

# Re-Operationalizing ‘Open-Country’: Introducing a Place-Level Geography for the Study of Rural Crime

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## ABSTRACT

The proper operationalization of urban and rural is extremely important to our understanding of the impacts of specific ecological context on human behavior. However, even with the ever-improving definitional advancements, our understanding of these community-level concepts, in regards to a comprehensive geographic space, is still somewhat unsatisfying. This article aims to contribute to this issue through the introduction of a ‘place’ based geography using current Census geographies in the creation of a unified geographic landscape of the contiguous United States. The new place-level geography is superior to previous operational approaches to identifying urban and rural communities in that it allows for the examination of both without the additional variation inherent in larger geographies and providing a more comprehensive coverage than smaller geographies. Furthermore, this approach allows for the development of a unique, but phenomenologically meaningful, sub-county geography that substantively holds meaning in conceptualizing rural and urban ecological context.

## KEYWORDS

Count Data, Crime, GIS, Police Jurisdiction, Rural, Spatial Coverage, UCR, Urban

## INTRODUCTION

Basic to the study of rural crime is a clear understanding of the term “rural.” The conceptualization, and subsequent operationalization, of rural communities inevitably shapes our understanding of the ecological context in which deviant and criminal behavior occurs. How one defines “rural” determines underlying population at risk, the data available on that population, as well incidence of the phenomenon in question. In turn, these elements dictate the findings, and who, if at all, will be targeted by policies addressing rural crime issues. Given ramifications of mis-specifying rural places, Esselstyn (1953) called for the development of a “geographically non-urban” criminology. Esselstyn was primarily focused on the development of a conceptualized non-urban space, resulting in the development of his term “open country”, which was used to describe any area not under some form of place-level police (and by inference, other city-based) jurisdiction.

Since this early call for a better understanding of the geography of crime, which is included in the ecological analysis of crime, there has been a number of attempts have been made at improving the ‘state of the art’ in terms of defining what represents an urban or rural community. Many aggregate level social research projects make use of Office of Management and Budget’s (OMB) defined

Metropolitan Areas (MA), which rely on social and economic integration across county level data as the primary unit of analysis (see the Geographic Areas Reference Manual, henceforth GARM, 2005). However, recent research has shown that not only are MA's extremely heterogeneous, in terms of population, economic, and social indicators, but the counties within those metro areas suffer from similar measurement problems (Porter and Howell 2009).

In response to this issue, there has been a number of sub-county approaches, primarily the use of Census Tracts, to examine the incidence of crime. However, Census Tracts focus too narrowly on an isolated urban-centric issues while neglecting areas of a more rural or of less-developed urban character (Baller et al. 2001, Cohen & Tita 1999; Clinard 1942; Hipp 2007; Messner et al. 1999, 2005; Messner and Anselin 2004; Wells and Weisheit 2004). This oversight has neglected to understand crime in the vast majority of place settlements in the U.S., as seventy-seven percent of all Census places fall outside of urban areas (Wells & Weisheit 2004).

Due to this disjuncture, most of the attention given to the ecological context of crime has focused primarily on minute portions of the available geographical units of analysis. Furthermore, the extreme heterogeneity, which exists in many of the geographies used in these examinations of crime, such as counties (Land et al. 1990; Messner and Anselin 2004; Messner et al. 1999), makes it evident that a better understanding of all ecologically distinct units is important in order to further our understanding of reported crime in general. Building on this existing literature, this paper aims to contribute to this line of research by spatially decomposing counties into Census places and what Esselstyn (1953) earlier called "open country," or 'non-places'. Furthermore, this will allow for the development of a unique, but phenomenologically meaningful, sub-county geography that substantively holds meaning in conceptualizing rural and urban localities, while comprehensively examining ecological crime across the entire U.S.

## **REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE**

### **Geography of Crime**

Like all social phenomena, criminal behavior is deeply rooted in the place where it occurs. Accordingly, the conceptualization and operationalization of theoretically relevant unit of analysis is key to our understanding social-economic factors that shape its incidence and distribution. However, as suggested in the introduction, the current examination of crime has been modified to accompany changes in the way in which processes are affected, spread and reorganized through space. In fact, now there is a great deal of concern on the actual unit of analysis appropriate for the examination of type-specific criminal offending in relation to the determinants of ecologically related criminal offending and the diffusion processes through which crime mobilizes in geographic space.

In all cases, the unit of analysis, as represented by the level of geography, plays an important role in being able to understand crime, where it happens and why it might be happening in those places. However, the "proper" unit of analysis for this examination has been extensively debated. In the spirit of Land (1990), Messner et al. (1999) pointed that there are a number of geographies that could possibly be used for both the statistical and spatial analysis of crime, including metro areas, states, counties, cities, tract, and blocks. The authors went on to emphasize that the selection of geography ultimately should rely on proper investigation of the phenomenon or process of investigation. Therefore, an uncritical acceptance of existing, yet flawed, units of analysis may yield results that are not reliable in relation to others gained from more theoretically driven units of analysis.

Early on, Esselstyn (1953) was interested in creating a substantively meaningful geography for studying and differentiating urban and rural crime at a sub-county level. Through this process, he

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