Getting Jumped in Vacationland: The Complicated Rhetoric and Realities of Assault in a Small Town

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\textbf{ABSTRACT}

Crime research often fails to recognize the context of small-town crime as meaningfully different from urban and rural crime contexts. Furthermore, non-urban spaces serve as the symbolic counterpoint to problematized urban areas. Even now, research fails to provide the detail and nuance needed to explain how complex local perceptions of small-town crime disprove the monolithic assumption of idyllic small towns. This study interrogates the disconnections between the realities of assault in a small town and the rhetorical constructions of perceived offenders. We analyze available police report data from the town of Sandusky, Ohio, comparing it with local social media commentary to identify and explain gaps between the reported incidence of assault and related perception and rhetoric among area residents. We find that area residents construct their town as violent, crime-ridden, and beyond hope. Discourses surrounding reports of violence reinforce cynicism, assign blame, and rely on race, youth, and poverty tropes. This study constitutes a divergence from previous crime literature that considers small towns as generally less prone to violent crime than big cities and treats public perception of small towns as positive overall. We contribute important axes for comparison between institutional and locally constructed rhetorical spaces and address localized anomic perspectives on small-town crime.

Small towns are not only an important and under-studied site for crime research, they also provide an opportunity for the dynamic interrogation of life and experience that is neither rural nor entirely metropolitan. Until recently, crime research treated small towns and rural areas as virtually synonymous (Weisheit et al., 2005). Undifferentiated non-urban space, however, makes it exceedingly difficult to describe the lives of non-urban residents, and the crime that occurs outside of the metropolis. Worse yet, in treating non-metropolitan spaces as monolithic, there is no nuance or capacity for studying the...
variations within small towns and rural spaces, much less the in-depth interrogation of extreme cases of crime outside of large urban environments. This is important because, far from longstanding cultural depictions of ideal and bucolic communities, non-metropolitan life has been newly problematized as drug-ridden and dangerous (Bell, 2006; Camsari & Libertin, 2017; Craig, 2018; Spencer & Kochel, 2018; Wuthnow, 2019).

In discussing the non-metropolitan, we must first consider that there is a major difference between small towns and the outlying rural countryside. A core-based statistical system for differentiating residential zones was adopted by the U.S. Census Bureau in 2000. The new system defines towns with a population between 10,000 and 50,000 as the micropolitan serving as the socioeconomic core of the surrounding and related micropolitan statistical area (μSAs) (Kulcsar, 2004). This distinction clearly delineates small towns, the surrounding area linked socioeconomically, and the outlying rural areas. That is not to say small towns are monolithic. To consider them uniform and intractable understates the reality that small towns are both individually and collectively complex and varied social settings. Likewise, while many view the small American town in idyllic terms, this perception is not universal (Suttles, 1972).

To that end, crime and crime-related problems are socially constructed differently from one town to the next (Wuthnow, 2013, 2019). While one town may still maintain prototypical characteristics of an ideal small-town America, a nearby town of relative size might be suffering from higher poverty, higher violent crime rates, and an all but nonexistent sense of community. Likewise, crime as socially constructed does not necessarily match the actual incidence of crime (Barton et al., 2017). Residents of both these hypothetical towns may view theirs as idyllic and the other as plagued with severe social problems. Even within a town, residents may have widely different perceptions of the crime problem. As we know from the literature on crime myths, perception may be completely divorced from any statistically verifiable crime rates (Wright, 1985). Therefore, we consider both the local rhetorical and discursive constructions on small-town crime and institutional statistics of crime.

In this study, we combine two distinctly different data sources to demonstrate the disconnect between the social construction and empirical reality of criminal assault in a specific small town. We focus on a small town in Ohio that is unique in some ways but also expresses understudied patterns in small-town crime more broadly. We unpack the current case through a multi-part analysis of online discourse and police reports that we contextualize using local historical and news media data. We identify and analyze discursive themes that frame the crime problem as hopeless and employ age-based, class-based, and racist tropes to contextualize the criminal landscape that varies significantly from the picture of crime presented in institutional statistics. We seek to understand how othering and blameworthiness construct these differing frames of
discourse and institutional crime statistics. We conclude that residents in our sample view their town as violent and maintain dispositions of cynicism and despair. Many use the discussion of crime to promote racial, anti-youth, and poverty tropes. Far from expressions of community cohesion, many of the commenters express exasperation and hopelessness while a few, a highly vocal minority, advocate for an acceleration of the violence.

Site of the Research

In the shadow of America’s largest amusement park sits the small town of Sandusky, Ohio. Approximately 3.5 million people made the trip to the Cedar Point Amusement Park in 2016 with millions more visiting the area annually (OTA, 2017). This region along the Lake Erie coastline between Cleveland and Toledo, also known as the Firelands, became known as Vacationland in the early 20th century due to its popularity as a summertime vacation destination (Hildebrandt & Hildebrandt, 2015). Today, tourists travel to the area to visit Cedar Point, area islands and shorelines, and three area indoor water parks that operate year-round. Between June and September, tourism peaks in the area (80%), bringing $1.6 billion to Erie County each year (2017). Notably, Sandusky was even recognized by USA Today in 2019 as Best Coastal Small Town in America (Cimini et al., 2019), garnering national attention as a desirable vacation destination.

Despite this influx of visitors, wealth, and accolades, Sandusky also suffers from widespread poverty and elevated crime rates compared to the rest of the country. Sandusky is part of America’s Rustbelt. Large industrial manufacturing plants in and around the town have experienced decades of layoffs, closures, and changes in ownership, adding to economic instability and global market fluctuations—resulting in financial hardships for many area residents (Hackworth, 2018). Despite the high-powered tourism industry, 22% of Sandusky residents live in poverty, nearly twice the national average of 11.8% (Census, 2019). The dynamic tension between Sandusky as a vibrant vacation locale and as a casualty of global industrial changes makes the town more than a simple micropolitan. Instead, it serves as a complex set of contradictory social constructions and a set of dynamic criminological problems and examples.

Local, Demographic and Crime Contexts

Sandusky, Ohio, is in the western portion of Erie County and is home to 25,000 of the county’s 75,000 residents (see Figure 1). Sandusky’s population is majority white (67.3%) and black (23.9%), and the town has substantially fewer college graduates (15.2%) than the national average (31.5%) (Census, 2019). Employment inequality is evident in Sandusky, as the unemployment rate for whites in Sandusky is 6.41%, whereas the black
unemployment rate is nearly double at 12.1%. Individuals who identify as mixed-race fare even worse, with an unemployment percentage of 15.8% (Census, 2018).

Sandusky varies from the rest of Erie County, which is less racially diverse and better off economically. For example, Sandusky is both the county seat and the core micropolitan to the μSA that encompasses the same land and borders as Erie County, Ohio (see Figure 1) (Census & Ruhrfisch, 2006). Erie County’s population is 86.8% white (higher than the national average of 72%), with a college graduation rate of 22.7% and an overall poverty rate of 10.8% - slightly below the national average (Census, 2019). Erie County’s black residents constitute 8.8% of the population and reside almost exclusively in Sandusky.

Sandusky also far outpaces the national average in violent crime, including assault crimes as defined by the Ohio Revised Code (Assembly, 2013). In 2016, the United States averaged 119 assaults per 100,000 residents (FBI, 2017). However, in Sandusky, a town with ~25,000 residents, there were 244 assaults reported to police in the same period. Thus, at 976 assaults per 100,000 residents, Sandusky’s assault rate is nearly nine times higher than the national average. In the forthcoming analysis, we focus on assaults, though we might have selected several other types of crime in Sandusky. We believe an analysis of assaults is especially prudent because it is violent, typically In the forthcoming analysis, we focus on assaults, though we might have selected several other types of crime in Sandusky. We believe an analysis of assaults is especially prudent because it is violent, normally involves at least one victim and one perpetrator\(^1\), and Sandusky has an exceptionally high rate of assault. In this study, we endeavor not necessarily to diagnose this phenomenon in its entirety, but rather we trace how the perceptions, discourses, and rhetoric of crime in Sandusky compared to its administrative and police statistics. In doing this, we also consider the unique dichotomy of Sandusky as Vacationland for its visitors and the violent reality for its residents.

Reconsidering the Idyllic Small Town

Before addressing the social construction of small-town crime, it is helpful to acknowledge the idyllic, idealized view of small towns and the rural countryside and separate the two often conjoined concepts. Rural and small-town America is often imagined in terms of safety and pastoral serenity, far removed from the perceived social disorganization of the urban metropolis (Bell, 2006; Dinitz, 1973; Gans, 1979; Suttles, 1972). This idyllic view of non-urban life and its closely-knit communities is incomplete and non-urban spaces come with their share of social problems and maladaptive social situations, including

\(^1\) This is not always the case since some conflicts are deemed to be between mutual combatants.
heterogeneous economic and structural disadvantage, reliance on informal social controls, and a general distrust of government authority (Bouffard & Muftić, 2006; Weisheit et al., 2005). Small towns are also distinct from the suburban context, not only because they are, by definition, not attached to a metropolis, but because historic development of towns and suburbs differ in ways that cause them to be both economically and demographically dissimilar (e.g., racial, and economic homogeneity) (Singer, 2014).

Figure 1: Map of Erie County, Ohio
Until recently, criminological research often lumped small towns in rural areas, despite significant differences within the small-town context. Small towns are more like smaller cities than non-metropolitan rural areas in some senses (e.g., serving as the central hub for social and economic life) (Kulcsar, 2004). In other ways, small-town residents share similar experiences with their rural counterparts. Residents of rural areas and small towns tend to have smaller social networks than urban metropolitans, making frequent interaction and regular physical proximity with acquaintances more likely (Chan, 2019; Freudenburg, 1986; Schläpfer et al., 2014; Small & Adler, 2019).

In the past, criminologists have suggested that rural crime may be a byproduct of rapid population changes. Violent crime in rural areas may result from obstacles in social bonding, and rural homicide is an issue of religiosity (Deller & Deller, 2010; Lee & Bartkowski, 2004; Lee, 2008; Lee & Thomas, 2010). However, later research finds little to no relationship between non-urban assault and residential instability but does find assault correlates with ethnic heterogeneity and economic disadvantage (Goodson & Bouffard, 2017; Kaylen et al., 2017). Once largely overlooked as a legitimate site for research in assault and other violent crime, non-urban spaces may provide a wealth of relevant insights. In one recent example, contextual factors surrounding non-urban assaults were found to be more highly variable with male-perpetrated than with female-perpetrated assaults among adults (Rennison & DeKeseredy, 2017).

Despite myths that idealize non-urban life, crime exists in both rural and small-town America (Weisheit et al., 2005; Wright, 1985). The untroubled utopia of the picturesque small town exists primarily in the American imagination. Small towns serve as a symbolic ideal, one where "terrible things are not supposed to happen" and any deviation from this imagined sanctuary is cause for alarm and incredulity (Frank, 2005). Dinitz’s (1973) study of the pseudonymous town of Lincoln Ohio (population ~ 11,500) centered on perceptions of crime as coming from without—a byproduct of encroaching modernity and urbanicity (Dinitz, 1973). Yet this small town’s Main Street had its fair share of criminal activity. Despite arguably high levels of property crime, per extensive victimization interviews, very few were reported to police (Dinitz, 1973, p. 11). Of the crimes reported to police, very few (9.4%) ended in arrest (1973, p. 9). Community norms of informality and familiarity, reinforced through police discretion, permitted Lincoln’s residents to treat crime as effectively non-existent. Residents viewed crime as an outside problem, and remained fearful of encroaching “drug pushers, murderers, hippies, protesters, long-hairs, freaks, demonstrators, rioters, and communists” from “out there” (1973, p. 17). Crime known to originate within the town, in contrast, was a matter for the parents to address and a topic of local gossip (1973, p. 11-13). This insight into both the crime, and the perceptions of crime and criminality, found in non-urban spaces in the U.S.
during the 1970s adds much-needed context to the rosy, pastoral picture often associated with American small towns.

While small towns are generally idealized, residents within a given town may perceive their community’s crime situation to be highly problematic. Wide variations on the perception of small-town crime may exist. Furthermore, these perceptions may have little to do with the actual incidence of crime (Ferraro, 1995; Hale, 1996; Nofziger & Williams, 2005; Poveda, 1972).

Residents communicate with one another about their perceptions of neighboring areas and about the reputation of the next town to form a perceptual consensus regarding the level of criminality believed to exist, both in their town and in the next town over (Suttles, 1972). This co-constructed view of the local area crime may not only exacerbate fear of crime but also, with the advent of social media, may now be an invitation for gossip, public shaming, and rage (Crockett, 2017; Hale, 1996; Salem & Lewis, 2016). Though the disconnection between crime rates and the expression of moral outrage surrounding perceptions of criminality is not unknown, it is vital that criminology interrogate how these two phenomena overlap and intersect (Crockett, 2017; Weisheit & Wells, 1996).

Importantly, in recent years, an increasingly critical eye has been cast upon the problem of non-urban crime. For instance, the once idealized social situation of closely-knit small-town social networks has been recast as a potentially deadly social problem in communities dealing with widespread polysubstance use (Draus & Carlson, 2009). Relatedly, public perception of crime in non-urban spaces must also be addressed. For instance, public opinion has long endorsed the myth that rural and small-town crime is a relatively new phenomenon (Donnermeyer & DeKeseredy, 2013; Sampson, 2012; Wright, 1985). Interrelatedly, popular opinion still generally holds that small towns and the rural countryside maintain nicer residents and safer communities than their urban counterparts (Carrington et al., 2014; Toughill, 2007).

**Analytic Strategy**

We employ a blended multi-method analytic approach to understand the relationship between perceptions of crime in Sandusky and the reality of interfacing with the criminal justice system in the town. First, we analyze the perceptions and attitudes of area residents by conducting a digital ethnography of social media as defined by Postill and Pink (2012), defining the online-offline as a continuous research site (Postill & Pink, 2012). To that end, we focus our attention in the social media arena on a locally based
Facebook page. Vacationland Scanner Feed Uncensored (VSFU)\(^2\), is a public Facebook group dedicated to reporting and commenting on police and first-responder activity within this highly localized geographic area. Using a strategic qualitative coding scheme, we analyze social media comments to collect data on each commenter’s perception of crime and criminality in the local area, as well as gathering discursive and rhetorical content using initial line-by-line coding. Next, we conduct focused coding for themes along perceptual and rhetorical lines, noting the discursive strategies employed. Finally, we code for salient characteristics of commenters and participants in this social media group to better understand who the primary participants are in these conversations about local crime. Importantly, we then construct a coded race variable for VSFU commenters. Using photographs from publicly accessible Facebook profiles, we code race on a small number of categories including Black, White, Hispanic, Asian, and Other using a theoretically validated race-coding strategy (Campbell & Troyer, 2007; Herman, 2010; Saperstein, 2006).

We then evaluate quantitative indicators from police reports and official statistics to understand the story of crime in Sandusky from a different perspective. In doing so, we contrast the rhetoric employed by VSFU commenters with local police data documenting incidence of assault.

**Data**

To address the question of local perceptions on small-town crime, we conduct an ethnographic analysis on the VSFU Facebook group. VSFU has approximately 30,000 followers as of April 2018 (that number is now nearly 50,000) and focuses on police and emergency dispatch scanner chatter in Erie County, Ohio, where Sandusky is located. Most VSFU posts reference scanner activity originating in Sandusky. The operators of the VSFU Facebook group act as amateur citizen journalists, listening to and posting content from local police, fire, and EMS dispatch frequencies (Bruns et al., 2012). In many cases, the content of the VSFU posts consist of verbatim quotes from police scanner chatter. Using keywords searches of VSFU posts including the words “fights” or references to people being “jumped” between January 2016 and December 2018 we collect 381 comments from 222 unique individuals over 19 threaded discussions. One post was a live video posted to the VSFU page and all the rest were text-only posts.

We were able to obtain photographs for 213 of the 222 commenters (96%). 212 of these profiles were held by individuals and 1 was used by a pair of individuals. To verify that a photograph was of the account holder, we manually screened profiles for a) multiple

\(^2\) The name of this Facebook group has been changed.
profile photographs of the same non-juvenile individual, b) commenters referring to the subject of the photograph by name or inferred name, and c) tagged photographs of the individual. Table 1 presents the race distribution of commenters who are 87.9% white, 2.7% black, 4.5% Hispanic, and 0.9% were not identifiable.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>87.89</td>
<td>196</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>2.69</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>4.48</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>0.90</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Photo Available</td>
<td>4.04</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To compare perception with institutional data, we collect and analyze incident report data on assaults from local law enforcement. We accessed these reports through a publicly available data source unique to the local area. Sandusky makes individual police report data available using an online reporting system known as ‘glyph reports’, which allows us to code police reports on various factors. For instance, Sandusky police reported 244 assaults in 2016, and we code each assault for the race, residency status, and the relationship between the victim and perpetrator. Additionally, we code for location type, whether the assault involved drugs, guns, or alcohol, and if the police report the incident as gang-related.

Our coding strategy presupposes the veracity of assault reports, unless and until reports strongly support the alternative. We only deviate from this presupposition if the report explicitly documents police skepticism, or if the responding officers act in a way that explicitly discredits the presenting victims’ claims. For example, in several cases, the police noted inconsistencies in the pattern of injury on the alleged perpetrator and victims and ended up arresting and charging the presenting victim for assault. In those cases, we responded by reversing the codes for victim and offender.

Table 2 presents some descriptive information about Sandusky assaults at the incident level. The most common location for assault reports were in residential dwellings, in public streets, and bars. Most assaults in Sandusky were perpetrated by someone that the victim knew, with less than 15% of assaults described as by a stranger. In 16.8% of police reports, there was not enough detail in the narrative to firmly code the relationship between the victim and offender. The single largest relationship group was

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3 It was very common in the participant pool to set profile photographs as pictures of one’s children. Since children under 13 cannot legally control Facebook accounts, we assume that young children are not the primary holders of any accounts in this data set.
romantic connections, with 24.59% of assaults stemming from romantically involved combatants. Very few assaults explicitly involved guns (5) or gang activity (2). More common were drugs and drug use (15) or alcohol involvement (60).

Table 2: Incident-Level Data (N=244)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Location</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bar</td>
<td>8.20</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Street</td>
<td>17.62</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dwelling</td>
<td>52.05</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>22.13</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stranger</td>
<td>14.75</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Known</td>
<td>59.43</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>16.80</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>9.02</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romantic (subset of known)</td>
<td>24.59</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involved Substances</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alcohol</td>
<td>24.59</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drugs</td>
<td>6.15</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Factors</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guns</td>
<td>2.05</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gangs</td>
<td>0.82</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Race and Residence of Assault Victims and Perpetrators

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Victim Race</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>64.40</td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>35.20</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>0.40</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victim Residency</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sandusky Res.</td>
<td>88.93</td>
<td>225</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nearby Res.</td>
<td>6.72</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non Res.</td>
<td>4.35</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perpetrator Race</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>39.17</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>59.58</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1.25</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perpetrator Residency</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sandusky Res.</td>
<td>90.00</td>
<td>198</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nearby Res.</td>
<td>5.45</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non Res.</td>
<td>4.55</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 (above) breaks down demographic information along two key axes of local police reports regarding assault, namely, the race and residency of both the victim(s) and alleged offender(s). Across 253 victims, 225 (88.9%) were known to be residents of
Sandusky. This is important to note because it illustrates how violence affects local people in large numbers even though millions of non-local people visit Cedar Point and other area tourist attractions each year. Victims in reported assaults were a majority white (64.40%) or black (35.20%). The residential breakdown of the 251 identified perpetrators was very similar, with 90% of known perpetrators described as local to Sandusky. The alleged perpetrators were more often black (59.6%) than white (39.2%). We stress here that these figures are neither a complete nor entirely representative measure of assaults in Sandusky. Due to structural factors and non-reporting, the true number of assaults is unobservable. While these figures do provide some estimations of prevalence, they most accurately tell the story of who reports assaults to the police and how the responding officers describe the involved parties.

The overall result of this dual data collection is a dynamic and keenly focused consideration of the relationship between perception of violent assault and the available police data. In the analysis that follows we identify important themes from the digital ethnography, employing Gill’s (2000) discourse analytic strategy for identifying and addressing rhetorical themes and situating them in conversation with quantitative indicators and historical considerations (Gill, 2000; Leach, 2000; Pink, 2016; Postill & Pink, 2012).

Findings

The Cynical-Despair Discourse

Vacationland Scanner Feed Uncensored commenters often first viewed topic posts on their Facebook home screen or wall, and since all VSFU posts are public, anyone can view and comment. However, the public nature of both VSFU posts and comments does little to cause commenters to self-censor. For instance, in 2016, VSFU posted, “Jaycee park, 20 subjects fighting, called in 911” the first comment came from Bill, calling for an escalation in the violence when he suggested, perhaps sarcastically, “just throw in 19 hammers.”

VSFU comments regarding assault often follow one of two interrelated discursive frames - one of extreme cynicism and one of earnest despair. Sarcastic, even cruel commentary recurs throughout comments to VSFU Facebook posts. Commentary frames assault in the local area and police response to crime in general, in terms ranging from

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4 Note that residential and racial identifications for perpetrators were more often missing. 31 offenders were not provided a clear residential status, and 11 were not assigned a racial category.

5 All names provided are pseudonyms.
downhearted and dour to those comments with a sinister tone and dehumanizing content. One recurring example comes from Al. Frequently, when the VSFU page makes a post involving a fight, Al responds with a simple, one-word comment; “Purge.” The most plausible interpretation of Al’s comment is a reference to the Purge dystopian movie and television franchise; a reference that implicitly suggests an acceleration of violence and the suspension of legal protections for the involved parties. When confronted by another commenter on the suggestion of a purge, Al adds credence to the above interpretation by responding:

I have no fucking tolerance for these worthless fucking kids doing dope. Fucking people don’t know how to raise kids these days. They needed their asses whooped, but the fucking courts thinks it's wrong. They’re all stupid.6

Al makes several of his assumptions clear - the general ages of the involved parties, the potential involvement of drug use, and what he perceives to be the real reasons behind all the fighting - that a failure to punish bad behavior by the parents and the contemporary rejection of corporal punishment have created an anomic dystopian present. Al’s reference to “kids doing dope” is not unique. Even though VSFU does not mention drug use in any of the selected posts, commenters regularly suggest drug use as a potential catalyst for the violence.

When VSFU commenters are not cynically calling for increased violence or a return to corporal punishment, there is another distinct tone that is taken - one of sadness and despair at what is often contextualized as the hopeless state of the town. The despair discourse has a decidedly moralizing tone, as is the case in 2017 when VSFU posted about a bar fight ending in the statement “officer on scene is requesting a squad for a pregnant female that was punched in the stomach.” Immediately, commenters question why a pregnant woman was in the bar. In response, a woman claiming to be the bartender at that time asserted in several comments and replies that the pregnant woman was served alcohol, but did not look pregnant and at no time did she say that she was pregnant. The bartender also claims that, in fact, it was the pregnant woman that started the entire fight to begin with. Not only was the pregnant woman blamed by the bartender for starting the fight and hiding her pregnancy until police arrived, but her mere presence in a bar while “with child” was questioned by several commenters.

6 Rather than note all typographical errors, quotations of VSFU comments are corrected without notation and represent the desired meaning of the original poster to the best of our comprehension. Exceptions include any potentially intentional typographical errors, and any irregular punctuation as they may have been used for subtext or emphasis by the commenter.
A pregnant woman drinking and fighting in a bar serves as a discursive image, embodying the depths of depravity that some commentary suggests is endemic to the local area. While Adele comments “I can't believe she would drink and start fights with people while she is pregnant!! So sad! This poor baby doesn't stand a chance!!” Janice exclaims, “What has happened to Sandusky???” continuing, “Seems like something tragic at least once a day ... so sad.” Both comments express sadness and despair, but while Adele expresses disbelief in the pregnant woman’s capacity to put herself and her unborn child at risk, Janice’s comment suggests that this singular incident is evidence of the tragic state of the town as a whole. Throughout the VSFU comments, the despair discourse generally combines these two aspects— that the persons involved are acting out of a moral failing, and that this is part of an overall corruption of norms and values in town.

**Vigilante Reporting and Local Gossip**

The overlapping cynicism and desperation expressed in the commentary on Vacationland Scanner Feed Uncensored is indicative of a larger rejection of traditional authority in favor, whether tacitly or expressed outright, of vigilantism—something that is echoed in the existence of VSFU itself. VSFU fashions itself as a newsgroup, following-up on the goings-on of the town, driving to crime and emergency scenes as they are happening, taking pictures and video, then posting or streaming this content to Facebook and their associated YouTube page. They tell anyone who questions their presence or takes issue with the fact that they are taking pictures or recording video that they are “with the news” and are, at times, aggressive in their attempt to get as close to the action as possible. Rather than waiting for local newspapers or television news to decide that a given story is worth reporting, VSFU members became self-appointed journalists of the local area. Since they post directly from police, fire, and EMS scanner chatter, they sometimes share sensitive information directly to Facebook - where it becomes the subject of gossip, rumors, sarcastic jokes, and moral indignation.

This vigilante-style of reporting and the associated gossip-mongering in the small town is part of a larger pattern of distrust and pessimism for established social institutions. In the area surrounding Sandusky, for instance, several stories provide examples of growing skepticism towards law enforcement. After weeks of searching, the remains of a missing Port Clinton boy, 14-year-old Harley Dilly, were uncovered in the chimney of a nearby abandoned house. Area residents immediately began questioning the veracity of

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7 In a video posted on December 26, 2016, an VSFU member went to the scene of a house fire. When a woman asked what he was doing, the person streaming video for VSFU said “I’m with the news.” When pressed further he backed away from the woman, but complained audibly “and as usual, we get shit for being on the scene, but what’s new, right? We do our job, we get cussed out for being here.”
the “official story” and began questioning if police were engaging in a cover-up (Anderson, 2020). Local police in another town held a press conference two weeks later, on a completely unrelated set of incidents, in which a group calling itself “Dads Against Predators” (DAP) pose as adolescent children on dating apps to lure sexual predators to public places and filming their responses. After four such videos went viral locally, a local law enforcement agency issued a statement saying that the actions of DAP are unlawful and advised against any continued actions (Durbin, 2020).

The response to the discovery of Harley Dilly and the police statement regarding DAP was criticized by many locals on social media, in public Facebook posts as well as in public Facebook groups. There are several Facebook groups dedicated to topics of interest in the Vacationland area. At least three such groups also exist for neighboring Norwalk, one for Port Clinton, and additional groups focused on police and other first responder scanner chatter in Erie County. Several of these groups have over 30,000 followers, a follower count that often dwarfs the residential population count of the corresponding locale. Members of these “uncensored” local Facebook groups can post gossip directly, and often do—allowing personal grievances and vendettas to spill out into the public sphere. These pages share their content to followers’ Facebook feed and through other social media platforms, thus virtually nullifying any reasonable expectation of privacy and providing multiple platforms for harassment, the promotion of antisocial messages, and targeting fellow community members. These groups also allow for wild speculation and unfettered criticism of social institutions, such as law enforcement and media outlets, owing to the groups’ descriptions as being a space for “uncensored” talk.

The Rhetoric of Blame

The contemptuous nature of local perceptions on established social institutions relates to both despair and cynicism and the rhetoric surrounding the topic of violence in Vacationland. There appears to be plenty of blame to go around, according to VSFU commentary, suggesting that the rhetoric employed is epideictic (arguing that individuals are worthy of praise or blame). The text and tone of VSFU content (e.g., the pregnant woman punched in her stomach) ultimately influences and perhaps even inspires the harsh, emotionally charged response from the groups' followers (e.g., "This poor baby doesn't stand a chance!!!"). Interrelatedly, since the group and the comments are public, VSFU posts and discussions often appear within the social media content of community members whether they follow the Facebook page or not.

Moreover, VSFU posts involving fights incite severe judgment from commenters based on the number of combatants and location. During initial data collection, the number of involved parties was not a search term, but emerged from the data as 44% of
selected posts included either the mention of a “large fight” or noted ten (10) or more combatants; two posts stated that there were twenty (20) combatants. With references to large fights, users make sweeping generalizations about large groups of people and places.

The terminology and parlance employed on the police radio frequency; the short, often matter-of-fact descriptions of events necessarily tied to locations; become evocative discursive prompts when converted to text and taken out of their original context. From this transition of discursive context, along with local and societal biases and stereotypes, commenters base their assumptions about specific locations and the combatants involved (Leach, 2000).

Regardless of the level of information provided, the prevailing commentary was that the combatants were likely juveniles, poor, African American, or some combination of the three. Police noted that juveniles were involved in only one of the incidents analyzed, but commenters asserted that “young punks” were fighting in the streets and that when a fight broke out in the parking lot of a bar that “they cater to the ones under 21.” In the twenty-person fight at Jaycee Park mentioned above, one person commented, “let me guess, juveniles.”

In the one instance that police dispatch reported, “20 juvenile females fighting in the street, Fulton street.” The conversation shifted to what block the fight was on. Comments appeared to come from residents who lived near Fulton Street and had an opinion about the block and the house from which the fight originated. “That house,” as they described it, “needs to be put on a nuisance watch.” Though one of the commenters, apparently residing near “that house,” intended to call the city about the issue, she did not believe that the authorities would do anything. Because she asserts, they are renters and not homeowners. Additional comments suggest that someone should contact the municipal authorities to pressure the landlord to address the problem, reasoning that the tenants were likely receiving housing assistance. For instance, one commenter suggests, “I'm guessing the tenants they have are not responsible for their rent, and so since rent is a given from Metro Housing, they most likely do not care who's living there.” Thus, commenters make direct links between fighting and poverty.

References to poverty, however, are rare within this sample. More consistent with VSFU comments on fighting were the sometimes coded, if not explicit, stigmatizing racial language. When a large fight broke out in a local bar (one of seven such incidents during our reporting period), Carol linked youth and poverty when she opined that it's the “immature ones … who like to gang jump the innocent ones.” Carol continues, “Get the trash off your streets, and you wouldn’t have these calls.” Carol then links a government
website referencing the federal penal code defining criminal street gangs. There was no explicit reference to race. However, Carol seemed to be making a statement which she wanted first couched in euphemism and then legitimized through hypertext - that what must be going on is “gang” violence perpetrated by “trash” that needs removing from “your streets.” In isolation, a reference to “trash” could have suggested the poor white trash pejorative, references to “gangs” and “streets” serve as coded references to oft-repeated stereotypes of black Americans.

Other, less veiled, more aggressive racialized language appears in the comments of VSFU posts. When VSFU posted about a fight outside of a black-owned and operated billiard hall, Tucker responded in all caps: “MORE “GHETTO RATS” RIOTING AGAIN?” (quotes in original). Tucker knew what he was alluding to when he put parentheses around “ghetto rats” and he likely had every reason to believe that anyone who read his comment did as well. While others comment that the local area judge must have let all the criminals out and sarcastically call the combatants “Sandusky’s finest.” Tucker intends for readers to comprehend his disgust for the violence and the perceived race of the involved parties. Tucker is not the only one to use quotation marks to suggest a racist subtext. Al, the same person who repeatedly suggests a “purge” to get rid of those he deems undesirable, says of a large group fight in unseasonably warm February 2017: “Warm weather brings “them” out” (quotes in original). Another VSFU follower asks what Al means by “them” and places a laughing-face emoji before and a thinking-face emoji after the question. Al replies “Those” and refuses to elaborate (quotes in original). But Tucker and Al’s comments suggest a specific group in mind but are reticent to make their meaning explicit. Notably, the context for the incident that inspired Tucker’s “ghetto rats” comment occurred outside of Even Breaks Billiards & Bar, a black-owned and operated business.

“Hancrack Street”

Much of the racially charged rhetoric connects to area locations with a racialized backstory. When the socio-demographic makeup of its residents consists of stigmatized peoples, the geographic location lends itself to a cognitive shorthand conducive to prejudicial interpretations of events and moral judgments cast upon involved parties (Frohmann, 1997). Hancock Street provides a clear example of such a cognitive maneuver.

A stretch of Hancock Street in Sandusky has been a small yet highly visible black neighborhood for generations. In the 1980s, with the emergence of crack cocaine in Sandusky, Hancock Street came to be referred to pejoratively as “Hancrack” or “Handcrack” among some area residents. Over thirty years later, when VSFU posted
reports of shots fired outside of a drive-thru grocery on Hancock Street." Patrick commented, "GET THOSE PEOPLE OUT OF SANDUSKY." When a VSFU citizen journalist decided to get in his car and drive to the scene of an ongoing police investigation at the drive-thru, the driver's commentary recontextualized the audible sound of police scanner chatter on the video. The citizen journalist's commentary, in turn, prompted time-stamped comments from viewers.

About twenty seconds into the video, police dispatch relays to law enforcement officers en route that the caller who reported that shots fired did not hear the shots. A friend informed the caller, and they relayed this message to the police. The amateur journalist and VSFU commenters overlooked this detail, continuing to comment under the impression a crime had taken place. Commentary continues, including a comment time-stamped at around twenty seconds referring to "Hancrack Street." At a minute in, as the VSFU driver begins moving forward, he abruptly says, "Oh, we got a chase, we got a chase." The vehicle's engine roars as the driver accelerates, speeding up after two people he believes to be involved in the alleged incident. "I don't know if the cops see this or not," he says, but "these ones are running here." As the driver simultaneously acts as the self-appointed neighborhood watch and reporter, VSFU viewers are commenting that the area around Hancock Street is a "bad neighborhood." One person remarks "typical Hancock," another calls the neighborhood "Little Chicago" while others sarcastically feign surprise at the goings-on—"Hancock Street? No way!"

One comment exclaims, "Move out now!" though it is unclear who the intended recipient is. Still, others express disgust, not just at the situation, but at the town itself - with statements like "I'm glad I don't live there anymore, Sandusky went to hell," and "Typical Handcrack Street. I'm glad I don't live in Sandusky. I love it out here in cornfield country." The weather, again, is referenced: "It did warm up to about 50 today so what else would you expect outta this area?"

While commenters heap aspersions on "Hancrack" and Sandusky, the vigilante citizen reporter continues his disembodied commentary while driving. Two minutes into the six-minute video, the VSFU driver gives up his search, saying, "I don't know if they were involved or not, it's just weird that they started running as soon as the cops showed up." The car remains parked a few blocks from where police have the road blocked. Dispatch says the 911 call came from two blocks away, making the accuracy of the information questionable at best. Meanwhile, another commenter chimed in, "Either a bad drug deal or beefing over some chick most likely." References to drug deals and "beefing" over women continue the trend of using stigmatizing language and racist tropes as a way of making sense of the situation, even as the video is being streamed live from a parked car in a small town. Ultimately, the live stream served as an opportunity for several
commenters to demonize Hancock, vilify its residents, and express disgust at the town of Sandusky.

*Racialized Spaces and Empirical Realities*

The rhetorical space occupied by the 87% white commenters of the VSFU looks somewhat different than the world defined by police reports. In our investigation of all police reports for assault in 2016, we confirmed some of the sentiments expressed by the Facebook commenters, but not others. We found that approximately 90% of victims and offenders were Sandusky locals. Involved parties generally knew each other before the incident, with fights between strangers totaling around 15%. Comments on VSFU typecast crime in Sandusky as predominantly, if not exclusively, a problem of young black men. However, in the coded police reports, we found that 39% of reported perpetrators were white. This finding invalidates the uniformity of the racially charged rhetoric of VSFU comments. Likewise, this might also constitute an underrepresentation of the assault incidence involving white offenders. We contend that such an uneven distribution of reporting may occur due to extant patterns of policing and reporting practices in Sandusky, especially considering the race-based perceptions on violence and virulence of civilian surveillance of racialized spaces such as Hancock Street detailed above.

As we noted earlier in the text, economic hardship is not felt equally in Sandusky. Unemployment is higher for black residents, and income is statistically lower. *Figures 2 and 3* (below) first gives a visual depiction of racialized areas in Sandusky.⁸ *Figure 2* shows white occupied households, while *Figure 3* shows black occupied households. We highlight Hancock Street to illustrate a variation between local perception and demographic fact. Most of Hancock Street’s black residents live on either side of a few blocks of the street itself which is not apparent in this map consisting of block-level data.

*Figure 4* (below) is a second map that plots all of the assaults coded in the 2016 police reports and clusters them by location. We see substantial overlap in many assault clusters and economically disadvantaged neighborhoods. However, we also see large clusters of assaults in primarily commercial areas. An important consideration in understanding assault reporting is the agency and social capital required to submit a complaint. Authorities rarely witness the reported assault firsthand. Instead, police rely on eyewitness or victim reports, which may prove more influenced by implicit biases of the reporting individual than the actual severity of the offense. Therefore, it is unclear if higher rates of white victims and black perpetrators (as seen in *Figure 4* below) truly represents the demographic reality of assault victimization in Sandusky, or a greater likelihood to

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report incidence in such a manner. Either way, there is substantially more white involvement in assault crimes in Sandusky than the VSFU rhetoric focusing on young black combatants across local discussion groups reveals.

**Figure 2: Racialized Areas of Sandusky, Percent White**

![Map showing racialized areas of Sandusky, percent white]

**Figure 3: Racialized areas of Sandusky, percent black**

![Map showing racialized areas of Sandusky, percent black]
We also coded police reports for any mention of gangs, guns, drugs, and alcohol. Neither gangs nor guns were prevalent in this sample of assaults to a statistically meaningful level. Drugs appeared prevalent, with an occurrence rate of 6.15%. Still, this percentage was only achievable with a generous category that allowed for any drugs seized at the scene (even if not involved in the active incident) to count. Much more common was alcohol, which was mentioned or noted in 24.59% of cases, while an additional 8.2% of cases occurred in bars. This finding does not dismiss concerns of drugs in the community but does illuminate a disconnect between the tropes employed by the Facebook group and the institutional records of events.

**Figure 4: Map of 2016 Assaults, Clustered**

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**Discussion**

In *The Great American City*, Sampson argued that moral cynicism, concentrated disadvantage, and a lack of collective efficacy are counterfactual to altruistic behavior (Sampson, 2012). Like much of the canon of criminology, Sampson makes effective use of Chicago’s vast and readily accessible data on crime and community. An altruism
typology shows that social altruism relates to community well-being in at least one crucial measure, homicide rate (2012). Disregarding the population differences between Chicago and Sandusky, Ohio, we may then ask where the cynicism of local area residents comes from in much the same terms as Sampson provides. Considering that altruism and collective efficacy can count among their near opposites, egotism, and hopelessness, any community that regularly experiences these social ills may find their perception of the situation cynical and melancholic. We also argue that relative and even perceived disadvantage have no less capacity to incite despondency (Dawson et al., 2019; Marchlewska et al., 2018). Whether this despondency is localized to a fleeting thought and fades from the mind or compounds after successive exposure to stimuli, comments like those from VSFU members after they read text or witnessed video suggesting a lack of collective efficacy appear to lend support to Sampson’s assertion.

The other side of the VSFU assault discourse—the earnest, yet moralizing, despair for the perceived loss of the small-town idyll provides an outlet to express displeasure at stories of group violence in ways that also allow them to maintain an air of respectability, perhaps even superiority (Smith, 2014). That this displeasure often has racializing undertones in the predominantly white digital space of VSFU should come as no surprise. Still, it does force a careful reading of colorblind racist language, the use of terms such as “them” and “those people” as well as noting the racialization of space and place to create a colloquial racist subtext (Bonilla-Silva, 2017; Fishkin, 1995, Moon et al., 1999). Perhaps it is known, perhaps not, that over a third of reported assaults involve a white perpetrator despite the frequent implication in VSFU rhetoric that juvenile black males perpetrate most, or all, of the fighting in Sandusky.

The word “despair” in the discourse is not an accidental allusion to Deaths of Despair (Case & Deaton, 2015). Non-urban U.S. whites with lower educational attainment simultaneously experienced decreased life expectancy and increased cynicism and desperation in their community outlook and worldview (Metzl, 2019; Monnat, 2016). That said, this case study may be the first explicit example of small-town perceptions in a high-GDP market. Much of the rhetoric in this study display a collective posture somewhere between impotent rage and morose moral indignation. When Case and Deaton revisit their Deaths of Despair data in 2017, they acknowledge that income and economic stagnation alone cannot account for the increased mortality of white Americans but propose a narrative of cumulative disadvantage (Case & Deaton, 2017). While Case and Deaton focus on potential economic causes for increased mortality, it is worthwhile for sociologists and criminologists to consider how the same factors may affect perceptions on topics like collective efficacy and the adoption of a pessimistic view of one’s community.
As with any research study, there are several limitations we were unable to resolve completely. First, this analysis focuses on one social media group and the dialogue it produces. We purport that this group is extensive and influential, making it the logical choice for analysis. Still, it is also true that a segment of voices (predominantly African American) are absent from this digital space. While we consider this disparity itself a relevant finding involving perceptions of crime in Sandusky, in the future, we intend to seek out additional rhetoric and voices for analysis specifically. Interrelated to the limitation above, we acknowledge that we cannot claim that the data adequately represents the dominant opinions or attitudes of the area population through social media comments alone.

Furthermore, our research quantifies assault crimes from 2016 alone. Data is available from 2014-2019 to extend this analysis, but in 2018 the Sandusky Police force stopped recording the race of involved persons in their glyph reports. This shift in the demographic accounting of crime statistics makes comparisons of racial rhetoric and documentable police interactions more challenging.

With these limitations in mind, we are optimistic about the future applications of the data sources and theoretical contributions in small-town crime and perceptions of crime as both a bridge between rural and urban crime and crime myth literature and as a distinct and worthwhile arena for crime study in its own right. We further assert that comparing disconnections between institutional and popular constructions of small-towns in general and small-town crime, in particular, will provide vital contexts for the complex and contradictory experience of the late-modern micropolitan town.

In this article, we used multiple complementary methods to study patterns and perceptions of crime in the understudied small-town crime context. Far removed from the idealized notion of the small-town, even America’s Best Coastal Small Town has complicated problems that are worthy of criminological scrutiny. The perspective of residents does not necessarily match the idyllic view held by those who drive in, visit the parks, try the wine, and go back home. That is not to say that residents have an entirely accurate perception of the situation in their town either. With the acknowledgment that police incident data also has its own set of assumptions, the information that it provides is adequate in disconfirming the most cynical racialized rhetoric of VSFU users. Future research in small-town crime will hopefully address more complex questions regarding crime and the experience of crime (e.g., fear of crime) in important ways in the small town, as distinct from rural, suburban, and urban contexts.
Implications

This article adds substantively to academic knowledge regarding how modern micropolitans understand crime in their communities. It constitutes an advance in mixed methods approaches by demonstrating how different data sources (qualitative and quantitative) tell contextually different stories about the phenomenon. Importantly, when we consider these methods together, a more nuanced picture of the underlying perception of small-town crime emerges. We also advance methods practically by showing how institutional data and qualitative data in online communities can help us learn about those communities. In connecting social media discourse with real-world data, we address disconnections between community perception and reality. Implications for policy and practice include the importance of studying small-town crime in general, and the gap in procedural policies at the intersection of digital social media and vigilante-style media production.

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