

DIMENSIONS OF RURAL CRIME

By

G. Howard Phillips

Department of Agricultural Economics
and Rural Sociology,
Ohio Agricultural and Research Development Center,
Ohio Cooperative Extension Service,
and The Ohio State University
Columbus, Ohio 43211

A Paper Presented at the Academy for Criminal Justice Sciences,
Cincinnati, Ohio, March 16, 1979.

DIMENSIONS OF RURAL CRIME

Background to the Studies

In the United States until about World War II, crime in rural areas was not generally viewed as a major problem (except perhaps in selected places.) This statement can be made with some degree of confidence since the literature in almost all relevant fields reflects little attention to this issue. There are exceptions but no long-term problem seems to have existed over time. Some would argue the low incidence of crime reflects only police under-reporting and less opportunity. Whatever the truth of the matter, incidences of property and personal crimes were much lower than in urban areas. At least, this has been true since we have had some regular record keeping on the subject. However, since about 1960 there has been a notable rise in the number of crimes in rural areas according to data reported in the Uniform Crime Reports. The Uniform Crime Reports were the only longitudinal rural data available until just recently. The lone exception with which I am familiar, is the set of studies conducted in Michigan since 1973.¹

The growing crime problem as reflected by feedback from rural people and rural organizations, resulted in several questions: "Why is crime increasing? What is the nature and scope of the problem? and Who is committing the crimes in rural areas?" To seek answers to these and other related questions, four studies were conducted in Ohio during the period of 1973 to 1975.

Our first study was an attitudinal and opinion survey conducted among council members of the Ohio Farm Bureau Federation.² This survey was designed to find out if people perceived an increase in crimes and what they knew and thought about the problem. A second study was initiated with the Ohio's rural sheriffs'.³ The major interest in this study was to find out what crimes they knew about, and secondly, who were being arrested for committing crimes. Another question of interest: What crimes did people say were occurring to them? Was this different from crimes reported to sheriffs? To find the answer to these questions, a state-wide victimization survey was initiated to determine the exact nature and scope of crimes occurring to rural people as perceived by themselves.⁴ Vandalism was found to be the leading problem. As a result, a fourth study was undertaken to investigate vandalism. Findings from these studies are intermixed below as we address the questions set forth earlier in this paper.⁵

METHODOLOGIES

Farm Bureau Council Study

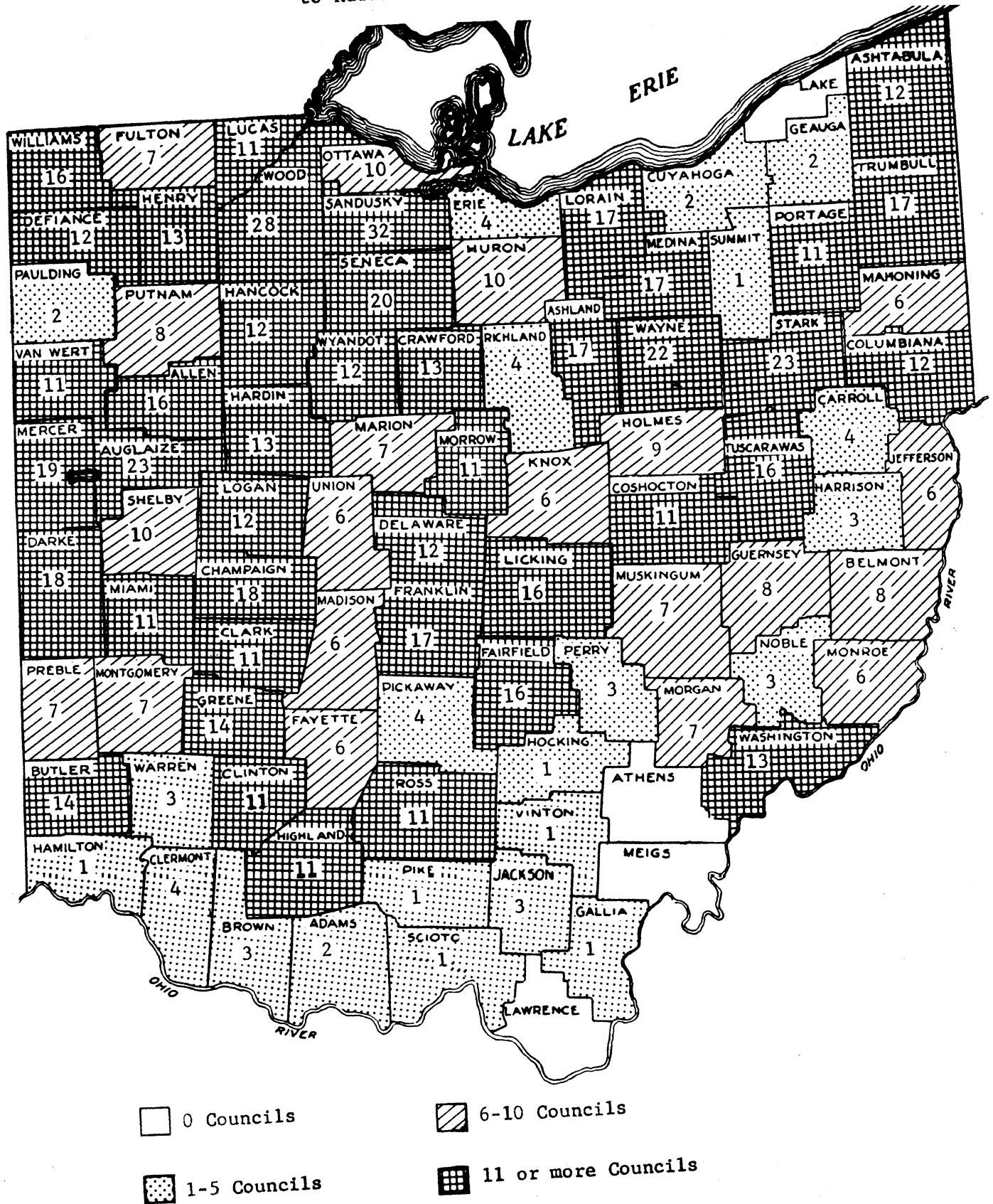
This study consisted of a survey of members of Ohio Farm Bureau's 1400 councils. Members were asked to complete a group questionnaire concerning their perceptions and attitudes toward rural crime and problems associated with the rising crime rate. This questionnaire was provided the members as a regular monthly discussion guide and they were instructed to complete one questionnaire for each group and return to the Ohio Farm Bureau office in

the usual manner. Returned questionnaires were received from 842 councils (representing over 10,000 rural residents). This represents a 60 percent return. Figure 1 reveals the distribution of councils responding (see next page). Only councils in the counties of Athens, Lake, Lawrence, and Meigs did not participate in the study. The wide distribution of returns tends to reduce the likelihood of a bias favoring one point of view rather than another. Nevertheless, the reader should be aware of the limitations this procedure entails.

Offenders and Offenses Study

Nine counties were selected on a stratified non-random basis. Three counties were selected in each of three sub-state areas designated as appalachia, cornbelt, and northeast industrial. These sub-state areas were designated on the basis of similarity of rural areas and attributes within the sub-state area. It was judged that the three counties per area were representative of the rural portions of the other counties in the designated area. It was also decided to choose counties adjacent to each other in each area. The rationale for this selection process was to permit examining potential crime patterns across county lines. Figure 2 shows the counties selected and the sub-state area which they represented in this study (see page 5). A comparison of population profiles for the rural population of the nine sample counties with the U.S. Bureau of the Census Data for the state reveals no statistical differences on an age profile. It was thus concluded that the nine selected counties are representative of the rural population of Ohio. Table 1 shows the age distribution.

Figure 1: Number of Farm Bureau Councils Responding to Rural Crime Questionnaire, 1974



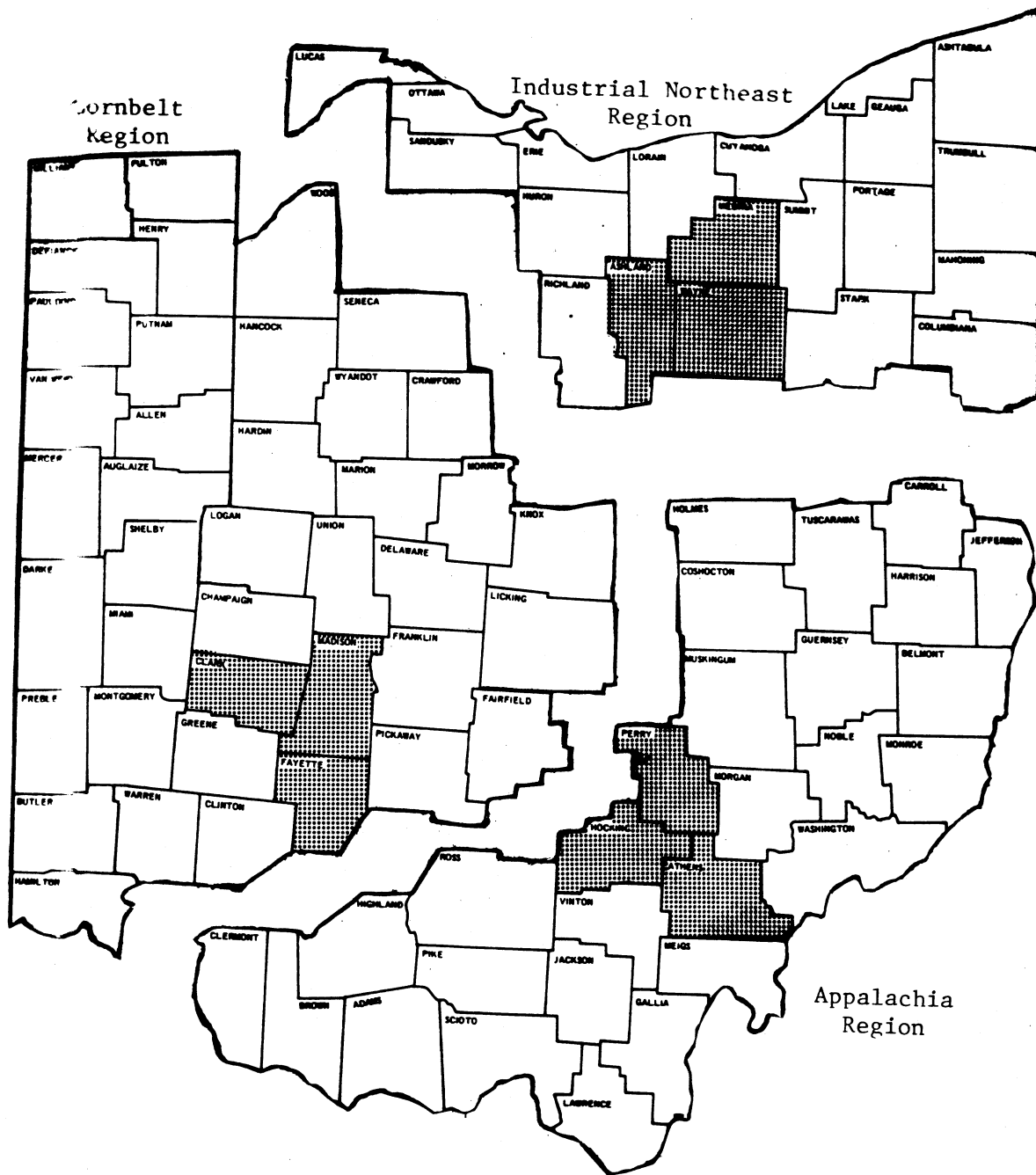


Figure 2: Three Geographical Regions of Ohio and Study Counties

Sheriffs in these nine counties kept daily records of all offenders apprehended in the rural portions of their counties as well as offenses reported for the period of June 1, 1974 through May 31, 1975. The report form was developed for this study and all sheriffs utilized the same instruments. The information was collected at the end of each month during the study period.

Table 1

Comparison of the 1970 Rural Population by Age for Ohio and the Counties of Ashland, Athens, Clark, Fayette, Hocking Madison Medina, Perry and Wayne.

Ohio Rural Population					
Age	Total		Nine Sample Counties		Percentage Differences
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	
Under 10	516,263	19.6	50,191	19.5	.1
10-14	310,412	11.8	29,758	11.6	.2
15-19	257,599	9.8	24,532	9.5	.3
20-24	160,387	6.1	16,517	6.4	.3
25-29	161,216	6.1	17,120	6.7	.6
30-34	157,875	6.0	16,268	6.3	.3
35-39	151,901	5.8	14,576	5.7	.1
40-44	160,994	6.1	15,066	5.9	.2
45-49	157,031	6.0	14,797	5.8	.2
50-54	141,112	5.4	13,707	5.3	.1
55-59	122,676	4.7	11,948	4.6	.1
60-64	100,621	3.8	9,958	3.9	.1
65+	230,586	8.8	22,587	8.8	.0
Total	2,628,673	100.0	257,025	100.0	----

Source: U.S. Census of Population-1970-PC(1)-C37 OHIO.

Victimization Study

The same nine counties as described under the Offenders and Offenses Study were utilized for the Victimization Study. The sample population for the Victimization schedule was chosen in the following manner. Ten townships were randomly drawn from all of the townships in each of the nine counties. An intersection of two roads was arbitrarily picked from a map and this became the starting point for a continuous type sample in each township. The number of starting points was based on the number of persons to be interviewed in each county. The interviewers were assigned the direction to proceed and the households to be selected for the interview. Ten families were selected by this method in each township. In addition, three additional townships were selected in Clark, two in Wayne, and one in Medina to pick up additional interviews. A total of 889 questionnaires were completed by personal interview or a drop-off questionnaire. A personal interview was conducted only at the request of the interviewee.

Vandalism Study

The study population included all sophomore high school students (a total of 634) in attendance on the day a questionnaire was administered. The 599 10th grade students interviewed were from three rural Ohio high schools. Ninety-five percent of the completed questionnaires were included in the study. The three high schools were selected after considering these criteria: (1) one rural high school was to be selected from each of three counties that were designated in the larger study to be representative of three sub-state regions of

appalachia, cornbelt and industrial northeast; (2) each school was to have a sophomore class of a minimum of 150 students; and (3) appropriate school officials needed to be willing to cooperate with administering the questionnaire. Rural areas were defined as open country and unincorporated concentrations of population.

The questionnaire consisted of five sections containing 57 items as well as general information about the study, an introduction to the term vandalism and assurances of confidentiality.

Recognizing that data gathered through self-reporting questionnaires might be over- or under-reported, a search of the literature produced the validation study of Clark and Tiff. These researchers found 55.0 percent of their sample had participated in vandalistic behavior. When they compared initial responses to a questionnaire with subsequent responses made during a polygraph examination, they found 77.5 percent of the responses to vandalism items were accurate, 10.0 percent over-reported and 12.5 percent ~~under-reported~~. They suggest that ". . . accuracy is directly related to seriousness of offense, and inaccuracy . . . was highly related to declared personal norms and reference group norms."⁶

In this self-reporting study, it would seem reasonable to assume that similar forces might be at work within the sample and that results would be expected to be comparable. Therefore, these data should be viewed with the usual caution until replicate studies have been completed and are found to be supportive of these findings.

FINDINGS

One of the first questions prompting this research was: What are the leading crimes occurring in rural Ohio? A second question was: Is there a difference in crimes known to police and those crimes that people say occur to them? Data in Figure 3 reveals theft (29 percent) as the leading crime known to police with vandalism (17 percent) second, burglary and attempts (14 percent) were third.

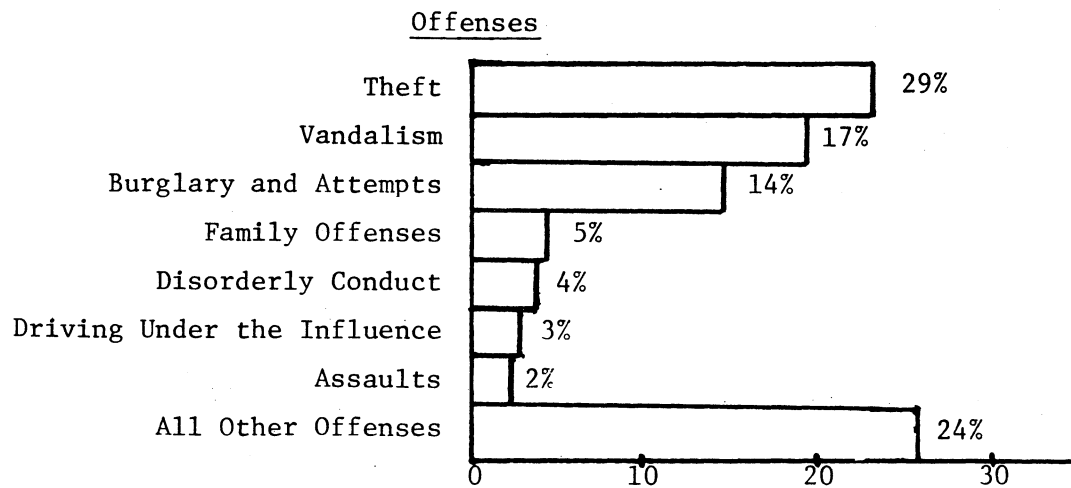


Figure 3: Percent of Offenses Known to Ohio Sheriffs by Major Categories of Crime.

The questions was also addressed utilizing data from the victimization study. Data in Figure 4 reveals vandalism is the leading crime (38 percent), and theft (13 percent) a distant second according to the residents themselves.

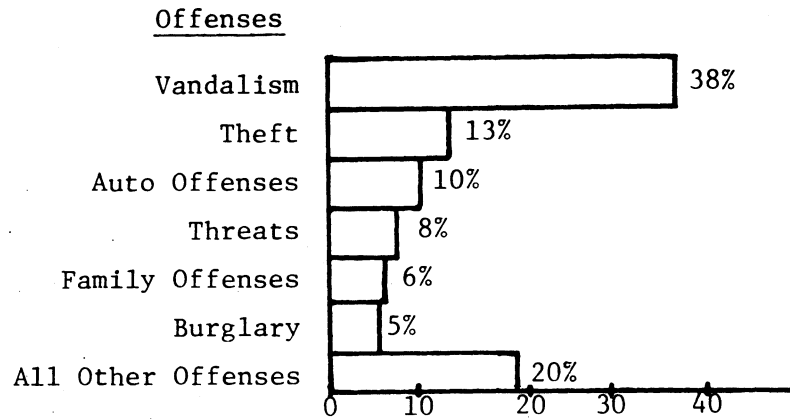


Figure 4: Percent of Offenses Occurring to Ohio Rural Residents by Major Categories of Crime.

It is obvious from data presented in Figures 3 and 4 that property crimes are the overwhelming problem in rural Ohio.

The answer to the second question is clear. Crimes known to police are different in percent of occurrences from what people report. These differences were anticipated as a result of urban victimization studies. Therefore, respondents in the victimization study were asked to indicate whether or not they reported a crime occurring to them or members of their household. Data in Figure 5 reveals a range of 63 percent of burglaries reported to only 15 percent of frauds. Overall, only 45 percent of the crimes were reported to law enforcement authorities. This finding is consistent with recent urban studies.⁷

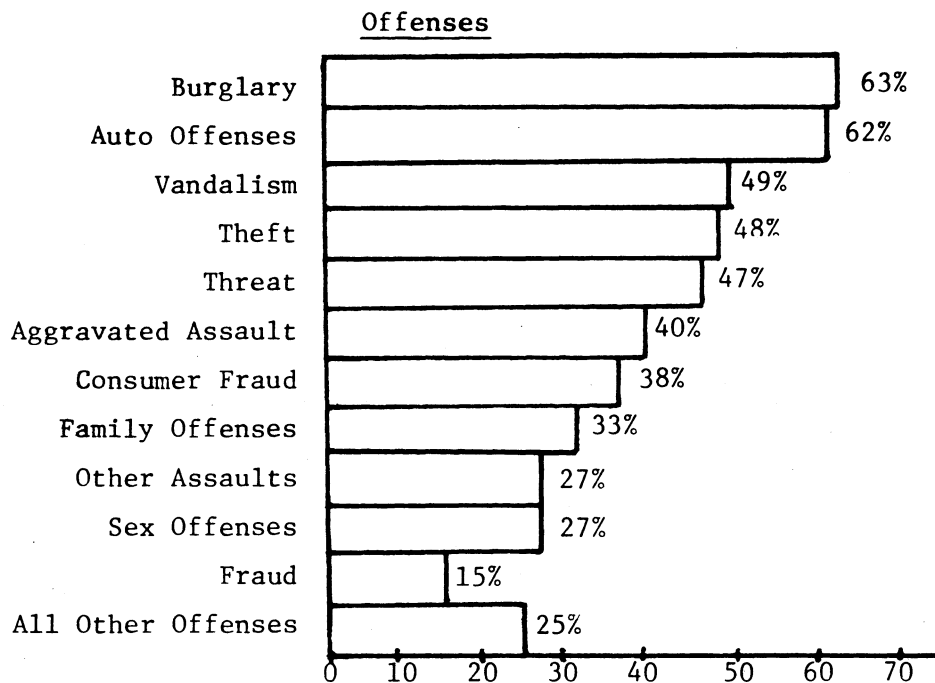


Figure 5: Percent of Crimes Reported to a Law Enforcement Agency by Category.

The next logical question is: Why were crimes not reported? Information was also sought from the Farm Bureau council members relative to this issue. Members of 391 councils (46 percent) said they were aware of **unreported crimes**. Respondents in both the victimization and the Farm Bureau council studies indicate similar reasons why crimes are not reported. Forty-three percent of the reporting council said "it was no use." Other descriptive phrases included in this category were: "difficult to enforce," "lack of enforcement," "slow follow-up," "too much leniency in the courts," "red tape," "lack of legal evidence," and "would not do any good." Twenty-three percent suggested "unwillingness to get involved" as the next most important reason. This response implied a number of things: they did not want to get someone they knew in trouble; the value of

the items did not justify the time required to follow-up; and they neglected to follow through. Thirteen percent noted a "fear or reprisal" as a main reason. Generally, this was a fear of reprisal against the property more than fear of physical harm. These findings suggest that the scope of the crime problem is at least twice as large as is known to police agencies. However, in many cases, if not in most, crimes that are not reported tend to be less serious than those which are reported.

Rural Offenders

The characteristics of rural offenders presented here represent those offenders apprehended by Ohio sheriffs during the period of June 1, 1974 through May 31, 1975. It is possible that those apprehended may not be representative of all persons who commit crimes in rural areas. However, there is no evidence to suggest the group is not representative.

Age

Figure 6 compares a profile of rural offenders apprehended with a profile of Ohio's total rural population (see page 13).

Crimes in rural areas are disproportionately committed by young people. An analysis of data reveals 74 percent of these apprehended in rural areas are under 30 years of age. In the total rural population, only 53 percent are under 30 years of age. A further breakdown of these data reveals that teenagers have the highest percentage of arrests (see Figure 7).

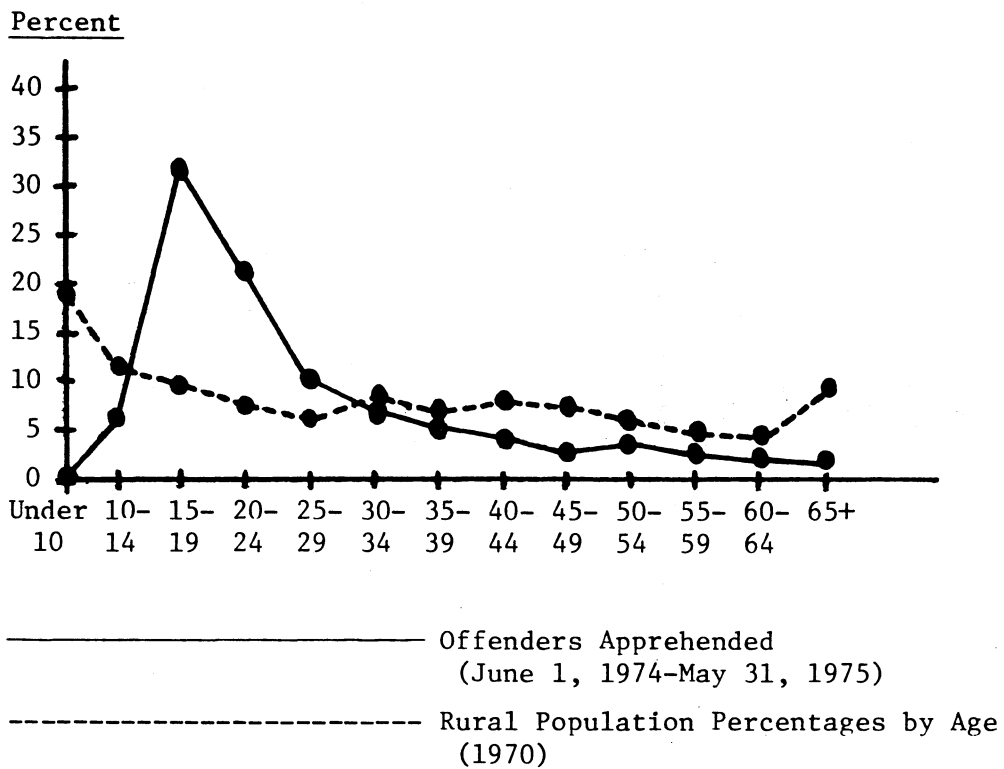


Figure 6: Percent of Offenders Apprehended by Ohio Sheriffs in Rural Areas Compared to the Rural Population by Age Categories.

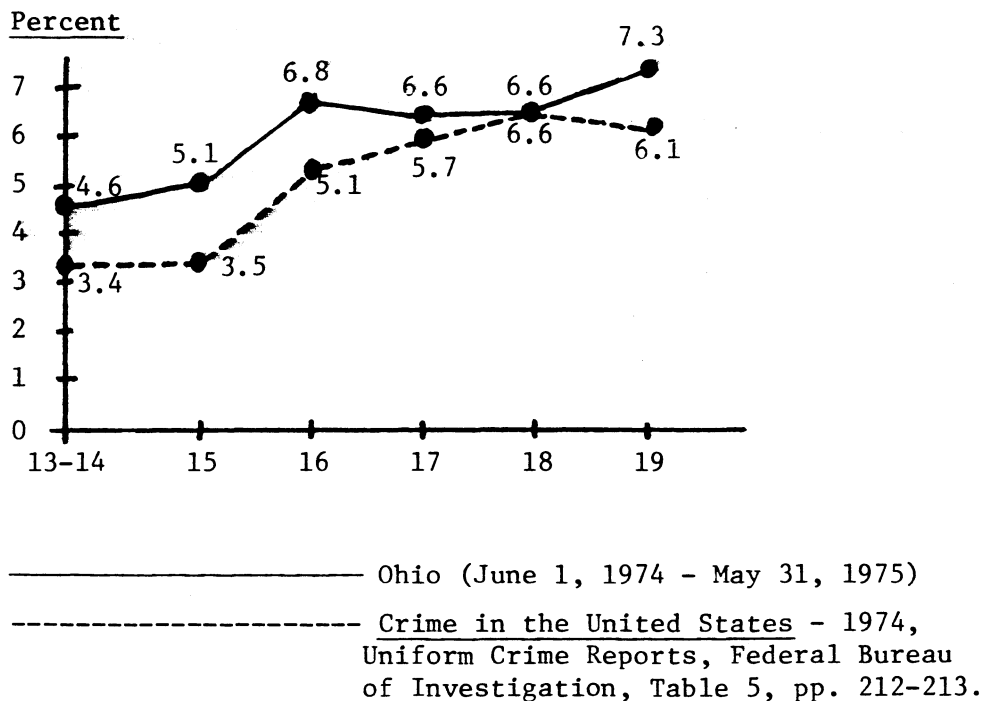
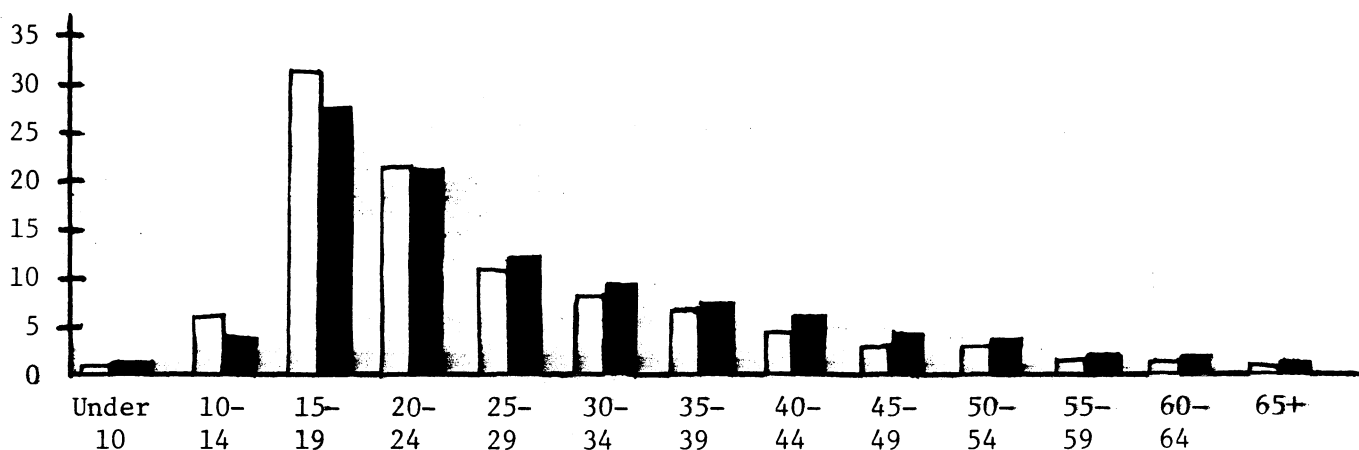


Figure 7: Percent of Teenagers Apprehended in Rural Areas of Ohio and the United States by Age.

Teenagers from 15-19 years of age represent only 9.8 percent of the total Ohio rural population but account for one third of all persons apprehended in rural areas. This tends to be higher for this age group in Ohio than for the 15-19 year olds in the rural portions of the nation as a whole (27 percent). A comparison of all age groups for rural Ohio and rural United States may be seen in Figure 8. As previously noted, Ohio tends to have a slightly higher percent of teenage apprehensions than the U.S. but fewer middle-aged arrests.

Percent



Ohio Offenders Apprehended
(June 1, 1974 - May 31, 1975)



U.S. Offenders Apprehended
(Uniform Crime Reports - 1974, Table 51)

Figure 8: Percent of Offenders Apprehended in Ohio and the United States by Age Category.

Location of Offenses Reported

Data in Table 2 (page 16) depict location of crimes reported to Ohio sheriffs. Most crime occurred on well travelled roads, in rural nonfarm residential areas, and in sight of other residences. Business establishments in rural locations led the list of specific crime sites other than residential. Recreational facilities were a distant second.

Types of Items Involved in Crimes

Information presented in Table 3 (page 17) indicates that automotive related items (20.8 percent) leads the list of those things destroyed or taken in rural crimes. Property and business related items (17.6 percent) were second, and residences and related items (17.4 percent) were third. All livestock represented only 3.1 percent of things involved in crimes. Most of these 261 offenses reported involved dogs. Few incidents involved farm livestock but these tended to be of more economic value.

Vandals and Vandalism

As previously noted, vandalism is the leading problem in rural areas, and is increasing. Federal Bureau of Investigations Uniform Crime Reports, published annually, defines vandalism as ". . . willful or malicious destruction, injury, disfigurement, or defacement of property without consent of the owner or person having custody or control."⁸ Students filling out the questionnaire were read this

Table 2

Location of Crime Committed in Rural Areas
as Reported by Nine Ohio Sheriffs from
June 1974 through May 1975

Location of Crime	Number
On a Farm	1961
In Rural Nonfarm Residential Area	7087
In Sight of Other Residences	6818
On a Well Travelled Road	7308
In an Isolated Area	1179
In a Town Under 2,500	2091
Business Establishments	892
Service Stations	269
Recreational Facilities	351
Construction Sites	96
Schools	223
Churches and Cemeteries	79
Restaurant and Bars	318
All Other Public Buildings	133
Other	521
Don't Know Location	127

Source: Offense forms.

Table 3

Types of Items Taken or Destroyed in Crimes Committed
in Ohio's Rural Areas from June 1974 through May, 1975

Items	Number	Percent
Automotive Cars, trucks, parts, tractors, trailers, etc.	1,722	20.8
Property, Tools and Equipment, Construction items, lawn and garden, business, signs, office, etc.	1,459	17.6
Residence and Related Items -- appliances, furniture, porch and yard, etc.	1,443	17.4
Money, Bad Checks, etc.	796	9.6
T.V., Radio, Stereo, etc.	744	9.0
Recreational Vehicles, Equipment, Building, etc.	588	6.7
Mailboxes	431	5.2
Clothes, Jewelry, Guns	320	3.9
Food and Drink Items	283	3.4
Animals beef, dairy, sheep, dogs, etc.	261	3.1
All Other	151	1.8
Schools, Churches, Cemeteries, Public Buildings	127	1.5
TOTAL	8,295	100.0

Source: Offense forms.

definition and it was also printed on the questionnaire as a basis for their self-reporting activity. Data presented in Table 4 reveals that more than half of the sophomore students reported being involved in one or more acts of vandalism. It is also noteworthy that more than two-thirds of the males reported one or more acts of vandalism while females reported slightly more than one-third. It is also shown that vandalism is a group phenomenon. This is hardly a new finding but it does provide additional evidence that rural vandals have this characteristic in common with their urban counterparts.

Table 4

Self-Reported Acts of Vandalism and Selected Characteristics
of Sophomore Students, 1975

Committed One Or More Acts	Yes 52%	No 48%
Sex of Vandals	Males 68%	Females 32%
Acts Committed In Group Or Alone	Group 93%	Alone 7%

Perhaps the most important dimension of vandalism is why people do it. Student respondents in this research suggested they did it for a number of reasons. Data presented in Table 5 indicate that the most prevalent reason is that they committed an act of vandalism for fun, as a part of a game or as a part of a contest of skills. Six out of 10 acts of vandalism (59.9 percent) were done for these reasons. The motivating factors for this type of behavior have been suggested by Cohen as being competition, curiosity, or skill testing.⁹ Fun, enjoyment, a game are terms often used by the participant to describe his action. Rarely does the participant view his behavior as wrong: he was involved in a game; the property damage was incidental to this activity.

Table 5

Rural Ohio High School Sophomore Respondents'
Views As To Why They Participated In A
Vandalistic Act, 1975

Reason Given	Percent
A Game, Fun, Contest, Etc.	59.9
Getting Even	11.7
Side Effect of Committing A More Serious Offense	7.3
Combination of Reasons	6.9
An Expression of Rage	4.0
To Draw Attention To Issue Or Grievance	3.6
Other	6.6
Total	100.0

Information was sought in this study to determine if the participant viewed his act of vandalism as a crime or a prank. Clinard and Quinney suggest that vandals usually view their actions as non-criminal in nature.¹⁰ Table 6 contains the response of this study population. Nearly 3 out of 4 do not perceive their act as criminal. This strongly suggests that any approach developed must address the fact that perpetrators of vandalism do not see their behavior as particularly wrong. Therefore, attitudinal change is probably necessary before much reduction in vandalism is likely to occur.

Table 6

Rural Ohio High School Sophomore Respondents
Views As To Whether They Were Committing A Criminal Act,
When They Participated In Vandalism, 1975

View Vandalistic Acts As Criminal	Number	Percent
No	199	70.80
Yes	82	29.20
Total	281	100.0

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Rather than present a tight, defensible paper on a narrow topic, I decided to present a collage of data from four studies. My approach was to give an overview of rural crimes and persons apprehended for crime in rural Ohio.

I would point up four conclusions:

1. Overwhelmingly, the problem of crime in rural Ohio is property oriented. This may not be as sensational as rape or homicide, but it is what rural sheriffs have to deal with.
2. It is a problem largely involving young people -- teenagers in particular.
3. Vandalism is the single biggest problem with different forms of theft second.
4. A majority of youth are vandals -- but do not perceive themselves as such.

REFERENCES

1. Crime in Michigan: A Report from Residents and Employers (6th Edition in an annual series). Lansing: Michigan Commission on Criminal Justice, May, 1978.
2. Phillips, G. Howard. Rural Crime As Perceived by Members of Farm Bureau Councils. Columbus: Department of Agricultural Economics and Rural Sociology, Ohio Agricultural Research and Development Center and The Ohio State University, Report 1, September, 1974.
3. Phillips, G. Howard. Rural Crimes and Rural Offenders. Ohio Cooperative Extension Service and The Ohio State University, Department of Agricultural Economics and Rural Sociology, EB 613, 1976.
4. Phillips, G. Howard. Crime in Rural Ohio. Ohio Agricultural Research and Development Center and The Ohio State University, Department of Agricultural Economics and Rural Sociology, ESO 363, 1975.
5. Phillips, G. Howard and Kaye Bartlett. Vandals and Vandalism in Rural Ohio. Wooster: Ohio Agricultural Research and Development Center, Research Circular 222, October, 1976.
6. Clark, John P. and Larry L. Tift. "Polygraph and Interview Validation of Self-Reported Deviant Behavior." American Sociological Review, August 31, 1966: 516-523.
7. Criminal Victimization in the United States: 1973. U.S. Department of Justice. NO.SD-NCP-N-4, December, 1976.
8. Crime in the United States: 1973. U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, p. 55.
9. Cohen, Stanley. "Property Destruction: Motives and Meanings." pp. 23-42 in Colin Ward (ed.), Vandalism. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, 1973.
10. Clinard, Marshall B., and Richard Quinney. Criminal Behavior Systems. New York: Holt, Rinehard, and Winston, pp. 89-91, 1967.