

**‘MORE THAN WINDMILLS & FOUR-WHEEL DRIVES’:
AN INTERAGENCY PERSPECTIVE ON
RESPONDING TO CRIME IN RURAL AREAS**

**Presented by the Regional Services team of
Victim Support Service (South Australia)
September 2008**

Abstract

Country living is portrayed as idyllic and peaceful, but the reality is often very different for victims of crime living in South Australia’s rural and remote areas. Statistics indicate that crimes against the person are significantly higher than those for urban populations, despite strong indications that victims are less likely to report crime in these environments compared to their urban counterparts.

Rather than superimposing urban models of service delivery onto rural environments, we argue that experiences of crime may be radically different for people living in rural areas. Traditionally, this difference has attracted little attention, and even less research.

This presentation explores the different ways in which rural victims experience crime, and gain access to the criminal justice system and other services. It aims to explore a positive way forward to equity for all crime victims, through the use of innovation and alternative understandings.

Biography

The South Australian Victim Support Service Regional Services team consists of seven country-based Regional Coordinators, volunteers and an Adelaide based Manager.

All of the Regional Coordinators live and work in country South Australia and come from a range of diverse professional backgrounds such as education, health, welfare, nursing and counselling. The Regional Coordinators are an experienced team of country-based practitioners who are involved in direct service provision with victims of crime. In addition they are actively involved in numerous networks, committees and community development initiatives. Many of the team also choose to be active in their communities through volunteer work.

The Regional team consists of: Cheryl Fazzalari-Molloy (Riverland), Virginia Hill (Southeast), Carola Maier (Murraylands), Jenny Lewis (Port Pirie), Kate Kemp-Turner (Whyalla), Helen van Roekel (Port Lincoln), Hayley McGeever (Port Augusta) and Jodie Sloan (Manager, Adelaide).

Introduction: Who We Are, How We Work

Victim Support Service (VSS) has operated in South Australia for nearly 30 years, providing professional support and counselling to a range of victims of crime. Whilst the main office is located in Adelaide, in 2001-2002, five regional offices were set up in key regional areas: Mount Gambier, Berri, Port Pirie, Port Augusta and Port Lincoln. In 2004, two additional offices were established in Whyalla and Murray Bridge.

In an effort to assist these new regional workers, partnerships were established with a prominent community organisation in each town, to provide local orientation and support to workers and assist in developing the profile of these new services. Today, two of these employment partnerships still remain, but most regional VSS workers are now employed directly by VSS.

VSS Service Delivery Model

We believe that a major contributor to the success of our Country regional offices is a model based on the following principles:

- *The importance of regional ownership.*
Workers live and work in rural areas, and work closely with other agencies in each region, particularly partnership organisations. Whilst each regional service is based on the same model, individual workers have a level of flexibility in their work with their communities: roles are tailored in each region to avoid duplication of existing services, and address gaps in local service delivery. This plays out as a varying emphasis on counselling, advocacy, community development and court support.
- *The importance of working collaboratively with other key regional services, such as police.*
Regional workers maintain close working ties with local services and police. Approximately 60% of all referrals in the regions come from local police. A great deal of community development work conducted in the regions involves the coordination and participation in local reference and action groups with other key services.
- *Being part of a state-wide organisation.*
VSS has developed considerable expertise in victimology over the past 30 years. By providing an overarching framework (policies, training, trauma counselling expertise, etc) VSS is able to provide training, mentoring and consultation to regional workers operating in isolation. In addition, regional-specific issues and concerns are communicated back to the main office, allowing for wider and more high powered advocacy on a state wide level on behalf of crime victims in rural areas.

The Myths and Realities of Rural Life: Pretty, Idyllic and Dull

There are strong community images of what life is like in country areas. Thoughts spring to mind of rolling green hills and friendly but eccentric locals, where life is simpler, slower, predictable and unchanging. But while these images bear little resemblance to the varied and changing rural and remote environment across South Australia, they do impact on the beliefs and understandings we have of rural issues, and the way in which rural problems are defined and addressed.

According to EconSearch (2005), 73% of South Australia's population resides in Adelaide. A common complaint of those living in rural areas is the heavy focus of resources and attention paid to the city compared to the country – the often repeated groan that South Australia seems to end at Gepps Cross (i.e. the northern outskirts of Adelaide). The rural and remote areas have, traditionally, received less focus and attention from government and businesses, and perhaps are even seen as a little boring. Indeed, this appears to be both nation wide phenomenon (Harding et al 1998), even an international phenomenon and a historical phenomenon (Donnermeyer, 2007), in the discussion of rural crime.

We would like to make the point that in fact, rural and remote South Australia is responsible for:

- 100% of the state's GDP from broad acre agriculture,
- 89% of the state's GDP from viticulture and horticulture, and
- 97% of the state's GDP from fishing and aquaculture.

Overall, we contribute 25% of the Gross State product, and represent 27% of South Australia's population (EconSearch, 2005). With the developing mining sector, this contribution to the state's economy is increasing. So we believe that, indeed, the rural and remote areas of the state are worthy of serious consideration.

The reality is that we know there are "discrepancies between the reality of rural life and its image in the public consciousness" (Gray, 2007, p. v). We know that regional and remote country areas have unique crime problems of their own, and that these crime problems "rival those in urban areas" (Gray, 2007, p. v).

Carrington (2007) notes that "the sheer size and concentration of property crime in metropolitan centres often skews the analysis of crime rates, and makes urban centres appear more violent and crime prone than regional and rural localities. However, when violent crimes are distinguished from property crimes the pattern reverses" (Carrington, 2007, p.88) While this increase in crime rate is not consistent across all rural areas "generally, the further from the metropolitan capital the higher the per capita rate becomes for violent crimes such as assault, domestic assault and sexual assault" (Carrington, 2007, p.89).

In addition, “victims were more often blamed for their victimisation” (Barclay & Donnermeyer, 2007, p50) in rural communities than in urban areas

There also is “evidence that rates for violent crimes and property offences have been growing at a faster rate in regional Australia” (Carcach, 1997 in Carrington, 2007, p42).

Our Reality

603 new clients accessed a VSS Country Regional office during 2007-2008 financial year (approx 25% of total new clients for VSS). In addition 3,396 client contacts were made with a Regional Coordinator during this period. We continue to see an increase in contact with our services and an increase in contacts regarding personal crimes such as assault and sexual assault.

In this presentation, we would like to highlight that working with victims of crime in rural and remote areas is significantly different to urban based ways of working. There are different factors to take into consideration that we would like to explore here. We would also like to share some of our ideas about ways forward for service provision in country areas.

What is different about crime in rural areas?

1. Property Crime: Experiences of property crime can be radically different to the types of crime experienced in urban areas. Examples of farm crime include theft and damage of livestock and machinery, arson, theft of fuel, damage to crops, the killing of livestock as a response to neighbour disputes, or the destruction of fences putting livestock at risk. Due to large distances and fewer observers, it may be days or weeks before such crimes are detected, and are difficult to investigate (Barclay, 2001).
2. Personal Crime: As highlighted above, the rates of assault, family and domestic violence, sexual assaults and murder are higher in rural areas than urban areas on a per capita basis, although not consistently so.

Due to time constraints for this presentation, we will limit our discussion to personal crime.

We would also like to point out that some may surmise that higher rates of crime in rural and remote areas is as a result of the increased levels of violence in remote Aboriginal communities. Whilst this higher rate is well documented in the literature, this does not solely account for the higher rural crime rate, or account for indications of far higher rates of non-reporting of crime than that in urban areas (Carrington, 2007).

Carrington (2007) in her paper, ‘Violence and the architecture of rural life’, talks about “*The Cloak of Silence*” that helps hide violence in white rural family life.

Four key factors that contribute to this Cloak of Silence include:

1. *Sharper boundaries drawn around private and community life and against outside social interventions.*
Carrington (2007) discusses the social ordering of the private and public space of small townships and farming communities, which insulates the white rural family from visibility.
2. *The scale of unreported violence in rural localities.*
The intimacy and social density of small communities make it particularly difficult for victims to report crime. In small towns, where everyone knows everyone, and gossips abound, shame and embarrassment can prevent reporting. Confidentiality cannot be assumed, despite the best efforts of police and welfare professionals. The likelihood of police, health and welfare professionals knowing the offender, and even having regular social contact, will inhibit victims reporting crime.
3. *The pervasiveness of a rural ideology of self-reliance that discourages the use of social services and supports where instances of family violence arise.*
Rural people hold strongly to ideals of self reliance, and seeking assistance from government and social services is often perceived as weakness or failure.
4. *Difficulty in accessing appropriate services.*
Isolation, a lack of crisis response services, and fragmented service delivery in rural areas all serve to make attempts to seek help even more difficult.
(Carrington 2007)

In South Australia, this sense of rural family privacy and self reliance played out so clearly during the 2004 Eyre Peninsula Bushfires, where, despite massive losses sustained by many, few were comfortable accepting government and community assistance: nurses found that home visits were the only way many farmers would get bushfire injuries treated, and fire victims needed to be actively targeted to register for ongoing assistance. As a result, it is often so much harder for service providers to make inroads into such communities to provide much needed services.

In addition, issues can include:

Reporting Crime

“Social and logistical obstacles to reporting (crime) in many country towns are likely to be far greater than those facing urban residents” (Scott, Hogg, Barclay & Donnermeyer, 2007, p10). Consider the single-officer police station, where the only police officer is also required to conduct patrols of the region and attend training, as well as usual time off. On a recent visit to a small township on a

Monday afternoon, a worker was greeted at the door of the police station with a note, 'Back Wednesday'.

Traditional Gender Roles and Concepts

"Masculinity and unequal power relations are a feature of rural culture" (Barclay & Donnermeyer, 2007, p50). In many rural areas, more traditional concepts of masculinity, femininity and sexuality often remain. This can act as a powerful deterrent to people (particularly women) when reporting crime, particularly crimes such as sexual assault. As mentioned above, the trend for country people to be less likely to seek help by accessing services is still strong in many communities. For example, beliefs such as the need to 'keep it in the family', and the desire to prevent potential public humiliation and betrayal if crime is reported are still prevalent.

Environmental Factors

Rural life is strongly affected by changing environmental conditions, for example the impact of bushfire, drought, falling grain prices, increasing costs of fuel, etc. Not only farming families, but all those living in rural areas are affected, which results in increasing stress on local businesses and families.

Confidentiality

The 'reputation' and subsequent community perceived credibility of individual families is taken into consideration when a crime takes place. This impacts on both the victim and offender. There is often a significant fear of repercussions on family, friends and local businesses if a crime is reported.

Confidentiality in these settings takes on a profound significance, when even being seen entering a building will be noticed. A police car outside your house will be news throughout the neighbourhood. The Magistrates Court listings, now available on the internet, often provide an interesting source of local gossip. Despite the suppression of identities in the media, individuals are generally well enough known to be identified without specific references.

And if You Leave?

There are numerous additional safety concerns for women escaping domestic violence. Victims of crime often are forced to leave their support networks, extended family and community, as well as their only source of employment and income. The wealth and income of rural properties is often tied up in Family Trusts. Children are uprooted from family, school, sporting ties and their animals. Many victims may attempt to continue to live in the community with the assistance of a restraining order, however a police response time of over an hour will make any such safety measure meaningless.

Wider Community Impacts

There may be a significant 'ripple effect' on the community as a result of violent crime. For example, a reported sexual assault in a small community is unlikely to

remain confidential, with both offender and victim known to all. Communities will often be clearly divided into those siding with either perpetrator or victim. A murder or suicide will have a profound and long term resonance throughout a community. Imagine the impact of reporting historical child sexual abuse by an adult victim, regarding a well respected community member, and the possible consequences if the court action fails, and the offender is acquitted.

What is Different about Service Provision? Some of Our Concerns:

Access to Help

There are significant access and equity issues in rural areas, with fewer services available, trying to cover large geographical areas of the state. Many workers are only part time, because of funding restrictions. Specialist services for sexual assault, adult survivors of child sexual assault and trauma, are rare or non-existent in most rural areas.

Consider also that few doctors in rural areas are willing to conduct sexual assault forensic examinations, thus requiring victims to be sent to Adelaide via public transport if they wish evidence to be gathered.

Police Responses

Significant differences in police response rates is often due to distance involved, as well as patrol numbers, for example, responding to a breach of a restraining order on a farm property or in a town without a police station.

Policing methods can also vary in local circumstances, with a Western Australian study indicating that far fewer arrests led to convictions in rural/remote areas compared to major metropolitan areas (Harding et al, 1998).

There may also be a perceived bias by community members if a local police officer is friendly with certain locals, through playing sport or socialising with the general community.

Service Providers

Service providers are often required to be generic, but also skilled enough to be providing specialist services otherwise unavailable. For example, there are no specific sexual assault worker positions in rural South Australia.

Professional boundaries and confidentiality take on new meanings when contact with clients occurs on weekends at sporting events, in the supermarket, even picking up kids from school.

There are ongoing challenges for workers who live and work in country communities. A positive reputation and flawless credibility of service providers is essential: a single breach of confidentiality, or a chance comment, may have a profound impact on the way a service is perceived by a community. A service

provider's reputation is not solely restricted to the workplace and staff may often feel like they are 'never off duty'. All regional workers have reported being approached by clients outside of normal working hours with requests for information and assistance.

Whilst networking is often seen as a strength for country workers (we can often get a lot done more easily when a group of service providers know each other well), isolation from specialist services and sources of expertise presents continual problems. There are also ongoing issues in the recruitment and retention of trained staff, which is often significantly more difficult in small populations. Unfortunately, the country can often be used as a training ground for workers looking to get basic experience before returning to the city, or seen as a fast track to promotion.

Courts and Justice

In South Australia the District and Supreme Courts conduct country circuits to hear matters in Port Augusta and Mount Gambier. For serious personal crimes, victims and their families, along with other witnesses, are sometimes required to travel many hundreds of kilometres in order to give evidence, or see the outcome of their court matters. This often happens with very little notice or preparation time. This can cause significant anxiety for an already distressed victim, with financial assistance available only for witnesses, not family members and support people.

In addition it has been suggested that one of the major reasons doctors refuse to do sexual assault forensic examinations is their concern that they will be required to be away from their practice for several days at a time in order to give evidence in court. This is considered particularly difficult if this time cannot be scheduled in advance.

Victims of Crime Compensation

Of particular concern is a reported lack of Victims of Crime Compensation applications from country areas. The SA Attorney-General's Department suggest that many country-based victims of crime do not apply for Victims of Crime Compensation, and there are indications that this does stem from a rural based sense of self-reliance, and a reluctance to accept 'government handouts'. In addition, there is a lack of solicitors providing compensation work in rural areas, and a general lack of knowledge regarding compensation processes.

New Ways Forwards, Pathways to Change

As a group of country-based regional workers, we choose to work in country areas. In addition to the often difficult and isolating work conditions, there are many advantages as well, such as the development of skills and knowledge in a wider area, close working ties with other services, and ironically, fewer clients falling 'between the gaps' due to greater flexibility in criteria for service delivery.

Country worker positions are often labelled as generic, however we believe that they should be recognised as 'specialist positions'. They require a particular knowledge base, which includes:

- Working with victims of crime and an understanding of potential issues;
- An understanding of the myths and realities of crime in rural and remote areas;
- A recognition of the barriers and limitations preventing victims of crime accessing services;
- The additional risks of further abuse and violence after police assistance has been sought;
- An understanding of the individual characteristics of the country areas in which they work, that is all country areas are not the same; and
- A passionate commitment to community development principles.

Country areas are valued economically for their contribution, that is the income and produce from agriculture and mining in rural and remote South Australia, yet we have a long way to go if we are to achieve equity in accessing services.

Whilst the Victims of Crime Act 2001 may cover the whole of SA, the reality of the services and options available to you as a victim of crime will differ greatly depending on where you live, for example, how a region responds to a sexual assault, and access to the criminal justice system.

We see improvements in technology offering many positive and new pathways forward for victims of crime. One such example is the use of video conferencing in court rooms, enabling victims of crime and other witnesses (including doctors and other expert witnesses) being able to give evidence via video-link up between courthouses. This would have the impact of greatly reducing the sense of displacement and fear experienced by victims, allow for family and personal supports to be more easily available and greatly reduce expense. In addition, it would allow doctors to provide relevant forensic evidence and still maintain their busy medical practices.

We recognise the need for specific community education programs, community development projects and restorative justice initiatives that challenge gender power imbalances, and address barriers to the criminal justice system. The use of restorative justice strategies, and the use of pre-sentencing conferences, may greatly assist victims of crime to feel safe in their communities after court matters are completed.

Conclusion

The causes of crime, responses to crime and impact of crime vary between country and urban areas. We therefore need creative service delivery models to respond to cultural differences.

We see a pathway forward that is about recognising and prioritising the needs of country people, and challenging the dominant discourse of the “poor country cousins” who just make do with what they have.

We are resourceful and we believe that the “particularities and culture in the regional context can also serve as a catalyst for new and innovative approaches to criminal justice” (Hogg, 2007, p181).

One of our many pathways is to recognise the difference in doing this work in rural and remote areas and value the principles of partnership, collaboration and regional ownership that are often taken for granted.

We hope that funding for country services will increase so that our services can be extended to include all country areas and remote communities.

Finally, we support the idea that “rural crime merits analysis in its own right” (Scott et al, 2007, p11) and hope that Australian based research in this area continues to grow.

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