

“I suppose there is a lot of stereotyping – there are a lot of prominent business types in the community who perpetuate really patriarchal views about women – whereas the perception is that it’s just country people. And then there are pockets within the community of really well informed people who are really progressive. So I suppose the stereotypes don’t allow a broader perspective on the range of people living in smaller communities or take account of the diversity.”

Differences between the city and the country are more likely to be a matter of degree rather than kind. While a sexual double standard may be common in some rural areas, it is also pervasive in cities. According to Lockie and Bourke (2001), the concept of “rurality” emphasises the cultural uniqueness of communities outside metropolitan areas, rather than imposing specific features to forge an abstract idea of “the rural”. The notion of rurality may be more useful as it retains the difference that non-metropolitan areas have from capital cities, but does not attempt to homogenise or stereotype the diversity of various regions and communities.

## Incidence of sexual assault in rural Australia

Do differences in incidence and prevalence exist between urban and rural areas? What data sources have information on this issue? How do we identify and address factors that may impact this data?

The incidence and prevalence of sexual assault in rural communities has often been the subject of considerable debate. The difficulty arises primarily because research has so far neglected to reliably distinguish rates of sexual assault by region. While large scale population-based research like the Women’s Safety Survey (ABS 1996) was able to produce national estimates of physical and sexual violence, it could not adequately differentiate incidence by specific region or geographical location.<sup>6</sup>

Ultimately, the sources that aim to provide estimates of the incidence of sexual assault all acknowledge the notoriously high levels of under-reporting. Evidence suggests it may still be fewer than one in ten women who report to police (Coumarelos and Allen 1999).

With this in mind, the following section will briefly review what we do know of the incidence of sexual violence in rural communities, recognising the specific barriers to disclosure and reporting that rural women inevitably face. Mostly, the available data draws on official statistics, such as police reports, that are in fact likely to produce the most conservative estimates.

### *Recorded sexual assault in Australia*

Denise Lievore in her report *Non-reporting and Hidden Recording of Sexual Assault: An International Review* uses police statistics to give a detailed breakdown of rates of reported sexual assault across the various state and territorial jurisdictions using population density as an indicator of whether a region should be considered rural or urban (2003: 73-79). In summary, she reports that:

- In Queensland’s southeast, which is the most urbanised and densely populated area, the rate of sexual assault was generally lower than the state average, while

remote Far North Queensland had by far the highest rate. Statistics from 1996-1997 indicated that Indigenous women in the far north regions were 16-25 times more likely to be sexually assaulted than women (both Indigenous and non-Indigenous) who lived in the remainder of the state. Southern, Central and Northern regions, which have lower population densities and other rural characteristics, also had elevated rates.

- New South Wales had regional rates of sexual assault around four times the average of metropolitan regions.
- In the Northern Territory, with only three very large police regions, the highest rate of assault was in the Northern Region, which encompasses Darwin and the most urbanised areas of the Territory.
- In Victoria, there was no clear differentiation between urban and rural rates of sexual assault – two rural regions had higher, and two lower, rates than metropolitan Melbourne.
- Rates of sexual assault varied across Western Australia, although the Kimberly region's rate of 380 (well over twice the state average of 170) reflects the high levels of victimisation experienced by Indigenous women living in rural and very remote regions.
- A breakdown of sexual assault rates in rural and metropolitan regions was not available for South Australia.
- For the Australian Capital Territory, the prevalence rate of sexual assault reported in the *Crime & Safety Survey 2002* (ABS 2003: 28) is 0.3 per cent of the population, but there is no distinction made with respect to urban versus regional locations.

### ***Studies of rural violence***

While some studies (Crime and Safety Survey conducted by the ABS 2002; O'Connor and Gray 1989) find little or no difference in sexual assault reporting rates for urban and rural areas, there remains debate as to whether violent crime, in general, is higher or lower in rural areas (Jobes et al. 2002; Carcach 2000a; Carcach 2000b; Hogg and Carrington 1998). Hogg and Carrington's research into crime in five regions across New South Wales indicated that rates of violent crime in some rural communities were significantly higher than the state average. For example, the Far Western region of New South Wales had a sexual offence rate of 596.9 per 100,000 compared to a collapsed average of 314.0 across all regions in the study (Hogg and Carrington 1998: 164).

The Rural Crime and Safety Survey undertaken in Western Australia found that women living in rural or remote areas reported higher rates of violence than women living in metropolitan regions. Moreover, victimisation rates for women were higher than men's when the rural and remote rates were combined for all nine regions of Western Australia (Crime Research Centre 1998). While the authors were struck by this finding, given that men generally report overall higher victimisation rates of violent crime than women, it seems likely that if attention were given to the relationship between offenders and victims, that a significant proportion of the offences would be accounted for by domestic violence.

### ***Studies of domestic violence and child sexual assault in rural Australia***

More localised studies with a focus on domestic violence and child sexual assault can also speak to the issue of sexual assault against adult women, given that they often note the combined forms of violence women experience, particularly at the

hands of intimate partners or family members (Campbell 1989; Coker et al. 2000; Krug et al. 2002).

Mostly, counsellors and researchers agree that there are unique dimensions to women's experiences of domestic violence in rural communities (Alston 1997; Lovell 1996; Coorey 1990). However, the extent to which these can inform our understanding of estimates of the incidence of, or women's experiences of, sexual assault in rural contexts is limited. First, many studies on domestic violence neglect the issue of sexual assault entirely, or are limited in how they address the specific issue of sexual violence by intimate partners (Heenan 2004). Second, the domestic violence literature, where it does make mention of sexual violence, restricts its focus to the context of violence in the home. Sexual assaults by acquaintances, neighbours, friends, and strangers rarely figure. Nonetheless, if research suggests that domestic violence against women is significantly higher in rural areas, then it seems at least likely that sexual assault, *within intimate relationships*, might also occur with higher frequency.

While international studies have varied on this point, there is evidence in Australia to suggest that rates of domestic violence in rural and remote communities are disturbingly high.<sup>7</sup> National data from the Supported Accommodation and Assistance Programs (SAAP services) collected in 1997-1998 revealed that women living in remote communities who were attempting to obtain intervention or apprehended violence orders, in response to domestic violence, accounted for half the national average (11 per cent compared with 22 per cent). The associated rates of domestic violence estimated by the authors on the basis of women's calls for support during the same period were double for large rural centres and almost five times higher for remote areas when compared with capital cities (WESNET 2000: 4).

For Aboriginal women living in rural communities, the rates of family and domestic violence are chronic. According to Ferrante et al. (1996: 37), Aboriginal women living in remote and regional areas were 45 times more likely to be victims of domestic violence than non-Aboriginal women, and 1.5 times more likely to experience violence in metropolitan areas.

A small number of studies indicate that intra-familial child sexual abuse may also be higher in rural areas. Goldman and Goldman (1988) found elevated rates of incest for girls raised on farms or in communities with populations of less than 5000. Lynn (1990) claimed that Gippsland has a rate of child sex abuse that is two and a half times the Victorian average. Collingridge (1993) also reported an increased rate of incest in rural New South Wales compared to urban areas. A number of services we surveyed independently raised the issue of a high prevalence rate of intra-familial child sexual abuse in rural areas.

Indeed one worker suggested that the stereotypical assumption of rural or remote communities somehow *promoting* incest may well carry some truth, in that there was some evidence of perpetrators actively *selecting* rural locations to offend, in a bid to avoid familial, community and legal intervention:

**“Anecdotally, in this community it is felt there may be a higher proportion of intra-familial abuse. Families coming to attention often reside in isolated areas or move between [place omitted] and other rural communities. This isolation may be sought by the offender in the family and also prevents access by non-offending family members to services which might intervene.”**