

## RURAL POLICING: UNDERSTANDING POLICE KNOWLEDGE AND PRACTICE IN RURAL COMMUNITIES

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**Summary:** This pilot study, conducted in partnership with Northern Constabulary, examined the dimensions of rural policing practice and knowledge in Scotland. Interviews and focus groups were conducted with 34 frontline, supervisory and senior officers, ranging in rank from Constable to Chief Constable. The two main questions addressed were: What unique demands are encountered by the police service in different rural contexts in Scotland?; and What unique approaches to policing have been developed? Officers drew upon their years of experience in urban, rural and island communities in Northern Constabulary, as well as in other Scottish and UK jurisdictions. Data revealed that rural policing has a fundamentally different nature to urban policing, requiring active community engagement to be effective. While the nature of crime is not dramatically different from urban centres, the frequency of crime is much reduced, and as a result officers routinely take on the work of higher ranks and specialist units. Overall the study found that rural policing makes unique demands on officers and supervisors, and fulfils unique functions in strengthening communities and inter-professional linkages. This study was funded by the Scottish Institute for Policing Research, the Carnegie Foundation and the Stirling School of Education.

## INTRODUCTION

*'There is a delusion that it's going to be some sort of Hamish McBeth lifestyle; you're going to be living in a wee village with your Scottie dog, you're going to be out on the push bike round the village saying hello to the baker and the minister but the reality is, well okay, it's not the reality at all'*

Policing practice varies tremendously according to particular contexts. Rural communities present special challenges to police 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 neighbourhoods, 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 in Scotland. 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. The study had three 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 formulate specific research questions and a methodological approach for a larger comparative study to analyse rural policing models and challenges across countries.

Northern Constabulary covers an area of 12,000 square miles, the largest land mass covered by a UK Police force. In this vast area, stretching from the village of Kilchoan in the South West to Shetland in the North, there exist a number of different community configurations. From the urban streets of Inverness to small geographically dispersed communities on the mainland and on the islands, the policing style in Northern varies according to needs, local history of community-police relations, resource allocation and community expectations. In the words of one officer, 'within Northern there are significant differences in policing style and approaches'. While team policing is prevalent in larger centres and small communities, police most often work on their own in more remote and less populated areas. It is important to note that in our discussion of policing in rural areas the definition of rural is not as straightforward as it might seem, but rather appears to be contextual. For example the community of Stornoway might seem rural by comparison to Glasgow, but not by comparison to Portree or Wick.

This research is being undertaken during an economic recession. Government cutbacks to the police in the UK have included reducing staff as well as closing stations. In Northern Constabulary many single office stations have been closed, and services such as call centres have been centralised. On a national level there is talk of amalgamating the eight constabularies in Scotland into three or perhaps even one constabulary to achieve cost savings. Alongside this turmoil in the organisation of police services, the economic downturn is increasing unemployment and social problems in communities which make police coverage even more important.

## MAJOR FINDINGS TO DATE

Our preliminary findings show that rural police practice can be understood through the following six areas: the nature of rural policing, rural policing as community engagement, policing where you live, the nature of rural criminality, leadership issues and rural realities. The study found that rural policing makes unique demands on officers and supervisors, and fulfils unique functions in strengthening communities and inter-professional linkages. Officers expressed strong satisfaction for working in rural communities and pride in making meaningful connections to their communities.

### **Policing rural communities: Negotiating 'what works'**

Officers in this study described rural policing as a process of negotiating consent with the community. Rural police practice involves policing by consent, which first involves establishing legitimacy with the community, and then maintaining high levels of accountability to the community. Without public trust in police, policing by consent is difficult or impossible.

This negotiation involves both formal and informal collaborative approaches to policing with other agencies, voluntary members of the force and, in many cases, members of the community. For example, special constables, the Coast Guard, hill walking groups, fire-fighters, educators, social service workers and community groups all routinely work with the police in rural areas. Members of the community often play critical roles in crime scene management.

On an individual level officers have to negotiate their personal safety on a daily basis. Because they are often working on their own and backup is not immediately available, they have to use their communication skills to effectively diffuse situations in which their personal safety might be at risk. They have to know when to 'be brave' and when to walk away from a situation. One officer stated, 'you have to learn how to use your tongue and always know that there's going to be another day'

### **Policing where you live: 'Being in the community or being of the community'**

One of the unique aspects of rural policing is the fact that the officers live in the communities they police. They have a direct relationship with the community not only in their work, but also when they are off duty. When they are at the supermarket, at their child's school for a parent-teacher interview, or out for a meal at a local restaurant, they are recognised as 'the police officer'. This heightened visibility can be advantageous to the officer as informal chats with community members in these settings often result in the officer gaining important information about community issues. The negative side of this widespread informal practice, however, is that the line between being on and off duty is blurred. The rural police officer is sometimes seen by the community as accessible twenty four hours a day. It was reported that since the community knew where the officer lived people would knock on their door at all hours of the day and night. In addition to expectations that the officer is always on duty, the officer's family has unusual expectations put on them as well. The officer's partner is often expected to relay messages, to answer the phone, even to provide advice to the community, and the officer's children are expected to behave in an exemplary way.

The rural community was described by many officers as 'a fishbowl with no hiding place'. The rural police officer is always 'under the microscope' for all their professional actions and their off-duty behaviour. Constables are advised by senior officers as they move into rural posts to be aware that they are constantly under surveillance by the community, and many officers described this as very difficult to deal with.

Officers learn to strike a balance between being part of the community and separate from it in order to carry out their policing duties. Part of the rural policing practice involves the recognition that the 'long lasting fix' has to be prioritised over a quick arrest.

One officer reported, 'if you lock up somebody during the day, then (a) it could be your neighbour or (b) you could be standing beside them in the pub the next evening so you really have to police with a very much community orientated style and common sense approach because it is not hit and run'. Despite taking this into account several officers reported receiving threats from community members after they had made an arrest. Because the number of officers is low in rural areas and backup might take hours to arrive, these threats against the officers are serious concerns. Threats are a way for members of the community to see how far they can push the officer. Responding to these threats in an assertive but respectful manner is important for the officer to establish their credibility as a law enforcer and community member.

Officers in Northern are bound by a transfer policy that states that within their first 15 years of service they need to spend five years each in an urban, Highland rural, and island setting. While this policy is intended to ensure that the police do not become too integrated into the community, and to provide work experience across settings, it can be disruptive to effective policing in a community as it can take years to build the necessary relationships and community trust. The officers settle in a community, but they know that they are not there permanently. Relocation, and the costs of relocation, is seen as part of the job. In the past the force provided officers with police housing, but this practice has stopped and relocating to remote areas can be very costly. One officer reported that he moved to a remote area with a healthy savings account and five years later because of the cost of living he left owing money on a line of credit. Several officers reported having trouble selling their houses in rural areas when it was time to transfer to a new area.

### **Rural policing as community engagement: Community Intelligence Model**

Rural policing involved high levels of community involvement. When asked what their most important role was as a police officer, many ranked the role of 'mediator' over 'enforcer' and 'social service worker'. Communication and mediation are key activities in their work. Officers of various ranks attended community councils, ward forums, and had regular meeting with local elected officials. These meetings serve as an opportunity to learn about community priorities, and hear feedback on both individual officer's and the police force's performance. Police have to balance between community priorities such as parking, and national priorities such as organised crime and drugs which the community might not immediately see as their issues. In order to maintain legitimacy with the community, the police need to respond to and resolve minor quality of life issues. In fact, 80 percent of all calls to Northern Constabulary are attended by police. Many of the reasons for these calls would be understood as non-police issues. However, this practice serves several purposes. First it increases the visibility of the police, builds goodwill and allows for opportunities to gather intelligence on community activities. Secondly, it is part of the negotiated psychological contract of local legitimacy of police and therefore builds local consent.

Officers reported having to find an acceptable balance between 'by the book' policing' and community expectations. Police practice that is more prevalent in urban centres - transaction-based policing in which officers deal with issues as they are reported - is felt to be ineffective in rural communities where relationship-based policing is required. In the words of one constable, 'if you dealt with a situation as uniformly as may happen in Glasgow, then I think very very quickly you could be isolated as an individual, be isolated as a police officer, and then you would be isolating the police from the community and things would be going on and often would be unreported. Our ability to deal with things up here is based on the people actually coming and having a chat with us'. Officers have to use discretion wisely, balancing between what is in the best interests of the community while upholding the law, always keeping in mind what resources and backup are available.

### **Nature of rural criminality: Volume v. breadth**

Officers reported that rural areas experience the same range of crime as is seen in urban areas. Crimes spanned from verbal abuse to drink driving to murder. In addition to this range of crime there were specific rural issues the officers had to deal with such as roaming livestock and agricultural equipment theft. While the crime patterns were similar, the frequency of crimes was much less than in an urban jurisdiction. The same crimes may occur in urban and rural areas, but they are dealt with differently in a community-based policing model. Crimes such as vandalism which have a notoriously low detection rate in urban areas are regularly solved in rural areas.

With respect to training and development, some officers indicated that they believed the lower volume of crime was beneficial to an officer's skill development as they could learn the jobs 'properly'. Unlike in urban centres with more robust staffing levels and greater numbers of officers with specialist skills, rural officers had to be able to deal with a range of crime from the start of the process to the very end, often on their own. One officer remarked, 'from a very early stage in my career we were dealing with serious assaults, attempted murders ... it was yours, you're running with it, the responsibility's yours'.

On the job training is critical to learning how to effectively police in rural areas. Officers have to learn the job quickly, often without training. It was reported that the standardised formal training given at the Scottish Police College was largely based on urban models of policing. From the nature of crime, the assumption of resource allocation to the relationship between the police and the community, the training at the Scottish Police College relied on urban policing practices. Therefore local on the job training was viewed as critical to officer development, especially in learning how to work on your own and build relationships with the community.

### **Leading and managing a rural police force: Balancing priorities with diminishing resources**

Leadership in rural forces depends on understanding the nature of rural policing, empowering officers to use their discretion, setting out clear expectations, communication, visibility, setting an exemplary model, and dealing with problematic behaviour when it arises. Many officers spoke of the effectiveness of the devolved management style used in Northern Constabulary in which it involves senior officers giving guidance to junior officers but not micromanaging their actions or decisions. Senior officers acknowledged that because Northern covers such a large land mass and has a relatively small number of officers, individual officers needed to have discretion to act to solve issues. The management hierarchy is very flat with officers having an enlarged scope in their work and they are often working one or two levels above their rank compared to where they would be in other forces. Promotion is more difficult in Northern because of this management structure.

Supervisors need to ensure police visibility through participation in community forums, community planning processes, as well as in more traditional means such as having uniformed police being seen in the community. Visibility of officers is often difficult due to the vast distances covered and the need to be invisible in the course of crime detection.

Demonstrating effectiveness in rural policing is not straightforward as widespread measures of police activity do not always capture rural policing practices. On some measures, such as detection rates, Northern Constabulary rates highly. But on other measures that tabulate volume of incidents, arrests etc., rural areas might appear to have little or no activity. Rural policing involves a great deal of proactive work, and crimes that are averted do not show up on measurements. The success of proactive policing is reduced crime statistics and this can mask the level of police work that goes into achieving community cohesion. Lack of reporting does not equal lack of activity.

### **Rural practice shaped by rural realities**

Finally, we found that rural policing practices were inextricably linked with the realities of rural life – the geography, the weather, technology, transportation modes and infrastructure, as well as the histories and religious practices of the communities.

## **FUTURE WORK**

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 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.

## **SOURCES OF FURTHER INFORMATION**

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