

Marijuana Subcultures Studying Crime in Rural America

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The idea of studying domestic marijuana growers came to me by accident. I was watching the ten o'clock local news on an October evening. The state police were conducting a raid on a large marijuana-growing operation and had invited a local television station to cover the event. A father and son were arrested. The father was a farmer who was about sixty years old, and his son, who farmed with him, was about twenty-five years old. Both were long-term residents of the community, wore bib overalls, and looked like stereotypical farmers.

Their marijuana operation was large, over one thousand plants. This meant it required a great deal of labor and a market for the finished product. It was also a relatively sophisticated operation. The plants were cultivated as *sinsemilla*, a way of growing marijuana in which male

plants are killed and the flowering bud tops of the female plants are harvested. This meant these "simple farmers" had a relatively advanced knowledge of marijuana growing.

This was not the first local story about the arrest of a marijuana grower. What drew my attention to this case were the comments of the son. As he stood in handcuffs, a microphone was put in his face and he was asked to comment. His reply: "I just want the people of Illinois to know how professional their police are and what a good job they did investigating this case. The people of this state should be proud of their state police." The comment was odd. He was not saying this with sarcasm or hostility, and he appeared to have little "street-smarts" or experience with the police. A later interview confirmed that he was quite naive about the criminal justice process. I asked him if he had any prior contacts with the police, and he said there had been one occasion several years earlier. He and his father were working in the barnyard when his father's heart began causing him problems. He was out of the prescription medicine he needed and sent his

son to town to buy more. On the way to town, the son was nervous and in a hurry and didn't stop fully at a stop sign. When the officer pulled him over, the son realized he had forgotten his driver's license. I asked what else happened, and he said that was all—that was the extent of his prior criminality. I could not get those contrasting images out of my mind. On the one hand, he defined this minor traffic incident as prior criminality, but, on the other hand, he had a large and sophisticated marijuana-growing operation. I kept returning to the same question: "How did someone so naive about crime become involved in an operation this large and this complicated?" This apparent incongruity prodded me to learn more about large-scale marijuana cultivators.

Getting Started

I quickly learned that marijuana growers had not been systematically studied. While a number of researchers had addressed drug problems, most of the research had focused on middle-class marijuana users, on hard-core addicts, or on street-level drug dealers. Middle-class users had been the subject of numerous surveys, while hard-core addicts and street dealers had frequently been the subject of field research.

Information about marijuana growers was sparse. Aside from a few brief journalistic accounts, most information about the marijuana industry came from the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA). I knew from data collected by the DEA that marijuana cultivation took place in every state and that the amount of marijuana seized each year was substantial. For example, in the late 1980s, when the study began, authorities were routinely seizing between five and seven million cultivated plants each year, and they were eradicating well over one hundred million wild marijuana plants each year. Since for many drugs the amount seized by police represents only 10 to 20 percent of the total, the size of the marijuana industry was potentially huge. Even conservative estimates of the numbers of marijuana growers suggested that over one million people might be involved. While these production estimates were useful starting points, they told me nothing about the kinds of people involved or their motivations for entering the business.

I next turned to *High Times* magazine and a number of how-to books on marijuana cultivation. These sources were enormously informative

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about the mechanics of marijuana cultivation. They said little, however, about the sorts of people involved in growing or about the marijuana industry itself. Neither the development nor the marketing of these how-to-grow materials required a great deal of personal information about marijuana growers. The consumers of these books and magazines, in turn, had good reason not to share much information about themselves. Most copies of *High Times*, for example, are sold anonymously over the counter, rather than by subscriptions. I suspect that many of the subscription sales are to police officers who buy them for their departments in order to keep abreast of developments in marijuana cultivation technology—something many departments in the study did. Ironically, the police in this study were more likely to be regular readers of *High Times* than were the commercial marijuana growers.

My training was in survey research, but it was clear that the problem did not lend itself to study through surveys. There was no ready list of growers; the subject was one that would make growers reluctant to put their behaviors in writing; further, my interest was in dynamic processes and interactions. Most important, a survey was ill suited for a “fishing expedition” into an area about which almost nothing was known. Without a basic understanding of the issues and the people involved, it would have been impossible to know what survey questions to ask and for whom they should be written.

For these reasons I was drawn to field research, which has often been used to develop an understanding of the dynamics of drug use and drug dealing. Field studies had proven fruitful in describing the “drug scene” and had led to a richer understanding of the culture of drug use and drug dealing. Unfortunately, these studies shared a common weakness: with a few exceptions, they were based in urban settings. The culture of drugs in rural areas had remained largely unexplored.

Most commercial marijuana growing takes place in rural areas, and it quickly became apparent that many of the techniques used to study the urban drug problem were either inappropriate in rural settings or had to be substantially modified. This also meant there were few examples of existing research to guide the study. Thus, it was necessary to deal with two unknowns, the *substantive issue* of marijuana cultivation and the *methodological issue* of conducting research in rural areas. I have dealt with the

substantive issue of marijuana cultivation elsewhere.¹ While I have also considered methodological issues in rural research,² the discussion that follows provides an expanded and personally grounded discussion of these methodological concerns.

A Matter of Perspective

My own methodological experiences have been eclectic. I have utilized a variety of methodologies, depending on the substantive issues and the specific questions to be addressed. For this study I wanted a glimpse into the world of the marijuana grower, but I also wanted to appreciate the larger context in which that everyday world existed, including the world of police who pursued marijuana growers. I believed then, and still believe, that each of those worldviews could be better understood when juxtaposed against the other. While field researchers often tout the advantages of becoming a true insider, it was clear that I could not be a complete insider in the world of the grower and still have good access to the world of the “pot police.” That is, full participation in either group would limit my access to the other. Further, given that little field research had been done on rural crime in general and on rural marijuana growers in particular, it was unclear whether intimate access to either group would be possible. My own experiences growing up in rural southern Indiana led me to expect that intimate access would be very difficult to obtain without some kinship tie or some pre-existing connection to a grower.

I resolved to do what I could to maintain the position of neutral observer, while appreciating that few researchers are ever truly neutral. I decided in advance that in my interviews with police and with growers, I would go to their settings to speak with them. Most growers were interviewed in their homes, which allowed me to learn a great deal about them, including the fact that many were amateur gardeners and cultivators of a variety of legal plants. And, since most grew plants in or near their homes, the interview also gave me the opportunity to view the physical setting in which growing took place.

In the interviews I attempted to be sympathetic and nonjudgmental. I did not overtly deceive either growers or the police, although I routinely played the role of naive observer, allowing them to “educate” me about

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the issues. This required that interviews be rather loosely structured to allow them to flow more like conversations than formal interactions.

The role of neutral observer and “student” of the marijuana issue seemed to work particularly well with growers. Marijuana was an issue that aroused passionate feelings in many of these growers and also in a surprisingly large number of the police. Growers who had been arrested were accustomed to being either villainized by those who had an anti-marijuana agenda or praised by family members or others who had a pro-marijuana agenda. In the aftermath of the disruption and confusion arising from their arrest and conviction, many seemed eager to use the interview as a sounding board in which they could freely express their opinions and feelings. On many occasions I felt more like a visiting therapist than a researcher.

As the research progressed, it became clear that my choice of approach was a good one. While these commercial growers were actively cultivating marijuana, none of them was active in the political movement to legalize marijuana, and only a few became involved in the movement after their arrest. For most growers the arrest was a personal tragedy. Approaching the issue from a broader political position, either pro-legalization or anti-legalization, would have reflected a lack of sensitivity to their individual concerns and probably would have made it more difficult to conduct candid interviews about those concerns.

My decision to play the role of detached observer was also vindicated, in my mind, at the conclusion of the study. I sent copies of my findings to growers, to people connected with the marijuana industry, and to police who have handled marijuana cultivation cases—and all three groups generally agreed that I had presented an accurate picture of commercial marijuana growers. This was no small accomplishment, given their very different perspectives on the issue and the strength of their feelings about it.

The Study

My plan was to select 30 marijuana growers identified by the Illinois State Police as part of the “Cash Crop” program. Using each of these 30 growers as a starting point, I would then use snowballing techniques in which the arrested grower would give me the names of approximately

10 other people in his or her social network. These others would include members of the family, police who investigated the case, community members, and, where applicable, accomplices. Thus, a total of 330 people were to be interviewed: 30 growers and 300 community members. Several factors led to changes in these plans.

First, the state police had originally promised to share their list of arrested marijuana growers, but when it came time to carry out the study they changed their minds. It was explained that officers generally believed that arrested growers would resume growing after their sentences had been served. Authorities were concerned that my interviews would make growers wary of being caught, and some growers would stop cultivating plants, thus depriving the police of another arrest. In other words, the police didn't want my research to discourage criminal activity! This was logic that only a bureaucrat could love. As it happened, it was a fortuitous turn of events. Instead of using the state police files as starting points, letters were sent to the sheriff, the editor of the major newspaper, and the county extension agent of each Illinois county. The letters explained the project and mentioned that a staff member would be calling for information. A month later, similar letters and phone calls were directed to state's attorneys in each county. County extension agents were initially thought to be a good source of information about activities in rural agricultural areas. However, they either did not have or would not share such information. Similarly, small-town newspapers were of little help, although newspapers in larger adjoining communities did provide coverage. Small-town newspapers were generally loath to report news about "bad people" in their community, although they were sometimes quite comfortable running such stories about people in nearby counties. Sheriffs and prosecutors were more helpful, although even for this group there were individuals who were not cooperative.

Through this process seventy-four cases were identified. This was an improvement over the use of state police files in three important ways.

First, I had decided early on to be honest with those I was interviewing. When contacted, nearly all of them wanted to know how I had gotten their names. I could honestly explain that I saw their case in a local paper, and in most cases I had a copy of the story with me. I am convinced I would have had far more refusals had I said their names came from the police. Growers were rightly suspicious of anyone asking questions about

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their illegal activity. Citing the press gave me a legitimate entree. This same process seemed to facilitate interviews with the police, some of whom seemed far more guarded (or perhaps more paranoid) than the growers.

Second, relying on newspaper accounts to locate cases provided an excellent means for beginning the interviews. I would generally start by saying that according to the newspapers they had an operation of a particular size and of a certain complexity. I sometimes raised other issues, such as the seizure of weapons by the police. The grower would invariably begin his or her response with something like: "Don't believe everything you read in the papers. Let me tell you what my operation was really like," or "Let me explain about those weapons."

Third, as the study drew near its conclusion, the state police did cooperate by providing some sketchy information about arrests over several years, including the date and county of arrest and the number of plants eradicated—but no names of arrestees. Nonetheless, they provided enough information that we could compare their list with ours. While all agencies are expected to report marijuana seizures to the state police, at least 14 of the 74 cases originally identified through our searches were not in state police files. Apparently they were handled locally without a report being forwarded to the state police.

Of the 74 original cases, 19 were excluded for a variety of reasons—some had had their cases thrown out, and others had been found not guilty. Of the remaining 55 growers, 70 percent were listed in the phone book and were contacted by telephone. The remainder were either in prison or had an unlisted number. Of those who were contacted, approximately 60 percent consented to be interviewed. The most common reason for refusing an interview was that their arrest was traumatic and had caused them a great deal of embarrassment in the community, feelings they did not wish to stir up again. Residential stability, listed phone numbers, and concern with community opinion were all factors that were likely more pronounced among these rural growers than would have been true among inner-city street dealers.

By the conclusion of the study, interviews had been conducted with 32 commercial marijuana growers from Illinois, 20 Illinois officials, 13 officials from 5 other states, and over a dozen others from around the country who had some familiarity with marijuana growers. This "other" category included the authors of marijuana cultivation books and magazines, the current and several past directors of the National Organization

for the Reform of Marijuana Laws (NORML), defense attorneys, prosecutors, and even a technician who had helped develop satellite imaging to spot outdoor marijuana patches. Missing from the interview group were community residents referred to the interviewer by the grower. The arrest and its aftermath were very sensitive topics among these growers. Most did not want community members to be interviewed about the arrest. While I might have done such interviews without the consent of the growers, such an action would have been insensitive and could have harmed their jobs or their reputations. Further, as discussed below, rural citizens were often hesitant to talk about the illegal activities of members of their own community.

During the course of this study it became obvious that one reason so little was known about marijuana growers was the rural context in which much growing took place. The discussion that follows focuses on methodological issues arising from this rural context.

Drugs in Rural Communities

The scholarly neglect of marijuana cultivation in rural areas cannot be explained solely as a result of the absence of drugs in rural communities. Surveys find that the rate of marijuana use in rural areas has rapidly approached that in urban areas.³ In addition, rural areas are increasingly used to produce synthetic drugs, such as methamphetamine.⁴ Rural areas are also essential in the movement of imported drugs, particularly heroin and cocaine, across the country.⁵ Rural Kentucky, for example, is not only a major producer of marijuana, but also has been an important transshipment point for cocaine.⁶ The absence of scholarly research on marijuana growers does not result from the absence of drugs in rural areas. A more likely explanation for this lack of research focuses on several features of rural America. These include geography, urban ethnocentrism, and the nature of rural culture.

A Question of Geography

The rural setting in which most large marijuana fields are found presents challenges regarding both geography and culture. Regarding geography, the media, special police drug units, and researchers are all more often centered in urban areas and, consequently, have focused on drug is-

sues in the urban environment. To urban observers of the drug scene, the domestic marijuana industry has been largely invisible.

The wide geographic dispersion of marijuana producers continues to limit research and media attention on the issue and was a major limitation for law enforcement until the mid-1980s. Before then, marijuana detection and eradication were almost exclusively local responsibilities, usually headed by rural county sheriffs, who are among the most underfunded and understaffed of law enforcement agencies. During the 1980s, the federal government became more involved in eradicating domestic marijuana. At the same time, there have been increased cooperative efforts across jurisdictions, such as the formation of task forces which include county sheriffs and the state police. Despite the increased attention to rural drug enforcement, there are still comparatively more drug arrests in urban areas. Castellano and Uchida estimate that the rate of drug arrests in urban areas is nearly four times that in rural counties.⁷ They also argue that because most drug enforcement is pro-active, variations in arrest rates among jurisdictions are more the result of differences in enforcement efforts than of differences in consumption patterns. The effect of geography on police operations is well illustrated by the comments of a New Mexico state trooper. Regarding highway accidents in New Mexico, he noted that “[w]hen I was in Vietnam, a medic was never more than 10 minutes away. Here you can wait by a wreck on the highway for 45 minutes before help gets there.”⁸

For the media, rural drug cases are simply too scattered and too remote for quick coverage. For example, some of the most potent strains of marijuana developed in the United States were created near Spokane, Washington, which is nearly three hundred miles from Seattle. Major networks and newspapers are not physically positioned to give such developments extensive coverage. Researchers and agencies that fund research are also concentrated in urban areas. In addition, rural marijuana cultivation cases are often widely dispersed, which has meant that studying the problem is very labor intensive. In this study, for example, it was common for a single interview to require two to three hours of travel each way. By comparison the logistics of interviewing drug dealers and users in a single neighborhood or section of a large city are simple.

Geography and the relatively closer social networks in rural communities combine to pose a dilemma for the rural researcher. Geography

means that including a large number of cases quickly becomes very labor intensive and expensive. Close social networks mean that an intensive focus on a few individuals will raise problems of confidentiality and of the anonymity of research subjects. Word may quickly spread if an outsider is making a series of visits to a local resident, and citizens may easily recognize themselves or others in written reports, even if names and other identifying information are omitted.

Urban Ethnocentrism

Drugs in rural areas have also been ignored because of an urban bias among researchers, the media, and federal enforcement agencies. The urban bias in much social science research can be seen by walking through any library of a research university. While there are hundreds of books on urban studies, there are relatively few on rural life and culture. Researchers who focus on rural environments have a smaller base of published research experiences from which to work. This is particularly true for those who study drug cultures.

For the national media, an urban bias is partly a result of where television stations, larger radio stations, and major newspapers are located, partly a result of the urban backgrounds of news personnel, and partly a result of “playing” to such large markets as New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles by taking urban problems and portraying them as national problems. This happened in the 1980s when the national media portrayed crack cocaine as a problem which had permeated “main street U.S.A.”; in reality, there was little evidence that crack was widespread outside a few large urban areas, and in fact it didn’t penetrate rural areas until several years later. Conversely, rural drug problems are more likely to be perceived as isolated problems of little national interest. Because marijuana cultivation is primarily rural, stories about it are more likely to be seen as curiosities which are primarily of local interest. This is particularly ironic since much of the marijuana cultivated in large rural operations is eventually marketed in suburbs and cities.

A similar neglect of rural areas has been noted by Levin and Fox in their study of serial killers.⁹ Ed Gein, for example, used the skin and body parts of his victims to make belts, household decorations, masks, and to upholster furniture. Despite the sensational and gruesome nature of the

crimes, his killings were given relatively little national attention. Levine and Fox suggest that because his crimes took place in the small town of Plainfield, Wisconsin, they were little noted by the national press: "Outside of Wisconsin, few people had heard of Edward Gein . . . what happens in Plainfield is not nearly as important, at least to the national media, as what happens in a large city like Chicago or New York."¹⁰ It would be a mistake, however, to attribute the neglect of rural drug issues to simple geographic remoteness or low population density. Equally important is the culture of rural communities.

Rural Culture

Aside from geography and urban ethnocentrism, studies of drugs in rural areas must contend with rural culture. Rural culture affects the research process in several ways: (1) rural communities are often closed to outsiders; (2) rural citizens may be particularly reluctant to tell outsiders about local deviants; (3) rural citizens are often suspicious of state and federal governmental agencies, including agencies that fund research; (4) social interactions in rural areas may be less formal and legalistic; and (5) situations which have largely taken-for-granted definitions in urban areas may have very different meanings in rural areas.

Rural Areas Are Often Closed to Outsiders—An example of the self-imposed isolationism of rural areas is given in Kessler's description of the problems in establishing a legal services program in a rural community:

The norms of cooperation, trust and courtesy shared by members of the local bar apply exclusively to attorneys with strong local roots. In general, the legal community is unreceptive to lawyers from outside the county using their local court. Further, members of the local legal community are suspicious of, if not openly hostile to, lawyers born and raised outside the county opening a practice within the county. The attitudes of the legal community to outsiders are illustrated in the comments of one veteran local attorney: "If you're part of the community, practicing law here can be great. But it's not particularly pleasant for out-of-county people. There's a very tight knit organization over here that doesn't particularly care for the outsider."¹¹

Rural areas may be particularly closed to outsiders who are from urban areas. A Missouri Highway Patrol officer told me that rural growers who hired an attorney from the city were often at a disadvantage with a local jury: “You hire a Springfield attorney to go down and try a case in Neosko. For these people in Neosko, it just doesn’t set well with them. They say ‘we have Neosko attorneys. If they [the growers] are going to spend this kind of big bucks and take the money outside the county, they have got something to hide and they are guilty.’”

Urban drug researchers may find it very difficult to penetrate and understand the rural culture in many parts of the United States. In this study, a local sheriff was reluctant to be interviewed about growers in his area, agreeing only after a state trooper with whom he had worked had recommended me. The sheriff began the interview by vaguely describing a large case and casually throwing out questions to “test” me. For example: “The grower was a sorghum farmer—but being from the city you wouldn’t know what that is, would you?” As it turned out I grew up in a rural community and knew something about sorghum farming. Having passed his “test” by answering a series of similar questions, the tone of the interview changed to openness and cooperation. The interview lasted for several hours and was very informative. I left with the clear impression that his concern was that a stranger would be insensitive to local concerns and would paint an inaccurate (and unflattering) picture of the community. It was also my impression that a researcher with little knowledge of rural life would not have gotten very far in the interview, finding the sheriff polite but not very talkative.

In rural areas, outsiders are subject to particular scrutiny. For example, reservations about turning in local growers are not in play when the growers are clearly outsiders. One Minnesota case came to police attention because the new tenants of a local farm seemed to know nothing about farming and their behavior did not fit into that of the local area:

“You could tell they weren’t much as farmers. One of the first things they did was to plow under their best alfalfa. That was in late May, just after they moved in,” said a neighbor. “We just kind of waited to see what they would do next.” “They put up no trespassing signs—five of them right in a row that said ‘Keep Out.’ That’s just not the way we do things up here,” said another neighbor.¹²

The tendency to fend off outsiders who would study the seamy side of rural life was also evident in the reactions of faculty in our university's department of agriculture. Early in the process I had requested funding from our college to conduct a pilot study based on the interest kindled by the arrest of the farmer and son described at the beginning of this chapter. I later discovered that a faculty member in the university's department of agriculture tried to block the funding, saying, "No farmer would ever grow marijuana, and if someone is growing marijuana they are obviously not really a farmer." As a follow-up to my study of marijuana growers, I became interested in studying rural crime. When I approached another faculty member in the university's department of agriculture, who also lived in a rural area, about working on the project, he responded, "We don't have crime in rural areas, and when we do have a problem we take care of it ourselves." A colleague at another university whose research includes rural communities has reported similar experiences of paternalism and protective behaviors by academics who study agriculture.

Keeping Things In—Rural areas are not only known for shutting others out, but for keeping things in. There is often a concern that the misbehavior of community members will give the community a bad name. I had expected this based on my childhood experiences, and I saw numerous examples of it while doing my research.

It was originally planned that community members would be interviewed about the effects of arrests on the local area, partly in order to determine the level of local sympathy for growers. This turned out to be extremely difficult. After repeated failed efforts, and a few disappointing interviews, the strategy was stopped. These problems manifested themselves in several ways. In smaller communities, concern with community image was compounded by a hesitation to speak with outsiders and a concern that the grower or his family would be further embarrassed and hurt by any discussion of the case. In her research on marijuana growers in Kentucky, Hafley has also noted this tendency to keep bad news within the community: "The rural central and eastern Kentucky resident relishes socializing with others and discussing activities within the community. However, they will not discuss [with outsiders] illegal activities occurring within the community. For an outsider it can be difficult to get the rural resident to even admit such activities occur in their community. Rural central and eastern Kentucky residents take pride in not divulging the

community's business to outsiders. Other residents are aware of those within the community who are or have been participating in illegal activities. It is only the outsider who is deceived by protestations of moral outrage."¹³

The caution shown by these residents is in many ways understandable. Even with assurances of confidentiality, residents and officials from these rural areas did not know the researcher personally and had no way of knowing that their comments would not come back to somehow damage the reputation of the community. On the positive side, difficulties in obtaining the cooperation of citizens illustrated the power of community in these areas. These difficulties also suggest that the field researcher who comes from a rural area and is sensitive to rural culture is at a considerable advantage over the researcher who approaches the study with an urban background. Of course, a distrust of outsiders is not unique to rural communities, but it seems especially pronounced there. Further, in rural areas where the pool of interview subjects is small from the start, the impact on research can be substantial.

For the study of marijuana growers, the tendency of rural citizens to keep silent to outsiders was reinforced by the nature of marijuana growing. Unlike the cocaine dealer, who has the option of possessing the drug for a relatively short period of time, the marijuana grower is bound to his or her product for several months. During this time it may be discovered by either thieves or the police. It is clearly in the grower's best interest to keep quiet about what he or she is doing and where he or she is doing it. While secrecy is an excellent means of self-defense against marijuana thieves and against information being leaked to the police, secrecy is also consistent with rural culture. Kentucky stands as an extreme example. The level of secrecy among growers in Kentucky was particularly strong when dealing with people outside of the local community. For example, at the time I interviewed officials from Kentucky, there had been indictments against seventy people linked to Kentucky's "cornbread mafia." Although each was facing fifteen to twenty years in prison, *none* was willing to provide the names of others connected to the organization. In these cases all of the criminal investigations were conducted by state and federal police with little cooperation from local authorities. An official from another state observed: "People in rural areas tend to be pretty conservative generally and don't want government coming in, or an outsider com-

ing in, or foreigners coming in. They want the status quo and that's it. And when they develop a cancer from within they don't want it going out. They don't want people telling about it and they don't want people rocking the boat. They are the same people who will ostracize members of their society who get caught doing this [marijuana growing]." When cases were originally being located, six sheriffs reported having cases but were unwilling to provide names, even though the arrests and prosecutions were matters of public record.

The secrecy which surrounds commercial marijuana growing—combined with the fact that it largely occurs in rural settings—means that some of the techniques used to study urban drug use and urban drug networks will be less useful for studying rural growers. I had originally planned to begin with a sample of arrested growers, to interview them, and then to use snowball techniques to identify other growers who had never been caught. This strategy proved completely unworkable. Most arrestee growers *could not* give the names of other growers, and most had kept the size and sophistication of their own operations a secret from others. Most were justifiably concerned that if information about their growing operation became known in the community, it would increase the likelihood of theft or arrest. Bragging to others, even close friends, about the size and location of their operation was rare among large-scale growers, making the snowball technique for identifying other growers of questionable value in this population.

Another urban strategy was never tried because of its obvious limitations in rural areas. In their study of daily marijuana users, Henden and his associates located subjects by using newspaper advertisements.¹⁴ Such an approach would not be practical in sparsely populated rural settings in which growers are secretive, widely dispersed, and for whom anonymity would be more difficult to assure.

As noted above, the initial study had proposed short interviews with several citizens from each community in which a grower had been arrested. The intent was to supplement grower reports about community response in order to determine how rural communities support or reject longtime members arrested for growing marijuana. This proved to be the most difficult task of the project, and it was fortunate that the research did not hinge on successful interviews with community members. There were several problems in locating and interviewing community mem-

bers. The most serious problem was the general unwillingness of citizens in rural communities to talk about the misfortune or misbehavior of fellow community members. In one community, frustration with finding citizens to interview led to a decision to first interview a police officer who was well known and respected in the community and who was familiar with the case. More than two months of repeated efforts failed to produce an interview with the officer. He was willing to be interviewed about police procedure and technical details of the case, but was uncomfortable talking about the community response to the arrest and the way in which citizens changed their views of the offender following the arrest. Requests to the officer's supervisor generated a similar response. In another community, the local sheriff admitted that a farmer had been arrested for growing marijuana in the county, but the sheriff and the local prosecutor had discussed the matter and decided they would not discuss the case, or even give the name of the farmer. In still another instance, a sheriff's deputy was asked about a case for which the researcher had only sketchy information. The deputy replied that his job would be in jeopardy if he discussed the case or even gave the names of the arrested growers, who were two established members of the community.

The reluctance of citizens to talk about the criminal activities of their rural neighbors is not unique to the study of marijuana growers. In his oral history of homicides in rural Kentucky, Montell described the problems of getting citizens to talk about rural homicides, even as much as sixty years after the event.¹⁵ Montell's work also illustrated the importance of informal networks for gaining entry to these groups.

Aside from preserving the community's good name, keeping things in is also a product of strong informal networks in rural areas. These informal networks mean that citizens are likely to know both the offender and the offender's family. Even if there is little sympathy for the offender, rural residents may be reluctant to discuss these cases with outsiders out of concern for the feelings and reputation of the offender's family. Further, if the offender is even a distant relative, a citizen risks damage to her or his own reputation because of the considerable attention rural citizens pay to kinship networks.

Suspicion of Government—While wary of outsiders in general, those in rural areas are often particularly suspicious of government agencies. It is no accident that many militia groups and antitax groups work out of

rural areas.¹⁶ Representatives of state and federal agencies are seen as too distant from the people to truly understand their problems, and as unlikely to promote local interests.

One local sheriff spoke about serving on a statewide commission and about his experiences trying to communicate local problems to outsiders:

I served on a commission. There were twenty-two people on this commission and it was aimed at the production of marijuana. I brought it up that we needed more conservation officers in this area, not only for marijuana but for deer poaching, because we have so many deer. There was no one on that commission but myself who was from southern Illinois. Everybody else was from Chicago and places far away. Their immediate solution was to buy two airplanes. I just sat there and laughed at them. You know, when you fly over my county what you see are the tops of about ten million trees. You cannot find marijuana from the air in my county. They couldn't understand that, so I resigned.

This same sheriff, whose office was chronically understaffed, was asked about utilizing the DEA to assist in marijuana raids:

I did call the feds in a couple of times. Then I quit. I have no confidence in them. In the first place, they are egomaniacs. They think they are really something on a stick. They come into an area like this, of which they know nothing. They don't know the history of it, the people, the terrain. They can mess up an investigation faster than you can shake a stick at it. I had two unfortunate experiences. One was with this two-and-a-half-million-dollar patch we had. I could see it was quite an important thing; I mean we really needed to catch somebody. So I called in the DEA. You would have thought they were a SWAT team. They came in with all this fancy stuff. You can't imagine the equipment and stuff they had with them. I'm sure, just by the way they approached the plot, they scared the people off. And eventually, all we did was pull all the plants and burn them. I decided after that we would handle it ourselves, because we knew more about the territory than any of them did.

Shortly after my study of marijuana growers, I was working with a sheriff's deputy who was on a fellowship with the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center (FLETC). He was calling rural sheriffs and small-town police chiefs as part of a survey on community policing. When he identified himself as part of a federal agency, rural officials were often reluctant to cooperate. Their attitudes usually changed when he told them he was a sheriff's deputy who was only temporarily working with FLETC. Their attitudes were not based on their direct experiences with FLETC, but on their stereotypes of federal agencies. The researcher who receives federal funding to study rural crime may find that an explicit connection with the federal government limits the cooperation of local residents and authorities.

The belief that state and federal governments are insensitive to local needs, along with a strong sense of autonomy that characterizes many rural areas, may explain why proponents of rural development warn against public policies dictated by a strong central government.¹⁷ Another reflection of these attitudes is the finding that rural residents are generally less supportive than urban residents of government programs which provide welfare, housing, unemployment benefits, higher education, and Medicaid.¹⁸ However, hesitating to accept the help of state and local authorities should not be confused with tolerating crime. To the contrary, rural areas are often less tolerant of deviance.¹⁹ Paternoster, for example, reports that rural prosecutors may be *more* likely to seek the death penalty.²⁰ Further, when rural justice systems are more lenient, it is less a reflection of tolerance than of the simultaneous operation of *informal* sanctions.²¹

The Informal Nature of Rural Life—Interactions in rural areas are less often formal and legalistic than in urban areas. For example, during the course of the study, several growers expressed annoyance at the manner in which they were arrested. This was particularly true when the arrest was conducted with a team of officers (often drawing in officers from the state police) in a conventional military-style rush of the house. These growers often knew the local sheriff, as did most people in the area, and could not understand why he did not simply call on the phone and ask them to turn themselves in. In fact, there were several cases in which the sheriff did just that! The complaint of these growers was *not* with the fact of their arrest, but with the formal manner in which it was done.

The best police officers knew the area and the people and were sensitive to this issue. One officer, who grew up in a rural area, illustrated this with an example:

You can't act overly high and mighty with them, you won't get any cooperation. In the big cities, that's what you do, you come on strong, "I'm the boss." That's often a very effective method there, but not out here in the rural areas. . . . This summer I went down and there was a guy with maybe two hundred plants spread out over a small farm. I was fairly confident it was there and I pull up in his driveway. He was unloading wood. I'm in the pickup truck, and obviously he knows who I am. I walked up and told him what I was doing there. I said, "I've come to get your marijuana and we're going to be doing an open field search. We're not going to be going through your barns or anything right now. You've got some marijuana out there and I've just come up here to tell you what I'm doing." I helped him unload his wood and then I said, "I'm going down by the pond and look at this marijuana. I'll be back in a minute." I went down, looked at it and came back up. I said, "Well, your marijuana is down there," and then I went ahead and helped him unload some more wood and talked about it. He went to jail with no problem. I think this was the kind of guy who would have liked to have fought you. But because of the way I handled it, he wasn't going to fight anybody. Because, I didn't go in there and say, "You're a marijuana grower and you're worthless." A lot of times if you're dealing with people in these rural areas, they don't have a problem with you coming in and arresting them. They just want to be treated like human beings.

In the same way, treating subjects with respect and gaining entrance to the research setting through informal channels is important for any type of field research on deviance, but for studying illegal behavior in rural areas it is essential. It is possible not only to insult people as individuals but also as rural residents. Rural citizens are often sensitive to any words or actions they might interpret as urban snobbery or condescension.

The relatively informal nature of interactions in rural areas is also reflected in a stronger system of informal social control. Several studies

have found that the justice system in rural areas is less bureaucratic than in urban areas. In the current study, informal social control was reflected in interviews when arrested growers were asked to name the worst consequence of their arrest. For many growers, the toughest part of their arrest and punishment was not their fine or imprisonment, but the damage to their reputation and the shame brought to their families, as the following four accounts attest:

Being put down for a federal conviction really puts you down into a deep hole. I've had to scratch, and claw, and dig, and try to repair what's left of the family name. And it's made me a lot hungrier for success than before my conviction. So, I have to prove to all these people that I'm not a piece of dirt lowlife, I am a good person, good man, and an excellent manager. And as soon as I get up to success, then I'd have proved them wrong.

Probably the publicity and the personal effect of it; it still hangs over my head. I'm getting over the money part of it; I mean, everybody gets over the money. For a while I wouldn't even go to town because I just didn't even want to be in town, people looking at you and staring at you. I don't like for people to think that I'm a criminal.

The fact that I had a good reputation; I worked all my life for this reputation and my standing in the community, and then to just be laughed at. And, I am so disappointed at our legal system; it is such a joke.

Probably the things that the prosecutor said bothered me. . . . The courtroom was full that day, and a lot of people from our neighborhood were there, a lot of people from the town were there. . . . It was the first time that anybody had ever said things like that. There's one person standing up there in front of everybody saying all that bad stuff about you . . . well, that hurt.

Despite the embarrassment, few had moved from their communities or planned to in the future. Many emphasized the importance of working

hard to re-establish their good names: “Well, letting down my friends has probably been the worst. But financially it’s been the most devastating in that area. It about wrecks your business. In a big city, it probably wouldn’t have made a difference. But in a small town, with professional people where you deal one on one with the same people all the time, it has a big effect. A lot of people say, ‘you should move out of here, this is a Peyton Place, and people will never forget.’ That’s my goal; I may move away eventually, but I’m bound and determined to get my reputation back.”

This informal control in turn raised further problems in setting up interviews with members of the grower’s community. Several growers, particularly those with no prior arrests, were concerned that community interviews would rekindle public animosity and compel them to relive the public embarrassment of their arrest. Considering the already noted reluctance of citizens to cooperate and the potential harm to growers who had agreed to take part in the study, it was decided to give citizen interviews a low priority.

Rural versus Urban Meanings—The rural environment in which marijuana growing takes place also compels the researcher to rethink definitions which are taken for granted in urban areas. Perhaps the clearest example of this is the possession of weapons. In urban settings (and according to the law), the presence of weapons is synonymous with violence or violent intentions, but in rural areas guns have a very different meaning. While about 75 percent of rural residents own guns, a rate triple that for urban residents, guns are *less likely to be used in a crime in rural areas*. For example, a 1990 report by the Bureau of Justice Statistics found that the rate of crimes committed with handguns was over three times as great in urban areas.²² Similarly, the *National Crime Victims Survey* reports that in cities 37 percent of rapes are committed with a handgun, compared with only 14 percent of rapes in rural areas.²³

In the present study there was simultaneously an absence of violence and a presence of weapons among marijuana growers, and this could partly be accounted for by the rural setting in which growing took place. It was around the issue of weapons that the definition of violence used by the law and that used by growers differed. In urban areas, firearms are carried with one main target in mind: other people. Of the growers who did not have guns in their houses at the time of the arrest, most lived in larger communities. In rural areas, however, guns have a very different meaning

and a variety of other applications. They are commonly carried when their owners are traveling in remote areas for the purpose of shooting varmints, hunting, and general target practice. State and federal laws regarding carrying firearms during the commission of a crime such as cultivating marijuana, however, are generally based on an urban definition of the function of personal weapons. Growers who carried weapons into the field for sport sometimes faced additional weapons charges, and all those with felony charges faced the loss of their firearm registration cards after their conviction. My interviews reveal this disjunction between urban and rural gun owners:

Q: You said you had a gun just for sport? A: We would always go out and shoot by the creek [near the patch]. We had a couple of cows down there, and some hogs. Q: So you weren't carrying the gun for self-defense? A: No. They asked me that too. I said, "Hell, I spent a year in Vietnam. I carried an M-16 and a grenade launcher there. Why would I carry a .25 automatic pistol in a tight pair of jeans if I was going to protect myself? I would have carried it in my hand." So, they don't use common sense.

Several growers lamented that their arrest forced them to give up hunting rifles they had used for sport. Despite their fondness for guns used for recreational purposes, some growers tried to avoid trouble by making certain they were unarmed when they tended their crops. Others made it clear that the possibility of violence gave them pause about their growing activities: "Yeah, I was [concerned], because the guy on that farm had an old junk car parked there. He said if anybody tried to rip him off, he'd take that car and he'd crash their cars. That's all he had it for, like a demolition car. If anybody came in there, and I was worried about somebody getting hurt, and I think he had a firearm, too, cause I saw him out shooting something one time. That I didn't go for, that's one of the reasons why I got out of it [commercial growing]."

In this regard, concerns about safety were initially raised by my university's human subjects committee. Ironically, their concerns were over *my* safety, not that of the research subjects. These concerns did not materialize. In only one of the interviews was there any sense that I might be

harmed. The subject was one of the few growers who would not allow me to tape the interview. His level of paranoia was very high, but not just about the interview. He suspected that I might be part of a conspiracy to get him—as were, he suspected, some members of his family and others in the community. He also made it clear, repeatedly, that he was willing to use violence against those who would betray him. While he did not want to be taped, he would not stop talking. I spent about three hours with him at his home. During this time I calmly tried to ask as many questions as he could coherently answer. He paced the floor continuously, and he frequently peeked out of the corners of windows to see who might be spying on him. He also engaged in long rants, sometimes coherent and sometimes not. Over the course of the “interview,” my mood changed from apprehension to pity, and finally to a mixture of impatience, boredom, and annoyance. This person may have been dangerous, but it was not because of his involvement in marijuana growing; he was psychologically unstable. By the end of the interview, my concerns were less about safety and more about deciding what to do with the information I had obtained during the interview.

Overall, there was little evidence of violence in the cases examined for this study, and little evidence of guns being owned with the intention of using them against people. There was no indication that people prone to violence were drawn to marijuana growing. To the contrary, there was a striking absence of violence, considering the dollar amounts involved and the ease with which violence could have been adopted. Most important, owning weapons in rural areas had a very different meaning from owning them in urban settings, particularly when the weapons were hunting rifles and small-bore pistols.

Variations across Settings

None of the preceding discussion is intended to suggest that rural culture is a completely homogeneous entity. What has been presented is a sketch of rural culture and its effects on the research process. Of course, there are wide variations in rural culture, as there are in urban cultures. In the course of the study it was clear that some of the features of rural culture described here were more pronounced in some portions of the state than others and that some interstate variations existed. Southern Illinois

is closer to the pure case of rural culture than is central or northern Illinois. Not surprisingly, then, I found access to interview subjects much more difficult in the south. For example, when comparing interviewed growers with those who refused to be interviewed, the two groups were similar in a variety of ways (in terms of age, sex, number of plants seized, and disposition of case). They differed, however, by region of the state. In the southern part of the state, refusals outnumbered consents by two to one, while in the remainder of the state, consents outnumbered refusals by two to one. To acknowledge variations in rural culture, however, is not to deny that it constitutes a distinct way of life when juxtaposed against the culture of urban areas.

Conclusions

While the context in which people live, work, and engage in crime and deviance is important for many types of research, qualitative research often draws contextual issues into the foreground. Similarly, the importance of community and networks of acquaintanceships in rural areas makes qualitative methods particularly appealing for research in these settings.²⁴ In other words, understanding context is essential to understanding rural crime, and for this reason qualitative research is a particularly useful tool for research in rural settings. Many important differences between rural and urban settings will not be obvious through more structured approaches such as survey research.

The preceding discussion was intended to illustrate several issues in this regard. First, I wanted to provide a personal illustration of the origins of a research idea and of the ways in which it was turned into a research project. Second, I endeavored to build a case for rural culture as something distinct from urban culture. Finally, I attempted to show how this rural culture, along with other features of the rural setting, influenced my research process. It is not wise to assume that the methods we use to study urban problems will automatically fit rural settings, that the findings of urban research can be assumed to fit rural circumstances, or that the policy implications of urban research must be identical to those for rural settings. Moreover, researchers must be sensitive to differences within and among rural areas. The key is to adapt the methods to the local context, rather than forcing local contexts to fit a single methodology.

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