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Urban and rural residence and its significance on services for victims of domestic violence in Cyprus

Introduction

Differences between rural and urban areas often translate to differences among the residents of these areas. Individuals in cities are more likely to have good access to education, health care and other vital services mainly due to their proximity. On the other hand, those living in rural areas experience faster growing rates of poverty (UNFPA, 2007). Few studies since the emergence of domestic violence in the field of psychology have extended the scope of their research to incidents of domestic violence in regards to whether the victims are located in an urban or rural area ([Adler, 1996](#); [Alston, 1997](#); [Schafer & Giblin, 2010](#)). The rural population of Cyprus approximates 30% of the entire population (Statistical Service, 2011). Definitions of urban and rural areas are based on the European Commission's Eurostat definitions of urban regions as having: "1. a population density threshold (300 inhabitants per km²) applied to grid cells of 1 km²; and 2. a minimum size threshold (5 000 inhabitants) applied to grouped grid cells above the density threshold." Rural residents are defined as those living outside the aforementioned regions (Eurostat, 2007).

In Cyprus, there are currently no studies investigating differences between urban and rural samples in their experiences of domestic violence; in fact, there are only a limited number of published studies of domestic violence using a Cypriot sample (Georgiades, 2008; Georgiades, 2009; Panayiotopoulos, 2011). The current research study utilises data made available by the only non-governmental organisation (NGO) in Cyprus dealing with domestic violence (the Association for the Prevention and Handling of Violence in the Family; also known as SPAVO) in an attempt to not only expand the international literature but also the literature focusing on the issue of domestic violence in Cyprus. In the present paper,

SPAVO's data referring to the services used by victims of domestic violence will be outlined through the use of descriptive data, and subsequently a discussion will follow regarding the implications of these findings.

Domestic violence and area of residence

Shame is implicated as a reason for not contacting the authorities following incidents of domestic violence (Few, 2005). Additionally, local cultural influences have been implicated in how women are affected by domestic violence in rural areas, and men's perpetration of this violence. Self-reliance, pride, privacy, belonging and closeness, family and religiousness are arguably powerful in influencing individual's experiences with domestic violence, whether this individual is the victim or perpetrator, and understanding these values and beliefs are critical to developing effective responses to domestic violence (Wendt, 2009). Alston (1997) has demonstrated that at times domestic violence is not being appropriately dealt with in rural societies primarily due to rural ideologies and gender stereotypes, which serve to promote machismo and power imbalances in the household, as reasons. Despite the growth of knowledge in the field of domestic violence in rural settings, it is evident that processes are in place which inhibit individuals who reside in rural areas from seeking and requesting access to services related to domestic violence.

The significance of rural locality in relation to domestic violence has widely been under-examined. Ragusa (2013) argues that rurality should in fact be prioritised. Firstly, experiences of domestic violence are moderated by the individual's experience of rurality. For instance, whereas for some countries location of residence may not play a significant part in the individual's experience with domestic violence, for other countries their location of residence may even be a matter of life and death. Secondly, issues related to the rural location of victims of domestic violence, such as lack of access, information or services, are of vital

importance in research within this field. Dahlbäck (1996) and Ragusa (2013) have individually highlighted the significance of investigating the location of victims of crime and whether the location is significant in how victims deal with the crime they have experienced. The research presented below will offer an overview of the field, covering studies that have looked at the difference between urban and rural dwellers in relation to domestic violence and subsequently the experience these individuals have in accessing and requesting help.

Domestic violence services

A review of the international literature has indicated a steady increase in the number of studies investigating the location of victims of domestic abuse over the past 20 years (Adler, 1996; Eastman, Bunch, Williams, & [Carawan, 2007](#); Teaster, Roberto, & Dugar, [2006](#)). Alston (1997), using a semi-structured interview format, questioned service providers (e.g., police officers, social workers, visiting sexual assault workers) in rural areas of Australia regarding violence against women in rural environments. Her most poignant finding was that official figures do not reflect the true extent and complexity of the violence faced by these women. Although cases of assault were often brought to the attention of the police, these cases were typically only the most serious ones.

Logan, Stevenson, Evans and Leukefeld (2004) carried out an all-encompassing study into rural and urban women's perceptions of barriers to health-related and criminal justice services. The four main types of barriers to accessing these services were: affordability, availability, accessibility, and acceptability. In addition to these barriers, women, and in particular those with victimisation histories, required a great amount of effort to obtain the range of services. Furthermore and besides the barriers to health services, barriers were present in utilising the criminal justice system. These barriers were present for both urban and rural women though their experiences of these barriers are different.

Conversely, rural service providers also face challenges, and these are often unique challenges and experiences not experienced by urban service providers ([Evanson, 2006](#)). Rural service providers may experience increased contacts with their clients in the community (e.g., at the supermarket, through mutual friends and family), challenges to confidentiality and anonymity due to the close proximity of everyone in the community, and finally a high degree of visibility of both the victim and service provider ([Evanson, 2006](#)). Therefore, in light of issues faced by rural victims of domestic violence, their experiences with service providers may also be influenced by the experience of the rural service providers themselves.

A study carried out in the United States came to the conclusion that rural domestic violence and its policing was not being adequately addressed. Specifically, when visible injuries were presented to the police by abused women, there were few differences in the provision of police services. On the other hand, victims of abuse from urban areas consistently rated the police more positively ([Websdale & Johnson, 1997](#)). The conclusion that rural policing is problematic has been demonstrated and supported by researchers in recent years. [Schafer and Giblin \(2010\)](#) used data from police agencies in rural areas of the US and noted the lack of appropriate infrastructure in rural areas needed to meet the requirements of domestic violence victims. These problems were often exacerbated by cultural or community traditions, that acted as an inhibitor to dealing with domestic violence. Some studies suggest that domestic violence may in fact be a greater problem in rural rather than urban areas due to proximity and familiarity, with third parties being very willing to conceal the problem ([Hall-Sanchez, 2014](#); [Hogg & Carrington, 2003](#)).

Cultural and sociological differences between urban and rural areas may play a role in how domestic violence service providers respond to victims. A study conducted in rural areas

of southern United States based on a sample of women in a shelter found that, although the types of violence experienced were similar to that of victims in urban areas, the women living in these rural areas were mostly in longer term abusive relationships (over 10 years), and were less likely to contact aid services (Krishnan, Hilbert, & VanLeeuwen, 2001). Only around half had gone to the police, 35% sought medical attention (even though they reported physical abuse as the most common type of abuse they experienced) and around one third attended counselling due to limited availability, lack of knowledge and information, and family and cultural barriers.

Two other studies conducted in rural Ohio, United States point at specific rural community and cultural ties that prevent victims of domestic violence from receiving help. DeKeseredy and Joseph (2006) recruited 20 women over 18 years old who had ever experienced any form of unwanted sexual experience when attempting to end or ending a relationship with a husband or co-habiting male partner. Along with sexual abuse, 85% of participants experienced physical abuse, 90% sexual abuse, 70% economic abuse, 15% reported their partner used their children to hurt them, 10% experienced abuse of pets, 40% stalking and 30% had prized possessions destroyed by intimate partners.. Hall-Sanchez's study (2014) recruited a sample of 12 women of a similar background to discuss their thoughts on a previous study on rural sexual assault. Two thirds of victims reported their partner's same-sex peers perpetuated and legitimized abuse of women through frequent consumption of alcohol, giving information on controlling women and attachment to abusive peers. These behaviours were reported frequently among male perpetrators who were involved in rural hunting subcultures. Many victims reported not feeling safe at home because of the accessibility of guns and that members of the community who witness domestic violence within other families ignore it as a private issue between the couple. This

points not only to differences in availability of services which cause differences in rural dwellers' experiences of domestic violence but also cultural and community characteristics of rural areas which promote domestic violence such as peer support of women abuse, access to guns and hunting culture, drinking and drug use, patriarchal views, and the communities' uninvolvement in cases of partner violence.

Some research specifically investigated cultural differences related to domestic violence within rural communities. Hogg and Carrington (2003) looked at aboriginal and white rural families' experiences with domestic violence by interviewing a cross-section of the population about it and found a main difference was that violence within Aboriginal families is displayed in public settings whereas in white families it occurs in private. Aboriginal women were said to be more likely to contact the police for immediate intervention but very reluctant to proceed with legally prosecuting their abuser. However, hidden domestic violence within white rural families was also found to be pervasive. Unreported crime in these situations was estimated by the study's authors at anywhere between 50% and 95%. Their main explanation for this discrete though prevalent phenomenon was caused by the social ordering of public and private life among these communities. Abused women feel fear of embarrassment (of themselves, their abusers and their community), social isolation and not having anywhere to go if they leave their abusive husbands. Furthermore, white rural communities were more patriarchal where women mainly performed work in the homes while men were more visible in the public sphere as most rural jobs are sex-segregated. Furthermore, controlling behaviours by abusive men isolate rural women more than urban residents due to their physical distance from other members of the community. Whereas gun possession plays a large role in domestic violence in white families, this was not a concern in domestic violence cases among aboriginal families where

gun ownership and use in homicide cases is very rare. Moreover, there is a lack of concern and visibility about domestic violence in white rural communities as social policies that occurred in response to feminism to protect women facing violence were faced with significant resistance in rural areas due to their values of independence and self-sufficiency.

Sudderth (2006) identified problems with rural agencies responding to domestic violence. Smaller departments and limited resources complicated procedures whereby agencies should have offered more training opportunities to their staff but were not always able to fulfil this commitment. Sudderth (2006) also found that collaboration in rural communities is more comprehensive because more of the community can be involved in dealing with the issue. This is significant in acting as a recommendation to involve the entire community in dealing with the issue of domestic violence not only in Cyprus but in other countries with large rural communities.

Although there are specific cultural differences in certain rural communities which impact domestic violence in ways that they do not in urban areas, main differences found are the lack of access to and knowledge of services, patriarchy, and the invisibility of domestic violence in rural areas due to lack of community concern. Nevertheless, rural areas may have more comprehensive action in dealing with domestic violence cases as service providers are likely to be more familiar with each other and with the individuals involved. On the other hand, victims in rural areas may be more reluctant to seek services because they know all the service providers, thus fearing shame for themselves as victims and for their perpetrators as well as shame for potentially tarnishing the reputation of their community, and rural communities in general as being peaceful. However, none of the above studies directly investigated the differences between urban and rural communities in terms of domestic violence service use. The research above has highlighted the differences in services offered to

victims of domestic violence according to location of residence, in addition to the role of the victim in seeking and utilising these services. It would appear that many factors play a part in the services offered and received to victims of domestic violence, and that these factors are even more significant once location is factored into the equation. Unfortunately, there is no known research in Cyprus that enlighten us to the circumstances of victims of domestic violence.

Research questions

The research studies presented above have painted a picture of inconsistency in the actions of service providers (including police services) in rural and urban settings. As stated above, there are currently no studies in Cyprus regarding the state of domestic violence in rural versus urban settings. It is our aim therefore, to present our findings regarding these differences using data obtained by SPAVO. Cyprus is an interesting case to examine for domestic violence as it is possible to provide a nation-wide analysis between domestic violence in urban and rural communities using the data of SPAVO. In addition, it is a place where domestic violence policy is still being developed only having been recognized legally in 1994 with the Violence in the Family law [Prevention and Protection of Victims, 47(I)].

1. Our first research question focuses on whether there were fewer calls to the helpline from rural areas than from urban areas. We believe this to be the case due to the reluctance of rural dwellers to request assistance for such issues.
2. Our second question aims is to investigate any further differences between rural and urban areas in relation to the services they have received prior to contacting SPAVO, the services they will be requesting from SPAVO and finally the services they are offered by

members of SPAVO's team. The literature outlined above has highlighted problems regarding the services that are available to rural residents and problems regarding the provision of these services by the providers. The researchers therefore chose to concentrate on these two aspects while also including an evaluative measure, that of the services offered by SPAVO's team. By including this information we are also evaluating SPAVO's efforts in offering their services to all callers regardless of their area of residence. We tentatively expect no differences between the urban and rural samples on the services they will be requesting and services they will be offered from SPAVO. On the other hand, research above leads us to expect rural dwellers to have had less access to services related to domestic abuse, as compared with urban dwellers.

Method

Procedure

The data was obtained directly from SPAVO's database which is updated by the association's employees. The years looked at were 2011-2012 because these were the most recent years available for analysis. The authors understand that data from two years cannot be used to claim that any phenomena identified from this research study have been or remain consistent over time; however, given the wealth of information that is available through this dataset, we feel it is appropriate for use in such studies.

Six employees and six volunteers from SPAVO were responsible for the collection of the data. SPAVO's database is the most complete database in Cyprus regarding figures on domestic violence, seeing as police records are currently unavailable to the public. Furthermore police records do not include instances of violence that have not been reported to the police or proceeded in prosecution. On the other hand, SPAVO's data cannot inform us

on the outcome of the particular case i.e. we are unaware as to whether the victim has remained with their abuser, if the case has been reported to the police, and if so whether further action has been taken by the criminal justice system. Overall, there is a wealth of information available from within SPAVO's database that is not currently available elsewhere, and so it is our opinion that this should be taken advantage of to promote research within this area for Cyprus.

A total of 2,919 cases were retrieved for 2011-2012. After removing 522 duplicates, 2,397 cases remained which were believed to be individual cases of domestic abuse reports. Duplicates were defined as repeat calls referring to the same case or victim. Duplicates were removed as to avoid inflation of the sample size with multiple entries of the same case. In addition, 1,010 cases were removed as the area in which the caller lived (urban or rural) was not reported. The call handlers record this information only if it is provided by the caller thus justifying the high number of cases whose area of residence was not recorded. This left a total of 1,387 cases of alleged abuse that were reported only once to SPAVO for inclusion in our analyses. The following analyses concentrated on victims of abuse as opposed to perpetrators as the aims of this paper do not relate to services provided, offered or utilised by the alleged perpetrators in this sample.

Ethical issues

Ethical issues arise regarding the personal information of alleged victims of abuse, regardless of their age. The data related to alleged victims and perpetrators of domestic violence cannot be shared with anyone outside of SPAVO, nor can it be reproduced in any way. Moreover, information revealing peoples' identities such as names and addresses were removed during the data analysis. In addition to the above, members of the research team can only work with the data while at SPAVO's premises and are not allowed access to the

internet while working on the data. These procedures are all in place to ensure the privacy and protection of both the alleged victims and perpetrators based on the Processing of Personal Data (Protection of the Individual) Law of 2001 of the Republic of Cyprus.

Sample

In this sample of 1,387 callers to SPAVO's helpline, 893 individuals reported being from an urban area (64.4%) and 494 reported being from a rural area (35.6%). In both the rural and urban samples, the majority of the alleged victims were females. Furthermore, the alleged victims were primarily within the 18-60 years age group, followed in respectively in smaller numbers by those in the 0-17 and 61+ age groups. The majority of the victims in both samples reported suffering psychological and physical abuse, followed in smaller number by the remaining types of abuse. Table 1 below shows detailed information on the demographics of the sample.

---Insert Table 1 here---

Results

The analysis of the data was split into three groups; 1) services requested by the caller at the time of the telephone communication with SPAVO's handler, 2) services received by the caller, and 3) services recommended to the caller by SPAVO's helpline operator.

Descriptive Statistics

Services requested

The descriptive statistics in Table 2 related to the services requested by the callers indicated no apparent differences between the urban and rural samples. Across both groups, the majority of the callers requested communication through the telephone as opposed to a

face to face meeting. Similarly, the majority of the victims contacting SPAVO across both groups requested advisory support. For the rural sample, this was followed respectively by: 1) the desire to report an incident, 2) to request information regarding the role of SPAVO, 3) to request advisory support (such as what the appropriate actions are in reporting incidents of abuse) and shelter, 4) to request only shelter, 5) to report an incident and request intervention (such as for members of SPAVO to visit the scene of an incident), followed by 6) requests of financial assistance and finally, 7) the request for counselling meetings. For the urban sample, the remaining individuals requested, respectively, 1) information, 2) the desire to report an incident, 3) to request only shelter, 4) to request advisory support and shelter, 5) to request a counselling meeting, 6) to report an incident and request intervention, and finally 7) financial assistance. It must be noted, however, that financial assistance and interventions in the home are not offered by SPAVO under any circumstances. The hypothesis that there would be no differences between the urban and rural samples on the services they would be requesting was met here.

---Insert Table 2 here---

Services received

Once again, Table 3 provides no indications of differences between the urban and rural samples in the services they received prior to contacting SPAVO. Over half of both samples did not give a statement to the police, whereas only about a third had given the police a verbal statement. Approximately a third of the sample stated the police did not get involved in following the incident of abuse. Approximately 30% of both samples stated they had not withdrawn their police report, whereas close to 5% for both samples said they had withdrew their report. The majority of the victims in both groups were not recipients of any form of help from the social services department. A smaller number of the victims reported

receiving either intervention at home and supervision or financial assistance. Almost 70% of both samples had not needed to visit the accident and emergency department, whereas about 15% had visited the accident and emergency department. Close to 70% of both samples had not spoken to a lawyer, nor to a psychologist or psychiatrist. The hypothesis which stated that rural dwellers would have less access to services related to domestic abuse, as compared with urban dwellers was not met as there were no differences between the two groups on the services they had used.

---Insert Table 3 here---

Services Recommended

Table 4 indicates no differences between the rural and urban samples on the services they were recommended by the helpline operators at SPAVO. The overwhelming majority of individuals in this sample (around 80% of both samples) stated that they had been asked to call SPAVO at a later stage. Approximately 60% from both samples reported they had been asked if they wanted to contact the police. Just over half of both samples reported they had been asked if they wanted to speak to the Social Services. The majority of individuals in both samples were not asked if they wanted to speak to a psychologist/ psychiatrist, if they wanted a counselling meeting with one of SPAVO's psychologists or if they wanted to speak to a lawyer. Almost none of the individuals in these samples had been asked if they wanted to visit a hospital, stay in SPAVO's shelter or participate in the intervention programme "Love without hurt". The hypothesis which stated that there would be no differences between the urban and rural samples on the services they would be offered from SPAVO was supported by the data here.

---Insert Table 4 here---

Discussion

The figures from SPAVO's data indicate the sample was comprised of approximately 60% urban dwellers and 40% rural dwellers. Results indicated no differences between urban and rural populations on the services they received prior to contacting SPAVO, the services they requested from SPAVO's helpline operators, and the services they were recommended by the helpline operators. The findings indicated most people requested only telephone communication with SPAVO, as opposed to face to face meetings and were seeking mostly advisory support. The majority of both samples had not given a statement to the police, had not involved the police, had not visited an accident and emergency department and had not requested assistance from a lawyer, psychologist or psychiatrist. The majority of the sample had been asked to contact SPAVO at a later stage and if they wanted to contact the police or social services. On the other hand, in most cases callers to the helpline were not asked if they wanted to speak to a psychologist/ psychiatrist, if they wanted a counselling meeting with one of SPAVO's psychologists, to speak to a lawyer, to visit a hospital, to stay at SPAVO's shelter, or to participate in an intervention programme.

Our expectations regarding the first research question were met by the data of this study. The majority of the sample in this study reported being from an urban area which is what was expected considering the distribution of the population according to rural and urban areas in Cyprus. That there were no differences between the two samples in the services they requested and were offered by SPAVO also supports our second hypothesis. It would appear

SPAVO's employees treat all callers to the helpline equally with no differentiation according to area of residence.

Expectations from the final research question were not met by our analyses. One possible reason for this stems from the fact that governmental services (e.g., social services) and charities or non-governmental organisations tend to operate within the limits of cities. The social services department, for instance, does not provide outreach services for residents of rural or less populated areas. Our findings here are in support of Schafer and Giblin (2010) who argued for a lack of appropriate infrastructure in rural areas. It would appear Cyprus also suffers from the same issues identified by the previous researchers. One might assume that rural dwellers would find the journey to the services they require as being long and tedious, and so avoid making these trips. The question may subsequently arise to why there remain no differences between these two samples. The majority of both samples stated in approximately equal percentages that they had not accessed services such as the police or social services. The issue, thus, appears to be, not the location of the caller, but rather their willingness to contact the appropriate services to begin with. Possible reasons for the fact that there are no differences between urban and rural dwellers could be because travel distances are shorter throughout Cyprus in general and most people, regardless of age or socioeconomic status, now have access to cars. Furthermore, many people residing in rural areas have been effectively forced to leave their homes for urban areas in search of employment, whereas many of those who remain in rural areas often commute to urban areas on a daily basis for their jobs. Thus urban and rural dwellers may not differ significantly in terms of the services available to them. Urban dwellers will likely be as conservative as rural dwellers, and they will probably be afraid of behaving in a way that is not socially acceptable and where people will gossip about them. The issues of culture, shame, religiousness and conservatism have all

been highlighted above in previous research (Alston, 1997; Wendt, 2009) and it is possible that these factors also have a role in Cyprus in the willingness of victims to report their abuse.

On the other hand, and in support of Alston (1997), the fact that there appear to be no differences between urban and rural dwellers on the services they have received access to could be a reflection of each group's willingness to report their abuse. While there may be differences between urban and rural dwellers, this difference will not be apparent if they are unwilling to seek help in the first place.

Findings are also conflicting regarding the services offered by the helpline operators to callers of the helpline. There may be two reasons for this finding; the first being that the helpline operators are not instructed to offer these services. The second reason, and possibly the most likely, is that the helpline operators offer these services to the caller depending on the nature of the call and the specific incident. Seeing as there were no differences on these variables between the urban and rural samples, it can safely be concluded that the helpline operators are not influenced by the caller's location when recommending any additional services.

Limitations of this type of research centre on the fact that the data we have presented here are not representative of all victims of domestic violence. This data is a reflection of people who recognise they have a problem at home and who are seeking ways to deal with it. There may also be other differences between urban and rural dwellers contacting SPAVO but not in ways we were able to measure through the dataset available to us (e.g., perhaps people in rural areas only contact SPAVO after more severe forms of abuse).

Future research could aim to interview victims of abuse who have stated that they have not contacted any other related service as to why they chose not to seek assistance from

elsewhere. It is not currently known whether factors such as shame, religiousness or cultural issues of these factors prevail in explaining the findings; however, future studies would undoubtedly shed light on the issue by including measures of these variables when attempting to explain why people from Cyprus, despite their location, experience difficulty in seeking services for domestic abuse.

In conclusion, data obtained from SPAVO, the only domestic violence NGO in Cyprus, has provided a significant insight into the experience urban and rural dwellers have with services available to victims of domestic violence. It appears that there are no differences between the two groups on the services they request both before contacting SPAVO and after, and the services they are offered from SPAVO. On the one hand, the fact that there are no differences between the samples is a significant advantage as it indicates the location of the victim is not a significant factor in their experiences of domestic violence. On the other hand, the majority of individuals from both samples had not accessed or sought a variety of services prior to contacting SPAVO. This would imply that there are other factors besides those inherent with service providers that influence whether or not individuals seek out services. In the case of Cyprus, it is highly likely the nature of society and the culture is greatly significant in swaying the individual in terms of reporting or not reporting incidents of abuse. Furthermore, this field overall highlights the need for the availability of service providers in rural Cyprus. It is possible that if service providers provided outreach programmes/ services to rural areas and made their presence known to members of the public, victims of domestic violence would feel more at ease with requesting help.

Another significant conclusion from the current study is the need for a systematic recording of domestic violence cases. The only data we have regarding cases of domestic violence in Cyprus come from SPAVO. Any data collected by the Police Department or

hospital/ medical services remain unknown to the general public. The researchers recommend for future research purposes and best practice that a common database is created which is updated by all relevant authorities (i.e. NGOs, Police, hospitals, courts). This database would inform us of the demographics of the victims and abusers, the progression of the case through the relevant service providers and the final outcome of the case. Future research would greatly enhance the field by highlighting the thought processes that are relevant to whether people seek assistance when dealing with domestic violence, and by making these services available to all people regardless of their area of residence.

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