

Calling 911 in rural California?

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A spring snowstorm was bearing down on the remote mountain town of Kettenpom when Norma and Jim Gund received an unexpected call from the Trinity County Sheriff's Office.

The Gund's neighbor, Kristine Constantino, had dialed 911 from her cabin five hours northwest of Sacramento and hung up. The closest deputy was en route from the county seat of Weaverville, 97 miles away. But the drive — through rugged forest and over steep passes — would take almost three hours.

The Gund's said the sheriff's office asked if they could check on their neighbor in the meantime. They were happy to oblige.

As the afternoon slid into evening, Jim, then 59, and Norma, 49, drove their blue Ford pickup to Constantino's house, a quarter-mile down a dirt road.

Norma approached the house while Jim stayed in the truck. Before she reached the front door, a man met her outside and told her Constantino was fine.

Norma insisted on going in anyway. As she crossed the threshold, she saw Constantino and her boyfriend dead on the floor, their bodies wrapped in plastic.

Then an excruciating jolt surged through her body. She later would learn she had been hit with a stun gun. But in the moment, Norma knew only that her muscles were contracting and her legs were buckling. She fell to the floor and the man jumped on top of her, slashing her face and throat with a hunting knife.

Entering the house to check on his wife, Jim saw the stranger holding Norma down, bloody blade in hand.

"Run, Norma! Run!" Jim shouted as the man turned the attack on him.

Too few deputies

As urban areas such as San Francisco, Los Angeles, Sacramento and Fresno grapple with discussions about [use of force](#) and the [over-policing](#) of minority communities, the

state's rural counties face a growing and no-less-serious law enforcement crisis: a severe shortage of staff that puts the public — and deputies — in danger.

A McClatchy investigation found that large stretches of rural California — where county sheriffs are the predominant law enforcement agencies and towns often run only a few blocks — do not have enough sworn deputies to provide adequate public safety for the communities they serve.

Departments in multiple jurisdictions are operating with skeleton staffs, McClatchy found, pushing response times into hours, or sometimes leaving residents without a response at all. In Trinity County, deputies regularly cover hundreds of miles of territory alone, leaving people like the Gunds to fend for themselves. When law enforcement does arrive in many outlying places, it's often a single officer cut off from backup and, in some cases, communication with her or his department.

"We have no money. We have no people," said Modoc County Sheriff Mike Poindexter, echoing more than a dozen rural California sheriffs. "We don't have near enough people. We just don't."

McClatchy interviewed law enforcement and residents in 20 counties and examined staffing levels and crime statistics in 25 counties identified as rural by the [California Communities Program](#), a rural-affairs center run by the University of California. These counties account for 41 percent of the state's land but 4 percent of its population. They include tourist destinations such as the Mendocino coast and Yosemite National Park, as well as some regions that are so inaccessible they require horses, snowmobiles or boats to reach.

Data analysis showed the number of sworn deputies in these rural California counties has dropped by 8 percent in the last decade, when sheriff's department staffing in urban counties declined by only 2 percent. In 2008, 1,758 sworn deputies worked in rural counties, according to the California Department of Justice. By 2017, that number had dropped to 1,610. The decrease may not sound drastic, but the loss of those deputies has pushed some already overworked departments to a tipping point in service, sheriffs and others said.

While the Sacramento County Sheriff's Department employs nearly 160 deputies for every 100 square miles it covers, the tiny sheriff's departments in Madera, Mariposa and Mendocino counties employ about four deputies for the same amount of turf. In Del Norte and Alpine, the counties make do with two deputies per 100 square miles.

Those figures include non-patrol personnel and those who work in county jails. Leaving those deputies out, the sparse staffing of rural sheriff's departments becomes even more striking.

At any given time, for example, the Lake County department has just five deputies patrolling an area the size of Rhode Island. Amador usually deploys three or four deputies over 612 square miles.

"Unless there is a call for service, there are a lot of areas in the county that don't get patrol coverage," said Amador County Sheriff Martin Ryan.

In Lake County, where the [Mendocino Complex Fire](#) is still burning, a resident calling for aid in its remote reaches might have to wait 90 minutes for a sheriff's deputy to arrive, "and that's on a good day," said Sheriff Brian Martin.

Residents of Mono County, on the eastern slope of the Sierra Nevada, sometimes must wait two hours for a deputy, said Mono Sheriff Ingrid Braun.

On the North Coast in Humboldt County, deputies' response times can be as long as three hours. In the isolated mountainous areas of Madera County, the wait can stretch to four hours.

In multiple rural counties, not a single deputy actively patrols for certain periods of the day.

"There are deputies at home basically in bed that are subject to call-out if something is happening," said Greg Van Patten, field services commander at the Mendocino department, where deputies do not patrol for four hours a night.

Many rural Californians interviewed by McClatchy said the lack of nearby law enforcement is frightening.

"We can't ever just call someone and know that they will be here in a timely manner," said Janet Irene, who runs the Country Hearth restaurant in the Modoc County town of Cedarville, 20 miles over a mountain pass from the sheriff's office.

'Things go on in the hills'

Rural areas often are sparsely populated and historically have had meager law enforcement presence as a result, even including the small police departments that some towns may have in addition to the county sheriff. But these counties are increasingly grappling with the same problems as their urban counterparts —

homelessness, mental illness and drug use and production, including marijuana and opioids. These issues all add strain to the bare-bones departments.

Some counties have high, or higher, crime rates than metropolitan areas.

McClatchy analyzed county-by-county crime data supplied by the California Department of Justice and found the violent crime rate in rural counties was higher overall than elsewhere in the state during 2017 — though it varied significantly by county.

About 4.7 violent crimes took place per 1,000 residents in the 25 rural counties in 2017, compared to 4.5 violent crimes per 1,000 residents in other California counties. Some rural counties — Shasta, Lassen, Inyo, Lake, Modoc, Mariposa, Trinity, Madera, Plumas and Del Norte — have among the highest violent crime rates in the state. Most are also among the poorest counties.

Trinity County, where the Gunds live, had a crime rate of 5.7 violent crimes per 1,000 residents in 2017, higher than the statewide rate, according to the California Department of Justice. The attack on the couple likely was part of a robbery of a marijuana grow that Constantino was managing, according to the Trinity County Sheriff's Office.

On that day in March 2011, as Jim Gund grappled with the assailant, Norma was able to escape. She drove their truck to the town's only store for help. The stranger hit Jim nearly two dozen times with the stun gun and slashed him with the knife, but Jim managed to get away as well.

The attacker, later identified as [Tomas Gouverneur](#), 32, fled and died after crashing his car while being pursued by sheriff's deputies in neighboring Mendocino County.

The Gunds survived the ordeal and filed a lawsuit against Trinity County, claiming they were inappropriately asked to do a deputy's job. The Trinity County Sheriff's Department originally had disputed that it asked them to check on Constantino but later acknowledged it during court testimony. The Gunds' suit has been unsuccessful for them so far but is headed to the state Supreme Court.

Trinity County Sheriff's Lt. Christopher Compton declined to discuss the case, citing the litigation. But Compton said renegade pot growing and drug abuse have increased in the county, adding to crime.

“I could say that the challenges are unique to us,” Compton said. “But I don’t know if they really are.”

Doug Binnewies, the sheriff of Mariposa County, said his area has been hit hard by a mental health crisis and suffers from an acute shortage of treatment facilities, a problem that affects crime there. Rural counties have 0.9 psychiatrists for every 10,000 residents, about half the statewide average, according to California Medical Board data. Mariposa has been experimenting with “tele-doc” video technology to connect jail inmates with mental-health professionals in other counties.

Tex Dowdy, the sheriff-elect of Modoc County, said an influx of transient residents drawn to the low cost of living has made identifying suspects harder for Modoc’s deputies.

“It isn’t the same place where we used to live,” Dowdy said. “You used to recognize the bad guy walking around the street because he was in the paper every week.”

Humboldt County Sheriff William Honsal said patrolling in territory long known for its marijuana growing sometimes means trying to protect citizens who have purposely moved far from civilization and won’t call for help.

“Things go on in the hills all around us that go unreported,” he said. “We know that. Daily. It happens. It’s something that we’ve just gotten used to. There are shootings that occur in the middle of the night. ... We know that there’s kidnappings, we know there are people getting brutalized out in the hills, we know there are people getting robbed.”

In San Joaquin Valley’s farm country, undocumented immigrants fearful of arrest are sometimes reluctant to report crimes and present another growing challenge, said Madera County Sheriff Jay Varney.

“They’re kind of underneath the fear that if they have contact with law enforcement, they’re going to be immediately deported back to whatever country they came from,” said Varney as he cruised past an almond orchard.

Until recent years, many rural departments had regional substations and hired “resident deputies” who lived in the remote areas they served. Those resident deputies knew their territories and most of the locals by name, making it harder for crime to go unnoticed, said multiple sheriffs. Resident deputies also allowed for quicker response times.

Read more here: <https://www.sacbee.com/latest-news/article215453050.html#storylink=cpy>

Those in need “just come and knock on your door,” said Modoc’s Poindexter. “You just grab your gun belt and go out the door and try to fix it.”

Budget cuts have eliminated most of those positions.

State policy also has increased the strain, sheriffs said. Gov. Jerry Brown’s 2010 [prison realignment program](#), adopted in response to massive state budget deficits and a court-ordered crackdown on prison overcrowding, has dramatically altered how criminals are housed. Thousands of low-level felons have been shifted from state prison to county jails.

Proposition 47, passed in 2014, also reduced some nonviolent crimes from felonies to misdemeanors. At the county level, some sheriffs and deputies claimed the changes have curtailed arrests and created a revolving-door effect in the jail system, in which inmates are quickly put back on the streets — or never brought in — to allow space for those serving longer sentences.

Multiple deputies said they felt discouraged by realignment and had stopped arresting people for low-level offenses such as drug possession.

On a weekday in Lake County a few months ago, veteran Deputy Dennis Keithly drove his Ford SUV patrol vehicle with his drug-sniffing yellow lab Dozer. His 12-hour shift covered hundreds of miles.

Read more here: <https://www.sacbee.com/latest-news/article215453050.html#storylink=cpy>

As he was driving past a vineyard near the county seat of Lakeport, he stopped to talk to two men standing by a car on the side of the road.

Keithly asked one of the men, who identified himself as “Bill,” to tilt his head back. Bill’s eyelids began fluttering, a likely sign of methamphetamine use, the deputy said. Keithly gave Bill a quick lecture on the dangers of meth — “You’re going to be dead in your 50s if you keep doing that” — and searched the car for drug paraphernalia. He didn’t find any. He returned to his vehicle and pressed on.

Keithly reasoned the men weren’t worth more effort, much less looking for a reason to arrest them.

“He’s going to be cut loose in three hours,” the veteran deputy said. “It would be a waste of my time, his time, the jail’s time.”

Slow economic recovery

Multiple sheriffs said the shortage of deputies is a simple money issue. Most rural counties are poor and lack an economic base despite the state’s current boom.

Huge pockets of Northern California struggled with the demise of the timber industry in the 1990s, and hardships in farming and commercial fishing. They have failed to completely recover from the Great Recession even as urban and coastal areas once again thrive. Main streets in rural towns are pockmarked with empty shops, and tax revenue has languished or diminished, leaving local governments without money to pay for public services.

Counties where homes have been lost to wildfires are especially hard hit. More than 1,000 homes were lost in the recent Carr Fire in Redding. Lake County — where the largest wildfire in state history, the Mendocino Complex Fire, currently is burning — has lost about 1,785 homes to a series of wildfires since 2015, eroding property taxes.

Rural economies also are constrained by their vast quantities of protected federal and state lands — forests, parks, preserves and military bases among them — off limits for development and those resulting property taxes.

Counties receive “payments in lieu of taxes” from the U.S. government and the state, but Poindexter, the Modoc sheriff, said the funding doesn’t fully compensate for the lost revenue. That funding also has been unpredictable and is intended for a variety of public services, not just law enforcement.

On the federal level, the funding totaled \$60.4 million in California this budget year. Trinity County, with 1.6 million acres of protected federal land, received \$1.4 million. Modoc received \$1.2 million.

Read more here: <https://www.sacbee.com/latest-news/article215453050.html#storylink=cpy>

But those amounts are expected to decrease in the next budget cycle as federal funding changes. That leaves sheriffs uncertain about how much money they can expect in the future.

“You can’t sustain an operating budget not knowing what is coming,” said Justin Caporusso, vice president of external affairs at the Rural County Representatives of California, an advocacy group.

The state compensates counties for protected lands, too, but that funding has been controversial and even less predictable. Since the 2015-2016 budget cycle, the state has given rural counties \$644,000 for payments in total each year to be divided among them, said state Sen. Mike McGuire, whose coastal district spans seven counties from Marin to the Oregon border.

But the state says the payments are voluntary and didn’t make any for more than a decade before that.

Brown vetoed a 2016 bill by McGuire that would have made the payments mandatory but promised to continue them during his administration. McGuire plans on bringing legislation again in a fourth attempt to make the payments permanent.

“Small communities in rural counties desperately need these dollars to keep their neighborhoods safe,” McGuire said.

McGuire said that even though the amount is a “drop in the bucket” for urban areas, it’s vital in poor counties. Lake County, in his district, received \$7,920 from the state funds this year — enough to pay for the county’s subscription to the federal emergency alert system, he said.

Sheriffs said one of the biggest hurdles with inconsistent funding is that it forces them to pay poorly in comparison to urban departments and to offer fewer benefits, making recruitment and retention difficult.

In Lake County, the roster of sworn deputies has fallen from 77 in 2003 to 65 today. (Sworn deputies carry firearms.) Starting pay is \$25 an hour, compared to \$36 an hour in Napa, just two hours away.

“We recruit at the academies, but we just can’t compete with the other counties,” said Capt. Kevin Jones of the Lassen Sheriff’s Office.

Modoc’s sheriff offers \$13 an hour to rookie deputies.

“We get someone else’s reject that either didn’t make it off probation or didn’t make it off field training, and so we, for lack of anybody else, we take them and try to fix the

problems they had,” Poindexter said. “Sometimes we hit a home run, sometimes we don’t.”

Different policing, different expectations

The lack of deputies has left both those with badges and those they serve with tempered expectations of what law enforcement can do.

“In a big city, you have backup that’s right there,” said Braun, the Mono sheriff, who previously was a Los Angeles police lieutenant. “In a rural area, you don’t. You learn how to do things on your own, or you wait for backup. It can be challenging.”

Many sheriffs said they rely heavily on help from state and federal agencies including the California Highway Patrol and the National Park Service. In Cedarville in Modoc, investigative news reporter Jean Bilodeaux recalled when someone fired a gun at her while she was in her front yard after she published a controversial story about the local hospital. Her 911 call took nearly an hour to answer — and then it was a park ranger who arrived.

As departments adapt to handle the changing demographics and dangers in their counties, the problem may grow worse.

On a recent June afternoon in another part of Modoc, Deputy Justin Ridgeway and Sgt. Mike Main drove nearly two hours to investigate a disturbance call in the Ranchettes, a wooded warren of dirt lanes, trailers and junk-filled yards that once was meant to be an upscale retirement community. Deputies don’t regularly patrol it.

“At some point, we let it get away from us,” Dowdy, the sheriff-elect, said.

A few years ago, a deputy would have gone alone into places like the Ranchettes. Now, after a deputy was fatally shot in an ambush in 2016 while responding solo to a domestic violence call, they try to go in pairs, even if it means longer wait times for other callers.

The call the deputies were answering that day stemmed from a woman who had complained that another resident, Damien Roberts, had threatened her after she told him he was driving too fast. The deputies found what they described as an illegal pot grow at Roberts’ trailer and encountered Roberts driving about five miles away. A tall man with a heavy beard, he was irate when deputies pulled him over and asked him to step out of his truck. He yelled and waved his arms above his head, arguing the 911 caller had threatened his companion. Alone, it could have felt threatening for a deputy.

Ridgeway and Main remained nonchalant. Ridgeway told Roberts to stay away from the neighbors — and said he had given Roberts' neighbors the same warning. The deputies didn't bring up the illegal marijuana, deciding instead to return with re-enforcements.

Roberts, who said he'd had other altercations with police, calmed down and shook Ridgeway's hand.

"We have freedom with responsibility out here," Roberts told a McClatchy reporter. "We can do a lot of stuff. These guys referee."

On the two-hour trip back to the station, Main said he didn't know if he had done enough to intervene or if the dispute would escalate. But "verbal judo" was the best he could do without more backup. He said the first lesson he teaches new deputies is sometimes it's best to walk away.

"We've got to be smarter," he said. "I know that there is a hell of a lot of stuff where I'd feel a lot more comfortable going to a call with (more) people rather than just my lonesome. There's Tombstone courage where you get yourself into a situation where you've bit off more than you can chew and it might get you killed. ... If your Spidey senses are telling you something is about to get real, get the hell out of there, especially if you are by yourself."

How we reported this story: Four McClatchy journalists set out last December to answer a question — how effective is rural law enforcement in California? Starting with a list of 25 rural counties, as defined by a University of California policy center, they assembled a set of databases to compare crime rates and law-enforcement staffing levels with the state's urban counties. They then interviewed sheriffs, deputies and residents in 20 counties, by phone or in person. They also spent hours in patrol cars in Lake, Mono, Madera and Modoc counties and traveled to Kettenpom in Trinity County to meet with assault victims Norma and Jim Gund.

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