



Australian Government

Australian Institute of Family Studies  
Australian Centre for the Study of Sexual Assault

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.

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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.

What are some of the ways that geographic isolation, low population density and low accessibility combine to produce specific conditions that impact on sexual assault victims?

### *Demographic and geographical characteristics*

In the most straightforward terms, we often distinguish rurality according to the demographic and geographic dimensions of non-metropolitan Australia (Allen 2003; Lievore 2003). It is primarily through examining population size and geographical distance from industrial epicentres that we arrive at descriptions like “peri-urban”, “regional centre”, “rural”, or “remote” areas. Carcach (2000a) identifies characteristics that tend to define areas that lie outside of capital cities as: geographic isolation; low population density; and issues of accessibility.

These factors combine in different ways in different rural communities. For example, a town located 100 kilometres from a capital city with a very small population may have limited services within the town. The relative proximity to a capital city, that is better serviced, may nevertheless make the town fairly accessible for someone with a car. But a person without a car may find themselves very isolated – even more so than if they lived in a regional centre which, with a bigger population and greater distance from a capital, is more likely to have local services. In other words, population density, geographic isolation and accessibility do not necessarily, or proportionally, always correspond. It is how these elements combine that produces the specific difficulties that individual rural communities might face.

However, the challenges posed by geography might also prompt the development of new ways of approaching the service needs of particular communities. For example, Robyn Mason (2001) has emphasised how strategically important it has been for rural services to build collaborative relationships with local networks to better ensure the successful operation of specialist sexual assault services. Mason describes how working to expand the service offered by the Centre Against Sexual Assault (CASA) in Ballarat (located in Victoria 100 kilometres north-west of Melbourne) to include a 24-hour crisis care response to victims of recent sexual assault, depended on positioning the role of the service within the context of health and other key community service networks to help secure the support and involvement of professionals who might otherwise not have agreed to work in partnership with them. This, she says, has allowed those with substantial influence in the community to become better educated and informed about “what the service stands for” (Mason 2001: 30) and to be assured of the need for a specialist but coordinated service response to sexual assault.

In other states of Australia, regional project workers have also directed attention to building relationships across existing services by offering training and support to other professions such as general practitioners, police, and hospital staff in order to encourage a more coordinated and sensitive response to victims of sexual assault whether or not they choose to make an official report across the service sector.<sup>3</sup>

It is arguably also due to the smaller size and scope of communities that encouraged services in regional Victoria to carve new ground in terms of coordinating crisis responses to women who experience both domestic violence and sexual assault. Joanne Sheehan, Carla Meurs and Judy Flanagan (2001) have written of how their services are “doing it differently” in rural Victoria by running collaborative service models that offer women a continuum of service delivery.

According to the coordinator of the service in the Mallee region:

“With the services becoming integrated, women could be offered a range of support options regardless of the reason for their initial contact. So they might contact to get support in taking out an intervention order, or need safe accommodation, or counselling support. The point of entry therefore is irrelevant, victims receive a continuity of service regardless of whether the issue is crisis oriented, or about obtaining information, court support, seeking an intervention order, or sexual assault – the services are provided. If a woman identifies sexual violence in the context of DV [domestic violence], she would be referred to the sexual assault arm of the service in terms of counselling support. If a woman has recently been sexually assaulted by her partner and is receiving crisis care, the sexual assault worker would respond first, then a worker from the DV arm would offer support where it concerned other issues.”

According to Sheehan, Meurs and Flanagan (2001), the power of this model lies in developing a strong service system that offers continuity for women living in rural communities and a greater capacity for the service to co-ordinate a response to the range of needs she might have, including a greater capacity to protect her anonymity.

### *Economic/occupational dimensions*

The economic organisation or dominant industry within particular rural areas may variously impact on the incidence or characteristics of most sexual assaults, the responses to sexual violence, or the kinds of interventions available to victim/survivors following an assault. Women who live in areas dominated by agriculture, for example, are more likely to live on a property some distance from town, and may be less able to access support services than women living in a mining township (Alston 1997). However, women in mining communities may face barriers to disclosure resulting from a portion of the community being dislocated and relatively transient (Sturney 1989).

Specific occupational groups may face particular difficulties. For example, women who are partnered or married to Australian Defence Force personnel, and either move frequently or live in defence townships, have been identified as uniquely isolated when they experience intimate partner violence (WESNET 2000). Other examples provided by workers who responded to the ACSSA survey included tourists and women and children living in alternative communities, which resulted in their facing particular difficulties with disclosure or reporting.

One worker reported:

“The philosophy and lifestyle associated with some alternative communities and associated community organisations creates vulnerabilities for some women and children and complicates intervention where community disbelief that abuse has occurred or identification with and support for the alleged offender undermines the protective stance of significant others.”

Another said:

“The tourist environment, particularly for backpackers, creates particular vulnerabilities arising from the risk-taking associated with their adventurousness as well as the disorientation and reliance on others that occurs in unfamiliar environments.”

Towns that are primarily organised by certain industry, or that appear to serve a particular economic function, may also impact on the characteristics of sexual assaults that come to the attention of services or police in that region. For example, where a highly transient labour force enters the area periodically for short-term work, there may be a higher rate of assaults perpetrated by strangers. Coastal areas with strong tourism industries may have particular patterns of assault – very high levels of assaults over the weekend that involve high alcohol consumption, for instance. Interestingly, the sexual assault service for the Whitsunday Islands, in Queensland, was one of the first services to embark upon a drink spiking awareness campaign. Similarly, the Sexual Assault Support Service on the Gold Coast in Queensland, where thousands of school-leavers gather to hold their end of year celebrations, produces strong awareness and prevention campaigns directed at young people. Indeed, the challenges faced by workers in their attempts to target particular communities may result in services becoming particularly resourceful in their approach and practice.

As one service commented:

**“I think smaller regions also can offer really innovative ideas on how to do things more creatively. We’re willing to try different things.”**

Finally, we need to remain mindful of how economic structures are of themselves gendered – women and men experience the economic life of an area, its opportunities and constraints, differently (Sainsbury 1996; Connell 2000). Research suggests that women’s economic status can have an impact on rates of, and responses to, sexual assault (Krug et al. 2002). In the context of domestic violence, Edwards (1998) points to evidence that suggests that women living in rural communities find it harder to leave a violent relationship than women living in metropolitan regions – 60 per cent of women from remote areas who leave the family home after a violent episode return, compared with 30 per cent nationally. This may in part reflect fewer employment options for rural women and the resultant greater economic dependency they may have on their (violent) male partners (AIHW 1998; Samyia-Coorey 1987).

### ***Social/cultural dimensions***

Weisheit, Wells and Falcone (1995) emphasise that “a rural area is not simply a physical space but a social place as well”. Numerous socio-cultural aspects of rural areas have been identified as differentiating a specific “rural culture” from a “city culture”. These include:

- greater social and political conservatism (Kelly 1989; Watkins and Watkins 1984);
- stronger enforcement of gender rules and traditional roles in the family (WESNET 2000; Dempsey 1992);
- a strong belief in the privacy of family matters (Macklin 1995);
- a mythology of mateship among men and reinforced patterns of female subservience (Gibson et al. 1990);
- distrust of “outsiders” and a suspicion of policy solutions “imported” from the city (Dietrich and Mason 1998; Crocker 1996; Lonne 1990; Lynn 1990);
- less anonymity or privacy (Lievore 2003);
- greater levels of surveillance, particularly of women and girls (Hillier and Harrison 1999); and
- strong social controls, operating through informal and “intimate” processes and mechanisms (O’Connor and Gray 1989: 25).

The socio-cultural differences between urban and rural areas have implications both for women's experience of sexual assault, and for service delivery. Women's responses to sexual violence, the range of options that are available to them, and their own capacity to take action after an assault will all be affected by the socio-cultural dynamics of the place in which they live.

To start with, victim/survivors in small communities may be more likely than urban women to experience ongoing contact with the perpetrator, because public space and community relations are likely to be far more localised and intimate than in urban contexts.

Services noted this as a major problem for women in their responses to the ACSSA survey:

**"There's more chance of meeting the perpetrator, their family or social network . . ."**

**"The communities are very close. Everyone knows someone who knows you. Victimisation is alive and well from the time the report is made, as it is almost impossible to be anonymous. It is almost impossible not to see the perpetrator out and about on a very regular basis, or their family and friends."**

**"Victims feel and *are* very visible . . . over the years, some women have left town – I remember one in particular when a local footballer was acquitted, and the victim felt harassed and vilified . . . history can go back a long way, and I have seen families ostracised over generations."**

Relatively speaking, it is also easier for metropolitan women to attempt to re-establish themselves within a new environment. For example, moving suburbs within a capital city can mean changing amenities like shops and schools, but leaves family and work relatively accessible. In a small town, the choice of creating a new life, and remaining anonymous, may not be as available. Leaving the town entirely may be the only way in which a woman can avoid seeing the perpetrator or being the subject of community gossip:

**"Metropolitan culture tends to be more isolated at an individual level. People stick to themselves and are more active in choosing who they have in their lives. You can live anonymously if you choose to. I know my face and name is quite well known in the community just from doing court support. This is less strong in a metropolitan area. The survivors face the same difficulty. They will be infamous even though they choose not to be."**

For Indigenous women and women from culturally diverse communities, these problems are situated within a far broader, and more structural context where the silence surrounding sexual assault, and the failure to establish adequate services, have been endemic. When Wendy Weeks (2002) chronicled the various approaches of mainstream services in developing more accessible and culturally sensitive service approaches, there were still few services that could illustrate structural change in their service delivery, such as employing Indigenous workers or staff from culturally diverse backgrounds.<sup>4</sup>

Hurriyet Babacan (1999) has also written of how little consideration is given to the types of services and support needs that would best assist women from non-English-speaking backgrounds who are victims of violence. As Babacan suggests, the small numbers of ethnic communities across Australia<sup>5</sup> have resulted in the

needs of non-English-speaking background people living in rural communities being substantially marginalised. For immigrant women who are victims of violence, the issue of adequate service provision is one of many disincentives they face in accessing support. Representatives from ethno-specific services who participated in consultations arranged by the Victorian Law Reform Commission (2003) suggested that alongside the lack of culturally appropriate responses that women received from services, police, and the courts, they often had to negotiate concerns in relation to residency, the problem of being financially and socially dependent on sponsors, and their fear of being disbelieved or blamed by other members in their communities.

Through the survey of regional, rural and remote services, workers candidly described how little they felt they could offer in the way of ongoing strategies that would produce real changes in terms of access and equity, in the face of continued under-resourcing and under-funding. While most of the services who responded to the ACSSA survey identified links with Aboriginal communities in their regions, very few Indigenous service users attended any of the services. The sole worker at a newly established Indigenous sexual assault unit, while remaining optimistic about the impact the service would have, spoke of the pressures associated with a lone unit being responsible for what remained a huge service need amongst women, children and men in the surrounding Aboriginal communities.

As Weeks suggests, some Indigenous and culturally diverse women may choose to access services outside of their immediate communities to protect their privacy and confidentiality. She therefore urges that mainstream services adopt a “dual strategy” (Weeks 2002: 56) that maximises their capacities to offer culturally diverse and sensitive service responses. In this light, some services wrote of their successes through employing workers from a diverse range of backgrounds whose roles were to forge links with local communities or to deliver education and awareness programs. One service referred to the “stepping stones approach” of increasing awareness of the service through identifying key people in the community, or “cultural brokers” who can provide support for victims to attend. Services noted a strong correlation between these kinds of approaches and the gradually increasing numbers of women from diverse cultural backgrounds accessing the service.

**How do we avoid myths and stereotypes about rural areas, while still attending to the specificity of rural culture, and acknowledging differences from urban areas?**

While there may well be differences in the rural versus urban experience, it is also important not to overgeneralise the differences, or adopt a universalised account of rural life (Halfacree 1993; Wendt and Cheers 2004). In the context of domestic violence against women and sexual assault, it is especially important not to create a misleading dichotomy in which urban areas are seen as wholly progressive, while rural communities are positioned as uniformly conservative.

Several services cautioned us against a simple stereotyping of “rural culture”:

**“While there is some conservatism in attitudes that give rise to ideas of male entitlement and perceive women negatively in terms of traditional myths about women and sexual assault (and this is reflected in local juries), the staff of this Service feel it is hard to identify the extent that this would be accurate, given these attitudes are also present in metropolitan areas.”**

“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