

scottish justice matters

POLICING

Reflections on developments and
changes to policing in Scotland

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POLICING ANTISOCIAL BEHAVIOUR IN RURAL SCOTLAND

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ANTISOCIAL BEHAVIOUR (ASB) policy and discourse has been developed within and focused upon urban areas, yet 94% of Scotland's space is classed as 'rural'. By examining the distinctive ways in which rural police officers respond to ASB it is possible to gain insights into broader rural social processes and to argue that the rural context is a key consideration when thinking about the way that the policing of ASB is carried out throughout Scotland. This has become particularly pertinent since the creation of Police Scotland, given that the focus on centralisation has significantly altered the level at which strategic decisions are made. The policing of ASB in rural areas has been entirely absent from academic and policy debates.

Policing rural Scotland can be challenging, not only because the police are often located remotely from the communities that they serve, but also because of the sheer size of rural policing beats. Yet, the rural context plays a key part of understanding the police response to ASB in rural Scotland (Wooff, 2015). It offers opportunities for the police to respond in local, context dependent ways which often amount to a 'softer' policing response than that in urban areas. In this article I use research findings from my ESRC-funded PhD project which involved 80 hours of participant observation, 33 interviews and eight focus groups across the two case study locations to evidence this before going on to consider the impact of Police Scotland on rural policing.

Rural context and policing

My research suggests that the rural context impacts on policing in a number of ways. First, rural police officers tend to negotiate the maintenance of order in response to ASB in rural communities, both at macro and micro scales. The large areas involved in their the beat means that officers often have little choice other than to negotiate order because back-up is a long-distance away and transporting detainees to the nearest police cells takes a long time:

The distance you are from custody, like here in [fieldwork site] you are at least an hour round to take someone to custody [...] you need to box cleverer here. Particularly with disturbances, because the nearest backup might be half an hour away ... by blue light (Police Inspector)

At the micro-scale, rural police officers frequently live and work in the community that they police, which means many officers have an embedded knowledge and understanding of the community they police and the associated challenges. This added situated knowledge often enables a softer policing response, whereby community solutions are sought to deal with low-key ASB in a more fundamental manner than in urban locations.

One of the ways that 'softer' policing happens is through the use of discretion. There is not the space to go through the arguments relating to discretion and policing here, but the rural context appears to promote it. In a US study Weisheit et al. (2005) note that rural officers tend to do activities which not only vary more but are also more wide-ranging than their urban colleagues, typically emphasising crime prevention over enforcement. Also in the US, Payne et al. (2005) suggest that this is in part because the physical

distances involved means that discretion is used in ways to facilitate a choice between enforcement and other interventions. For example, in Scotland

Discretion is vital. It is trying to weigh up - [the officer] will make that assessment themselves, you know is something serious enough that we can't ignore it by just giving a warning [...] So whilst there are things we can't have discretion over - drink drivers for example - we have no discretion over this nor should we ... but there might be instances where maybe someone in [name of city] doing the same thing will get the jail where here they won't ... (Police Inspector).

there are distinct spatial challenges associated with rural policing which mean that it is necessary for officers to use their discretion when responding to ASB

Although it is imperative not to fall into idyllic notions of rural policing, there are distinct spatial challenges associated with rural policing which mean that it is necessary for officers to use their discretion when responding to ASB. The knowledge officers have of the situation they are policing means that they can often respond by using their discretion and community-based knowledge in a way that is less possible to do in urban based situations. It is important, however, to acknowledge that rural Scotland is not a uniform space and therefore there are different geographic challenges associated with policing different rural communities. In particular, different communities require different policing responses depending on informal community structures already in place. In remote rural communities with active community groups, for example, the policing response to ASB varies from an accessible rural community with a high percentage of social housing.

The use of discretion and negotiated order maintenance therefore relies on police-community relationships and knowledge in rural communities. This is impacted upon by the type of rural community and the length of time the officer has been policing the community and consequently the intimate knowledge that they have of the community. It is therefore important as a rural community officer, to understand how the rural context impacts on these relationships. As Fenwick et al. (2011) note, many rural police officers are required to 'think on their feet' and interact with the community in a different manner than their urban colleagues. As a community officer noted:

I have what I call 'the monthly tea spots', these are people in the community who have the gossip and know what's going on - info that's very useful to me. So I pop by Miss H's, sit down, have a cuppa ... that way she thinks she's getting good service and I get to hear about all that's been going on ... (Community police officer).

Indeed, the fact that many officers live and work in the communities they police means that they have a situated, informal knowledge about different people, their circumstances and the way that different local factors interact. Drawing on this information allows embedded community police officers to negotiate order and respond to ASB in ways which are more nuanced. Rural policing therefore presents greater opportunity to govern through the social, where soft policing skills are used to a greater degree. It is important not to over generalise, this is not something which happens in every rural community and is dependent on structural policing

decisions such as how long a community officer works in a rural community and whether the officer has a situated knowledge gained by living in the community that they police. Additionally, different rural communities have different challenges related to ASB which require locally developed and implemented policing response strategies. Nevertheless, I would argue that rural communities present greater opportunities for the police to respond in less formalised ways to ASB, negotiating order and using their discretion to a greater degree.

It is also important to remember that rural Scotland is a diverse environment, which requires different policing responses in different communities and an understanding of the complexities of policing over large areas. Police Scotland has provided a number of opportunities, particularly in relation to standardising policing delivery at a national scale. However, there are also challenges associated with this approach, in particular, the (potential) to undermine the more nuanced approach to policing described here. There are distinctive elements associated with rural policing, notably a lack of nearby back-up and a situated knowledge of the community which makes discretion a more likely route in responding to ASB.

This has important research and policy implications because given that large tracts of Scotland are considered 'rural', there has been a relative dearth of work examining the police in these contexts. By better understanding the spatiality of the police in rural communities and their response to ASB over space, resources can be more appropriately dispatched. This is particularly important in relation to the introduction of the single police force in Scotland, where there are concerns that the local, rural policing context has been diluted by the centralisation of power and control. Although at a strategic level this may be beneficial, as this article has highlighted, it is important that a degree of localised policing decision making is preserved and enabled within the national structure. Additionally, rural policing should be considered a core part of the skill set of Scottish police officers, a part of the policing craft which relies on 'softer' policing skills.

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