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Luis Alberto Reyes Figueroa, PhD Candidate
Luis.reyes@ed.ac.uk

University of Edinburgh, School of Law

THE SYMBOLIC DIMENSION OF RURAL POLICING AND CONFIDENCE IN POLICE SCOTLAND

Summary: This briefing outlines the key issues and findings from independently funded Masters research that explored people's experiences on crime and policing in a rural area of southern Scotland. Interviews were conducted with two council officials, two police officers and ten local residents. Ten participants from different demographic backgrounds were interviewed. A focus group was also conducted with an LGBTI group to gain insight into their position in the community. The findings showed that, although crime is very low in the town, the respondents identified Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB) as the main concern, especially among young people. The respondents also suggested that the visibility of certain types of crime, such as domestic violence, are closely related - although not exclusively - to differences in deprivation and criminality levels among neighbourhoods. Their perception was that certain groups represented a symbolic threat to the social moral order. For instance, the presence of foreigners in the town may be associated, to some extent, to crime and the worsening of the local economy. Similarly, some LGBTI members revealed that they have suffered intimidation, which they felt prevented them from fully integrating in social life. The exigency of law and order for addressing certain kinds of crime reflected the notion of what was morally unacceptable. In contrast, much less was demanded for other types of crime that remained tolerated or invisible. In general, the respondents had a positive opinion of the police. Their visibility and responsiveness were valued, but it was felt that they could address certain issues better. The general perception was that centralisation brought in by Police Scotland has made it harder for residents to report crime and reach police officers. Finally, most perceptions on crime and policing were highly influenced by the exposure to news-media and social media. These findings indicate the necessity of rethinking the policing policies in rural areas of Scotland, in the context of a centralised single police force and the challenges for enhancing public confidence in them.

Context of research: This briefing is based on Master's research that explored the ways in which people's experiences of crime and policing influenced their confidence in the police, in a rural area of Scotland. This study was originally entitled *Improving public confidence in Police Scotland in rural settings: the recognition of the symbolic dimension*. It was conducted at the School of Law, University of Edinburgh, between June and August 2017.

INTRODUCTION

CONTEXTUALISING AND FRAMING KEY ISSUES

It was framed within the declining trends of public confidence in the police in the UK, and more specifically in Scotland when, in 2013, eight local police bodies became a single force. Only two years later, the positive opinion of the police dropped 3% (Scottish Government, 2016). In response, the research has pointed to different explanations that influence public confidence in the police. However, most of this research (i.e. Bradford, 2014; Jackson, *et. al.*, 2014; Kääriäinen, 2014; Merry *et. al.*, 2012; Myhill & Quinton, 2010; Skogan, 2006; Terpstra, 2011) has been conducted in urban environments and has focused on instrumental aspects of policing. The instrumental model suggests that the people abide by law and obey the police if they perceive that doing so is beneficial and outweighs the costs of not doing so. This view favours police effectiveness for tackling and preventing crime, as well as credible sanctioning threats that deter people from breaking the law. Thus, its foundations lie on a results-driven approach and deterrence-oriented strategies.

Although scarce, the extant research on crime and policing in rural places shows that instrumental views of policing fail to address the particularities of the countryside. In rural areas, the rules of public order seem to emanate from local social norms, and policing reflects this symbolically. This symbolism is especially relevant for perceptions on crime and policing, which have implications on social relations among rural residents, and between the residents and the police. From a theoretical point of view, it is significant for rural residents to have close relationships with the police and responsiveness from them. In exchange, the police obtain high levels of public respect and cooperation (Anderson, 1999; Girling, Loader and Sparks, 2000). In addition, not only do the police convey societal security, but they also indicate the status of the social and moral order (Walker, 1996: 56). Rural societies exhibit Neo-Durkheimian attitudes, whereby confidence in the police is associated with their ability to

represent the values of society. When the moral structure is perceived to be waning, people expect a stronger response from the police to re-establish the moral order and the values that such institution ought to represent. If this does not occur, confidence levels will drop. Thus, the symbolic dimension of policing is especially significant in rural areas for enhancing confidence in the police, insofar as it contributes to the maintenance of the social and moral order valued by the residents.

The studies available also stress the importance of having a clear understanding of the factors that distinguish rural life, and that differentiate its present from its past. In this regard, 'rurality' has been approached from two contending views. On one hand, it has been considered as a dangerous, savage and malevolent place "*populated by ignorant and conservative people*" (Donnermeyer *et. al.*, 2013: 81). On the other hand, it has been regarded as "*relatively orderly and cohesive*" in nature (i.e. Hogg & Carrington, 2006: 9), or mythicised as being homogeneous, static and sometimes a contradictory rural idyll (Moody, 1999: 15). In this idyllic view, social conflict is absent in rural places. However, there are divisions and differences among their members, due to changes in the composition of their communities. These cannot be seen because the idyllisation obscures to them (Moody, 1999). Similarly, the idyllic idea that crime is trivial or inexistent can be hardly sustained. Crime rates may be higher than urban rates in certain localities, at times and for specific types of crime (Donnermeyer and DeKeseredy, 2008). Just as in urban environments, the 'rural' is a place where people can also have different statuses –victims, offenders, and law-abiding citizens– at the same time and within the same place (Donnermeyer *et. al.*, 2013). Moreover, in the moral structure of rural places, individuals interpret crime as a "*marker of the breakdown of social organisation and moral norms*" (Jackson and Sunshine, 2007: 217).

More recently, rural perspectives criticise that the rural idyll marginalises individuals and groups that do not fit in the accepted idyllic imaginary (Scott

and Hogg, 2015). Instead, such critical approaches argue that the actions and perceptions of rural residents are affected, not by where they live, but by how they live there. The representations of rurality come to life through the activities and interactions that those living there perform in their everyday lives (Wooff, 2015). Not only does this view offer a contextual account of rural localities, but it also recognises the plurality of cultures, networks and social dynamics that occur in the same place.

From a practical point of view, exploring the symbolic dimension in rural areas also deserved attention, since Scotland is predominantly rural, its exploration allows better understanding of the interpretations of crime and policing that people have in the rural context, where they live. Accordingly, the aim of this research was to explore people's experiences on crime and policing in a rural area of southern Scotland. It sought to answer three questions:

1. What is perceived as crime in rural Scotland?
2. How is crime perceived, in terms of concern and its sources, among the residents of rural Scotland?
3. What social mechanisms are used by the residents in rural Scotland for responding to public sensibilities of crime?

SOURCES OF INFORMATION

This study adopted a qualitative approach. This included face-to-face interviews with two local council officials, two police officers, and ten local residents from different demographic backgrounds including young people, the elderly, immigrants, and victims of crime – as well as residential origins (i.e. born-and-bred locals) and people that arrived more recently to live there. As the research sought to remain open to relevant data, it was possible to organise a focus group with local community members who identify as LGBTI. The inclusive nature of this method was important to give them voice, since they belong to the vulnerable 'other rural' people

that are invisible in traditional rural depictions. The access to the residents was possible with the support of the local Police Division, which highly influenced the sample of participants. Although this could raise concerns of partially representing the community, it was considered a legitimate strategy, given the exploratory nature of this project. The name of the town where this study took place – whose name cannot be disclosed due to ethical considerations – was chosen due to important changes that it has experienced during the last three decades. New housing and retail developments have transformed the local landscape. Other types of businesses have become more relevant than farming. The composition of its population has also shifted towards more elderly and immigrant residents, as well as English tenants and visitors. It worth noting that the choice of this town could open to criticism as to what extent it could be considered rural, due to the changes that have occurred there. However, the town offered the possibility to study if and how such changes had affected the perceptions of the residents' ordinary context. Thus, it allowed the exploration of different views on the 'traditional' or idyllic perceptions of rural life, and how these may have been altered by the recent developments that the town has experienced.

FINDINGS

The interviews and the focus group supplied rich narratives on the experiences on crime and policing. These constitute the main results, reported below.

What is perceived as crime in a case study in rural Scotland?

All the respondents agreed that crime is very low in the town, but many of them identified Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB) as a main problem, especially among younger people. Since this can have a different connotation in rural settings (Wooff, 2014) the participants associated ASB with drugs-and-alcohol related crimes, vandalism, street disorder, and other forms of

property damage. It was also related –in lesser extent– to travelling-crime and scams. Interestingly, four respondents mentioned that the main reason behind ASB among the youths is parenting. In their opinion, young people learned ASB attitudes from their parents –such as drug addiction. A comment from one elderly participant was enlightening on the moral feature that parenthood entails: *“There are too many mothers working, not looking after their children... put a mother in the workplace, put more police on the streets”*.

When asked about other forms of crime many of the respondents were aware of domestic violence occurrence, but not particular cases, or how frequently these occurred. Nevertheless, perceptions on domestic violence seemed to be different among the residents that spent most of their time in deprived neighbourhoods. A young participant said that *“is a lot of domestic violence and vandalism in the town”*. Therefore, these views must be contextualised to the neighbourhood’s reality. In addition, most of the main crimes that the participants identified matched those mentioned by the police and council officials. This is relevant, as the police response depends on priority levels that they assign internally, and these may not always match people’s priorities.

How is crime perceived, in terms of concern and its sources, among the residents of the town studied in rural Scotland?

The respondents associated their concerns with both internal and external sources. In the literature *“the rural others”* refers to members of the ‘community’ considered illegitimate, due to their social characteristics.

Some narratives pointed out that locals, rather than outsiders committed most types of crime, which is opposed to idyllic views. Other voices, especially the elderly, related certain foreign nationalities with crime. For instance, Eastern Europeans and Nigerians were deemed responsible of travelling-crime and phone scams, as one participant mentioned: *“People*

from Romania and Lithuania could be a problem. In the TV they were saying a bus came from Rumania trafficking people... you also read about them in local newspapers on pickpocket crimes”.

The concerns were also related to general unwanted social change, or nostalgic views of ‘how the town used to be’. A respondent reflected on the economic decay observed in the town centre: *“the town centre looks forgotten... there were more businesses in the town centre. It was a very busy weekend town, but now the town centre is death”*. Other perceptions suggested that the presence of foreigners in the town may be associated –to some extent– to the worsening of the local economy during the last 20 to 30 years. This could lead to social conflicts in the near Post-Brexit future, considering the scarcity of jobs and the moderate increase of immigrant population mentioned by several participants, as one respondent reflected: *“After Brexit this could become a problem. Polish work for the minimum wage. There are not many jobs in (town), but Eastern Europeans are getting local jobs”*. The literature mentions that certain groups face marginalisation because they represent a symbolic threat to the local moral order. Thus, immigrants face the risk of being associated with economic turmoil, but also with crime. There were signals of labelling in some narratives, as one elderly respondent mentioned: *“this is one of the reasons for which Britain wants to be free, to be able to control its own borders, and decide who comes in the country and who doesn’t”*.

Several voices considered young people as another source of threat, although internal. They were perceived as idle people associated with disorder, and more specifically with drinking, swearing and vandalism in public spaces. This is consistent with some accounts in previous research (i.e. Anderson, 1999; Donnermeyer and Dekeseredy, 2013; Girling *et. al.*, 2000) that identify the link between youths and street disorder. One younger respondent noticed *“...in my neighbourhood the elderly are afraid of the youths for vandalism. Many people do not want to report directly for a possible retaliation (from them)”*. Nevertheless, this contradicts other accounts that challenge the narrative of

disorderly young people, defined as such by people that lack an understanding of the younger (i.e. Brown, 2013; Burney, 2005; Wooff, 2015).

A further source identified from the data collected, is that practically all the perceptions were highly influenced by the exposure to news-media and social media. Rural media highlights those events and characters that are unrelated to the 'idyllic' idea of the countryside. Conflict and diversity are good examples of what fails to adjust to such idyllic idea of rural social life. A young respondent living in a deprived neighbourhood reflected *"people have the perception that the town is full of druggies. It doesn't help that newspapers state there are 300 addicted in the town"*. The impact of social media is similar, as it contributes to reinforce representations of social change, such as the occurrence and amplification of crime. This is particularly true among the youths, as one respondent recalled: *"sometimes nightlife in the town can become the front page of the local paper. And the police would post this in their Facebook... they (group involved) are 18-20-year-old boys, according to the newspaper and Facebook"*.

What social mechanisms are used by the residents in rural Scotland for responding to public sensibilities of crime?

There were divergent views about the social control mechanisms, depending on where the respondents lived and on their position in the social structure. Informal social control could be positive insofar as formal mechanisms that the police represent would be less required to deal with certain types of crime-related issues. This seemed to be especially true for residents living in villages near the outskirts of the town. A couple of them mentioned that people know each other, and some issues could be solved locally. One of them reflected: *"when I was younger, I damaged the neighbour's fence, but instead of calling the police, he called my mom and she paid for the damages... just because my mom was welcomed by the neighbours"*. On the

other hand, the town has grown considerably during the last 30 years, and people from different areas are not often in contact, thereby diminishing the informal mechanisms of social control. Some respondents mentioned that they would report any incident to the police, rather than solving it in private.

The responses showed that the major established and morally powerful group in a rural social structure defined what forms of informal social control are acceptable. These could produce 'closure' or self-inhibition among vulnerable groups (see: Scott & Hogg, 2015: 176). The LGBTI focus group revealed that they have suffered intimidation as one of the participants mentioned: *"I was walking out of a restaurant and a group of people were walking towards me and looking at me. I felt that all the eyes in the world were looking at me. I felt intimidated"*. It was expressed that gossip and ridicule have prevented them from completely integrating in certain areas of social life, as put by another participant: *"I don't feel comfortable going out on a Friday night in the town centre because I don't want to be beaten up just because I'm gay"*. Most responses also suggested that the exigency of formal mechanisms, such as law and order, reflected the notion of order of what was morally unacceptable. In contrast, much less was demanded to what remains tolerated or invisible. As a result, some types of crime (i.e. hate crime and domestic abuse) were unreported due to the fear of being marginalised. One LGBTI participant exemplified this: *"If it is something LGBTI I don't report it. It puts me in the position where I'm going to be the one who has been looked at and nothing is gonna happen. You get sick of this. So why would I put myself through all that stress when I know that it will never be resolved"*.

As to whether the police responded in ways that met the residents' expectations, a couple of findings were especially relevant. First, the participants had, in general, a positive opinion of the police. However, many responses showed that they could have addressed certain issues better, such as alcohol-related disorder outside pubs during on a weekend night and drugs issues.

These are markers of waning moral order and people expect a stronger response from the police to re-establish it (See: Jackson & Sunshine, 2007). In this regards, one respondent said *“we need more police... more police staff, more police presence. People are scared about drugs and the police are not around”*. Second, the residents expected a close relationship with the police. Most opinions showed that there is a close relationship with them, but the creation of Police Scotland has made it harder for residents to reach police officers. Since the phone calls were directed to a control centre in Glasgow, reporting a crime has become more complicated. The centralisation brought in by Police Scotland has hindered accessibility to police officers and, thus, the residents feel that a part of their former police has been taken away from them. People in rural areas prefer to speak directly to police officers, more than seeing them patrolling in their cars, as one respondent mentioned *“people don’t see them around, and because the call centre is a nightmare, people think they are useless... people feel very far removed from the police. Even if the police car flashes in the nights, this does not give somebody confidence that somebody is there. There used to be police officers like ‘bobby on the beat’ before, so people had more time to talk to them”*.

IMPLICATIONS FOR RURAL POLICING

Beyond placing this study in the relevant literature, it also has practical implications for policing rural areas in Scotland. In the context of a single police force and the challenges that they face to enhance confidence, the following considerations could be useful for informing suitable strategies:

- Specific skills among police officers are important to understand what the residents consider the priority crimes and address them as people expect. Negotiated maintenance, situated knowledge and police-community relations are examples of such skills, which police officers do not learn at the police academy, but through mentoring in the field

(Wooff, 2015). These are non-coercive elements that rely on the symbolic dimension of policing.

- The residents valued the police presence, but they expect more presence or visibility, as this contributes to reassure the public, even with low levels of crime. This poses a challenge to the police for reconciling the people’s expectation with the difficulty that more demand for policing services reduces the possibility of the police of delivering such visibility. It is worth noting that the residents considered more accessibility to the police within their expectations, which gives the police an opportunity for improving an aspect that seemed to be related with ‘visibility’ or ‘presence’.
- The local police were considered professional and polite in their treatment. However, Police Scotland were deemed hard to contact. The residents perceived a dissociation between the centralised body –which arouses negative opinions– and their local police, despite being the same institution.
- The symbolic dimension of policing is reflected in the emotive appeal that they arouse among the rural residents, who expect from them messages that reassert the social and moral order. As such, the community policy (CP) philosophy that the Police Division in the town recently implemented for addressing local concerns was useful in generating the perception among the residents that the police have improved during the last couple of years. However, CP must be connected to theoretical elaborations on procedural justice, because the quality of public encounters with the residents has the potential to enhance the legitimacy and public confidence in the local police.
- In addition, CP, as any other good local-based initiative, could be undermined by contradictory policing policies. For instance, fewer officers deployed in the town and

closure of police stations can limit the CP efficacy. The generalised perception seemed to be that Police Scotland took away resources from local police. For the residents, the ‘bobby-on-the-beat’ and police stations evoked emotive collective memories related with a sense of belonging and public reassurance. Their absence could potentially erode police legitimacy and public confidence in them.

- The police must consider the difficulty involved in operationalising ‘community’ as a concept. Not recognising the existence of different communities, risks CP falling prey of rigid hierarchical structures that could lead to labelling certain social groups as ‘unaccepted’. These are usually marginalised and more likely to be over policed, informally by the major social group, or formally by the police (Scott and Hogg, 2015). Thus, the police must tailor their services to different groups, especially for the most isolated (i.e. LGBTI), and vulnerable (i.e. socially deprived) ones.
- Property crimes usually receive more attention because these are more likely to be reported, but certain types of crime are less visible and, therefore, less likely to be reported. Some studies (i.e. Donnermeyer *et al.*, 2013) suggest that, although domestic violence and offences against LGBTI groups are higher in rural than in urban areas, residents do not consider them as priorities. Therefore, the police must continue to promote awareness on offences against vulnerable and marginalised groups and respond to these.

FUTURE WORK

Although this study was exploratory, the findings discussed above indicate the necessity of rethinking the policing policies in rural areas of Scotland. Considering the implications that this could have in the context of a centralised single police force and challenges for enhancing public confidence in them, further research is needed

for informing future adjustments in rural policing. Innovative policies could contribute to improve police practice and devolve rural localities the symbolic structures that contribute to reassure their residents. In addition, a further theoretical discussion is necessary on rural experiences of crime and on how other social forces also shape perceptions.

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