

## The Dangers of Small Town Life

I live in a small town, so I was quite shocked a few weeks ago by an announcement that a researcher at the University of Pennsylvania had discovered that rural life was more threatening to one's existence than life in the city. This startling discovery was published in the *Annals of Emergency Medicine*, a respected peer-reviewed journal, and immediately received wide coverage by both electronic and print media. Sage Myers, a physician at the University of Pennsylvania and the study's lead author, was quick to aver, "The big, bad city is less deadly than the suburbs or small-town America."

It got worse. The University itself declared that the study "overturn(ed) a commonly-held belief that cities are inherently more dangerous than suburban and rural communities." MSN crowed, "...It's a fantasy that rural small towns are safer than urban hellholes..." continuing, "The risk of death from an injury is more than 20 percent higher in rural counties as a result of shootings, drowning, vehicle accidents, falls and other accidents."

Thankful for the fact that my children had managed to reach near-adulthood without a gruesome and untimely death, I suppressed my immediate urge to put my house on the market and began to look into the study in more detail. It has been my experience over the years that many great "discoveries" touted by the press seem not quite so grand when examined closely. Not wanting to leave my cozy little farm in the country, I was hoping this might be the case with this new finding. I managed to get my hands on a copy of the article and began reading.

The study looked only at what were termed "unintentional" deaths—accidents mostly—but including both homicides and suicides, a bit of a stretch by my way of thinking. It was awash in statistics, analyzing approximately 1.3 million deaths from 1999 through 2006. As I dug into the numbers, some interesting facts began to emerge. Far and away the most common cause of death was motor vehicle accidents. Many of the "statistically significant" differences in death rates compared the "most rural" areas of the U. S. to the "most urban." Translated into practical words, that meant stacking the death rates in, say, Withlacoochee, Georgia against those in the precincts of New York's Times Square.

Even this statistical disparity in traffic deaths began to break down if you don't compare the *most* urban areas to the *most* rural. The authors ranked degrees of "rurality" on a 9-point scale. If you simply view

the middle of this scale, the motor vehicle accident death rates are only slightly different. The authors were comparing one extreme to the other, a trick sure to maximize the differences. Hey, folks in the big city don't drive that much, and when they do, it's for shorter distances. Being killed in a car crash is—for the most part—dependant on how much you drive, it's that simple. If you live in a rural area, you're going to drive (or be driven) greater distances.

Digging further, I discovered that the rates of death from homicide were much lower in rural areas, on average far less than half. It would appear that the conventional wisdom that you're more likely to be a murder victim if you live in a city is still true, despite what the press releases might say.

The more I thought about it, the more it bothered me. What do urban dwellers do for a living? Work in offices and stores and in service trades, perhaps? Turning to some other sources, I looked up the Bureau of Labor Statistics list of most dangerous jobs. For 2012, the number one on-the-job killers faced those involved in agriculture, forestry, fishing and hunting, producing death rates roughly 10 times that of workers in the "leisure and hospitality" segment of the economy. To translate this, loggers, for example, are more likely to be killed on the job than are waitresses. Following this, the next most dangerous jobs involved mining, transportation (i.e., truck driving mostly) and construction. I don't recall seeing too many mines in urban areas, and unless I'm mistaken, most "transportation" takes place on the open (rural) road.

In an interview about her research, Dr. Myers said, "If you consider safety as your risk of injury overall, we found that you're actually safest in larger cities and get less safe as the areas become more rural." This turns out to be a pretty disingenuous statement. A better way of phrasing it might be, "If you don't drive—which is the most likely way to be killed in an accident—you will be safer." The media's misguided reaction to this bit of news was the equivalent of the headline, "Scientists reveal shocking new finding: The sun is said to rise in the east and set in the west."

So, my house is not on the market and I'm feeling a bit reassured that my chances of being murdered are less out here in the boonies. And for the majority of those who didn't bother to read beyond the headlines, I've enhanced my reputation among them as an adventurer, one willing to face unknown dangers for the edgy pleasure of living far away from the city. I'll let them keep their delusions.