

Responding to sexual assault in rural communities

Alexandra Neame and Melanie Heenan

Many of the problems faced by rural communities in responding to sexual assault mirror those that confront victims and service providers who live in cities. However, issues of isolation, the levels of rural conservatism, and the denial of sexual assault within rural communities remains distinct. Rural women continue to suffer the impact of sexual assault in ways that uniquely compromise their capacity to remain anonymous, their right to access culturally appropriate services, and their rights to seek a police and/or a legal response.

A key concern for the violence against women field is how to ensure that the needs of women living in rural and remote areas are adequately met. This Briefing Paper will primarily review the existing literature that deals with sexual assault and service provision outside metropolitan areas and take account of some of the contemporary issues that women and workers often need to negotiate through living in contexts of “rurality”. The paper is also supplemented by some small-scale survey research undertaken by the Australian Centre for the Study of Sexual Assault (ACSSA) with a selection of service providers to explore, first hand, some of the factors that currently impact on service delivery at this time.¹ While the research cannot provide any generalised account of “the rural experience” in Australia, the survey responses drawn on throughout the body of this paper, provide some rich impressions of what workers see as some of the key issues and concerns they manage as a result of being situated in isolated, remote or regional centres.²

Accordingly, this paper is structured around four main themes that often figure in the literature on issues relating to sexual assault or violence against women in rural contexts.

The first section acknowledges the difficulty of adequately defining and describing what is meant when we talk about “rural” communities in Australia. We also consider how demographic characteristics, economic and occupational dimensions and socio-cultural factors can contribute to producing specific rural conditions that not only impact on women’s experiences following a sexual assault, but also underpin the cultural contexts in which service responses must operate.

The second section uses a variety of sources to discuss the rates of sexual assault incidence and prevalence, and reviews the debate over whether real differences exist between rates of sexual violence in urban versus rural areas. Given the notorious difficulties in reliably estimating the incidence of sexual assault, it is also important to attend to the unique barriers faced by rural women in considering whether to disclose or report sexual assault to police, or to attempt to access support services.



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The Australian Centre for the Study of Sexual Assault aims to improve access to current information on sexual assault in order to assist policy makers and other interested in this area to develop evidence-based strategies to prevent, respond to, and ultimately reduce the incidence of sexual assault.

The Australian Centre for the Study of Sexual Assault is funded by the Office of the Status of Women, through the National Initiative to Combat Sexual Assault. The Centre is hosted by the Australian Institute of Family Studies.

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Internet: www.aifs.gov.au/acssa

ISBN 0 642 39514 4
ISSN 1448-8140 (Print)
ISSN 1448-8167 (Online)

Designed by Double Jay Graphic Design
Printed by Impact Printing

The additional burden faced by rural women accessing counselling and medical support, or in pursuing a criminal justice response, is the subject of section three.

Finally, the paper considers the diverse challenges that services and workers face in a variety of non-metropolitan contexts. These challenges are *practical* (the increased cost of service provision), *organisational* (the complexity of practice relationships in a small community), and *philosophical* (the capacity of feminist practice models to address the cultural uniqueness of rural life).

Describing “Rural Australia”

Australia has strong attachments – historically, economically, and symbolically – to areas outside of capital cities, and the communities, people and practices that we identify with “Rural Australia”. Romanticised images of the “rural idyll” – a small-scale, naturally bonded, cohesive and caring community – are strong in our national mythology (Allen 2003; Hogg and Carrington 1998; Macklin 1995). However, the ways in which city dwellers talk about rural spaces may well reflect more the musings and impressions of those city dwellers than any informed or direct experiences of living in “The Country” (Stehlik 2001). Images of rural Australia are often organised in the popular imagination according to just a few defining features – for example, a farming district with rolling hills, a mining town defined by its industry, or an isolated Aboriginal community.

However, this kind of one-dimensional imagery is clearly at odds with the experiences of workers in rural communities as described in their responses to the ACSSA survey. For example, one worker described considerable diversity across the service area in which she and her team functioned:

“The locality is very much a rural one but with some small beach and fishing communities. Some areas serviced are quite isolated physically, and there are two isolated Aboriginal communities. There is no public transport, and the next major centre is an hour away.”

We therefore need to be careful in establishing what influences or characterises our notions of “Rural Australia”, and in what ways we understand differences in and across rural communities.

Three ways of describing rural characteristics are discussed: demographic and geographical characteristics, economic and occupational dimensions, and socio-cultural factors or influences.