**Rural Policing:  
Understanding Police Knowledge and Practice in Rural Communities**

Funding body and duration

A project funded by the Scottish Institute for Policing Research, the Stirling Institute of Education, and the Carnegie Foundation, in partnership with the Northern Constabulary

Principal Investigators

* **Project supervisors:** Professor Tara Fenwick, Stirling Institute of Education, University of Stirling; Dr. Richard Dockrell, Stirling Institute of Education, University of Stirling, to manage the project activities, data analysis, and production of project reports.
* **Project consultant:** Professor Nicholas Fyfe, University of Dundee, to assist with data interpretation, focusing the findings, and positioning the study themes in terms of scholarly literature on policing.
* **Researcher:** Research Fellow, University of Stirling, to conduct interviews, assist with data analysis, and contribute to developing specific publications and presentations reporting the study.

Project Aims

The study has four main objectives:

1. to identify the distinct challenges of rural policing and the unique policing practices, knowledge and leadership developed to meet these challenges in rural Scotland;
2. to suggest specific implications for rural police officers' training, support, assessment, and leadership;
3. to explore the overall contributions of the police service to rural community well-being; and
4. to formulate specific research questions and a methodological approach for a larger comparative study to analyse rural policing models and challenges across countries.

Overview of the Research

* What unique demands are encountered by the police service in different rural contexts in Scotland?
* What unique approaches to policing have been developed for these rural areas?
* What unique contributions to rural community well-being can be made by the police service?

These are the three main questions guiding this study. Policing practice in Scotland and elsewhere varies tremendously according to particular contexts. Rural communities present special challenges to police professionals including large territorial distances, isolation from colleagues, limited access to resources for support, unique community expectations, role conflicts experienced by police officers in the social dynamics of rural neighborhoods, and even different forms of criminality. Unfortunately, evidence-based practice for policing tends to be based on models derived from urban contexts which have little in common with the demands of rural areas. Only a very limited research literature is available that documents or analyses the unique approaches and challenges of rural policing. This research seeks to address this gap by gathering evidence of distinct dimensions of rural policing practice and knowledge in Scotland's Highlands and Islands, e.g. those dimensions that require particular skills, resources and infrastructure that are not commonly recognized or supported. The study uses methods known as 'qualitative research' to examine individuals' professional experiences of rural policing. Focusing on Northern Constabulary, we will use a combination of in-depth focus groups and personal interviews with police personnel representing diverse locations and professional experience in rural policing. We are hoping that this study will form the first phase of a larger research project on rural policing that will involve other countries in Europe and globally that are concerned with understanding and supporting rural policing. This study's findings will generate an initial mapping of rural Scotland policing to identify unique demands, practices, organising approaches and policing needs, to compare with rural policing issues in other countries.

Research Methods

The study will use a mix of individual interviews with 6-10 senior management personnel in Northern Constabulary, and six focus groups (each with 6-8 participants) with sergeants and constables in different divisions. In addition, we will make available a confidential electronic survey for police officers in Northern Constabulary who wish to send their written responses to the focus group questions but who cannot arrange to attend a group session.

Interview and focus group questions will examine individuals' experiences, values and approaches to rural policing, and critical incidents of their rural police experience. The questions will focus on three main themes of rural policing practice:

* Community engagement and service delivery (including specific challenges of distances, territory, isolation and vulnerability in rural contexts)
* Tackling criminality/ anti-social behavior (including the unique nature of criminality and the most effective responses, in rural contexts); and
* Management and supervision of police work in rural contexts.

Focus groups and interviews will be tape-recorded and analysed using comparative qualitative analytic methods. All aspects of the study will be conducted in full accordance with ethical principles set forth by the British Educational Research Association. That is, all participants will be enlisted through fully informed and voluntary consent, all information they provide will be anonymised, all identification of individuals will be kept strictly confidential, and all participants have the right to withdraw from the study at any time for any reason.

Outcomes and Impacts

We will offer a presentation of the study findings and their practical implications for the Northern Constabulary. We also plan to present a workshop/seminar to interested members of SIPR (Scottish Institute for Policing Research), government representatives, and academics. Findings will be posted on the website for ProPEL: International Network for Research in Professional Practice, Education and Learning (University of Stirling) and the SIPR website. Potentially, findings will be used as the basis for a module on Rural Policing that can be offered through the new Postgraduate Diploma in Policing offered by SIPR. We also plan to present findings in scholarly papers presented to conferences and published in academic journals.

**Publications**

[**Research Summary: Rural policing: understanding police knowledge and practice in rural communities**](https://web.archive.org/web/20180107094839/http:/www.sipr.ac.uk/downloads/Research_Summaries/Research_Summary_10.pdf) Professor Tara Fenwick, Dr. Richard Dockrell, Dr. Bonnie Slade & Ian Roberts, University of Stirling; Professor Nicholas Fyfe, University of Dundee [Entered, September 2011]

[**Rural Policing: Understanding Police Knowledge and Practice in Rural Communities**](https://web.archive.org/web/20180107094839/http:/www.sipr.ac.uk/downloads/AnnRep2011/Rural_policing.pdf) (SIPR Annual Report, 2011)