

EVERYTHING HAS GOTTEN WORSE.

VIOLENT CRIME IS SURGING IN RURAL IOWA, FUELED BY THE STATE'S METH AND MENTAL HEALTH CRISES

LEE ROOD DES MOINES REGISTER

Published May 2018

GUTHRIE COUNTY, Iowa — Three of this county's seven deputies and a K-9 dog spent nine hours in March combing a secluded area near Lake Panorama for an alleged rapist.

Michael Mackensie Taylor, 35, a former taekwondo instructor from West Des Moines with a history of harassing women, was accused of beating his victim unconscious, then sexually assaulting her until she ran to a deputy's car, a criminal complaint said.

Even more disturbing was the alleged arson and murder last May that took the life of two Guthrie Center girls. Melanie Paige Exline, 12, had lived in town a couple of months; her 16-year-old cousin, Shakiah Cockerham, had for most of her life.

"It was devastating to all of us. I don't know how it couldn't be with two school-aged girls like that," said next-door neighbor Chuck Cleveland, 49.

Violent crime is slowly becoming more common in small towns and cities across Iowa, outpacing a rise in the state's urban centers, a Reader's Watchdog probe has found.

Law enforcement officials say drug use and a lack of mental health services across the state are helping push crime numbers higher.

The unsettling change is becoming increasingly apparent to Iowa's wider law enforcement community, and the Department of Corrections is scheduled to host a summit on the problem next month.

And it is altering the "smaller-is-safer" perception so long held by many Iowans in rural communities.

"My wife and I are sort of in a unique position because we're both (emergency) dispatchers," said Cleveland, who has lived in Guthrie County since the 1970s. "But we also raised kids who went to school here, and we didn't used to see this stuff then."

Statistics vary based on the data and timelines examined. But the rising trend is clear, state analysts say.

While Iowa's violent crime rate increased a slight 3 percent from 2006 to 2016, the rate among communities of fewer than 10,000 residents rose 50 percent during that same period, and the rate rose 16 percent in "micropolitan" areas of 10,000 to 49,999 people.

FBI data from the Iowa Department of Public Safety show that while violent crime statewide rose 7 percent from 2014 to 2016, smaller cities and towns saw much greater increases. Cities of 10,000 to 24,999 people saw a 1 percent increase. But cities of 25,000 to 49,999 people saw an 18 percent rise, and towns with fewer than 10,000 people saw a 12 percent hike.

The rise in small-town violent crime is most apparent in a handful of Iowa counties spread around the state, other data show. In Guthrie County, charges involving violent crime increased 84 percent — from 50 to 92 — from 2015 to 2017, according to county-level data requested from Iowa's Division of Criminal & Juvenile

Justice Planning. Six other rural Iowa counties — Monona, Madison, Osceola, Page, Jones and Monroe — saw violent charges leap by 50 percent or more, the data show. [Manage Subscription](#)

State analysts note that fluctuations in crime numbers can have a big impact on percent change. For example, murder and non-negligent manslaughter cases rose 25 percent statewide from 2014 to 2016, even though the overall number changed slightly from 64 to 72.

But other violent crime categories with larger numbers of cases, such as rape, rose as well — increasing 4.9 percent from 1,193 to 1,251.

New trouble mixes in

Longtime public officials such as Sheriff Marty Arganbright and County Attorney Mary Benton of Guthrie County say cheap housing lures in newcomers, who fill homes of natives who have moved to cities.

Criminal activity by some of those newcomers, combined with crime by longtime offenders, contributes to a downward spiral, they say.

Nonviolent crimes such as drug charges, burglary, motor vehicle theft, forgery and intimidation cases have also seen significant rises in the state's smallest communities, the 2014-16 FBI data show.

"Everything has gotten worse, not better. I hate to say that," Arganbright said. "The crime is higher. We have people who have moved in from Des Moines or other states.

"People ask me what's going to happen, and I don't know."

Iowa's violent crime rate remains about 25 percent lower than the U.S. average. But more serious violent crime has been on the rise since 2012.

Benton, who will retire at the end of the year, has noticed the overall rise in crime. Indictable felony offenses climbed 64 percent — from 182 to 300 — in Guthrie County from 2013 to 2017, she said.

At nearly 600 square miles, Guthrie County is 97 percent white, with about as many youth as seniors. With a median income of \$52,702 and a poverty rate around 11 percent, it is not among Iowa's poorest counties.

Yet widespread addiction, crime and neglect have caused some to use the term "rural ghetto" to describe what's happening in parts of Bagley, Bayard, Casey, Jamaica, Menlo, Panora, Stuart and Yale, small towns within the county, locals say.

Benton said she is not hopeful the problem will improve soon.

"Small towns aren't what they used to be, and some are worse than others," she said. "When I started here 23 years ago, it was all the usual suspects. In a county of 11,000 people, you used to know just about everybody charged with a crime in the last 20 years.

"But now, I'm like, 'Who's that?'"

Meth still drives the addiction train

Drive around Casey, a town of 400 once known for its antiques, and Deputy Kent Gries can point to homes where he's been dispatched on almost every block.

Gries estimates he's been to about 75 percent of the homes in Casey, because of either drugs, domestic disturbances or welfare checks.

The primary driver, he said, is the highly addictive Mexican cartel methamphetamine flowing into the area and the mental health problems that drug and others worsen, he said.

The city is only beginning to rebuild a city hall and community center burned to the ground by a city clerk convicted of stealing. The last remaining antique store in town and the Casey Cafe are being sold.

Casey's mayor and members of the City Council don't dispute the decline. But they have been working more closely with the sheriff's office and others to enforce ordinances and address abandoned property.

On a recent Sunday, a handful of people assembled at the local library to clear trash and spruce up around town.

"Years ago, people started moving to Casey because people said they don't enforce anything," said Mayor Barry Chalfant, who was raised on a farm 10 miles outside of town. "Once it's here, it's hard to get rid of it."

Chalfant and Councilman Bret Wedemeyer said Casey has an unusual amount of activity at the same houses, often in the middle of the night, and the town no longer has a local police officer.

"It's still a nice little town, but it's seen some hard years," said Wedemeyer, who sells insurance and real estate.

Ultra-pure meth ramps up problems

According to one oft-quoted national drug-use survey, the National Survey on Drug Use and Health, Iowa still has one of the lowest rates of illicit drug use in the nation and one of the highest rates of binge drinking.

But Gries said problems with meth are worse now in central and west-central Iowa than when hundreds of small, homemade labs riddled the Iowa countryside at the turn of the decade.

Iowa's prison population proves the point.

Meth-related prison admissions have been rising since 2009, climbing to 586 last year, according to Iowa's Department of Corrections. Admissions for heroin, pot, cocaine and opioids pale in comparison.

In 2014, the last national figure available, Iowa's rate of residents seeking treatment for meth addiction ranked highest in the United States, according to the Governor's Office on Drug Control Policy. Roughly 213 of every 100,000 Iowans sought treatment primarily for meth.

The national average was 53 for every 100,000.

Marijuana flowing into Iowa from several U.S. states is superior in quality to pot from Mexico. So cartels have

slashed prices and saturated communities with ultra-pure methamphetamine, Gries said.

Crystal meth that went for \$2,000 an ounce a couple of years ago can now be found for \$400 to \$450 an ounce, he said.

That kind of purity, around 97 percent, can create instant addicts of people who never had addiction problems before, experts say.

Last year, 9,193 Iowans were admitted for treatment with meth as their primary addiction — up 126 percent from the year 2000.

“The president called the opioid epidemic a national crisis,” Gries said. “But for two generations now, we’ve been having people kill themselves slowly with methamphetamine. And in that same time, they’ve been tearing their families apart.”

Gries said he’s made 350 drug arrests in his six years in Guthrie County — most of them for meth, marijuana and a mix of other drugs. That’s roughly one in every 30 county residents. The county’s six other deputies make similar numbers of arrests.

“Substance abuse and mental health are at the nexus of every call we get,” he said.

Less law enforcement in rural areas

With less law enforcement available in rural areas, some arrests are more dangerous than others.

In 2016, a wiry parolee who was high and carrying a golf ball-sized stash of meth in his pocket attacked Gries in a Casey’s store in Panora while he was the only deputy on duty in the county.

He said the three-minute scuffle that ensued was one of only two times in his career that he had to push a panic button alerting others he was in trouble. To get help, he said, he wound up flagging down a bail bondsman driving by the convenience store.

“Otherwise, I was going to have to shoot the guy,” he said.

The attack on Gries and other close calls helped Arganbright persuade county supervisors to increase the number of deputies several years ago from five to seven.

But the sheriff’s department also absorbed Guthrie Center’s two-officer police department at the same time.

Elsewhere in Iowa, resources have not kept up with the slow increase in crime.

Monona County Sheriff Jeffery Pratt said people increasingly are moving to far western Iowa for the same reasons as in Guthrie. Some assume they can fly under the radar of local law enforcement, he said.

Pratt said the drug problem in the area has gotten so bad that he’s devoted three of his seven deputies to intelligence work. Last October, those deputies served 14 search warrants in one night, overfilling the county jail.

“And beds for the mentally ill are still very hard to find,” Pratt said. “We have had to look to transport as far away as Chicago. We’re hauling people to Iowa City, a good five-hour drive for us.

“I asked for another deputy this year, but the supervisors said there wasn’t enough money. They said they could see the need, but there still wasn’t enough money.”

Jail: Home for those in crisis

A decade ago, it was common to find Guthrie County’s 10-person jail, built in the 1950s, empty on a weekday.

But last month, six inmates were there on a Thursday afternoon, including two high-bail prisoners such as Taylor, the former West Des Moines man accused of kidnapping and rape.

More often, cells are filled with people with addiction or mental health problems who have been busted for possession or other crimes, the sheriff said.

“The mental health folks land in my jail,” Arganbright said. “I call it Marty’s rehab. You get food and a place to sleep. But jail is not a place for mental health patients.”

Across the state, adult mental health commitments have exploded by almost 50 percent since 2008.

Yet Iowa ranks 49th out of 50 states for state mental hospital beds. Deputies complain that the state’s real-time database of available inpatient psychiatric beds is hopelessly inaccurate.

Last month, after thousands of families across the state criticized the lack of treatment, Gov. Kim Reynolds signed a bill, House File 2456, that expands mental health services.

It creates six regional “access centers” for people who are having mental health crises who but don’t need hospitalization.

The bill also creates “assertive community treatment” teams to help people with serious mental illness stay on medication and in treatment to try to avoid hospitalization. The legislation changes mental health commitment rules and encourages the development of “subacute” treatment facilities.

Dale Woolery, associate director of the Governor’s Office on Drug Control Policy, said the new law should help.

“But we have not turned the tide on the meth addiction problem,” he said. “That’s something we’re going to have to try to do better.”

A struggle to keep officers

It’s unclear yet whether drugs or mental health played a role in the two most high-profile violent crimes recently in Guthrie County.

Patrick Ryan Thompson, a 25-year-old Nevada man, was charged with arson and murder in the two girls’ slayings last May.

Thompson allegedly sent texts before the fire suggesting he was homicidal over reports of incest involving 12-year-old Paige Exline's brother and father.

A continued escalation of such serious crimes will take a toll on law enforcement, especially sheriff's departments, officials said.

All of Iowa's 99 counties have sheriff's departments, but only about 292 of the state's 943 municipalities still have police departments, according to the Iowa Law Enforcement Academy.

"In some of these small towns, the response time is not good," said Alan Kemp, executive director of the Iowa League of Cities.

In Guthrie County, cities without local police include Bagley, Bayard, Casey, Guthrie Center, Jamaica, Menlo and Yale.

Only Panora, population 1,124, and Stuart, population 1,648, have their own police departments. Others share deputies with the county.

Small towns, Arganbright said, can't keep police because they pay less than larger cities and most sheriffs departments.

"We stay busy," Arganbright said.

Lee Rood's Reader's Watchdog column helps Iowans get answers and accountability from public officials, the justice system, businesses and nonprofits. Reach her at lrood@registermedia.com, at 515-284-8549, on Twitter at @leerood or on Facebook at [Facebook.com/readerswatchdog](https://www.facebook.com/readerswatchdog).