

LSU professor dissects patterns of violence in rural communities

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Findings suggest that civic participation is key to cutting rates of violent crime

Matthew Lee, professor of sociology at LSU, has taken an intense look at the phenomenon of violence in rural areas. His article, "Civic Community in the Hinterland: Toward a Theory of Rural Social Structure and Violence," will be published in the prestigious journal *Criminology*. This article serves as the culmination to Lee's prestigious Career Award, presented to him by the National Science Foundation in 2003.

"This is what I call a 'civic community perspective' on rural violence," said Lee.

"Past research in the area was narrow in scope and had not found a way to integrate various ideas on the different avenues of civic involvement. I have tried to tie all this together in the hopes of developing a well-rounded theory toward understanding the problem."

Rural areas traditionally known for high rates of violent crime include Mississippi's Delta Region, parts of Appalachia and Louisiana's Florida parishes.

Lee found that three major factors play a significant role in determining the level of violence in a rural setting:

"When these three factors have been eroded or compromised, the

conditions are favorable for violent crime to flourish," said Lee.

The stability of a local population looks at factors such as home ownership versus rental rates, levels of long-term residency and turnover and strength of social networks within the community. "Perhaps not surprisingly, places that have high levels of rental occupancy and a transient citizen base are more likely to experience increased violent crime than a community with high home ownership and a stable population base," said Lee.

Participatory civic cultures, including widespread engagement in groups such as the Elks Club, the Parent-Teacher Association or even the Girl Scouts as well as religious institutions, also bode well for a community. According to the article, juvenile homicide rates are lower in rural communities where the rate of adherence to civic participation is high.

Finally, the presence of a robust middle-class is closely tied to the idea of locally oriented capitalism, or community-run businesses. The economic investment into one's own community generally instigates a great deal of buy-in from the rest of the area. Ownership of small business also has a tendency to instill the urge for other forms of civic participation in proprietors, as they generally have more time and money to sink into such endeavors.

Source: Louisiana State University

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