The purpose of this research is to explore how rural-urban differences influence the attitudes and behavior of law enforcement. While the majority of previous research has focused on attitudes and behaviors of police officers in urban police departments, this study intends to assess how the attitudes and behaviors of both rural and urban law enforcement agencies are influenced by the size of the community in which they work (Brock, Copeland, Scott, & Ethridge, 2001; Jiao, 2001; O’Shea, 1999). This research topic is important because it reveals substantial differences between rural and urban communities when our current explanation of police subculture assumes there is much uniformity between agencies (O’Shea, 1999).

In order to assess how urban-rural differences influence the attitudes and behavior of law enforcement, it is important to be aware of the differences in perceptions and expectations that rural and urban residents have for their local police (Jiao, 2001). Decker (1979) explains that although the content of crimes is similar in rural and urban areas, the type of response from law enforcement is determined by community preferences. While more recent research (Jiao, 2001) contradicts similarities in the content of rural versus urban crime, it does support the idea that community preferences are a considerable determinant of police force responses. O’Shea (2001) builds on the idea that urban and rural law enforcement agencies differ due to efforts to match police service techniques to the demands of the community served. Because communities differ according to geographical region, he concludes that the operations of police agencies will vary as well. Different styles of living are applied to different sizes of communities, placing different demands on law enforcement officials (Surrette, Ebert, Willis, & Smallidge, 2003). Jiao’s (2001) research findings indicate that smaller cities tend to indicate more traditional or conservative communities, therefore warranting more informal social control. The generalizability of this study is questionable due to the location where the interviews and
questionnaire were given. The high population density of southern New Jersey may be more representative of only the Northeastern part of the United States.

Two research studies (Decker, 1979; O’Shea, 1999) addressed a second rural-urban difference that has been shown to influence the attitudes and behavior of law enforcement; that of the locally elected official. O’Shea (1999) explains that the strong incentive of a locally elected official to be reelected is dependent upon the satisfaction of the community. In order for an appointed police executive to retain a position of authority, they also must comply with the demands of the community. In an elected police executive’s situation the effect on policy decisions is even more direct. Because of this reelection incentive, and through his observations of the sheriff in “Pine County,” Decker (1979) made the distinction that rural police are more sensitive and responsive to community demands. He attributes this to the fact that an elected official must conform to community demands if they wish to be reelected. It is important to note that Decker’s (1979) observations may be biased due to the fact that his study was limited to only rural policing observations and excluded observing urban policing.

A third difference between urban and rural law enforcement agencies addressed by two of the studies (Jiao, 2001; O’Shea, 1999) was related to the expectations of the community. According to Jiao (2001), small or rural police forces are viewed as social work-oriented, while larger agencies are considered to be more law enforcement-oriented. The small size of the town created expectations among residents that police were more readily available to interact with community residents and perform a wide variety of services. Jiao (2001) explains that more public support for the police department is gained from citizens through these many interactions. This supports Decker’s (1979) findings from his observations of Pine County police. He recalled several instances where the citizens of Pine County reported a wide range of marginal behaviors
to the sheriff. The law enforcing-oriented police forces in urban areas are perceived to have less
time and expected to focus on enforcing criminal laws and controlling crime, therefore urban
residents appear to have less support for the law (Jiao, 2001). This supports the findings in a
study done by O’Shea (1999), where the results of a survey given to both rural and urban officers
indicated stronger beliefs by the urban officers that the community does not support its officers.
The study does not permit generalizing the findings to all police officers because although the
population sampled was mentioned, no information was given to how the sample was obtained.

This research seeks to address the influences on attitudes and behavior of law
enforcement due to urban-rural differences. The previous research has covered a variety of
topics, including; the perceptions and expectations of residents in the community, the influence
of being an elected official, and the amount of public support for the police department due to
being social work-oriented or law enforcement-oriented. A serious limitation to the research was
the difficulty comparing the results of studies that focused specifically on either rural or urban
policing and used different research instruments (Brock et al, 2001; Decker, 1979). Also, several
of the studies had limited generalizability due to the location where the study took place (Brock
et al, 2001; Decker, 1979; Jiao, 2001). Some issues that merit further study would be the
difference in attitudes and behavior towards minorities by rural and urban police departments
and if those attitudes were related to community expectations.
References


