

# *Unspoken Crimes: Sexual Assault in Rural America*



**The NSVRC invites responses and comments to this book as well as any resources or information relevant to this topic.**

**NSVRC**

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National Sexual Violence Resource Center  
*A Project of the Pennsylvania Coalition Against Rape*

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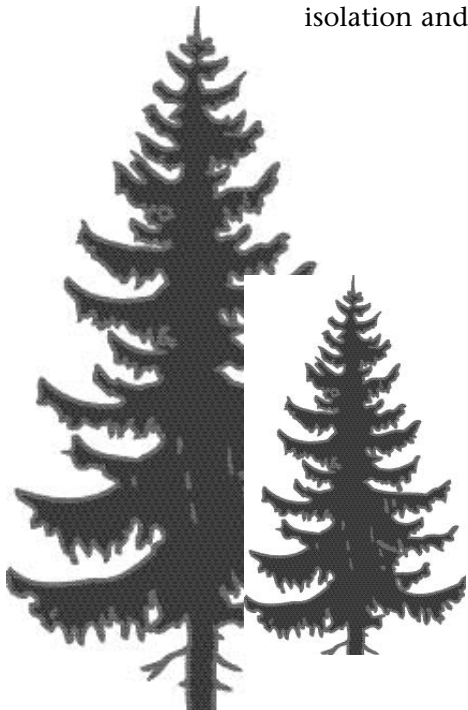
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## *Rape in a Rural Setting*

The morning after a party hosted in her home by her abusive husband, “Jane” was given the task of driving the male guests home. After dropping one of them off, she was left in the car with her husband’s cousin who offered to show her a shortcut to his house. Tired, and wanting to get rid of him as quickly as possible, Jane agreed. The shortcut did not go to his house but rather to a strip-mining site far from anything else. The man forced Jane into the back seat of the car where he forcibly raped her. Afterward he threw her out of the car and physically assaulted her. On instinct, Jane ran. Being in the middle of nowhere, she ran toward the sound of equipment running. She finally came upon a man driving heavy equipment, approximately one mile from the site of her assault. The man called 911 in an effort to get some help for Jane. Because the site was in such a remote area, the police responding to the call got lost on their way.

Jane now faces the ensuing police investigation and prosecution with little or no support from family and friends. She experiences a legal system that may place the blame for the incident on her, the victim. She lives in a community that does not want to believe “it” happens here – and if it does the woman must have asked for it. Jane is also facing the memory of childhood sexual abuse stirred up by this recent assault. Fortunately for her, however, there is a small rape crisis center that is able to provide her with support and advocacy. The center, which is under-funded, under-staffed and relies heavily on volunteers, will be there for Jane 24-hours a day for as long as it takes. In essence Jane and the center will struggle together in the face of isolation and lack of resources.



In this booklet, the National Sexual Violence Resource Center (NSVRC) considers sexual assault from a rural perspective, a viewpoint that is rarely presented. Social scientists and researchers who have looked at sexual assault have often considered diverse cultures and populations and asked how these cultures may confound reporting, accountability and service delivery, but they have virtually ignored the fact that rural America may also have deep-seated cultural and geographic characteristics that carry similar difficulties.

Service providers generally view sexual assault victims in rural areas as an underserved population, mostly because of a well-recognized, low rate of reporting and because of the often dispersed nature of services. In a sense, underserved means underreported and not very well understood, if at all. To varying degrees, rural populations are often marginalized from the mainstream power structure, which holds the opportunities for assistance and services through resources and policy initiatives.

Many questions come to mind, for example: How prevalent is sexual assault in rural areas of America? Is the rate higher or lower than in urban America? How do rural conditions impact the work of service providers? Which characteristics present the greatest barriers to reporting and services? There are few clear answers to such questions because crime statistics are not very revealing with regard to sexual assault, and especially with regard to rural sexual assault, and few practitioners have written on the topic. This means that we know little about the extent, unique characteristics or predictors of sexual victimization of rural populations.

This booklet considers rural characteristics that deter reporting and helps explain why sexual assaults in rural areas are often unspoken crimes. Importantly, it will also review some of the data on the prevalence of rural sexual assault because although rural sexual victimizations may be unspoken and unreported, it does not mean that they are not occurring. The booklet also reviews many of the difficulties encountered by advocates and offers insight and best practices of rural advocates.

Although this booklet discusses various issues of rural sexual assault for the entire nation, the NSVRC acknowledges the limitations of broad generalizations. In an attempt to be more specific, it examined the situation for rural populations in several states somewhat more closely. The NSVRC conducted phone interviews with some rural advocates. Regretfully, this project could not examine all states with rural populations, but this booklet represents a preliminary foray into the rural perspective. The NSVRC expects that other research and resources will follow.

This booklet examines sexual assault from a rural perspective. Its goal is to present service providers with a better sense of the unique characteristics that are so often a part of rural regions. It considers the issue of prevalence of rural sexual assault by examining national data as well as information from several states. In general, it suggests that rural sexual assault may be more prevalent than indicated by national data, and that in order to provide effective services in rural areas we must adopt a culturally sensitive approach. Finally, we offer comments, insights and some best practices as expressed by rural advocates.

## *The Meaning of Rural*

In general, low population density makes an area, county or region rural. Picture approximately 80 percent of the population crowded on 20 percent of the land; this leaves the rest of the population spread across a large area, often in isolated situations. In fact, according to 1997 data, more than 20 percent of the nation's population lives in non-metropolitan areas (Beale, 1999).

Rural counties account for nearly 75 percent of all counties and 83 percent of the nation's land. Seventy-four percent of the 3,040 counties in the US have a population of less than 50,000 and 24 percent have a population of less than 10,000. Poverty levels are generally higher in rural areas. "As a whole, rural areas tend to be more racially homogenous than urban areas. However, there is a great variation between sub-regions of the nation" (Nord, 1997).

Measurements of "rural" vary, often making it difficult to compare data. For example, the US Census demarks rural as "places with less than 2,500 and not in places incorporated or in census designated places or rural portions of extended cities." The Office of Management and Budget uses county figures as the basis for defining metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas. Researchers often use demarcations that include demographic characteristics.

A wide variety of rural situations means that it is difficult to generalize about rural characteristics or to adopt a universal, concise definition. Rural can mean many things in terms of living configurations. For example, it can mean a single family living on a farm miles from the next building or person, a small dispersed community with limited community services, pockets of families and ethnic groupings, or a small town that has experienced economic and population decline, just to name a few.

Rural also suggests a kind of cultural uniqueness that has led some to see "rurality" as a concept more than a specific region. One researcher suggests "(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" (Sims, 1988).

Others have explained rural areas essentially as a culture. "A rural area is not simply a physical place but a social place as well" (Weisheit, Wells & Falcone, 1994). This idea carries implications for service delivery because it suggests that we may need to adopt an approach that is sensitive to the cultural characteristics of rural populations.

Various ethnic, racial or religious groups living in rural areas may experience certain reinforcing or mitigating effects to the rural culture's social and insular characteristics. Later in this text, the discussion of rural Alaska suggests just such an effect among the rural Alaskan Native populations.

In general, low population density makes an area, county or region rural. Beyond that, however, rural cannot be concisely or simply defined. Various organizations and researchers use different demarcations. Low population density means that people living in a rural area have a high degree of familiarity with each other. This has led many observers to speak about rural as a subjective situation, attitude or culture.



Our general understanding of rural sexual assault largely comes from those advocates who work in rural areas. They see, first hand, that the culture and geographic conditions can confound the process of reporting and service delivery, which ultimately can limit justice and healing for victims. Their portrayals include acquaintance sexual assaults, lack of anonymity, very low reporting, few services and a rural culture that is insular (Royse, 1999).

In general we know that many survivors experience great difficulty in disclosing a sexual assault, especially when the perpetrator is known to the victim. In rural communities the propensity to not report may be reinforced by informal social codes that dictate privacy and maintaining family reputation. Sexual assaults in rural areas are mostly hidden crimes, hidden both intentionally and unintentionally by characteristics of a close-knit culture or an isolated lifestyle. This discussion of rural sexual assault includes incest, which may not be necessarily higher in rural areas, but based on lower anonymity in sparsely populated areas, appears to be a likely element.

In general, underreporting of sexual assault has long been recognized as a problem. Low rates of reporting mean that it is difficult to have a clear picture of the extent of sexual assault. It is estimated that for the nation, over 70% of sexual assaults are never reported to law enforcement (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2000). Many rural advocates believe that the extent of underreporting is much higher. Although some rural residents can be quite isolated and relatively unknown, in general, the lower population density in rural areas and the often close-knit nature of rural communities translates into a lack of anonymity.

Non-reporting in rural areas is typically more of a problem because of the high rate of non-stranger sexual assault. In rural communities that are often portrayed as a place where “everybody knows everybody” the likelihood of knowing your assailant is quite high. Betty Royse asserts that, “It 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.” Put another way, the high level of familiarity in rural communities means the level of non-stranger rape is necessarily high.

Rural areas have low population density and high levels of familiarity. In other words, a victim will have little anonymity. It means she, or a friend or family member is likely to be acquainted with or related to the perpetrator and that she may reencounter the perpetrator, even on a regular basis. Furthermore, “the closer the relationship between victim and assailant, the less likely the woman is to report the crime” (Hunter, Burns-Smith, Walsh, 1996). Studies have quite consistently pointed to the importance of the victim-offender relationship in affecting the propensity to report (Pollard, 1995; Ruback, 1993, Ruback & Ménard, 2001). In rural areas, law enforcement is likely to be part of the social network (Sims, 1988; Weisheit, Wells & Falcone, 1994; Weisheit, Wells & Falcome, 1995). This compounds the problem of reporting non-stranger sexual assaults.

In rural communities, the high level of familiarity among residents means that the sexual assaults that occur are quite likely to be perpetrated by an acquaintance and the victim is not likely to report the crime to police, and perhaps not to anyone.

## **Barriers to Reporting and Services**

### ***Lack of Anonymity***

Sociologists sometimes describe rural areas as having high levels of *acquaintance density*, which means that most residents have some level of familiarity with others in the community. They could be friends, relatives, or casual acquaintances. For a victim of sexual assault this translates into *nearly a total lack of anonymity and little chance for confidentiality*. Service providers understand how important confidentiality is for victims. When everyone knows what's going on, how can you expect much confidentiality? JoAnne, a director for a program in two rural Pennsylvania counties explains that confidentiality is the biggest issue in rural service.

If a rape victim parks her car at the police station or the local rape crisis center, the entire community could know this very quickly. The police or elected sheriffs may be friends or relatives of the perpetrator, and they may care more about maintaining friendly community relations than pursuing justice. Tanya, who also directs a rural program in Pennsylvania, explains, "Rural people don't report unless they have to. There is very little reporting right away. The majority reports months after the attack, only when they are having trouble functioning. People in rural communities victimize each other." In areas of low population density a person is not only more likely to have less anonymity, but the victimization that does occur will likely involve people who know each other.

### ***Greater Physical Isolation***

Since rural populations often find themselves at great distances from social services, medical care and law enforcement, victims may discover that it is too difficult, or virtually impossible, to report the crime or call for support. For very rural areas, the dispersed nature of services and programs can serve as a major deterrent to reporting.

Some people opt to live in quite isolated rural areas because they want solitude and privacy. These people may be personally unknown, even to the nearest neighbors, and very reticent about using civil and social assistance even in cases of emergency.

Traveling great distances offers a real challenge to victims and service providers. The roads are often poorly lit, very rough and not well marked. Finding transportation can be very difficult. Victims may not have access to private transportation, and there may be no public transportation or only infrequent service. With long distances, increased response time and difficulties in finding transportation, victims are less likely to report the assault.

Distances and terrain vary greatly across the nation. It is not unusual in some rural states for an advocate to drive several hours through the countryside at night to respond to a call. Alaska, with the nation's highest rate of rape, is a very rural state. With an estimated ninety percent of the state not being accessible via a road system, servicing victims usually requires traveling by air or sea. It often takes several days to respond to a call.

Some places are so remote that cell phones may not work, radio reception is spotty and public telephones are rare. Victims who want to report may not be

able to. This greater physical isolation carries a heavier toll for victims of sexual assault because they can have very immediate physical needs and they may not be able to get to or even contact medical help. Forensic examinations should be conducted as soon as possible and the victim may have other physical injuries requiring immediate attention. Hospitals can be a long distance away.

### ***Informal Social Controls***

Rural areas often have unwritten cultural rules that dictate secrecy of personal problems. “(S)ocial climate may have the biggest impact on failure to report in rural areas” (Ruback & Ménard, 2001). This social climate can cover a variety of attitudes about the needs and survival of the family and its interaction with the outside world.

One underlying value in many rural communities stresses the importance of family reputation over personal justice and sometimes, even over personal safety. Some recent studies suggest that it may be limiting to concentrate on the characteristics of the individual victim or offender instead of exploring familial aspects of sexual abuse (Fontes, 1995). Fontes explains that “these writings include discussions of roles and rules in families with incest.”

### ***Distrust of Outside Assistance***

Informal rural social regulations often include disdain for outside involvement. It means keeping things away from public organizations and agencies and dealing with any problem in a quieter, private way. Tanya reports that she has found that in Pennsylvania, “rural people tend to be suspicious of strangers.” Experienced service providers in rural areas understand this hesitancy to deal with organizations and have found that one solution is to build strong trusting relationships in the community over time. Renee says that in rural Mississippi it helps to go out and speak at schools, community clubs and forums.

### ***Perceptions of Sexual Assault***

In very isolated areas, attitudes toward sexual assault may appear relatively accepting. In fact, in all communities and not just in rural communities, what seems normal or acceptable is usually framed by the perspective of the family and community. What can develop is a degree of intergenerational tolerance of social and familial characteristics. For example, although a victim feels discomfort, fear or dread, the family may influence her attitudes to accept a situation as the reality or “just the way it is.”

In very remote communities, however, this effect may be more intense because of less frequent exposure to broader social norms that challenge the *status quo*. Some rural advocates have reported that a degree of tolerance of sexual assault is not uncommon. Ginger, who directs one of Alaska’s rural centers, says that sexual assault of adult women is not only nearly universal in her rural region but that there is a great deal of tolerance for adult sexual assault. In Mississippi, Renee points to a big problem with rural sheriffs who will not take sexual assault seriously; she quotes them as saying, “Honey, don’t worry about it!”

## *Concern for Family Continuation and Survival*

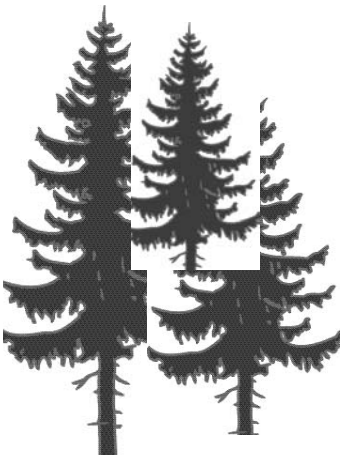
Depending on the situation, a wide range of practical considerations may stop a victim from reporting. Concerns over the family may range from fear for safety, agency intervention, lack of childcare, the need for transportation and income. These considerations can translate into reasons for not reporting sexual assault. Reporting and arrest could mean that the family income and viability would be reduced significantly, or in the case of very rural Alaska, reporting may literally lead to the removal of the *family food getter*. For example, an Alaska woman who was raped by her brother-in-law recanted after realizing that continuing with her charge would significantly affect her sister's survival. While these concerns are not unique to rural victims, in general, the isolation and the fewer social and economic options in rural areas may augment these concerns for rural residents.

## *Concerns Accessing Human Services*

Rural residents may experience anxiety or concern over accessing human services, in part due to lack of experience in using them. Since many services are not available in their community, rural residents may not have the comfort level to even call a hotline. Additionally, according to some rural advocates, residents often resist going to the next community or town for services.

## *Other Barriers*

The size and configuration of various rural communities, as well as other conditions, may also impact the willingness to report. Sometimes there can be language barriers, ethnic codes or unusual authoritarian relationships that impact social behavior. For example, in small towns, especially in rural Alaska, there are frequently a few dominant families that control much of social reactions. Perceptions of local law enforcement may vary significantly from one rural community to the next. More discussion on rural law enforcement follows in a later section. In general, however, rural communities often have unique characteristics and social configurations that may impact the willingness to report sexual assaults.



Rural populations often face intensified difficulties in reporting sexual assaults and finding services because of unique cultural characteristics. Some of these concerns and conditions in rural areas are: lack of anonymity, greater physical isolation, informal social controls, distrust of outside assistance, unclear perception of sexual assault, and concern for family continuation and survival.

# *Is There Less Sexual Assault in Rural Communities?*

A strong logic points to the importance of examining the prevalence of rural sexual assault. To what extent do rural sexual assault victims constitute an underserved population? On the one hand, a few government reports indicated generally lower rates of rural sexual assault. On the other, rural advocates and some researchers have pointed to equal or even greater number of sexual assault victims per capita in rural communities. This document reviews some data on prevalence and argues that the many pragmatic and cultural barriers to reporting and services make it particularly difficult to measure, reach or assist rural sexual assault victims.

## *National Data*

In general, crime tends to be higher in urban than in rural areas (Bachman, 1992; Duhart, 2000). Although usually attributed to higher population density, more ethnic diversity, higher residential mobility, and poverty, some of the conditions often associated with increased crime, such as poverty and unemployment, are often as high or higher in rural communities (Ruback & Ménard, 2001).

On the subject of sexual assault, national crime data are generally limited by both the definition of sexual assault and survey methodology. The FBI's Uniform Crime Report (UCR) provides information only about "rapes" reported to police, based on a narrow definition of rape; it defines rape as "the carnal knowledge of a female, forcibly and against her will." It includes only forcible rapes of females involving penile/vaginal penetration and excludes male and spousal victims as well as forms of sexual penetrations and incapacitation by means other than force. The National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) takes a broader approach and looks at sexual assault, but only includes individuals over the age of 12. "Both measures are almost certainly incorrect, in that there is general consensus that all measures of sexual assault in the United States underestimate the true extent of the crime. The only disagreements center on how much the particular measure of crime used affects the degree of this underestimation" (Ruback & Ménard 2001).

Using NCVS data, the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) promulgated two special reports in 1992 and 2000 that compared criminal victimization in urban, suburban and rural areas (Bachman, 1992; Duhart, 2000). 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. A closer look at these reports suggests that they reflect inherent methodological problems that render them unrevealing and not very credible with respect to sexual assault figures and most particularly with regard to rural sexual assault data.

The National Women's Study, conducted in 1989, was a national telephone survey of 4008 adult US women, age 18 and older. The methodology employed screening questions and follow-up interviews in order to increase the credibility of the data. The survey reported 12.65 percent completed rapes over the lifetime of responders. Although not initially reported with the survey findings, the data set

included location information on 4002 responses. Recently researchers analyzed this location data and found that 10.1 percent of women living in rural areas of the country reported that they had experienced a completed rape and 13.6 percent of those living in urban/suburban communities reported such experiences (de Arellano, Ruggiero, Kilpatrick, 2002).

Even this national survey, with its more sensitive methodology, suggests that women living in rural areas have lower rates of completed rape experiences. There are, however, a number of important aspects of rural sexual assault that might contribute to this and make the incidence of such assault difficult to measure. For example, the propensity of those living in rural communities to distrust outsiders and agencies may make it less likely that they will participate in telephone or other surveys. The question of whether sexual assault will be reported to or discussed with law enforcement, survey researchers, rape crisis centers, or even friends has not been well explored.

The literature suggests that the victim-offender relationship is important in predicting reporting. In part this relationship functions to help define rape as such. Ruback reports, "conceptually, the victim-offender relationship is important because it helps both the victim and others define whether or not an action is rape and whether or not reporting the crime to police would be worthwhile" (Ruback, 1993). In rural areas where most sexual assaults are by non-strangers, or even more likely, by closer acquaintances or relatives, the perception of the crime and the perceived utility of reporting it would likely deter the victim from reporting, or even from talking about it with others.

National surveys suggest that rates of rural sexual assault are lower than in urban areas. However, various aspects of rural culture may deter reporting or speaking with anyone, and survey methodologies cannot easily counter such tendencies. Given the low rate of reporting of non-stranger rape and the high level of familiarity in rural areas, rates of sexual assault may be as high or higher in rural communities than in urban areas.

## *Focus on Several States*

Moving beyond national level data, the question of the prevalence of rural sexual assaults will be examined by considering information and data from several states: Pennsylvania, Oklahoma, Alaska and Mississippi. Discussion of these states does not imply that they are representative of the rural configurations throughout the country. Rather, we look at these geographically diverse areas to demonstrate that rural sexual assault is both difficult to measure and may actually be as prevalent or more prevalent than is suggested by national data.

### *Pennsylvania*

Although Pennsylvania has some large cities and densely populated counties, nearly one-third of the population lives in rural areas accounting for approximately 60 percent of the counties.

A recent statistical analysis of rural sexual assault in Pennsylvania looked at two different sets of data (Ruback & Ménard, 2001). The authors examined data from the FBI's Uniform Crime Reports (UCR) and crisis center data for all 67 counties in Pennsylvania. The analysis included examination of various contextual factors that might affect prevalence and reporting. They found that county type (urban vs. rural) did affect the outcome. They concluded that "(a)lthough absolute numbers of sexual victimization were higher in urban counties, **rates** of sexual victimization were higher in rural counties." UCR data showed no statistical difference between rural and urban rates of sexual assault, but Pennsylvania Coalition Against Rape (PCAR) data from rape crisis centers (July 1, 1994 through June 30, 1998) had **significantly** higher rates in rural areas (Ruback & Ménard, 2001).

In general, reporting tends to be higher for stranger rape than acquaintance rape. Urban areas have higher rates of stranger sexual assault. When the analysis in this paper controlled for the effect of stranger sexual assault, the researchers found that urban counties had lower rates of reporting. That is, the higher rate of reporting sexual assault in urban counties is due to the higher rate of stranger sexual assaults in these counties.

In a second paper, using similar methodology, these researchers examined child sexual assault figures by analyzing PCAR data from rape crisis centers with data from Pennsylvania Office of Children, Youth and Families (CYS). This study also found that rural counties had higher rates of sexual assault. Both PCAR and CYS data indicated higher rates of sexual assault in rural counties (Ménard & Ruback, 2003).

Additionally, a review of PCAR data on county rates of per capita forcible adult rapes for the period July 2001 through June 2002 show that the eight highest rates were in rural counties. These eight rural counties had rates that exceeded all urban counties and they include the three most rural counties in the state. Additionally, of the forty rural counties, fourteen (or 35 percent) had rates that exceeded the average of all counties in the state.

Although one cannot generalize to the entire country, this Pennsylvania study indicated significantly higher rates of sexual assault in rural areas as compared to urban areas. The findings also underscore the fact that UCR data reflects only limited reporting and a narrow definition of rape.

## *Oklahoma*

Principally a rural state, Oklahoma has 77 counties of which only three are considered to be urban: Comanche, Oklahoma and Tulsa. County data of forcible rapes for 1998 and 1999 showed consistency in these urban counties: all three continued to have rates that were higher than the state average. However, there were more than a dozen rural counties in each of those years that also exceeded the state rate of sexual assault.

In 1998, the rural county of Harmon had the highest rate per county, but it represented only 3 rapes per 100,000. The following year the same county moved from first on the list to 75<sup>th</sup>. Similarly, the rural county of Cimmeron had no reported rapes in 1998, but with 2 per 100,000 moved to the top of the list for 1999. These dramatic fluctuations in rates demonstrate that populations can be so low that averages are severely affected by minute changes. It also underscores the fact that the decision to report a rape seriously affects the numbers. In fact, of the 14 counties in 1998 and the 16 counties in 1999 that had a rape rate higher than the state average, only 2 rural counties appear on both lists. Put another way, we cannot easily tell if rural rates are higher or lower because they are so sensitive to fluctuations in reporting.

In the case of the two rural counties in the above-state-rate category for both years, Okmulgee and Kay, the higher rates appear to be reflective of higher reporting related to programmatic efforts. The director of the program in Kay County felt that the establishment of a SANE (Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner) program has made a big difference; hospitals and law enforcement involvement has promoted the rate of reporting. The director in Okmulgee County felt that their consistently high rates of reporting resulted from their education/ public awareness campaigns and the training of law enforcement.

The Director of the program in the northwestern and most rural counties in Oklahoma explained that because so many of the counties have such low populations, the fluctuations in reporting indeed make a big difference in their relative rankings statewide.

When we look at the data another way, 74 rural counties compared to the three urban counties, we see a relative consistency of urban and rural rates. The county data viewed in this way does not react so dramatically to minor fluctuations in reporting. We also see that the decline from 1998 to 1999 in absolute number is reflected more in the rate of urban reporting than rural. The proportion of rural rapes to all rapes actually rose from 1998 to 1999.

The Oklahoma situation suggests that reported rapes do not clearly or consistently reflect the extent of sexual assault in rural areas. Low population density means the rates are extremely sensitive to fluctuations in reporting. The two cases of higher rural rates suggest that strong programmatic initiatives may account for consistently higher rates of reporting.



## Alaska

Alaska, the largest state in the US, measures roughly twice the size of Texas and about one-fifth the size of the lower 48 combined. With more than half the state's population concentrated in Anchorage, small towns and villages speckle the rest of the Alaskan landscape. Approximately 90 percent of Alaska cannot be reached by a road system but must be accessed by air or sea travel.

Police in cities and towns carry out law enforcement in those areas, but in fact, most communities in the state do not have police departments. Instead, state troopers conduct roving patrols over vast areas known as Detachment Coverage Areas. Rural Alaska is made up of five detachments. State troopers assigned to each detachment have jurisdiction over felonies. In lieu of a constant police presence, communities in these detachments have VPSOs, Village Public Safety Officers, who have jurisdiction only over misdemeanors. They do not carry weapons and are usually the first responder in law enforcement situations.

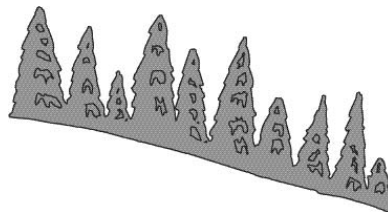
The FBI has quite consistently ranked Alaska with the highest rate of rape in the nation. "Alaska has topped that crime category about two-thirds of the time over the past two decades" (Pemberton, 2000). This is particularly alarming because the ranking reflects rapes only and not the broader category of sexual assault. Anchorage, Alaska's principal urban area with nearly half the state's population, has an exceedingly high rate of rape. Although the 1999 rate for Anchorage ranked less than the state average for that year, it still had a rate nearly two times higher than the rest of the nation. Again, these rates are for forcible rape only as reported by the UCR.

<i>1999 Rate of Rape per 100,000 Residents</i>		
Nation	Alaska	Anchorage
32.7	83.5	62.8

Figures provided by Municipality of Anchorage, Department of Health and Human Services, with a source of Uniform Crime Report.

Even more dramatic, Alaska's rape rates, when calculated in relationship to the number of female inhabitants, show that for 1999, Anchorage had a rate of 128 rapes per 100,000 females and Alaska had a rate of 173 per 100,000 females. *Note that the state rate exceeds the Anchorage rate pointing to the fact that rural areas of the state figure prominently in the high figures for the state.*

Since Alaska has the highest state rate of rape in the nation based on the UCR's narrow definition, it would be informative to consider the rate of sexual assault that includes other kinds of sexual violence.



The Alaska State Troopers provided additional data on sexual assault arrests in rural detachments for various categories of sexual assault and abuse that are not part of the data reflected in the UCR. These data for 1999 and 2000 present a compelling picture of the extent of sexual assault in all five of Alaska's rural detachments.

The degree of ruralness of each detachment can be determined by calculating the number of square miles per resident. Detachment C is most rural with one resident per 6.72 square miles followed by Detachment A with one resident per 4.85 square miles. The most rural detachments, C and A also had the highest rates of sexual assault. These rates suggest a higher degree of sexual violence rather than a higher than typical rate of reporting. Rural service providers explain that they are aware of very high levels of sexual assault, saying that it is especially common among adult rural women.

<b>Rural Detachments</b>		<b>A</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>C</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>E</b>
(Rates of sexual assaults per 100,000 residents)						
<b>1999</b>	Adult	233.6	97.2	370.0	96.3	58.5
	Minors*	282.2	184.3	498.3	192.6	203.1
	<b>Combined</b>	<b>515.8</b>	<b>281.5</b>	<b>868.3</b>	<b>289.0</b>	<b>261.5</b>
<b>2000</b>	Adults	204.4	91.1	380.0	96.3	58.5
	Minors*	243.3	261.2	578.9	118.8	230.8
	<b>Combined</b>	<b>447.7</b>	<b>352.4</b>	<b>959.0</b>	<b>215.1</b>	<b>289.2</b>

\*Figures represent minors (under 17 years old).

Much of the reporting that does occur reflects the mandatory reporting by various professionals such as the village's health aids and teachers. Ginger says that in her rural region of Alaska there is a growing willingness to report sexual assault of children but not of adults.



These 1998 photographs of Hughes, Alaska demonstrate the very isolated nature of many rural Alaskan communities. Above: Clinic. Right: New Housing. Photographs reprinted with the permission of the Alaska Department of Community and Economic Development.

Although rural Alaskan communities experience similar problems of isolation and barriers to assistance as do other remote communities, Alaskan Native communities also have cultural characteristics that may intensify these barriers. Advocates point out that there are cultural aspects of the Alaskan Native population that figure prominently into the decision to report an assault or to seek outside assistance. These cultural factors may range from fear of retribution by the community's powerful family to belief in ultimate spiritual justice.

These cultural concerns even when added to the remote lifestyle represent only part of the difficulty. Ginger, working in rural Alaska says that often victims do not come forward because they do not see it as particularly worthwhile because they recognize that there are virtually no resources available to help them.

Data concerning Alaska demonstrate very high rates of rape and sexual assault in rural areas. The rates from UCR data alone show that rural rates in some years were higher than in urban areas. With Anchorage having half the state's population, UCR data provides a view of how prominently rural rapes figure into the state's rate. These rural rates often exceed Anchorage's high rate of rape. Data on sexual assaults in rural detachments, provided by the Alaska State Troopers, similarly shows that rural areas experience very high rates of sexual assaults with the most rural detachments having the highest rates of sexual assault.

## *Mississippi*

Mississippi is a mostly rural state with 82 counties, eleven of which are considered urban. According to 2000 census data, the population per square mile in the state is 60.6 compared to a national figure of 79.6 persons per square mile. Among the urban counties, only two have census-designated *In Urban Populations* over 100,000 residents. This means that even urban counties can be quite rural and that as a whole the state is very rural. Adding to the demographic picture, 1999 census data indicate that 19.9 percent of Mississippi's population lives below the poverty level with a per capita income more than five thousand dollars less than the national per capita income.

Ten sexual assault programs serve the state, with each covering multiple counties. Most centers have some mixture of rural and urban communities and counties, although a number of these centers serve mostly rural areas.

The Mississippi Department of Public Health provided data on the sexual assaults reported by the ten sexual assault centers for the period covering 10/01/2000 through 9/30/2001. These data offer sexual assault figures by county, although a number of counties did not report assaults. Sixty-nine percent of the counties indicated sexual assaults for that year, but the report included many additional cases that were categorized as either *Out of State* or *Unknown*. These were not assigned to any particular counties and therefore are not considered as part of this review. Using U.S. Census population data for each county, the rates were calculated per 100,000 residents.

The analysis examined the *rate* of sexual assault in each county with respect to county type (urban vs. rural). The resulting rates indicated that many rural counties had rates of sexual assault higher than many urban counties. For example, Kemper, the most rural county, with a population of 10,453 and a population density of 13.6 persons per square mile, had the second highest rate of sexual assault in the state. Kemper's rate was higher than all other counties in the state, except for Lauderdale, an urban county. This means that except for Lauderdale, the rural county of Kemper had a rate of sexual assault that exceeded all urban counties.

With the second highest rate of sexual assault in the state, Kemper is the most rural county in the state based on population density. Lauderdale, with the state's highest rate of sexual assault, is not the most urban county with respect to population density. Part of the explanation for the rates in these two counties may be explained by programmatic initiatives. Both Kemper and Lauderdale are counties served by the East Mississippi Sexual Assault Center. This program indicates that its emphasis on education has made a real difference in reporting. These programmatic efforts help explain why these counties have higher rates of reporting.

The data and the opinions of rural advocates confirm that, in general, reporting tends to be low in rural Mississippi with the average rate for all rural counties being lower than the average rate for urban counties. The average of 46 reporting rural counties is 24.4 compared with a 35.3 rate for the 11 urban counties. The median rate for rural counties, however, was 1.9 higher than the urban median. Additionally, if you remove the highest urban (Lauderdale) rate and the highest rural (Kemper) rate, the average rates become much closer: 22.6 rural compared with 24.0 urban. Importantly, here again the median rural score is higher than the urban score by 1.98 points. There were over four times as many rural counties reporting as compared to urban ones. This means that some high and low scores can obscure a meaningful picture of rates.

This analysis indicates that rural sexual assaults are not necessarily lower than urban sexual assaults with many rural counties having rates higher than many urban counties. This becomes more obvious when the highest scores are omitted. It suggests that aggregate rates respond dramatically to both extremes in reporting and that programmatic efforts may make a noticeable difference in reporting.

The examination of one year of sexual assault data from Mississippi indicates that rural sexual assault rates are often higher than urban rates. The median rate of rural sexual assault was higher than the median urban rate. The high rates reported by Lauderdale and Kemper counties also suggest that programmatic efforts can promote reporting in both urban and rural areas.

In general, rural advocates face many difficulties. Most of these problems fall into two general areas: *funding issues* and *relationships with rural law enforcement*. For example, addressing rural attitudes and lack of anonymity requires a great deal of understanding, skill and patience on the part of advocates. Honing these capabilities requires things such as training and regular outreach into the community, efforts that require funding.

### *Funding Issues*

**Travel and Assistance Budget** A frequent complaint of rural service providers is lack of funding and the great cost of working in rural areas. It would be difficult to overstate the importance of the travel budget for rural advocates. This money may be used for advocates to travel long distances or for transportation for victims to reach their nearest center, clinic or hospital. Rural advocates commonly require an enormous travel budget to facilitate their work. For example, Mary, director of a rural Oklahoma program, says that to get to the crisis center, it's not unusual to travel an hour and a half. She reports spending fifteen to sixteen thousand dollars annually just to provide transportation for victims. Michelle, director of a program in rural Alaska, says she also spends many thousands of dollars annually on travel, and in Alaska traveling often requires a plane.

**Receiving Funding on an Urban Standard** Rural advocates sometimes complain that they are assessed somewhat unfairly, especially when it comes to funding. They explain that they must compete on an urban standard. In general the time and money required to respond to and process a rural case exceeds that for urban cases; that is, time and money spent per rural caseload is often higher than for urban cases. Working all week long, the rural advocate is not likely to process as many cases as her urban counterpart. This is a particular problem given that funding is often provided based on high numbers of victimizations. Ruback and Ménard in their studies of rural Pennsylvania sexual assaults found that despite the higher per capita rates of sexual assault in rural areas, VOCA (Victims of Crime Act) funding was dispensed on absolute numbers. They found that in Pennsylvania, both funding of emergency services and VOCA monies were higher in urban counties.

Because rural areas generally have lower levels of funding, rural service providers have to be more efficient with their funding. Mary, of rural Oklahoma, says that she needs to raise three dollars for every one dollar provided by the government. She also has to be extremely cost-efficient. This type of frugal, efficient spending has been confirmed in Pennsylvania with the studies of Ruback and Ménard who found that, dollar for dollar, rural counties spent their money in a more cost-effective manner (Ruback & Ménard, 2001).

**A Need for Additional Advocates, Training and Outreach** Rural advocates plead that they need additional help – more advocates. In programs that deal with domestic violence and sexual assault, their wish is often for an advocate specializing in sexual assault. Finally, most service providers interviewed stress the positive impact that outreach has in rural areas. Some have used radio shows for outreach and others make regular visits in the community as a way of building trust. The bottom line is that outreach costs money. Rural service providers speak quite compellingly on the need for funding. Tanya says, “In some sense it all comes down to money.”

## *Rural Law Enforcement*

Repeatedly, rural advocates stress the fact that the relationship with the local law enforcement is critical to service delivery. As previously noted, most rural law enforcement personnel are part of the social network (Sims, 1988; Weisheit, Wells & Falcone, 1994). Rural and small town police departments are neither perceived entirely as a problem or as an ally. In many cases the police are first responders, so rural service providers understand the importance of police to their work. They also understand that to rural populations, police usually play an important community relations role as well. This community relations role, according to one researcher, is the single most distinctive difference between urban and rural police and comprises 90 percent of the rural police's function (Sims, 1988).

This closeness means that rural police respond to a call for assistance with a more personal, social demeanor, and this can be quite pleasing to the community. However, the closeness of police can make confidentiality a real concern, especially for sexual assault victims. The rural sheriff or police may know the victim or the perpetrator. Additionally "since county Sheriffs are elected officials in nearly all fifty states, this makes rural law enforcement very sensitive to the power of public opinion" (Royse, 1999). Small rural law enforcement departments also tend to have a disproportionately high level of political influence because they must handle so many things within the community. This smallness means many rural police are general practitioners and have little specialized training with respect to sexual assaults.

In some rural areas the police have been quite problematic for sexual assault advocates. Assessments range from perceiving rural police as very conservative or negative with behavior that often serves to revictimize the victim to very positive and skillful in processing cases. Michelle explains that in rural Alaska, law enforcement does not always understand how to communicate with the Native population. The pace must be quite slow. Natives take long pauses in their speech, and she says the police can often cause problems by not understanding this style. Renee explains that in her rural region of Mississippi, there is a big problem with the sheriffs and police not taking sexual assault seriously.

Tondra, a sexual assault service provider in Mississippi, expresses a similar lack of awareness on the part of the police. She feels training makes a big difference. She says the biggest problem with the police is that they are very territorial. If a victim lives in one county and is raped in another, the advocate often has to act as mediator between the police. She also notes that there have been many problems with the police in the eight very rural counties she serves. She says "police haven't lived up to moral standards." She explains that the problems have included embezzlement, drug abuse, domestic violence and sexual assault. While such complaints may also be true of urban police, the greater level of familiarity within rural communities and the generally smaller size of rural police departments means that community residents would likely know of the improprieties and be concerned about finding sensitivity and fairness.

In general, all interviewed advocates noted that training of law enforcement helps significantly and that such training is a high priority for them.

## *What's Working!*

The NSVRC asked rural service providers to give us some idea of the kinds of things they do that have been successful. Many of these practices fall into areas of training, awareness and community outreach. All require an investment of funds and time.

### *Training*

Ellen, a rural advocate in Missouri, feels that the single most important kind of training is *sexual assault training of advocates* for those who usually work with domestic violence victims. She insists that the understanding and sensitivity required for sexual assault advocates is especially needed in rural areas where there is great difficulty in trusting and reporting. For centers that serve both domestic and sexual violence victims and for shelters, Ellen feels it is critical to have at least one trained person solely dedicated to sexual assault services. She has found that sexual assault training and speaking openly about that training, promotes reporting.

Rural advocates have noted that training of *rural police* and *nurses from rural hospitals* has had a very positive effect. Theresa says that in Oklahoma police training has been very positive and believes it has helped in increasing reporting. She laments, however, the fact that it is difficult to maintain trained officers due to a high turnover rate. Tanya says that in her rural area of Pennsylvania building a relationship with law enforcement is essential because it helps to build trust and a better working relationship. "It takes time to build trust in rural areas." Over time she has seen more general cooperation with the police.

Other advocates have pointed to the lack of sexual assault awareness and experience among rural police. Tondra says that in rural Mississippi, police are not very aware of how to process sexual assault cases or even what statutes apply. When it is difficult to organize a training, she has found that conducting even a day long training to a very small group of three or so is well worth the time and effort. Paul finds that in rural Oklahoma his program has been quite successful in educating and changing the attitudes of rural law enforcement and asserts, "they can be real allies because they have a lot of the information."

### *Awareness & Community Outreach*

Many advocates point to the importance of going into rural communities to build alliances with community groups and service providers, to raise awareness of sexual assault services, and especially to establish the trust that is so necessary to rural service delivery. Some recent literature discusses the relative value of interacting with community groups and agencies as possible allies in dealing with rural violence against women (CALCASA, 2001; Van Hightower & Gorton, 2002). Advocates argue that outreach is important, although many of their efforts appear to mostly build community presence and trust rather than significant collaboration.

Four general techniques for promoting awareness and community outreach have met with reported success. While the success is not always measurable in numbers, the rural advocates report a noticeable benefit, especially over time. Community visits, community collaboration, media outreach and satellite offices have all been reported as successful methods.

### ***Community Visits***

**I**n Alaska, Michelle found that non-emergency community visits are a very positive practice, even though it requires plane travel into the region. She usually takes a trooper and a teen advocate with her, and they speak to community service providers and at public gatherings.

In Mississippi, Renee uses a volunteer coordinator to get the word out by speaking at local public forums, such as clubs and schools. She says that it is important to consistently go out into the community.

### ***Community Collaboration***

**I**n Pennsylvania, JoAnne instituted a SA/DV Task Force to involve community organizations and agencies. The group includes representatives from hospitals, law enforcement, the judiciary and human services agencies. The Task Force meets regularly and JoAnne says sending the minutes from the meeting to participants is a way of keeping everyone connected and informed. She says building a relationship with community members facilitates reporting and referrals.

In Mississippi, Tondra has found that going into the hospitals for visits has helped a lot because health professionals are often the first responders. She also interacts with the United Way and auxiliary and gardening groups to help build credibility in the community.

In Pennsylvania, Tanya visits the schools' guidance counselors on a fairly consistent basis. She says it is important to make on-going visits because they promote referrals that are so very essential in rural areas where people do not easily report on their own.

### ***Media Outreach***

**I**n Alaska, Michelle has a yearly, one-hour radio show during Sexual Assault Awareness Month that goes out to all the villages in her very rural region. The show includes representatives from the district attorney's office, the state troopers, and program advocates. She says this program has made a tremendous difference; they receive many comments and calls. Many other advocates have reported the value of Public Service Announcements. In Missouri, Ellen writes frequent letters to the editor as a mechanism to raise awareness and promote the availability of sexual assault services.



## *Satellite Offices*

Several rural advocates feel that establishing satellite offices in rural communities can be quite helpful because it brings services closer to potential victims and helps to build trust. A few advocates note, however, that in very rural areas, sometimes a victim might prefer to travel a distance as a way of being more anonymous. Nevertheless, Ellen in Missouri and Paul in Oklahoma have found satellite offices to increase reporting rates. Paul says that when he opened satellite offices in two rural counties, people came to access services almost immediately. He adds, it's "hard to rebuild a life from 70-80 miles away." Nell in Mississippi has a traveling rural advocate that spends one day in an office in each rural county.

## *Other Considerations for Rural Advocacy*

Remember to leave your business card. The small act of leaving your card has proven to be a very important step for Tondra in rural Mississippi. She reports that even when a victim does not seem interested in talking, they will usually call later when they feel the situation is more confidential. This hesitancy to disclose an assault, even to service providers, is often pronounced in rural areas, and the call for help may occur long after the assault. Tanya has been working in her rural Pennsylvania program for 14 years and she says that rural people usually don't report unless they have to. "There is very little reporting right away." She says that the majority of those reporting do so sometimes months after the fact when they are having trouble functioning.

Program offices should be in a building with other services and businesses. Locating program facilities in buildings with multiple organizations and services helps to promote confidentiality. This is particularly important for sexual assault services. Nell in Mississippi says that it has really helped that her program is in a building with ten other services. She says this way people don't know the reason for someone going in the building. Psychologists and counselors have also found this to be an effective way to increase confidentiality. For sexual assault in rural areas, this is particularly important.

## *Program Identity*

Often, programs doing work in rural regions of the country provide both domestic violence and sexual assault services. In many of these cases the public identity of the program is as a "shelter" and does not project an image of advocacy and assistance, especially for sexual assault victims. Ellen found that in her rural region of Missouri it has helped a great deal to change the identity of her program away from one that is merely a shelter to one that does sexual assault advocacy as much as it does domestic violence advocacy. She insists that sexual assault should not merely be an add-on. She also says that a specifically dedicated sexual assault advocate is especially needed in rural areas. She feels that a significant reason for an increase in reporting stems from this identity change. She also says that advocates must become comfortable in identifying themselves as sexual assault advocates and not just, "oh yes, I also handle sexual assault cases, sometimes."

Ellen also speaks about rural advocacy throughout the nation. She reports that her many encounters with rural advocates have reinforced the importance of this idea of “identity.” She finds that they often feel uncomfortable working on sexual assault cases. This fact certainly makes a strong case for more training and more conscious attention to identity. It also suggests that if the advocates feel uncomfortable and unsure, victims may also perceive their uncertainty and lack of comfort.

### *Empowerment*

Sometimes in very rural areas, opportunities for assistance and services are very limited. Advocates often find that the practical and personal approach proves most relevant. Ginger explains that in the past her approach in rural Alaska had been a grassroots, human-to-human approach, but in recent years the emphasis has changed to a more criminal justice approach. With this opportunity to contrast the two approaches, she has been moving back to a more individual approach as more relevant to this rural region. She feels that helping and teaching on a one-to-one basis is very important in rural areas. She uses the concept of “Depend on Yourself!” as a way of empowering people.

Rural communities in this country, though widely varied in characteristics and configuration, often experience similar difficulties in providing adequate services for sexual assault victims. In part this reflects difficulties in providing services to rural populations who may have certain attitudes that do not make it easy for them to turn to others for help. Additionally, it reflects substantial barriers to reporting sexual victimization such as transportation problems and geographic isolation, making it difficult to report and find services. In turn, this low reporting results in a general perception of limited need, which affects funding levels, and may also de-emphasize the significance of this underserved population.

Although aggregate, national data reflect lower rates of sexual assault in rural areas; this investigation, and the research of Ruback and Ménard, demonstrate that by examining rates of sexual assault per capita by county type, (rural vs urban) the result may be different. Such an approach could reveal a situation in which sexual assaults in certain rural areas are as common per capita or even more common than in urban areas. While it is difficult to generalize to the many, diverse types of rural communities in this nation, this examination found that in some states and regions, rates of sexual assault victimization were higher in rural than in urban areas.

Looking at rural sexual assault from this new perspective suggests that sexual victimization of some rural populations may be more prevalent than previously recognized. It carries implications for further research, for service providers, trainers and funders. Most important, for those in the anti-sexual violence movement who work on the tough task of prevention, the implications of this review cast new light on the deep-seated, social codes and the often isolated and insulated rural conditions that have made rural populations neither easy to serve or easy to reach. Clearly, a first step in working on prevention must be to investigate the extent and nature of rural sexual victimization.

Notwithstanding these rural difficulties and characteristics, the need is compelling and the task is important. Researchers and service providers should begin to collect and maintain location data that will ultimately help answer many questions regarding various factors in rural communities that impact victimization and reporting. Rural advocates should be recognized for the very difficult work they do and be given assistance and support. Finally, victims must be afforded a culturally relevant approach which necessarily means building trust and investing time.

If as Royse 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, or even before we can adequately provide services. While we try to struggle with tough research questions, we must be concerned about those who live in isolated areas and those who live in small close-knit communities where “everybody knows everybody.” Our task is to recognize that in many rural communities, there are hidden crimes, unspoken crimes, that are often hushed and sometimes ignored, crimes of sexual violence that require sensitivity and understanding in order to promote safety and justice.

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*"Rural Pennsylvania" by Harold N. Hinton*

**Front Cover**

*Photograph:* Dee Babcock, 70, Winnebago, MN  
*Photographer:* **Nobuko Oyabu**  
Photojournalist  
*Faces of Rape & Sexual Abuse Survivors Project*

**Back Cover**

*Photograph:* Country Lane  
*Photographer:* **Harold N. Hinton**

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