

1956

Rural Urban Differentials and Juvenile Delinquency

William P. Lentz

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarlycommons.law.northwestern.edu/jclc>

 Part of the [Criminal Law Commons](#), [Criminology Commons](#), and the [Criminology and Criminal Justice Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

William P. Lentz, Rural Urban Differentials and Juvenile Delinquency, 47 J. Crim. L. Criminology & Police Sci. 331 (1956-1957)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Northwestern University School of Law Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology by an authorized editor of Northwestern University School of Law Scholarly Commons.

RURAL URBAN DIFFERENTIALS AND JUVENILE DELINQUENCY*

WILLIAM P. LENTZ

Are there significant differences between rural and urban delinquency? If there are, as this article indicates, then a differential application of our theoretical knowledge (which has been largely urban in character) is necessary.

The author is in charge of research and statistics for the Division for Children and Youth, State Department of Public Welfare, Madison, Wisconsin; part-time instructor in criminology for the University of Wisconsin Extension Division; formerly assistant superintendent of the Wisconsin Child Center at Sparta, Wisconsin. He has also been on the faculty of the Wisconsin Juvenile Law Enforcement Officer's Institute at the University of Wisconsin where the study described in this article has been presented.—
EDITOR.

Although the idea of rural-urban differences has been incorporated into sociological theory, such concepts are lacking in modern day studies of juvenile delinquency and crime. A few decades ago, however, rural-urban differences in delinquency and crime formed an extensive literature which for the most part, placed its emphasis upon the incidence of criminality.¹ Lower rates were found in rural areas than in cities. Although such studies had their shortcomings the findings were, at the time, apparently widely accepted.² Through devoting a few pages to such comparative data most modern texts have merely acknowledged their existence. In the meantime research on other rural-urban differences continued with the result that a considerable amount of attention has been devoted to a host of sociological variables.³

This vast sociological literature as well as some works in the field of criminology include many explanations which may account for differences in crime and delinquency. A few are given here. Rural-urban differences in social interaction and institutions are frequently attributed to corresponding differences in value systems.⁴ In the field of delinquency and crime reference can also be made to the essentially informal means of social control employed in the rural area compared to the more formal means of the urban area.⁵ Clinard explained rural-urban differences among

* This is also the title of the writer's unpublished Ph. D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin, August 1954, upon which this paper is based.

¹ One of the best surveys of this literature can be found in SOROKIN, P., ZIMMERMAN, CARLE, and GALPIN, CHARLES—A SYSTEMATIC SOURCEBOOK IN RURAL SOCIOLOGY, Minneapolis, 1930, pp. 27-52.

² *Ibid.*

³ Almost all texts in rural and urban sociology deal with some of the various rural-urban differences. The field is broad when one takes stock of the specific kinds of variables described. Rural-urban differences have been noted in regard to fertility, intelligence, education, welfare agencies, marriage, sanitation, health, social organization, value systems, community life, religion and many other categories.

⁴ LOOMIS, CHARLES and BEEGLE, J. ALLAN—RURAL SOCIAL SYSTEMS, N. Y., 1950, *passim*.

⁵ See any of the various works on social control. Some of the urban works on delinquency can also be compared with HOLLINGSHEAD, AUGUST-ELMTOWN'S YOUTH, N. Y., 1949 and BLUMENTHAL, ALBERT—SMALL TOWN STUFF, Chicago, 1932.

young adult offenders in terms of the degree of "urbanization" of the areas from which his subjects were drawn.⁶ The concepts of area and categoric risks which have been described by Reckless also pertain to this general problem.⁷

Despite these attempts to explain rural-urban differences there has been little or no application of this knowledge in the field of delinquency. Research which has been mainly urban in character has produced nearly all current sociological explanations of juvenile delinquency. Attention has been focused primarily upon the importance of gangs,⁸ delinquency areas,⁹ differential association,¹⁰ and the criminal culture,¹¹ as a result of the many urban studies. While some studies have utilized mixed rural-urban samples and others have used purely urban samples, the findings have not always been clearly labeled as applying to such groups. The impression is gained that the findings apply to *all* delinquents.

In order to bring about a rapprochement between theory and practice the broad problem selected for study was to determine if rural-urban differentials in delinquency can be found. If such differentials are found, have they any meaning for the theories and methodologies which have been previously applied in the field? Exploration of this question may lead to a clarification of such theories through their application (or non-application) to rural delinquency.

The problem may also be stated in terms of the concept of categoric risks.¹² This approach assumes that a person has a greater or lesser liability of being caught and reported as a violator by virtue of his position in society. Thus the occupational level, race, age, nativity, and other categories may impose differential liability upon various individuals. Risks may also apply to one geographic area as compared to another. Does the principle of categoric risks apply to rural-urban status?

METHODS-HYPOTHESES

As the study began all (420) of the boys who were committed to the Wisconsin School for Boys during 1948-49 were selected as the sample to be studied. This group was then separated into rural (130) and urban (290) sub-groups.¹³ Evidence which related to current theories of juvenile delinquency for which comparisons of rural and

⁶ CLINARD, MARSHALL B.—*The Process of Urbanization and criminal Behavior*, AJS, Vol. XLIII, No. 2, Sept. 1942, pp. 202-213.

⁷ RECKLESS, WALTER—*THE CRIME PROBLEM*, N. Y., 1950, Chapters 3 and 4. See also his *Etiology of Delinquent and Criminal Behavior*, SSRB BULL. 50 N. Y., 1943, pp. 159-160.

⁸ For a review of the relationship of the delinquent to gangs see; TAFT, DONALD—*CRIMINOLOGY*, N. Y., 1947, p. 167 and Chap. II.

⁹ SHAW, CLIFFORD, and MCKAY, HENRY—*JUVENILE DELINQUENCY IN URBAN AREAS*, Chicago, 1942.

¹⁰ SUTHERLAND, EDWIN—*PRINCIPLES OF CRIMINOLOGY*, Rev. Ed., N. Y., 1947, pp. 5-8.

¹¹ *Ibid.* Chap. 13.

¹² RECKLESS—*Op. Cit.*

¹³ For the purposes of the study the term "rural" included all open country and rural trading centers included within the "rural community" after Kolb and Brunner. This departure from the arbitrary census definition permitted the inclusion of small towns and villages as rural and suburbs as urban. Replication is possible. In addition, length of residence (last half of the subject's life), school attended, and occupation of the family breadwinner offered clues as to the rural-urban status of each subject.

urban groups could be made was obtained from the official records.¹⁴ The hypotheses were all stated in null form and then subjected to various tests for statistical significance to determine if there were differences between the two groups of boys.

In the first hypothesis the statement was made that there was no significant difference between rural and urban delinquents in regard to the nature and variety of offenses committed. Rural-urban differences in gang membership and the skills and knowledges displayed in the commission of offenses were covered in two further hypotheses. Still another was formulated concerning possible differences in the official handling and labeling of the delinquent. The last hypothesis was related to various indicators of adjustment; the statement was made that there was no significant difference between rural and urban boys with regard to their adjustment after having been committed to the correctional institution.

Refutation or proof of each proposition depended upon the results obtained through the use of Chi-square and the critical ratio when applicable. In refuting each hypothesis a statistically significant difference at not greater than the .05 level of confidence was considered necessary. Whenever possible Yules Q was also computed as a measure of the degree of association present. Taken individually the refutation of the various hypotheses and sub-hypotheses would have little meaning. Taken together, refutation of all or most of the hypotheses would present an imposing array of evidence of rural-urban differences in delinquency.

GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SAMPLE

The rural and urban groups did not differ significantly with regard to age (15 years average), school grade attained (8th), social status, and racial or minority groups represented. In general rural boys were apprehended at an earlier age and also lagged slightly behind the urban group in school grade attained. Rural boys (I.Q. = 92.5) had a significantly lower average I.Q. than urban boys (I.Q. = 95.5), a phenomenon which agrees with the findings of studies conducted on the measured intelligence of rural and urban youth.¹⁵

Most of the rural group came from small towns and villages (92 boys) although 38 of them came from farms. Many of the urban boys came from the larger urban areas of the state (over 100,000 pop.) but some of them came from smaller urban areas and suburban places. Although all geographic regions of the state were represented the more populous areas contributed the majority of the commitments to the correctional institution. Nearly 80 percent of both groups came from a family with low social status as indicated by the occupation of the family breadwinner.

THE OFFENSE PICTURE

All officially known offenses were classified according to eight mutually exclusive categories. Depending upon the offense for which he was committed to the Wisconsin

¹⁴ All records were read until Sept. 1952 so that 32 to 56 months might have elapsed after commitment.

¹⁵ SMITH, T. LYNN and McMAHAN, C. A.—THE SOCIOLOGY OF URBAN LIFE, N. Y., 1951, pp 748-760. In above comparison C. R. = 1.95, $p < .05$.

TABLE I
OFFENSES FOR WHICH BOYS WERE COMMITTED TO THE WISCONSIN SCHOOL FOR
BOYS DURING 1948-49

Kind	Rural Boys		Urban Boys		Critical Ratio
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	
1. Sex Offenses	17	13.08	30	10.34	0.83
2. B & E, Nominal	22	16.92	14	4.83	3.59*
3. B & E, Not Nominal	13	10.00	57	19.66	2.75*
4. Other Theft Nominal	8	6.15	25	8.62	0.88
5. Other Theft, Not Nominal	15	11.54	44	15.17	1.04
6. Truancy	13	10.00	19	6.55	1.15
7. Car Theft	13	10.00	68	23.45	3.74*
8. General Misconduct	29	22.31	33	11.38	2.67*
Totals	130	100.00	290	100.00	

* Critical ratio significant at .02 or .01 level.

School for Boys each boy was then placed in one of these categories. In Table I significant differences between rural and urban boys are shown in four classifications. The percentage of rural boys involved in breaking and entering for nominal purposes and general misconduct was *greater* than the percentage of urban boys who committed the same kind of offenses. At the same time the percentage of rural boys who stole cars and engaged in breaking and entering for other than nominal purposes was *less* than the percentage of urban boys.

There are also four categories for which no significant difference was obtained (sex offenses, two types of other theft, and truancy). According to other evidence in the records the categories used do not appear to be sufficiently refined to discriminate between the rural and urban segments of the sample. Although rural and urban boys were guilty of having sexual intercourse with teenagers both groups also committed

TABLE II
NUMBER OF KINDS OF OFFENSES COMMITTED BY EACH BOY ADMITTED TO THE
WISCONSIN SCHOOL FOR BOYS 1948-49

Number of Kinds of Offenses	Rural Boys		Urban Boys	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
1	60	46.2	16	5.6
2	55	42.3	82	28.3
3	11	8.5	111	38.3
4	4	3.0	56	19.3
5	0	0.0	25	8.6
Totals	130	100.0	290	100.0

$$M_r = 1.7 \pm 0.76$$

$$M_u = 3.0 \pm 1.2$$

$$CR = 13.6; P < .00001$$

TABLE III

THE DEGREE OF KNOWLEDGE DISPLAYED IN THE COMMISSION OF OFFENSES BY
BOYS ADMITTED TO THE WISCONSIN SCHOOL FOR BOYS 1948-49

	Little Knowledge	Moderate Knowledge	Much Knowledge	All Boys
Rural Boys.....	80 (61.6%)	34 (26.2%)	16 (12.3%)	130 (100%)
Urban Boys.....	22 (7.6%)	85 (29.3%)	183 (63.1%)	290 (100%)
Totals.....	102	119	199	420

offenses which were exclusively theirs', some urban boys frequented houses of prostitution and held "gang shags" while some of the rural boys raped or attempted to rape small girls, were guilty of indecent exposure, or committed sodomy with animals. Rural boys apparently preferred to steal from relatives, but urban boys avoided such acts, preferring strangers for their victims. Some of the differences which were not brought out by the classificatory scheme are illustrated by these and other distinctions found within each classification.

Each boy was also classified according to the number of kinds of offenses he had committed and since eight categories were used this was the maximum number which could be listed for any one individual. According to Table II there is a significant difference between rural and urban boys; rural boys committed an average of 1.7 kinds of offenses and urban boys an average of 3.0 kinds of offenses.

COMPANIONSHIP AND MEMBERSHIP IN GANGS

Since urban explanations of juvenile delinquency generally stress the companionship factor, the records were examined for evidence of companions present when apprehended.¹⁶ While only 16 percent of the urban boys were lone offenders nearly 52 percent of the rural boys were placed in this classification. There can be little doubt that rural boys were much more likely to be alone when committing their offenses.¹⁷ When these data are placed in a fourfold table Q equals 0.69 which indicates that there is a moderate negative correlation between rural status and having companions along when apprehended.

How many of these boys were members of gangs which were known to be composed of delinquent boys? Since gang members might commit delinquent acts while alone this question is also important. Only 22 percent of the rural boys and 87 percent of the urban boys were known to be members of delinquent gangs. Again urban boys appear much more inclined than rural boys to associate with known delinquents.¹⁸ A high positive association between urban status and membership in a delinquent gang is indicated by a Q or 0.92.

¹⁶ See especially the works of SILAW, THRASHER, and MILLER.

¹⁷ The Chi square for a 2×3 table (companions; none, one, two or more) equals 61.6 which is significant at the .0001 level, with two degrees of freedom. Subsequent data presented in this paper are significant at the same level or at the .00001 or .00242 level.

¹⁸ Chi square equals 263.4 with one degree of freedom; $P < .0001$.

KNOWLEDGES AND SKILL DISPLAYED IN THE COMMISSION OF OFFENSES

If the degree of knowledge and skill displayed in the commission of offenses could be assessed some idea of the amount of behavior processing which had been involved would be provided, *i.e.*, how well the delinquent had learned to commit his offenses. It has also been suggested that the existence of a criminal culture is essential to the acquisition of criminal skills.¹⁹ In any event when highly developed knowledges and skills are found to exist in delinquent gangs along with the presence of criminal culture in the area the opportunity is present for perpetuating a delinquent tradition in the neighborhood.

In order to determine the relative knowledge of criminal techniques displayed by each subject a rating scale was devised. This scale included four aspects of the delinquent act:

1. Specific techniques employed (simple or complex?)
2. Planning (thorough or bungling?)
3. Role of the subject (active or passive?)
4. History of previous offenses (how many times has the boy done this before?)

Significantly less skill and knowledge in the commission of their offenses were displayed by rural boys than was true for urban offenders.²⁰ When these data are given in a fourfold table Q equals 0.90 indicating that there is a high degree of association between urban status and the possession of skills and knowledges in the commission of offenses. Over 63 percent of the urban boys displayed a great deal of skill compared to only 12.3 percent for the rural boys.

DIFFERENTIAL OFFICIAL HANDLING AND LABELING OF THE DELINQUENT

Some evidence that a categoric risk exists during the adjudication phase or treatment process is indicated by differential official handling of the case.²¹ Are the cases of rural and urban boys handled in the same fashion? It would be possible to select a great many variables pertaining to the handling of cases and test them for rural-urban differences. In this study three such variables were selected and these pertained to the adjudication process.

How many boys from both groups were placed on official probation to a social agency? Only 15.4 percent of the rural boys compared to 70.3 percent of the urban boys were given this opportunity.²² Since Q equals 0.86 there is a high positive association between urban status and being on official probation.

If probation was not extensively used by rural courts, two alternatives in handling the cases seemed probable. Either the court must handle the cases on a non-probation status or relinquish them to some other agency such as the State Department of Public Welfare. The latter alternative was usually followed for the rural group. Rural boys appeared in court an average of only $1.5 \pm .53$ times while the urban boys averaged 3.5 ± 1.5 times.²³ Approximately 95 percent of the rural boys were before

¹⁹ SUTHERLAND—*Op. Cit.*, Chaps. 9 and 10.

²⁰ Chi square equals 64.3 with one degree of freedom, $P < .0001$.

²¹ RECKLESS, WALTER C.—*Op. Cit.*, Chap. 2.

²² Chi square equaled 169.8 with one degree of freedom; $P < .0001$.

²³ The urban average number of court appearances is much like that of the urban group used by the Gluecks in their most recent study (3.66). GLUECK, SHELDON and GLUECK, ELEANOR—*Op. Cit.*, Appendix A.

the judge only once or twice. The urban boys, on the other hand, were in court repeatedly, nearly half of them appearing three or four times and nearly 20 percent of them from five to eleven times.²⁴

There was also evidence that the rural boy was more likely to come from a family which was known for serious deviant behavior. This is in one sense a reflection of the reputation of the family since the rural family which was noted for seriously deviant behavior was usually under surveillance. Nearly 60 percent of the rural boys and 43 percent of the urban boys came from such families.²⁵ The amount of association was low with *Q* equaling only 0.31.

THE SOCIAL ADJUSTMENT OF RURAL AND URBAN DELINQUENTS

Since there were rural-urban differences in the commission of offenses, it would be logical to find further differences in the adjustment of each delinquent after commitment to the correctional institution. This is tantamount to saying that categorical risks for rural-urban status exist in regard to the post-commitment treatment of the delinquent. A considerable amount of data in each record was therefore examined in order to determine whether adjustment was more easily effected by either group. Complete data are not presented here, but some of the significant findings will be mentioned.

Various indicators of adjustment were used; some of them applied to the entire sample, and others to only those who were on parole or who were discharged.²⁶ Rural boys were more successful than urban boys when tests for statistical significance were applied to these criteria of adjustment.²⁷ They not only spent less time in the Wisconsin School for Boys but were not returned as often to this institution and were less inclined to commit further offenses. When further offenses were committed by rural boys they tended to be of the same kind as the original offense and not necessarily more serious. Urban boys, on the other hand, showed a tendency to go on to more serious offenses. Hence few rural boys were committed to other correctional institutions while a significantly greater number of urban boys had this experience. On parole too, the rural boy was more successful than the boy from the city. Rural boys had fewer parole revocations and failed to commit the variety of offenses displayed by urban parole violators. At the close of the study a greater percentage of rural boys were granted an early discharge; none remained under supervision until they reached the age of majority. Their prognoses were generally favorable whereas those of the urban boys were much more likely to be unfavorable.

CONCLUSIONS

Although the findings of this study did not specifically refute some of the urban explanations of delinquency, there is considerable evidence that such urban theories do not wholly explain rural delinquency. In view of the differential adjustment of

²⁴ The critical ratio for the difference was 19.4; $P < .00001$.

²⁵ Chi square equaled 9.2 with one degree of freedom; $P < .00242$.

²⁶ Since the sample was followed up for a period of only 32 to 56 months or until September 1952, the treatment status varied so that some were in the institution, some on parole, some discharged, and others in a reformatory or out of the state.

²⁷ Tests for significance on the data discussed in this section ranged from $P < .01$ to $P < .00001$.

rural and urban boys it is doubtful if the Glueck's theory of maturation would possess much utility in dealing with rural groups.²⁸ Apparently the criminal culture has little or no effect upon rural boys comparable to that which it has upon urban groups. Consequently the perpetuation of a delinquent tradition through local gangs in the neighborhood is more difficult in rural areas than in cities. There is also some doubt as to whether some rural "delinquents" can even be considered in the same category as the urban groups. They had committed relatively minor acts and frequently considered themselves to be "delinquents" only because they were in an institution for delinquent boys.

All of these differentials have some practical implications for treatment of the offender. It is not, of course, true that all rural boys are novices and that all urban boys are thoroughly versed in delinquency but the differences between the two groups indicate that diversification of treatment would be successful. The incarceration of the naive boy with the definitely crime-wise boy leads to problems in administration as well as individual treatment.

For research the implications are clear. Most statistical studies of mixed rural-urban groups of delinquents will produce erroneous findings. The researcher will do well to stratify his sample and identify the rural and urban components. It is also true that purely urban samples are likely to deal with a group of delinquents which is not like the rural group in the present study.²⁹ Regardless of whether an attempt is being made to predict success or failure on parole or predict who will become delinquent, it is always necessary to give due cognizance to the rural-urban components of the samples used. Hathaway and Monachesi recognized this in their work with the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory and noted some rural-urban differences.³⁰ Unfortunately most studies disregard this fact. Since rural and urban groups differ in so many respects one cannot generalize or draw etiological conclusions based upon solely urban or mixed samples.

To prove that the genesis of rural delinquency is vastly different from that of the urban variety was not the purpose of this study. The design of the study would hardly permit conclusive proof of such a proposition. Yet some insight into the problem has been brought out. That the ontogenetic processes of delinquency in the rural situation could be characteristic of such areas was suggested by the nature of the rural-urban differentials which were demonstrated. By insisting that these differentials may be due to something other than the general differences between the two areas one can, of course, challenge this proposition. The only rejoinder is that the variables examined were selected because they are necessary to an explanation of juvenile delinquency and that the differences noted are significant. If this is true, then those seeking to refute such findings would have to demonstrate that differences of this kind do not exist. Perhaps the choice of other variables which are also necessary

²⁸ GLUECK, SHELDON and GLUECK, ELEANOR—*JUVENILE DELINQUENTS GROWN UP*, N. Y., 1940, Chap. 7.

²⁹ The urban group studied in the GLUECK'S *UNRAVELING JUVENILE DELINQUENCY*, appears in many respects to be very much like the urban group in the Wisconsin School for Boys 1948-49.

³⁰ HATHAWAY, STARKE and MONACHESI, ELIO—*ANALYZING AND PREDICTING JUVENILE DELINQUENCY WITH THE MMPI*, 1953, pp. 49-50.

to an explanation of delinquency would not yield results comparable to this study. To search for other variables might be fruitless; the wiser course of action appears to be to give closer attention to the rural situation. Some of the variables which have been described in the study must be refined. By searching always for significant traits which will discriminate between sub-groups of rural delinquents, perhaps we will find some of the answers to the now unanswered question concerning rural juvenile delinquency.