

Beware those high school sophomores

Vandalism tops list of rural crimes

BY SHEILA MILLER

LITZ — Vandalism is the leading crime committed in the rural community, reports G. Howard Phillips of the Ohio State Rural Crime Prevention Department.

In studies conducted at Ohio State, Phillips showed 38 percent of all crimes committed against rural residents' properties were acts of vandalism.

Looking back at FBI records for the years 1972 and 1973, he discovered a 15.7 percent increase in the number of rural vandalism arrests in the U.S. And, of those arrested for the offense, 59 percent of the offenders were under 18 years of age.

His delving into the records also revealed that from 1972 to 1973, the number of persons under 18 years of age arrested for rural vandalism increased 25 percent, with the sixteen year old age group being the largest.

As a result of these surprising statistics, a study was undertaken at three rural Ohio high schools to survey sophomore students in an effort to discover who was committing these acts of willful and malicious destruction of property and why.

The findings of the study disclosed that 52 percent of the students had committed one or more acts of vandalism. Thirty-seven percent of the girls reported having been involved in vandalism while 68 percent of the boy students admitted involvement.

The study pointed out

there was no relationship between whether a student committed an act of vandalism and if he or she was a member of a religious organization. And, it didn't seem to make any difference whether the student was a hometown boy or girl or a short-term resident.

One factor that did point towards being significant was the marital status of parents.

"Rural high school sophomores are more likely to have committed acts of vandalism if the head of the household where they resided was divorced, separated, or widowed when compared to students from households where the head was married," reports Phillips.

The study also pointed to the fact that students whose family was headed by the mother or a parent over the age of 50 tended to be more involved in vandalism.

The survey findings also showed the crime was most often committed when the students were responding to peer pressure and had been drinking. Although most of students traveled to the scene of the crime in a car (47 percent), it was reported 36 percent walked to the vandalized site.

The findings also revealed the most frequent time for vandalism was in the fall (31 percent), on weekends (59 percent), and usually in the afternoon (36 percent).

And, Phillips reported over half of the vandalism acts were done "for the fun of it", with 12 percent done to get even.

Phillips attributes this

increasing rate of vandalism among teenagers to a number of things.

"... these students have low regard for the rights of other people to own or hold property unmolested. It perhaps suggests these rights have not been taught to modern youth or at least they have not fully accepted them.

"Perhaps a low regard for others' property rights is a spin-off of contemporary affluence. As more people have more property, perhaps it has less meaning or value as when it was scarce."

He also cites modern transportation, consolidation of schools, an increasing number of one spouse households, the declining sense of belonging to a community, and less defined roles for adolescents as part of the "rising phenomenon of vandalism in rural areas."

"Vandalism used to be thought of as pranks," he said. "Now it's a serious problem. It costs taxpayers over \$600 million to repair and replace the damages and losses for vandalism committed in rural schools."

"What's changed is accessibility."

"Building farm to market roads has been a popular political idea since World War II. However, the transportation system also allows the town and city residents a means of traveling to the country, committing criminal acts, and getting away anonymously."

"Added to that is the fact that in our affluent society,

more students have their own vehicles and too much time on their hands.

In years past, the farmer dominated the rural community — now the non-farm residents have integrated into the social setting. It used to be a crime control when everybody knew everybody — now there are a lot of strangers in the new population mix."

And recognizing a potential criminal is no easy task, he added. The Ohio State research team characterized offenders as follows:

- 74 percent are under 30 years of age;
- 16 and 19 year olds are the most often arrested age group;
- 87 percent are male;
- 27 percent are students;
- 60 percent are urban residents;
- 64 percent are unmarried;
- 45 percent are arrested in a group;
- 23 percent are intoxicated;
- 31 percent have previous records known to the police;
- 93 percent are white.

What are the types of things taken, damaged or destroyed by rural thieves or vandals?

The number one thing on their list, says Phillips, is gasoline. Automotive related items are the highest percentage of stolen or vandalized goods, ranking 21 percent.

Following automotive items are tools, 16 percent, residential belongings, 10 percent, recreational items, 8 percent, money, 8 percent;



televisions and radios, 7 percent; mailboxes, 7 percent; appliances, 6 percent; jewelry and guns, 6 percent; animals, 3 percent, and food and drink, 3 percent.

In next week's issue of Lancaster Farming, we'll take a look at where rural crime is likely to occur and what can be done to discourage it.

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