural (12%, n=12) or mostly rural (39%, n=40) (*Map 1*). Of the 52 completely or mostly rural counties, 48% are in the southern region of the state, 46% are in the central region, and 6% are in the northern region. Of the 12 completely rural counties, eight are in the southern region and four are in the central region. Some counties, such as Peoria, contain both rural and urban cities.



Map 1 Illinois Urban and Rural County Designations

Staffing

According to the 2018 <u>Illinois Uniform Crime Report (I-UCR)</u>, urban counties have a much higher rate of law enforcement personnel per 100,000 residents compared to rural counties; rural counties employed 17 per 100,000 residents, while urban counties employed 317 per 100,000 residents.⁶²

Arrests

According to I-UCR, the combined rates of reported person and property Index offenses⁶³ in Illinois' urban counties were nearly double those of rural counites in 2018 at 1,918 per 100,000 persons and 995 per 100,000 persons, respectively. The arrest rate for Index offenses also was lower in rural counties.⁶⁴ In 2018, the rate for Index offenses in rural counties was 299 arrests per 100,000 residents and 446 arrests per 100,000 residents in urban counties. Drug arrest rates were higher in rural counties, however. As illustrated in *Figure 1*, in 2018, there were 556 and 415 drug arrests per 100,000 people in rural and urban counties, respectively.⁶⁵





Source: ICJIA analysis of I-UCR data and U.S. Census Bureau population data. Note: 2018 I-UCR data for five rural counties were missing and excluded from analysis.

Conclusion

Despite that most police departments across the country serve jurisdictions of fewer than 10,000 persons, research on rural departments is limited.⁶⁶ However, studies indicate rural police departments tend to be less diverse, employ officers with less formal education, and manage with smaller budgets than their urban counterparts.⁶⁷ In addition, rural departments operate with a general lack of technological infrastructure (i.e., limited high-speed internet connections),

creating a barrier to tapping into more advanced technology that can assist then in police work.⁶⁸ Considerable differences also are noted in day-to-day patrol experiences of rural and urban police officers. Research has found compared to urban officers, rural officers are more likely to encounter residents of their jurisdiction,⁶⁹ handle more public service requests,⁷⁰ and experience more administrative stress from their work.⁷¹

Pooling resources is a way for rural criminal justice agencies to improve their functioning and stretch limited resources. Rural departments could explore partnerships with nearby agencies to ensure officers have access to timely backup. Police department consolidation also could be considered. Consolidation could include combining specialized units to forming a new agency with two departments.

In lieu of formal partnerships between police departments, the <u>Illinois Law Enforcement Alarm</u> <u>System</u> (ILEAS) can be resourceful to agencies seeking emergency response assistance and mutual aid. The ILEAS dispatch center can offer more patrol officers, equipment, and supervisors.

Rural police departments also may consider developing a metropolitan enforcement group or <u>multi-jurisdictional drug task force (MEG/TF)</u> to combat high-level drug crime in their areas.⁷² A 2017 evaluation of Illinois drug enforcement groups found that rural MEG/TFs made more felony arrests than those serving urban areas, suggesting these task forces are important in targeting drug crimes in rural areas.⁷³

In order to combat stress stemming from administrative and emotional issues as a result of police work in rural departments, stress management training programs may be a viable option.⁷⁴ In terms of implicit bias training, Perceptual Other-Race Training methods have been shown to be effective in reducing racial biases⁷⁵, and may be adapted to police training. However, research on the efficacy of implicit bias training on police officers indicates mixed results.⁷⁶ While these training programs are relatively affordable, more research is needed to better gauge how effective they are at curbing implicit bias among police officers, both in rural and urban departments.⁷⁷

Nationally, rural police departments face long distances and limited budgets to pay for training. In Illinois, the Illinois Law Enforcement Training and Standards Board (ILETSB) offers an <u>online learning network</u>, allowing law enforcement officers, correctional officers, and telecommunicators access to free online trainings on a variety of topics. ILETSB also operates 16 <u>mobile training units</u>, providing more centralized training centers for local police. Training units that cover large or very rural areas also offer webinars, decreasing costs and travel time. Further, ILEAS offers on-site training for officers throughout the state. Global and national organizations, such as the <u>International Association of Chiefs of Police</u>, <u>Council of State</u> <u>Governments Justice Center</u>, and <u>National Sheriff's Association</u> also offer online training webinars and other resources to provide useful information to officers.

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⁶² Source: ICJIA analysis of published I-UCR data

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⁶⁴ Source: ICJIA analysis of published I-UCR data

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