

Staying Safe in Farm Country



We uncover the five safest counties in rural America, and find out what keeps them that way.

BY SUSAN DAVIS

(Above) Sheriff Dale Williams and retired dairy farmers John and Ruth Weir are all natives of Carroll County, Ohio. “Everything here is a slower pace,” John says. PHOTO: SUSAN DAVIS

Farm country residents face different safety challenges than their city cousins, and they’re a trusting bunch. Millions of dollars worth of tractors, combines, fertilizer, tools and equipment are often left unlocked. Along with the barn doors, residents often leave the doors of their homes unlocked as well. Most of the residents were born and raised in a rural area and feel safe in the country.

The safety issue unique to farm counties is the price of equipment and the supplies, cost and time necessary to properly secure the equipment, says Ohio State rural sociologist Joe Donnermeyer in Columbus. And those city cousins don’t have \$6,300 worth of illegal drug ingredients outside their back doors in 1,500-gallon tanks of anhydrous ammonia.

So, with research help from OnBoard Informatics, *The Progressive Farmer* uncovered the safest rural counties. We took into account property crime, burglary, larceny, vehicle theft, and robbery and murder risk.

The counties we found with the lowest crime rates are as different as corn and cotton. Some have healthy law enforcement budgets and others are struggling. A few are less than an hour’s drive from major metro areas, and others don’t even have an interstate intersecting the area. In one county, the major crime challenge is keeping 4-wheelers from destroying crops; in another, it’s theft.

We did find a few safety secrets across the board, though: Being a nosy neighbor isn’t always a bad thing. Residents watch out for their neighbors and rely on the sheriff’s department to patrol the countryside.

Read on for more ideas on how to crack down on crime in your county.



#1 Carroll County, Ohio

Carroll County has hit the top of the list several years in a row. What's their secret? The residents credit seclusion for the low crime statistics. Even the closest urban areas, like Canton, are miles away, and no interstates cut through the county.

The northeastern Ohio county near Pennsylvania isn't totally free of crime. But while other rural counties have cut funding, Carroll County—with a population of 29,707—floats its sheriff's department a \$1.5 million budget.

"The commissioners and sheriff have placed a high priority on rural patrols by the sheriff's department," says Mike Hogan, Carroll County Extension educator.

"In three years we've busted 200 pushers," says the silver-haired Sheriff Dale Williams, who could have starred in a John Wayne movie. Williams credits residents like retired dairy farmer John Weir and his wife, Ruth, with watching for crime. "We are able to solve a lot of crime by a neighbor seeing something and giving us a call."

So, while living off the beaten path is a plus, the people make the difference. Howard Snyder farms 2,500 acres of corn, soybeans and wheat near Minerva. "That's the reason Carroll County is safe; it's mostly farming."



#2 Ralls County, Missouri

Like other residents in the safest places, farmer George Lane credits the local law enforcement with the county's top stats. "We have a good sheriff," says the county commissioner from Center, Mo.

When Lane, a lifelong resident, had problems with thieves breaking into his machine shed, the sheriff's department investigated to catch the perpetrators. Lane farms 1,200 acres of corn, soybeans and wheat, and raises cattle.

Livestock specialist Al Kennett isn't a native but has lived in Ralls County for 39 years. "We do have a very good sheriff's department in the county, and they have directed a lot of attention toward drug traffic in the county," says the University of Missouri Extension specialist from the county seat of New London.

Ralls has the lowest population—9,761—of the top counties.



#3 Tipton County, Tennessee

David Templeton, who farms 4,000 acres of corn and soybeans with his two sons near Brighton, Tenn., was surprised that his county would make a list like this. "We're a little more prudent than in the past, but we feel pretty safe compared to Memphis."

Memphis, with nearly twice the property crime of the national average, is about an hour's drive from Tipton's county seat of Covington. To keep criminals out of the 60,000-resident county, Sheriff J.T. Chumley partners with neighboring law enforcement officials. And the natives can monitor the county crime map on the sheriff's department web site (www.tiptonco.com).

A trespassing hot spot is the western part of the county, and the sheriff dispatches a patrolman to the area. "That's his primary job—helping farmers."

What do the crime rates mean?

Our crime rate numbers are the risk of incidence based on FBI crime data. The national average is 100; 200 would be twice the average risk, and 50 would be half the average risk. So, in Carroll County, Ohio, you are 20 times less likely to encounter crime than the average county nationwide.

These crime rates take into account both personal and property crimes from a number of different risk factors, from violent crime to vehicle theft to larceny. Visit our Best Places web site at about.dtnpf.com/bestplaces for a closer look at those numbers and full statistics on the counties in our top five.



#4 Bibb County, Alabama

Farmer Dan James praises Bibb County for being a wonderful place to raise a family. “Bibb County is a most congenial place. There are no metro areas so it lends itself to being a desirable place to live,” says James, who grows timber and raises cattle in a commercial cow/calf operation near Brent, Ala.

Located an hour south of Birmingham, the dry county (no liquor sales allowed) places second for the lowest robbery risk.

Does prohibition impact crime rates? “I look at it like this: If alcohol is readily available, people have a propensity to use it.” James sees the results of alcohol and drug addiction in a prison ministry at the Bibb County jail. In volunteering for several decades, James has worked with at least five sheriffs.

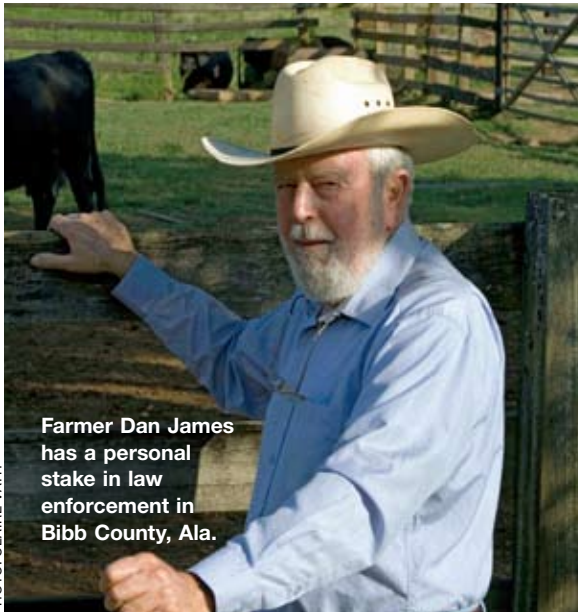


PHOTO: CLAIRE VATH

Farmer Dan James has a personal stake in law enforcement in Bibb County, Ala.



#5 Boone County, Indiana

This central Indiana county off Interstate 65 was also rated one of the top 10 places to live in rural America in 2006, and its crime rate fell after that designation.

“I’d like to give credit to the tremendous job that the sheriff and deputies are doing, but it’s the quality of people who live here,” says Sheriff Ken Campbell, who started working at the jail in 1979 when he was 19.

“A lot of the credit goes to the farmers and families who live in the rural area and take care of their neighbors.”

Neighborhood policing helps curb crime. You’re the best police officer in your area, Campbell stresses. “You know the neighbors and the area better than the deputies, and better than I do.”

The deputies speak to many community organizations like 4-H, whose members clean up the highways. Along with warning students about contamination from methamphetamine paraphernalia thrown alongside the road, the visit also explains how to report meth activities. They also demonstrate to students that “deputies are OK.” ●

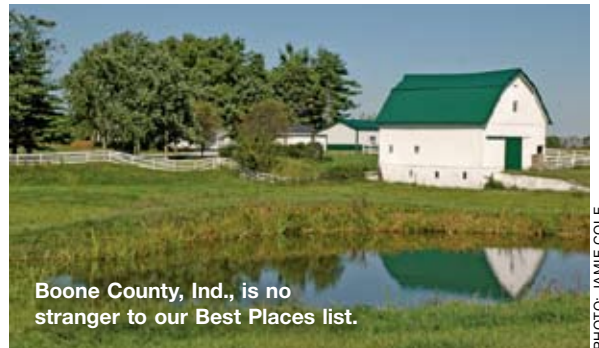


PHOTO: JAMIE COLE

Boone County, Ind., is no stranger to our Best Places list.



on the web

For complete stats on these counties, 2008’s top 500 rural counties and much more, visit the Best Places to Live in Rural America online at about.dtnpf.com/bestplaces