

December 2006

# Socially Disorganized Rural Communities

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## Recommended Citation

Tunnell, Kenneth D., "Socially Disorganized Rural Communities" (2006). *Justice Studies Faculty and Staff Research*. Paper 10.  
[http://encompass.eku.edu/cjps\\_fsresearch/10](http://encompass.eku.edu/cjps_fsresearch/10)

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## *Socially disorganized rural communities*

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Across the globe, rural communities and small towns are undergoing fundamental, and at times rapid, change. Within some rural areas of the USA, the decline of the family farm and the housing development of the countryside race along. In addition, the Wal-Marting of rural America and the demise of locally owned and operated businesses alter the small-town landscape. Once-quaint hamlets are becoming vastly different places to those of only a generation ago.

Living where I do and as a rural dweller, I likewise am not immune. I often am confronted with these changes of structure and how they affect my life, my family, and our anxiety about what may come. Over the past year and a half, I have set out to document these events within some areas of central Appalachia by paying visual attention to the downturn in farms and farming; to the disappearance of independent businesses; to local governments' difficulty in providing infrastructural resources to a growing rural population; to the aggressive invasion of big-box retail stores; to the decaying, abandoned, and forgotten symbols of community now awash in change; to the decline in civic community within rural villages and small towns; and to local social disorganization (Quinney, 1991, 2001; Tolbert, 2005).

Family farming in the USA has been on the decline for decades, with farmers' numbers dropping by 16 million since 1950 (Deavers and Hoppe, 1992). Farms likewise have decreased by over 4 million during the past century (USDA, 2005).

Similar developments have occurred in central Appalachia. In Kentucky alone, the number of farms has decreased 67 per cent across the past century (USDA, 2005). Tobacco farming has been a major income crop in Kentucky, but with the abolition of federal subsidies, tobacco farming and market prices remain unpredictable. The 2005 Burley tobacco crop, for example, dropped 30 per cent from the 2004 levels – the lowest productivity since 1937 (National Public Radio, 2005). Meanwhile, rural land prices dramatically increase. With globalization an economic reality and land and labor costs cheaper elsewhere, family farmers inhabit a weak competitive location.

Rural communities within an hour's drive or so of large cities are experiencing post-agrarian development. During the past decade, the population of rural dwellers increased by more than 3 million, primarily from young suburban and ex-urban professionals

(see Figure 1). Countryside and small towns within once agriculturally productive settings are becoming 'organized by consumption priorities' rather than agricultural production. A rural 'growth machine' is transforming one-time farm land into expensive housing and retail services. The new and anonymous residents' conspicuous consumption, and especially on expensive housing, becomes their 'standard for reputation' and social status (Salamon, 2003: 3, 11) – a disturbing juxtaposition to crumbling farm houses.

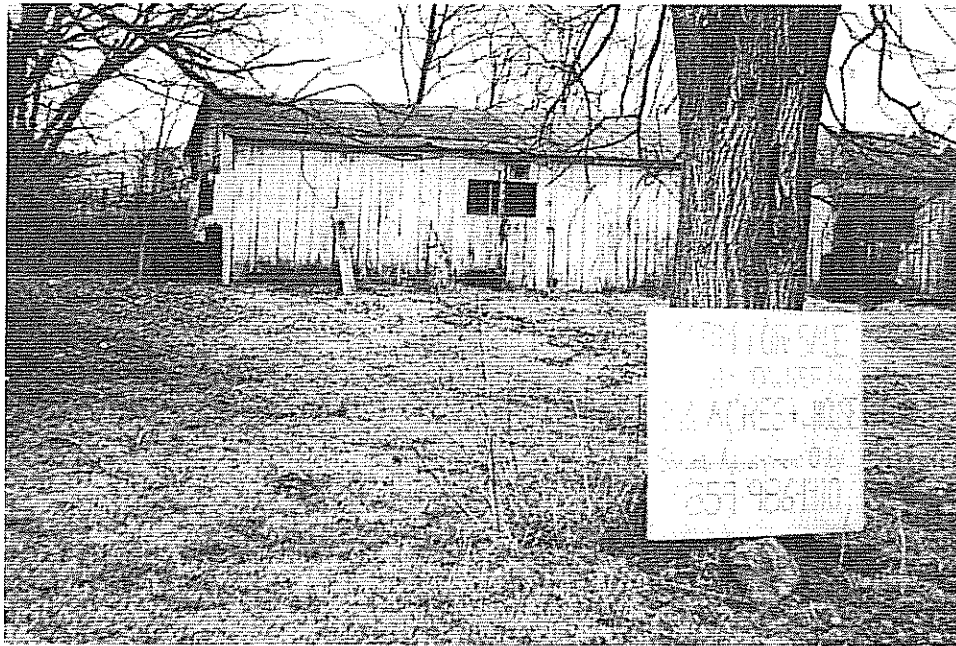


FIGURE 1 Farm sales are common with the downturn in family farming and the suburban development of the countryside (Madison County, Kentucky).

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Rural population growth contributes little to public coffers as newcomers work and shop elsewhere. It strains existing public services as rural small towns must manage more with less revenue. Noted too are worsening social problems such as chronic unemployment, entrenched poverty, crime, and drug manufacturing and trafficking (e.g. Mangum et al., 2003; Weisheit and Kernes, 2003; Tunnell, 2004).

Given these economic, cultural, and demographic changes, small towns are recruiting businesses to their areas by offering economic incentives (e.g. condemned land, tax relief, public utilities). The single largest employer to settle into rural communities and small towns is the southern-based discount behemoth, Wal-Mart. Researching the 'Wal-Marting of rural America' and its impact on area businesses, economist Kenneth Stone (1997) reports that local stores 'find they can't do it any more, and they close their doors'. Wal-Mart executives counter that 'the small business is going to have to adjust' (Davidson, 1996: 49, 50). Wal-Mart continues its aggressive growth, averaging over 200 store openings yearly.

Wal-Mart (and other big-box operations) are effectively altering the rural service providers. Local businesses that once served rural communities and small towns are closing (Figure 2). But the loss is not simply of a business. A part of a community's history and way of life are being forfeited never to be regained. Country stores, seed and feed stores, local garages, and small diners have been more than places for business transactions. They have been the single spot where locals – men, women and children – could fraternize, swap stories, catch up on local happenings, and discuss politics, the rewards and difficulties of farming, and the latest births and deaths. The impact on rural communities and small towns is irreversible. Now when locals (today mostly males) gather, it is within the sterile and uniformly organized space of a transnational business such as McDonalds or Burger King restaurants. Huddled in the tiny smoking sections, sitting in chairs bolted to the floors, drinking coffee, and swapping stories, they have the look of a displaced people.



FIGURE 2 At one time central to agrarian communities, locally owned businesses fold along with family farms (Grainger County, Tennessee).

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## SOCIALLY DISORGANIZED COMMUNITIES

I drive and take long looks. But once I'm stopped and out of the car, I glance – nothing like a gaze – through the viewfinder and quickly seize the image. These and the dozens of photographs made over the past 18 months occurred on the move, all while hoping not to raise property owners' curiosity or alarm. As I make my rounds, I record evidence of adverse changes to local economies and communities: abandoned housing, dilapidated barns, idle

grain silos, boarded up country stores, forgotten cars slumped outside forgotten garages, widening highways, large- and small-scale littering, and the development and paving-over of farm land. I read of OxyContin trafficking, methamphetamine labs and crack cocaine in towns of only 5000 residents. Newspapers report on public officials' complaints of insufficient funds for conducting the peoples' business.

Social disorganization theory emphasizes social integration and stability as necessary conditions for community. Population change 'exerts a destabilizing effect on local social control networks' and community social organization (Barnett and Mencken, 2002: 373). With rapid change, heterogeneity, and few intimate connections with their agrarian neighbors, new arrivals remain disconnected from community. They are not well integrated. They do not participate in local economies of work or leisure. Long-term residents may come to feel less fully integrated with the sudden or fundamental changes discussed earlier, for example, large-scale immigration, small business closings, high-speed highways, and the demise of family farming. In rural areas these changes contribute to 'a breakdown in both formal mechanisms (i.e., services) and informal mechanisms (social networks) of social control', and to increases in social problems (Barnett and Mencken 2002: 374; see also Hamit, 1999; Williams, 1999). Formal mechanisms or community services include the country community store, the locally owned garage, the seed and feed store – all of which are disappearing from rural communities. Social networks include those inter-connective community ties to others for camaraderie; something akin to *Gemeinschaft*.

In neighborhoods with high levels of collective efficacy, residents' relationships are intimate; they count on one another for social support (Sampson et al., 1998: 1). Disorganized communities lack collective efficacy, which impedes their ability to address their commonly shared problems. They also do not enjoy extra-community ties to offices and agencies necessary for obtaining government resources. They have little collective ability to win the attention of, or to get services and resources from, local governments (Barnett and Mencken, 2002). Residents of one economically distressed Kentucky county, for example, began displaying their automobile license plates upside down – a recognized indication of distress. But, rather than address the county's collective problems, authorities cautioned drivers to post their license plates right side up.

In some rural areas in the USA wholesale roadside dumping of trash (see Figure 3), with little government effort to prevent it, is common. More common is small-scale, yet cumulative, littering – soda cans, fast-food wrappers, and beer bottles – tossed from the open windows of cars and trucks. Rural residents' petitions for help from their local governments in collecting roadside trash or the simple posting of 'No Littering' signs often are dismissed – an indication of rural dwellers' political impotence.

## CONCLUSION

Abandoned farm houses, idle farm machinery, closing of independent businesses, illegal trash dumping, methamphetamine manufacturing, and OxyContin diversion are indications of rural communities' social disorganization. Their continued presence is an



FIGURE 3 Large- and small-scale littering plagues socially disorganized communities (Garrard County, Kentucky).

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indication of residents' inability to address their mutual problems, in other words, their lack of collective efficacy.

This research will continue to visually document communities' ongoing engagement with these problems amid the dynamics of globalization and to seek out those social behaviors that we have come to expect from socially disorganized neighborhoods.

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