

INTRODUCTION TO THE ISSUE ON RURAL TREATMENT COURT PROGRAMS

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This issue of *Drug Court Review* presents a collection of articles centered on problem-solving courts in rural areas. As has been noted elsewhere (Donnermeyer & DeKeseredy, 2014), an overwhelming proportion of criminal justice research has been conducted in urban and suburban areas. Consequent to this “urban bias,” there has been a paucity of research set in rural areas in general and even less so on rural problem-solving courts in particular. While this limitation is slowly being rectified, it has posed a number of challenges for practitioners and academics and likely impeded the expansion of best practices into rural areas. However, urban bias has been more than just coincidence. Interestingly, its origins can be traced back to the development of modern criminology in the United States, while its persistence stems from a false dichotomy of rural-urban divide and stereotype. Before introducing the manuscripts in this issue, I will consider the reasons for the poverty of rural research in hopes that we may avoid similar pitfalls in the future.

Anyone who has taken an introductory course in criminological theory likely learned that the roots of modern American criminology can generally be traced back to the famed Chicago School—that is, the sociology department of the University of Chicago, referred to as such due to the unique and paradigm-shifting work they were doing. While it is difficult to detail the notable contributions made by this collection of scholars during the early 20th century, the most important were, arguably, related to the theoretical causes of crime.

For context, early criminological paradigms favored by many of the early theorists (e.g., Hooten, Lombroso) located the source of criminality to deficiencies in individual constitution, character, or cognition (Sutherland, 1940). In other words, lawbreaking was part of an inherent nature for certain individuals. By contrast, the Chicago School largely rejected this premise and persuasively asserted the role of one’s social and structural environment in criminality. Their work led to the emergence of urban sociology.²

Most relevant, Robert Park and Ernest Burgess famously developed models of human ecology that relate the layout, natural boundaries, and other physical features of a city to various types of social behavior and patterns of movement occurring therein. The human ecology approach would subsequently be applied to the study of delinquency by Clifford Shaw, who, along with Henry McKay, would go on to use the insights gained from this approach to develop the theory of social disorganization. Social disorganization links social structural conditions (e.g., poverty, population heterogeneity, residential mobility) to mechanisms of social control within a geographic area, such as a

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² It should be noted that ideas of environmental and ecological influence were not necessarily new. Indeed, their intellectual heritage can be traced back to European scholars, including Guerry, Quetelet, and Mayhew, who focused on social conditions and the geographic distribution of certain phenomena. However, the Chicago School was responsible for bringing these ideas to the forefront of American sociology.

neighborhood. As such, crime, poverty, unemployment, homelessness, and other social problems are symptoms of an area unable to establish social control due to its disorganized state, not the individual pathology of its residents.

Clearly, the foundational ideas of the Chicago School have had a profound and largely positive impact on the direction of criminology over the course of the 20th century. At the same time, their contribution to an enduring preoccupation with urban and suburban areas is likely equally clear. To be fair, it is understandable that scholars would focus on the area around them, especially when that area is the city of Chicago. Chicago, like many areas, was undergoing rapid change in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Industrialization combined with an influx of European immigrants saw urban, and subsequently suburban, populations explode, which contributed to a number of social problems. Therefore, it was only natural for urbanization to be reflected in the etiology of modern criminological thought.

While social disorganization and place-based criminology have, with a few notable exceptions (Sampson & Groves, 1989), remained prominent throughout the 20th century, it did not prevent other paradigms and research agendas from developing (e.g., labeling and other critical perspectives). This raises a question: Why has rural criminology remained underdeveloped to such a degree?

Part of the answer lies in the nature of urbanization and the power of stereotype. For example, strong stereotypes that painted cities and urban areas as “sinful” or amoral were persistent (Laub, 1983), especially during a time when large portions of population resided outside of such areas. Fear of strangers and “the other” no doubt played a role as critics bemoaned the loss of community (Sampson, 2012) and by extension systemic social organization (Bursik & Grasmick, 1993). There were even groups of reformists actively working to undo or neutralize the deleterious effects wrought by urbanization (Finestone, 1976). In short, urban areas became synonymous with all types of social ills, including crime, so the logical assumption was that studying urban areas was required when studying crime.

With these and similar stereotypes in mind, it is even possible to twist the logic of social disorganization theory to support these conclusions. Rural areas have relatively little crime because they do not visibly appear afflicted with the markers of disorganization. As has been noted elsewhere (Osgood & Chamber, 2000), this is confirmation bias; there is little reason to believe that disorganization is an inherently urban phenomenon.

To this point, rural areas differ substantially from one another just as cities do, including with respect to their ability to establish shared values and solve problems (Osgood & Chamber, 2000). Further, rates of certain crimes in rural areas, such as domestic violence, also compare to or exceed that of urban areas. Additionally, social ties and close-knit networks just as easily reinforce and foster the transmission negative cultural values (e.g., views towards women) as they can shared desires for the maintenance of order.

Despite many of the myths concerning crime in rural areas have been largely dispelled (Donnermeyer & DeKeseredy, 2014), the fact that rural criminology remains niche is highly problematic, especially when it comes to the administration of problem-solving courts. Although it was suggested several decades ago by Laub (1983) that much of what we know about urban crime likely applies to rural areas, the paucity of research makes it difficult to distinguish between what does and does not apply. To what extent does the body of knowledge related to

programing features, design, and current best practices developed in an urban and suburban context translate to a rural context? This is a question we are only beginning to be able to answer.

At the same time, we must be careful not to fall into a similar trap by assuming this question can be easily answered based on the same false stereotypes of idyllic rural life. Rural areas face many of the same challenges as other settings. Further, some of these challenges are compounded in rural settings due to the geographic location and isolation of these areas, including the availability of resources (including treatment providers), the travel distance required to reach providers, limited transportation, and a limited variety of services offered. Given that many rural areas are highly impoverished, the availability of funding for certain problem-solving court programs may be an additional hurdle. Not to mention that some rural areas may be more likely to endorse crime-control philosophies that are opposed to the mission of problem-solving courts in the first place.

While it is not possible to resolve all of these complications in a single issue, this issue's collection of papers begin to address these challenges by further contributing to the study of problem-solving courts in rural areas, primarily in comparison to other areas. The article "The Effect of Disproportionate Sanctioning on Client Noncompliance" by Vaske applies the tenets of deterrence theory to examine the impact of sanctioning on noncompliance. Interestingly, while many studies have considered the impact of certain and proportional sanctions on compliance and noncompliance, this is one of the first to consider the impact of disproportionality. Moreover, rather than attempting to weigh or objectively set the severity of the potential sanctions in some way, assessment of severity and proportionality are derived directly from the problem-solving court teams themselves.

The article "Treatment Needs and Gender Differences among Clients Entering a Rural Drug Treatment Court with a Co-Occurring Disorder" by Shaffer and colleagues explores the treatment needs of men and women with co-occurring disorders taking part in a drug treatment court in rural Massachusetts. While a number of notable differences emerge among these participants, especially on the basis of gender, the real value of this study is in the striking generalness of the needs of participants found in this court when compared to the literature more broadly. While more research is necessary, this article lends further credibility to the ability to generalize across settings.

Along similar lines, the article "In Their Own Words: Supports and Barriers to Recovery for Participants in Two Neighboring Drug Courts" by Palombi and colleagues uses participant reports from phase-up and graduation forms in order to examine perceived barriers and supports to recovery across a rural and an urban drug court. Like the above study, many similarities between the two settings were identified. However, important differences idiosyncratic to the rural court were also identified, suggesting the areas in which rural courts must further address the needs of their participants.

Finally, the most pressing issues documented in the rural drug court treatment track of the 2019 National Association of Drug Court Professionals are reviewed and summarized by Francis and Czarnecki for those unable to attend. These issues represent the areas that the foremost professionals in problem-solving court administration believe requires more robust research in the immediate future.

In developing this issue, we disseminated an open call on the topic but received few submissions. While this resulted in the current issue containing fewer manuscripts than previous issues, it further highlights the need for more

work (practical and academic) to focus on rural criminal justice programming. We hope this issue of the *Drug Court Review* provides additional insight into rural treatment courts and encourages readers to pursue research and practical enhancements through practitioner-researcher partnerships in the rural setting.

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