Perception of the Safety of a Place by the Urban and Rural Population in Slovenia

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Statistics on the incidence of crime in rural and urban areas around the world do not present a consistent picture and reveal the problem of the dark figure of crime, which raises at least two questions: 1) whether there is indeed a difference between urban and rural areas in the incidence and prevalence of crime; and, if so, 2) what characteristics of these places are believed to influence the incidence of crime. The aim of this article is to answer these two questions by examining people's beliefs (social constructs) theoretically and empirically using Slovenia as an example. The data used for this purpose are based on 60 structured interviews with urban and rural residents of both genders, aged 18 years and older, conducted throughout Slovenia in the winter of 2016–2017. The results point to the presence of strong myths about crime as a phenomenon of (larger) cities in Slovenia, and at the same time to the perceived lower quality of life in rural areas compared to cities. The idealised image of a safe countryside held by inhabitants of both rural and urban areas is confirmed by the well-known construction of the countryside as the "other" that supports the social hegemony of cities over the countryside in the accumulation of its space, human and natural resources. The paper concludes that the issue of inadequate reporting on crime in the context of rural and urban places needs further research and suggests that the influence of the media on the production and reporting of images of crime in specific places should be examined in more detail.

Keywords: crime, dark figure of crime, perceptions of safety, rural, urban, Slovenia

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1   Credibility and Validity of Statistics on Rural Crime

Statistics are clearly important to society. In newspapers, journalists often use statistics to show trends, such as "crime rates, population growth, the spread of disease, industrial production, educational attainment, or employment trends" (Gal, 2002: 3). In today's information society, policy decisions at national and supranational levels are often based on statistics (e.g. EUROSTAT Statistics Explained, 2018). The information that statistics provide, e.g. censuses or any other systematic data collection by official institutions, is also an indispensable component and support for researchers in addressing and studying social phenomena. The importance of statistics lies in the fact that they reveal and report changes, showing turning points and critical trends in various areas of concern to individuals and society as a whole. However, the complete picture of any phenomenon cannot be described and explained by statistical data alone. Moreover, statistics are often viewed with the distrust of both the public and the scientific

community in terms of their reliability due to several reasons, e.g. unsystematic or poor reporting (Allin, 2021; Lehtonen, 2019; Umbach, 2020). Thus, in addition to the use of statistics to explain social phenomena, other complementary research efforts are needed, such as the use of surveys focusing on selected social groups and indicators, qualitative methodological approaches that address and investigate the background of the emergence and maintenance of the phenomenon, and, last but not least, the use of an appropriate conceptual framework. As will be shown below, these considerations also apply to statistics on the occurrence of crime in rural and urban areas.

Official statistics on crime in rural and urban areas are inconsistent when looking at various international statistical databases. As available statistics for 2019 in the EU–28 show, urban residents are three times more likely (21.3% vs. 6.9%) to report problems with crime, violence, or vandalism in their neighbourhood than residents of rural areas (EUROSTAT, 2021). The corresponding figures for Slovenia from the same data source are as follows: urban 10.6% and rural 4.1%. Similarly, crime data for 2019/20 for England and Wales show that the rate of violence against people in predominantly rural areas was 22.6 per 1,000 population, compared to 30.0 per 1,000 population in predominantly urban areas (Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs, 2021). In the U.S., results from the Uniform Crime Reporting System (UCRS)

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from FBI and the National Crime Victimisation Survey (NCVS) also show that cities with larger populations generally have higher crime rates than suburban or rural cities (Urban and Rural Victimization, 2017). However, 2017 data for Canada shows that police–reported crime rates in rural areas (6,210 incidents per 100,000 population) were 23% higher than urban crime rates (5,051 incidents per 100,000 population), aside from the fact that self-reported victimisation rates are recognised as lower in rural areas than in urban areas (Perreault, 2019).

These differences in crime rates between urban and rural areas may be related to population size, as the authors of the aforementioned statistical reports point out, but also to other local factors: "For example, rural police agencies may have organisational, resource-related, or technological differences compared to their urban and suburban counterparts, resulting in underreporting of crimes and victimisation" (Urban and Rural Victimization, 2017). Indeed, there is a well-known debate in the literature about the validity and reliability of police statistics, pointing to the inaccuracy of official statistics and emphasising that there is a large gap between reality and the reporting of statistics, which creates a dark figure of crime (Ariel & Bland, 2019; Penney, 2014) influenced by police services: "It is commonly known that many crimes go unreported by victims. As such, the exact number is not known, but it is estimated that in excess of 40% of all crimes are not reported" (Penney, 2014: 1). Furthermore, according to the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics, only 55% of serious violent victimizations in 2015 were reported to the police. Victimizations of those living in urban locations were more likely to be reported to the police, compared to those in rural locales (Urban and Rural Victimization, 2018). Furthermore, it is assumed that there is no significant difference in the occurrence of crime in relation to location, for example, violence-supporting relations (male peer support) can take place at any time and in any location (Carrington, Donnermeyer, & DeKeseredy, 2014), and certain types of crime like intimate violence against women are even more frequent in rural than urban places (Donnermeyer, 2016; People, 2005).

To examine this complex case of rural crime statistics in more detail, it is appropriate to identify the characteristics – namely the broader range of causes – associated with the occurrence and reporting of place-based crime. Crime and other forms of misbehaviour are undoubtedly social phenomena related to human relationships and their characteristics. Thus, it seems appropriate to view the prevalence and nature of criminal victimisation not only through the lens of demographic or geographic factors (e.g. population density – the number of inhabitants per square kilometres), which is the predominant approach to collecting and presenting crime sta-

tistics, but also to take into account social and cultural influences, e.g. social constructs such as people's different beliefs and perceptions about crime and safety in various environments, in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon and to assess the validity of extant statistical data on crime in rural areas. This is a rather ambitious task, requiring many comparisons of data and results from different parts of the world. The findings presented here aim to contribute by shedding light on the context of research on perceptions of safety in place[2] in the case of Slovenia.

2 Theoretical Frameworks – Importance of Investigating Rural Life World

The academic debate on the rural–urban distinction has a long history, including the writings of Steuart (1767/1966) and Smith (1776/1970) in the 18th century, followed in the 19th century by Marx and Engels (1848/1965, 1871/1970), Tönnies (1887/2001), Simmel (1895/2012), Weber (1923/2012), and representatives of the Chicago School such as Wirth (1938) and Redfield (1947) in the first half of the 20th century, who, largely inspired by developments of the modernization process, drew contrasting pictures of the two environments in terms of their suitability for individual life and social progress (Bonner, 1997, 1998; Harriss & Moore, 2017). The common denominator of all their theoretical perspectives was fear, or at least unease, about the consequences of rapid social change, especially in the realm of family and community life, which seemed threatened with disintegration or even collapse. But these fears were ideologically motivated rather than supported by solid empirical evidence. The urban/rural dichotomy was the subject of extensive empirical study in the second half of the twentieth century and the target of numerous critiques, e.g. that it was seen as largely irrelevant because the interplay of globalization and localization processes and the bureaucratization of society had resulted in a predominantly urbanized population as far as "Western society" was concerned (Hale, 1995; Hutter, 1988, Pahl, 1966). Nevertheless, scholars and policymakers continue to view rurality as an important variable. Many researchers (Cloke, 2006: 19; Dymitrow & Stenseke, 2016; Sim, 1988: 59) deny that rural society and culture have disappeared and argue that urban and rural life still exist despite constant social change, and suggest that laypeople's ideas of what is and what is not rural or urban, from which a shared understanding of the rural places might emerge, have important social dimensions and implications. Furthermore, EU policies such as the Rural Development Programme, with

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[2] In this article, the term "place" is used interchangeably with the terms "locality" and "community", as is also the case in Donnermeyer (2019a).

its LEADER approach, refer to rural areas as encompassing multiple meanings and functions, be it as areas of agricultural production or of non-agricultural economy, as well as a place of recreation, relaxation and leisure, nature conservation, and last but not least, quality of life for the local population (European Committee of the Regions, 2017; European Network for Rural Development, 2021). From this point of view, there is no real reason not to study rural crime.

In explaining the phenomenon of rural crime, it is of course impossible not to draw on considerations developed by rural criminology. A brief overview of developments (Donnermeyer, 2019a, 2019b, 2020; Scott & Hogg, 2015) of this relatively new research field shows that a couple of conceptual and methodological approaches have been considered and discussed so far. First, social disorganisation theory and its variants have been used to statistically explain crime rates in different places/areas, but due to "anomalies", such as a distinctly urban bias in the classification of the observation areas, this approach has proved inappropriate in a rural context. Therefore, further efforts in this area are suggested, based more on the general concept of community or place and taking into account its variability, so as not to overlook the heterogeneity of rural areas. In line with the notion of community as a space in which specific power and discourse operate, expressions of human behaviour in general, including crime, are supposed to be grounded in the forms of social organisations or networks (their strength and multiplication), rather than in social disorganisation measured by census indicators, e.g. single-parent households. Community theorising proposes to take into account three interacting elements that shape any social relations based on proximity: meanings, practices, and spaces/structures that are, according to Liepins (2000), in a reciprocal relationship: meanings are embedded in structures/spaces and legitimate practices, practices challenge and allow meanings to circulate, practices emerge through and are shaped by structures, while structures materialise meanings. Male peer support theory (DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2009), a "middle range" theory, in line with the concepts described above, explains how meanings legitimise practices (supporting male dominance and rationalising the use of violence against women) and how practices are enacted in spaces and through structures (the socio-cultural context of patriarchy) that influence justice (Donnermeyer, 2019a). Reporting violence is arguably dependent on the functioning of the aforementioned elements. Thus, there is a clear need for a unified theory of place that can support research on security and crime in diverse environments and geographies.

Recent studies conducted in Slovenia have contributed to better insights into crime in place/location by confirming the existence of differences between urban and rural areas in

terms of fear of crime (Meško, Šifrer, & Vošnjak, 2009), assessing differences in the occurrence of various criminal/social deviant behaviours in place (Hacin & Eman, 2019), and confirming the different perceptions of safety or insecurity by residents and police officers of differently urbanised environments (Bučar-Ručman 2019; Pirnat & Meško, 2019; Sotlar & Tominc, 2019). These studies have mostly relied on quantitative data sources, i.e. statistical surveys and opinion polls that ensure representativeness. However, as the researchers point out (Bučar-Ručman, 2019; Meško et al., 2009), these data also suffer from stereotypical (socially desirable) responses to survey questions that give an inaccurate picture of the background of subjective views of crime and therefore do not provide insight into the deeper reasons for perceptions of risk and crime among people from different urban and rural settings. Therefore, there is a need for a combination of methodological approaches, and, in line with theorising "community", there is room for further theoretical elaborations.

The awareness that places and spaces have inscribed meanings and that they need to be "read" and interpreted in order to explain and understand the social and political relations at work in the inscription process dates back to the emergence of post-structuralist social theory (Barnes & Duncan, 1992; Woodward, 1998). Since the early 1990s, notions of space and place discursively constructed by people living both inside and outside rural areas have influenced rural studies in conceptualising rurality. For example, explanations of rural poverty and deprivation levels previously based only on quantitative indicators of living standards, complemented by qualitative approaches, with insights into experiences of poverty, deprivation, and marginalisation by people themselves, have shown that understandings of rural deprivation and poverty are influenced by the dominant rural discourse – the idea of the countryside as a naturally idyllic place (Bradley, Lowe, & Wright, 1986; Woodward, 1996). Similarly, definitions of disorder and crime are not necessarily based on real phenomena, but on preconceptions and cultural stereotypes embedded in particular social-structure and power relations (Scott & Hogg, 2015).

In this perspective, and for the purpose of this paper, it is pertinent to highlight the work of Kieran Bonner (1997) and his book "A Great Place to Raise Kids". His study starts from the point of view that it is worth examining meanings, definitions – the social construction of the countryside/rural land – in order to answer the question why participants in many research situations still refer to urban/rural differences and strongly express beliefs, for example in Yerxas' 1992 study, that the countryside is a better place to raise a family, even though sociologically speaking the urban/rural distinction should no longer exist, and how such beliefs influence peo-

ple's behaviour (e.g. willingness to report violence, crime). In stressing the importance of meanings in the study of human agency, Bonner proposes as a theoretical basis the use of the notion of the social life-world, which he adopted from Peter and Brigitte Berger and Hansfried Kellner (1973), and which characterises the pre-given basis of all human experience. The notion of a social life-world is explained as follows: people, in order to be human, live in a world that is (meaningfully) ordered. This gives the meaning to the survival that is fundamental to human existence. This life-world is social in its origin and in its ongoing maintenance. It has been established collectively and is kept going by collective consent. According to Berger et al. (1973), to understand fully the everyday reality of any group it is not enough to understand the interaction patterns and particular symbols of individual situation (e.g. in our case the phenomenon of crime in urban and rural setting) but one must also understand the overall structure of meanings: that is, how a particular phenomenon is produced/constructed and maintained, from where symbols and interactions referring to it derive collectively shared significance. The social life-world rests on meanings that constitute the reality of any given situation. These meanings are made up of definitions or assumptions that give reality its particular character (meaning/understanding) if it is collectively shared (Bonner, 1997: 60–61).

Accordingly, the reality of the rural environment and its difference from urban life have to be explored through people's social life-worlds, i.e. their everyday practices, together with their beliefs (cognitive, normative and theoretical elaborations of varying degrees), which pre-structure what appears to them as "intelligible" (Bonner, 1997: 60). Understanding reality involves reconstructing the assumptions with which people make sense of their life-world, which relates to the numerous domains that appear on their horizon. A particular feature of today's world is the plurality of spheres of life – private and public (e.g., family and work) – which are interconnected but also in opposition or conflict with each other. Therefore, in line with this reasoning, when exploring the life-world of rural setting it is pertinent to consider multiple domains. In his investigation Bonner (1997: 65) focused on the life-world of a particular social group (specifically parents), either those who have lived in the countryside for a long time or those who have recently moved to the countryside from an urban environment in Canada (particularly Prairie Edge), and assessed their claims about parenting in the rural context. His analysis revealed that, to parents, rural means "safety, convenience, less anxiety and appreciating of high visibility". His attempts to answer further the question as to why this is the case was focused on finding out what "being a good parent" means to these parents. This step of the research, which he labelled as a phenomenological, hermeneutical, and dialectical analysis, led him to identify the "predetermined views": basically, providing a safe and secure place to bring up children, which the parents in his study felt was easier and better for them to provide in a rural setting than in an urban one. So in this framework of understanding rurality, it is important to know what kind of concepts, what understanding of certain phenomena, e.g. responsible parenthood, people have in the modern world and who shapes that understanding and creates a hegemony over it.

3   Methodology – Research Approach

In line with the above suggestions, we asked participants in our study, urban and rural residents, to answer the following questions: 1) where they would like to live and why; 2) in which environment, rural or urban, is it better to spend childhood/youth; 3) where is it easier to balance family and professional life; and finally 4) which places are safer – where is there more crime and what kind of crime is there? The data collection was based on 60 structured interviews (including other questions not presented above) conducted across Slovenia in the winter of 2016–2017 with people living in various spatial contexts in Slovenia (city, town, village, remote house), of both genders, aged 18 and over. The sample was evenly split between both genders (30 men and 30 women) and the age groups were distributed as follows: 20 people 18–40 years old; 20 people 41–55 years old; and 20 people 56 years and over. There were 30 urban (city and town dwellers) and 30 rural residents (living in the village or remote house) in the sample. Part of the data was analysed using a basic descriptive approach (calculations of proportions), while the other part was related to a content (a manifest) analysis of the research participants' narratives (Bengtsson, 2016).

4   Findings – Assessment of the Life World

4.1 The Best Place to Live Is Where You Are at Home

The short answers ("city"/"countryside") to the first question show that most participants would like to live or stay where they already live because they are used to living there (Figure 1).
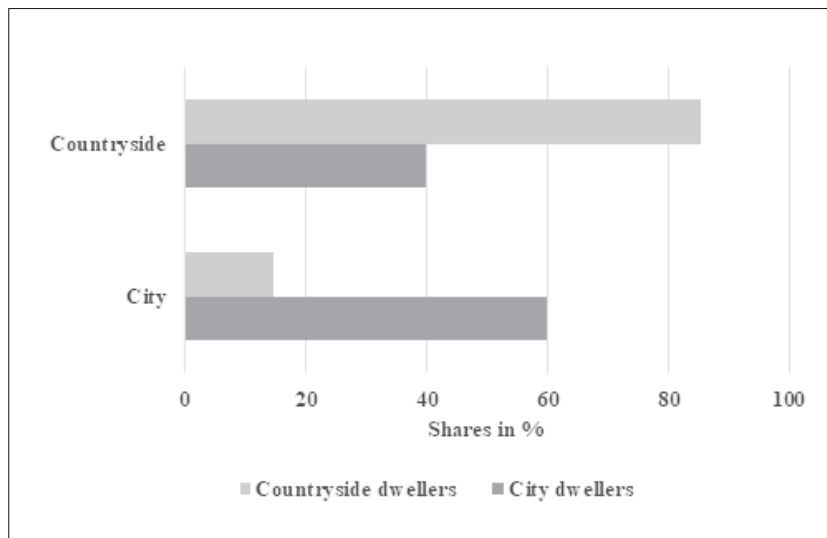
Figure 1: Preferences about where to live, in the city or in the countryside

Further responses on this issue suggest that those who live in the countryside would choose to live in the countryside for reasons such as direct access to nature, the opportunity to farm, enjoying peace, tranquillity, relaxation, a less stressful life without the hustle and bustle of the city, getting to know other people (e.g. neighbours) better and socialising with them, etc.. This is illustrated by the following two examples of participants' statements:

> In cities, the pace of life is too fast and people do not know each other when they meet on the street. In general, I like the social atmosphere in the countryside better, but especially the natural setting. You do not have to drive anywhere to walk in natural environment, because it is right outside your door (Female, 22 years old, high school graduate, lives in a village)

> If I had to choose, I would rather live in the countryside because I like being in nature, in an environment without noise. I like being at home in the countryside because it's more relaxing than the fast-paced and alienated life in the city where people just rush around (Female, 18 years old, high school graduate, lives in a village).

Those who live in a city would choose to live in a city because they feel that there is more going on, more opportunities, and better access to jobs, activities, cultural events, services and facilities. The following statement illustrates this view:

> Most towns in Slovenia are small with a relatively preserved contact with nature, without exposure of the negative burdens of big cities, while the countryside, especially in terms of infrastructure, is lagging far behind the standard of living in cities (Male, 55 years old, university graduate, lives in the city)

Those who prefer to live in the countryside rather than in the city where they now live would, if possible, choose the countryside because there they can have their peace and quiet, escape into natural environment, not be burdened by traffic, have their garden, and be creative. On the other hand, those who would leave their life in the country for a home in the city would do so because they think city life is more practical: there are more opportunities to find a job, better transportation links, better access to services, better options for spare time, and more privacy:

> People only care about their own lives and do not interfere in other people's lives (Female, 74 years old, 4 years of primary school, lives in a vilage).

4.2 Rural Areas Are the Best Place to Spend One's Childhood and Youth

In response to the second question, the majority of rural and urban residents in our study believe that rural areas are the better place to spend one's childhood and youth (Figure 2), which is consistent with the findings of Bonner's (1997) study and his reference readings.
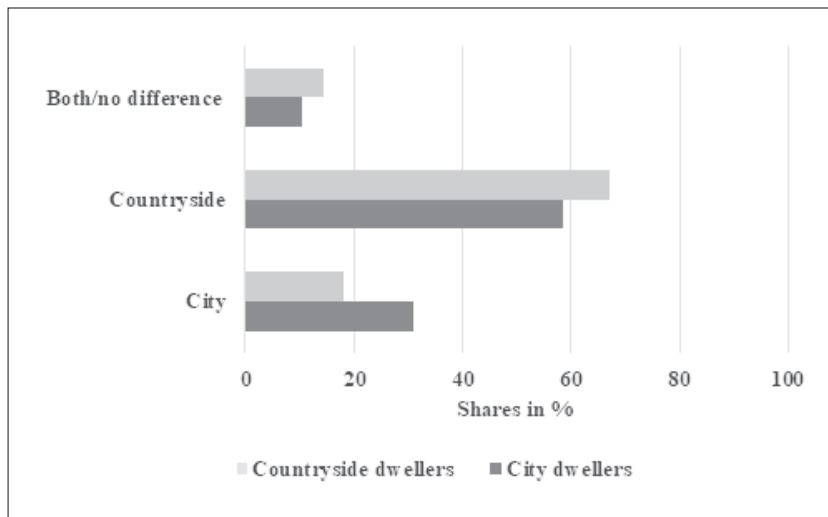
Figure 2: Views on where is it better to spend childhood/youth

This view was supported by additional statements from the point of view of children's and parents' experiences. Rural areas are considered a better and healthier environment for children because they offer more freedom of movement outdoors and opportunities for learning and creativity, fewer extra–curricular commitments, less exposure to consumerism and competition, more contact with and time spent with their peers than urban children, and more opportunities for intergenerational experiences. The following participants' statements exemplify these views:

> Certainly in rural areas, where children and young people, although often faced with distant schools and less organised leisure activities, can still socialise without being too influenced by modern consumerism and competition (Female, 55 years old, university graduate, lives in a small town).

> Youth is better spent in the countryside, as it allows you to learn flexibility, good work habits, respect for older people, and intergenerational experiences (Female, 61 years old, high school graduate, lives in a small rural town).

> In the countryside, because you can learn a lot of practical things, from food production to coexistence with animals. I also believe that children are less allergic and sick if they live in a "dirty" countryside (Male, 23 years old, high school graduate, lives in a small town).

Research participants also believe that parents in rural areas are at an advantage because their children cost them less money for the reason that they do not have to partici-pate in extracurricular activities. They also believe that it is not a problem for rural parents to let their children play outside unsupervised because rural areas are considered safer for children in terms of traffic hazards and peer influence. Participants who see the countryside as a better place to spend one's childhood and youth also believe that there is less crime, drugs, alcohol, and other undesirable things than in the city, which greatly helps parents in raising their children.

> Somehow I still tend to think that nowadays, when almost everything is available to us, it is better to spend child-hood and youth in the countryside. Over the years you acquire work habits and a sense of nature, you know how to live with it and respect it. Also, there is less crime, drugs, alcohol, and other undesirable things there, which helps parents raise their children. Some young people also want to go to the night club, cinema, etc., which is not available in the village, but there is probably (at least here) a quite well-developed theatre group, and of course it is a pity to miss the summer village festivals (Female, 22 years old, student, lives in a small rural town).

Participants who believe that the city is a better place for childhood and adolescence trust that rural areas are less well equipped with services and infrastructure that could provide the necessary conditions for schooling and social participation, and offer fewer opportunities for social contact, as shown in the following statements:

> It is nice to spend your youth in the countryside, but my impression is that it is better for young people's needs to live in or near the city. They can develop their potential

better, they are not tied to traffic, and they also have more choice in various activities (Female, 27 years old, university graduate, lives in a small town)

In the city there are more opportunities to socialise, and you can make more friends. You have a big group of kids from different blocks of flats playing together. I do not think there are that many kids in the village (Male, 20 years old, high school graduate, lives in a bigger city).

Participants who do not see differences between urban and rural areas, or who believe that there are advantages and disadvantages in both places, made the following statements:

In the case of Slovenia, I do not see much difference. Here children have the same opportunities to develop everywhere, no matter where they live (Male, 55 years old, university graduate, lives in a village).

I do not think either is bad. The advantages of the city are that you have playgrounds and more children available, you can choose who you like best, while in the village there are fewer children. The disadvantage of the city is the number of roads; you have to constantly watch out for someone jumping onto the road. In the countryside there are fewer roads, fewer cars, but more space for children to play (Male, 19 years old, high school graduate, lives in a small town).

4.3 Work and Family Life Is Better Reconciled in the City

It is believed that reconciling work and family life enables men and women to become economically independent and to achieve professional and personal fulfilment while meeting their family responsibilities. This enables women and men to participate more fully in professional, public, and political life, and improves their quality of life (Directive (EU) 2019/1158 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 June 2019 on work-life balance for parents and carers and repealing Council Directive 2010/18/EU, 2019; Weldon–Johns 2020). The vast majority of participants in our study, especially those living in cities, but also a significant proportion of those living in rural areas, believe that this is best achieved in the city (Figure 3).

They believe that this is because cities have better infrastructure and transport links, people live in a more concentrated way, and services and facilities are more accessible, e.g. nurseries, hospitals, homes for older people. The easy accessibility of all these facilities makes it much easier to balance work and family life, whereas in their experience some rural areas lack hospitals, kindergartens, etc. In this regard, our participants make the following comments:

Childcare is better organised in the city, as is care for older people and sick, as it's easier to find a professional to help (for a fee, of course). Meals are also better organised, as they are delivered to your home upon request. Today,
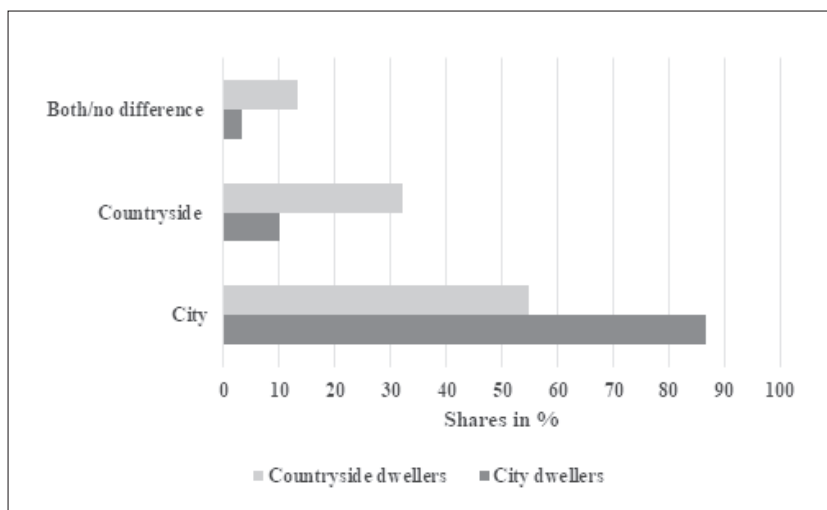

Figure 3: Views on where it is better to reconcile work and family life (childcare, care for older people and sick, and housework)

there are no (or fewer) older people in rural families, as there used to be in the past, to help their adult children with childcare and household chores (Male, 61 years old, primary school, lives in a village).

I think it is easier to balance family and work in the city, and there is better childcare there. In the countryside, children are usually looked after by grandparents, who cannot be as active in childcare as they get older. In the city, it is possible to work unhindered in the workplace while providing safe childcare, caring for the sick and older people, and doing housework (Female, 22 years old, student, lives in small town).

Those who believe that work-life balance is better ensured in rural areas pointed out that there are larger families and more family cohesion, people know each other better than in the city, there is more neighbourly cooperation, commitment to care, and trust among people:

nursing homes (Female, 61 years old, primary school, lives in a village).

Those few who see no difference between urban and rural areas in this regard point out that the balance between the two depends more on where you work or what you do than where you live. It also depends on how many relatives one has and how commitments to care for older people and sick are perceived.

4.4 Crime Is the City Phenomenon

As shown in Figure 4, the vast majority of participants in our study (87.1% of urban residents and 94.3% of rural residents) believe that there is more crime in urban areas than in rural ones.
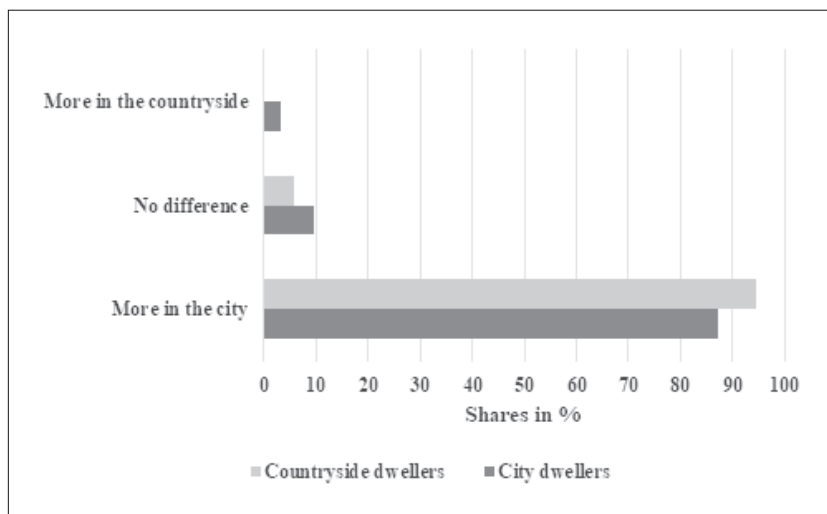

Figure 4: Views on where is more crime and violence, in the countryside or in the city

Neighbours are a lifesaver. There is always someone who can take care of the children. But in the city you have to pay for it (Male, 43 years old, high school graduate, lives in a village).

In the village people are more connected, parents can go to work while grandparents look after the children. Older people are still cared for by the young, and so are the sick. Housework is also well distributed within the family. In the city, you are put in a nursing home when you are old. But then they (families) have them at home again because they don't have the money to pay for accommodation in

Some of them even believe that there is no crime in rural areas or that such cases are very rare:

There is no crime in the countryside. If it does happen, it is rare, like a brawl or a quarrel between neighbours. In the cities it's different, there are more people, more immigrants, everyone has their own habits and shortcomings. Then there is theft (Female, 61 years old, primary school, lives in a village).

In the countryside, you can only get into disputes manifested in small things. In the city there are murders,

shootings, because they have more time to think about it, but in the countryside you have to work (Female, 75 years old, primary school, lives in a village).

Additionally, the participants believe that in urban areas all forms of crime and misbehaviour – physical as well as psychical – are more widespread like beatings, murders, burglaries, thefts, suicides, robberies, drugs trafficking, threats, rape, prostitution, vandalism, mobbing, etc. than in the rural areas. They believe the reasons are as follows:

– more mobility, more immigrants, more different nationalities and cultures, people don't know each other, they have no sense of other people;

– perpetrators find it easier to hide in the cities in the mass of people than in the countryside;

– in the cities there is easiest access to drugs and alcohol;

– idleness of city life, people have more time, they don't know what to do;

– more money flows into cities, there are more shops and more rich people live there;

– poor education, lack of socialisation of children and young people that do not respect others properties and lives;

– greater freedom of thought under the influence of the media, but greater exclusion and exposure to stress.

Just a few of the participants acknowledged the occurrence of crime in rural areas. They associate it mostly with the theft of material goods, e.g. farm products and machinery but rarely those in houses. They mentioned also quarrels or fights, e.g. ones that happen at village festivals, which, however, as participants believe, rarely turn into anything significant. The reason is that rural dwellers know each other and because of prevailing social control they do not report crime and seek help:

Violence depends on the person, and in the city as well as in the countryside these things happen, but in the countryside people hide what others cannot see, and in the city they are more likely to seek help (Male, 30 years old, university graduate, lives in a city).

Only three among the participants in our study recognised the phenomenon of domestic violence in rural areas. In this context, alcohol is seen as a mitigating factor, a manifestation of a dominant cultural pattern that is, however, not problematized:

Crime rarely happens in the countryside, perhaps when men get too drunk (Female, 45 years old, high school graduate, lives in a village).

5 Discussion and Conclusions – Myths about Crime and Place, Why They Arise and Persist?

Our analysis suggests the presence of strong myths about crime and place in the Slovenian context: crime is seen as an "urban problem", as our participants mostly believe that crime happens mainly in (big) cities. Crime with significant rural dimensions, such as environmental crime, drug and alcohol production, and fraud identified elsewhere (Donnermeyer, 2019a, 2019b, 2020), is not recognised as an existing problem, while agricultural crime, domestic violence, and violence against women are rarely pointed out. On the other hand, the analysis confirmed important shortcomings in the quality of life in rural areas compared to urban areas, i.e. poor infrastructure and lack of coverage and accessibility of services and facilities to meet people's needs, e.g. to reconcile work and family commitments. The idealised image of a safe countryside that most of our participants supports, regardless of their place of residency, and at the same time their shared image of a deprived and marginalised countryside, corroborates the well-known construction of the countryside as the "other" or referring to "otherness", concepts that are the central clue in sociological analyses of the construction of majority and minority identities (Bauman, 1990; Jenkins, 2014).

Based on the interpretation of some authors (Bell, 2006; Bonner, 1997, 1998; Cloke, 2006; Dymitrow & Stenseke, 2016: Mahon, 2005) on the symbolic understanding of the countryside, it seems paradoxical that the definition of the countryside as a safe place is in fact a product of the urban middle class. Through this identification, the city's superiority, its centrality, its dynamism, its success and its prosperity are asserted, albeit in a riskier way, over the countryside, which has a diametrically opposed image, that of the "other". This idealised image of the countryside meets the needs of the urban population, especially the middle class and its elites, for whom the countryside is a place of accumulation of space human and natural resources, and who therefore try to impose a social hegemony over such an image everywhere. The meaning of the rural idyll is thus created by the discourse of those who hold or share social power (e.g. the media), and is also taken up by the people who live in rural areas. For people living in rural areas, this idealised image of rural life is their hope and support in the uncertain and dangerous world in which they live, especially as people on the margins of society. It helps them survive and feel comfortable even though they face poorer infrastructure, fewer employment opportunities, and poorer access to basic services and facilities, but, as our interviews show, they believe they are surrounded by a beautiful, unspoiled environment and decent, trustworthy people.

Given the lack of basic services in rural areas (including the police), the tyranny of distance, and the characteristics of the personal support network in rural areas (the emphasis is on the intimacy of personal relationships, self-stigma, personal shame), the image that people form and accept must justify this inadequate coverage of services in rural areas, understood as a lack of social responsibility on the one hand and the need for self-sufficiency on the other. "What appears real, then, is what is allowed to appear on the basis of the epistemological and ontological assumptions that one accepts. This applies to both the paradigm of scientific discovery and the interpretive paradigm" (Bonner, 1997: 80).

It could be suggested that the prevailing (idealised) image of rural life influences the (under)reporting of crime and that, as a result, many cases are not registered and many victims are not protected. The problematic provision of social services to support victims and offenders in rural communities is a central theme of critical rural criminology (Carrington et al., 2014; Donnermeyer, 2019a, 2020). Clearly, the true impact of these myths on crime needs further investigation and additional research is needed to clarify the limited reporting reflected in existing statistics. Therefore, these myths need to be demystified and challenged, and authentic evidence needs to be presented.

While much work has been done in recent decades, particularly by social and cultural geographers and sociologists, and also rural criminologists to examine the meanings given to "rural" places (e.g. Bell, 2006; Bonner, 1997, 1998; Cloke, 2006; Dymitrow & Stenseke, 2016: Mahon, 2005), relatively little is still known about how crime problems are constructed in rural areas. It is thought (e.g. by Carrington et al., 2014; Scott & Hogg, 2015) that previous work has largely focused on fear of crime in such areas. While it is clear that definitions of crime in rural areas reflect enduring aspects of social order in such areas, there is scope to understand how specific visions of social order are articulated in everyday life, as suggested by Donnermeyer (2020), by looking at the ways of "crime talk" and "voice" and whether there are common threads or patterns in narratives about crime in rural areas.

It is also suggested that the dark figure of crime is the result of policing. However, it should be taken into account that the construction of a life-world with definitions of meaning through discursive practises (narratives) used to construct problems related to crime is also essential. In this context, it is important to highlight the reporting and representation of urban and rural crime in the media, e.g. newspapers, TV, blogs on social networks, etc., as an extension of social power centres. As previous studies have shown, there is a "selection criterion at work within editorial culture … that particular kinds of victims attract newspapers in reporting" (Peelo, Francis, Soothill, Pearson, & Ackerley, 2004: 259) and that myths about crime are the result of the media's invention of "truths" about offenders and crime, altering and distorting actual, real, and important information in order to attract people's attention (Bučar–Ručman, 2009; Meško & Eman, 2009; Petrovec 2009). Selection criteria are not neutral, but part of the definition of "other" and "otherness" that prove exclusion and marginalisation. Therefore, it would be important to find out whether this selection is related to the current image of crime in rural areas, how far it is from reality, and whether there are patterns that characterise the exclusion and inclusion of cases. Newspapers, for example, do not educate but sell news, and they have a strong power in forming public consciousness, including about crime (which is presented in a distorted way). Crime in the city (street crimes, violent crimes in urban neighbourhoods) is apparently perceived as more serious and preventable, and is therefore more likely to be reported than crime in the countryside (theft of agricultural machinery, illegal dumping sites). There are complex processes involved, for example, with newspaper bias associated with public reporting of crime. This is not in the best interests of society. It is therefore suggested that in the future more attention should be paid to the reconstruction of news about place-based crime in the media. This is an under-researched area, but one that undoubtedly creates meanings of rural crime and presumably influences reporting on crime and ultimately crime statistics.

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Zaznavanje varnosti kraja med mestnim in podeželskim prebivalstvom v Sloveniji

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Statistični podatki o pojavnosti kriminalitete na podeželju in v mestih po svetu ne kažejo enotne slike in razkrivajo problem temne lise kriminalitete, zato se postavljata vsaj dve vprašanji: 1) ali dejansko obstaja razlika med mestnimi in podeželskimi območji glede pogostosti in pojavnosti kaznivih dejanj; in če obstaja, 2) kakšne so tiste značilnosti območja, ki naj bi vplivale na pojavnost kaznivih dejanj. Namen tega prispevka je odgovoriti na ti dve vprašanji s teoretičnim in empiričnim preučevanjem prepričanj ljudi (socialnih konstruktov) na primeru Slovenije. V ta namen uporabljeni podatki temeljijo na 60 strukturiranih intervjujih s prebivalci mest in podeželja, obeh spolov, starimi 18 let in več, ki so bili opravljeni po vsej Sloveniji pozimi 2016–2017. Rezultati kažejo na prisotnost izrazitih mitov o kriminaliteti kot pojavu (večjih) mest v slovenskem prostoru in hkrati na zaznano nižjo kakovost življenja na podeželju v primerjavi z mesti. Idealizirana podoba varnega podeželja pri prebivalcih tako podeželskih kot mestnih območij se potrjuje z znano konstrukcijo podeželja kot »drugega«, ki podpira družbeno hegemonijo mest nad podeželjem pri akumulaciji prostora, človeških in naravnih virov slednjega. Prispevek ugotavlja, da je treba pomanjkljivo poročanje o kriminaliteti z vidika prostorskih območij še dodatno raziskati, in predlaga, da se podrobneje preučijo mediji kot oblikovalci in posredovalci sporočil o kriminaliteti v prostoru.

Ključne besede: kriminaliteta, temna lisa kriminalitete, zaznavanje varnosti, podeželje, mesto, Slovenija