Policing Rural Crimes and Rural Communities in England

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Abstract

This article examines factors that influence the processes and practices of crime prevention and investigation in rural areas of England. Whilst evidence shows that rural crime is a significant problem, there has been hitherto a dearth of research into how the issue is policed. Drawing on the perspectives of police personnel, this article examines the features of the rural environment and the organisation and management of police services that influence the delivery of police work in rural areas of England. Specifically, the article considers factors that influence the reporting and subsequent recording of rural crimes; how police officers understand and perceive rural crimes; how police services prioritise crimes for preventative and investigative purposes; how responsibility for investigating rural crimes is diffused across law enforcement agencies and how this can cause confusion for officers; matters related to the generation of evidence; officer understanding of the legislation regarding rural crime; the willingness of officers to undertake the investigation of rural crimes and the reluctance of some to live in the countryside; and the organisation and management of police resources in rural areas. In so doing, it sets out the reasons why the policing of rural spaces is distinctive and considers implications for police work and its outcomes.

Keywords: rural crime; policing; reporting; crime investigation; police organisation and management

This article examines police personnel perceptions of the factors that influence the processes and practices of crime prevention and investigation in rural areas of England. There is a growing recognition that accounting for features of rural places is important in understanding the processes involved in policing; yet, despite this, rural policing remains significantly under researched (Mawby & Yarwood, 2011; Hodgkinson & Harkness, 2020; Fenwick, 2015; Harkness, 2017). The meaning of a rural area is not easy to define (see for example, Hodgkinson & Harkness, 2020). However, the United Kingdom (UK) government classifies areas as rural if they fall outside of settlements with more than a 10,000-resident population (DEFRA, 2017), although there is variety within this and rural areas may be more or less remote in nature, among other variable characteristics (DEFRA, 2017). There is also no set definition of rural crime, and this term could simply refer to any crime which occurs in a rural area. In practice, these are offences defined by practitioners as 'rural' and typically relate to farms and agriculture, wildlife (Crown Prosecution Service, 2023) and the environment, and heritage crimes (Neighbourhood Watch Network, 2020). Within this, an emphasis is placed on the "quintessential rural crime": that is, crimes committed against farms and agricultural industries (Barclay, 2016, p. 107).

Despite recent evidence showing the significance and extent of some forms of rural crime (see, for example, Murgatroyd et al., 2019; RSPB, 2023) studies that empirically consider matters to do with the investigation of crimes in rural areas remain uncommon. This article draws on interviews with officers who have knowledge of and experience in tackling rural crime to unpick the features of the rural environment and the organisation and management of police services that influence the delivery of police work in rural areas. To begin we briefly examine the literature that has considered factors that are known to affect the enforcement of rural crimes. Then we set out our methodological approach. This is followed by the presentation and discussion of our findings. Implications – which include suggestions for increasing training, partnership working, and developing capacity – are discussed.

Drawing together commentary on the investigation of rural crimes and the findings of the small number of empirical studies that have been conducted in this area certain themes become evident. First, commentators draw attention to the "distinct, challenging and variable policing environment" of rural spaces (Wooff, 2015, p. 287) which features the 'tyranny of distance' – the vast distances that officers might have to travel to attend incidents in rural areas (Rantatalo, Lindberg & Hallgren, 2021; Smith, 2010; Terry, 2020). This is because it is difficult to get to locations in a timely manner and so to gather evidence. Second, they highlight how the nature of rural crime and rural communities can influence investigations. For example, wildlife crime has not been seen as serious, either by members of the public or investigating authorities (Nurse, 2012; Wellsmith, 2011). Third, rural crimes are often under-reported and it is difficult to generate a comprehensive understanding of rural crime problems. For example, wildlife crimes are technically 'victimless' crimes as animals cannot be considered victims in English law and there is no direct human victim to report the offence to the authorities. As a consequence, the vast majority of wildlife crimes will never come to the attention of authorities (Wellsmith, 2011; Nurse, 2012). In addition, police services may

lack recording systems which automatically 'flag up' rural crimes resulting in sketchy intelligence gathering (Smith, 2010). Fourth, investigation can become further complicated because the police might not always be the primary investigating agency. Indeed, legislation is enforced by other agencies, including charities (such as Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals) and local authorities (Smith, 2010; Wellsmith, 2011). Fifth, investigators may lack the specialist knowledge needed to investigate wildlife crime (Rantatalo, Lindberg & Hallgren, 2021) Lastly, under-resourcing is often cited as a major problem for investigations of rural crime (Wellsmith, 2011; Nurse, 2012). The difficulties of obtaining resources can be linked both to the low priority accorded to rural crime by some police services, compounded by under-reporting (Nurse, 2012; Wellsmith, 2011).

Having said that, a number of recent events, including the murder of Sarah Everard by Wayne Couzens, a serving Metropolitan Police (Met) officer, in March 2021, and the conviction of another Met officer, David Carrick, in February 2023 for a series of rapes and other serious offences committed while also a serving officer in the Met, have damaged the legitimacy of the police in the eyes of the public nationally, and not just in London (Devlin, 2023). The Everard case prompted the official inquiry led by Baroness Casey which examined working cultures in the Met. Its report, published in early 2023, found the force to be institutionally racist, misogynistic and homophobic (Casey, 2023). The report identified "unfair outcomes in communities that result from under-protection, from over-policing, or from both; and a culture of downplaying and denial of discrimination and repeated unwillingness to accept and deal with institutional failures" (Casey, 2023, p. 330). The Met's engagement with the population of London was described as "one-way, lacking candour, transparency and openness, feeling 'tick-box' and not genuinely valued", with the consequence that falling trust and confidence levels were damaging police legitimacy and that public consent needed to be rebuilt (Casey, 2023, pp. 333, 336).

Casey's findings were described as a 'cataclysmic disaster' for the Met that were not just a 'London issue' but were "buffeting forces across the country, dragging down trust and confidence even hundreds of miles from the capital" (Dodd, 2023). It is therefore likely that the public's view of the police was damaged by the findings outlined in the Casey report in many rural as well as urban areas. Of course, community views of the police are affected by a myriad of other factors, such as perceptions of police effectiveness and procedural justice, which play out just as keenly in rural as urban contexts. For example, Taylor, Wyant and Lockwood's (2015) United States-based study found that white residents in rural locations had higher perceptions of police fairness than non-white residents in both rural and urban areas. Research in the Canadian context has shown that rural residents are less likely than their urban equivalents to report that the police do a good job in a number of different aspects of service provision, including law enforcement, ensuring the public's safety and promptly responding to calls (Ruddell & O'Connor, 2021).

In the UK context, this more negative view of policing in the rural may be brought about by factors such as austerity-era budget cuts to policing, which have resulted in less visible policing owing to decreased officer numbers (Yarwood, 2015). In rural areas in which

police face-to-face interactions with the public may additionally be hampered by the larger distances needed to travel from village to village, social media can play an important role in providing an alternative way of engaging with the public, although the type and nature of interactions, and which subjects participants interact about, can vary according to which social media platform (such as Facebook or Twitter) that the police and public are using (Dai et al., 2017). Additionally, there is a lack of evidence as to whether such social media engagement actually helps to improve police legitimacy (Abraham & Ceccato, 2022).

There are few published studies that have examined how police personnel describe the influences on the processes and practices of policing rural crimes and rural communities. Accordingly, this article makes an important contribution to the literature by considering how the outcomes of police work might be expected to vary across different spaces. In so doing, it sets out the challenges of policing rural areas and provides evidence regarding how best to develop and implement tactics to address rural crimes.

In this article, we consider what is distinctive not only about crimes that occur in rural areas but also how the nature of rural crimes interacts with the policing of rural communities. Through this, we examine how rural crimes come to the attention of police services. We set out the degree to which rural crimes are prioritised for investigative or preventative attention. We examine the factors that influence responses to rural crimes, including resource and capacity issues. Ultimately the policing of rural areas is influenced by an interaction of features of the rural environment – the nature of rural crime; the situational characteristics of rural spaces; and the ways in which rural spaces are used) – and ways that resources are organised and managed. Taken together, this interaction of features of the rural environment and the organisation and management of police resources contributes to an under recognition of the scale and nature of rural crime problems, a failure to prioritise rural crimes, and present challenges for the processes and practices of investigation and crime prevention. Rural spaces and rural crimes are distinctive, and consequently the way that policing is delivered, organised, and managed may also need to be distinctive.

Methods

To generate in-depth understanding of the operation of rural policing, this article draws on semi-structured interviews with officers who have experience of working in rural crime areas. Twenty-four interviews were conducted in England in the summer of 2021 with rural crime officers from six rural teams. Eight participants were female and 16 were male. The sampling process was two-fold. First, police staff were identified through purposive sampling, a technique that involves identifying participants because of the specific characteristics and qualities that they possess. Second, a snowball sampling technique was used to recruit officers who had experience working with rural communities. Snowball sampling is based on networking and referral mechanisms and involves inviting a small number of primary seeds/contacts who fit the research conditions to participate in the project and who are then asked to suggest other potential participants. Those other participants are then asked in turn to recommend other people who fit the research criteria.

In all cases, police personnel were asked to reflect upon the organisation of policing in rural areas (including crime prevention, community engagement, and community policing); issues regarding the enforcement of the criminal law within rural areas (including challenges of responding to reports of crime in rural areas and how police organisations work to provide effective detection and disruption to criminals in rural areas); the role of technology; and aspects of the organisation and management of police work in rural areas. Interviews were transcribed professionally. Owing to the general COVID-19 restrictions imposed by the government over this time, all interviews were completed by telephone or on Microsoft Teams. Generally, interviews lasted for 45 minutes. They were then analysed thematically (Braun & Clarke, 2006), enabling common themes to be identified. What follows is an assessment of the key aspects of our research findings, beginning with how officers perceived rural crime was identified and then reported, drawing on four broad themes: (i) 'identifying and reporting rural crime'; (ii) 'prioritisation of rural crimes'; (iii) investigating rural crimes'; and (iv) 'capacity'.

Results

Identifying and Reporting Rural Crime

Participants identified several key issues with regards to identifying and reporting rural crime. A number noted there was tendency for people living in rural areas to underreport crimes and related problems. Officers described how witnesses may not recognise that a crime had occurred and/or that the police would investigate. Discussing wildlife crime, such as the killing of birds of prey or hare coursing, one interviewee stated:

> I think the number one difficulty I found in this job is, people just don't know to report it, so where I've spoken to, witnesses of offences, nine out of 10 times they'd turn around to me and say, *I didn't know I should report it to the police*. (T6)

Participants further discussed how victims may be unaware they had been the victims of certain rural crimes, such as theft of livestock, until long after the event, as one explained: "It's only several months later when they go back to bring them [livestock] back in and count them, and they'll realise there's 40 missing" (T8).

Where reported, participants noted that often rural crimes were not flagged us such on police recorded crime systems, making them impossible to identify. Some interviewees mentioned they were reliant on call handlers identifying and referring rural crimes to them, as one explained:

> … when the communities basically call up to our contact centre it is then kind of up to our contact centre to sort of pick up on the fact that there are rural aspects there that need to be noted. Once they pick up, they basically just tag it straight over to us. They send it directly to our Wildlife team who then basically workout who is the local

office to send it to. So it's mainly through training of our call handlers that this gets identified as rural and wildlife offences. (T6)

Consequently, some officers spent time looking at crime reports to manually identify cases that were related to rural issues, as one participant outlined:

Some part of our job is also to look over the way it's been put on our system and then maybe tick a box to say, actually yes, that's also rural related, so you tick the box and then it should come up easier on a search again, in the future. So changing the crime types, not the actual specific crime type, but just adding flags, like real crime flags. (T15)

Being able to add these flags was seen as important in ensuring that these crimes were properly investigated, that police personnel knew where to target interventions, to help shape the nature of those interventions, and to make a case for funding and developing performance frameworks. Because of this, participants commonly noted that they spent time reviewing crime reports to identify rural crimes and flag them as such. As this participant explained: "We're kind of doing it manually, and we're seeing the patterns emerge then that wouldn't get identified otherwise" (T16). As another stated:

It's sort of every morning at the beginning of every shift, we look over the occurrences between our previous shift and […] I look for those rural areas or for those hotspots for the rural and wildlife crime, and then just read through them to make sure that they've, it has been sort of put through correctly. (T6)

Prioritisation of Rural Crimes

Participants noted that rural crimes may not be prioritised for police action, partly because of the geography and the travelling time across large rural areas, as one officer outlined:

I think geography in [place name] is a biggie. The geography, obviously a job will come in at the top end of say, upper [place name] area, and I may only have one PC [Police Constable] or a PCSO [Police Community Support Officer] covering that at that moment in time, so it's travelling time. So by the time the report comes in, it's travelling time, so our location is key to that and I'm in [place name] at the moment, I've got a PCSO out in [place name], and as resources have sort of reduced, geography is a biggie for us, we're covering such a big area. […] So there is that and I think that's probably one of the biggest [issues]. (T9)

In addition, an incident of rural crime may not be prioritised because in the context of limited resources for investigations if it "… doesn't reach the level of harm that would've naturally truly necessitate an officer going out to it, investigating it to the level, giving it a department such as the criminal or the CID [Criminal Investigation Department] to own"

(T3). This especially links to the character of many rural crimes which typically involve agricultural equipment or animals which "… will always fall lower again on the threat and the harm than humans will" (T5). Likewise, rural crime could be low in the list of priorities for preventative work since, as the same officer put it: "It's easier to put more time and investment to where the most risk is" (T5). Another explained that "It wasn't anything that hit one of the key indicators that would really tick people's boxes from a community safety partnership point of view" (T3). From the perception of participants, such under reporting compounds the lower prioritisation accorded to rural crimes and rural communities, as one stated: "If you don't tell us, we don't know and so we assume there is no problem, and then your area won't get policed, but if you don't phone, we assume there's no problem" (T13; see also Wellsmith, 2011).

Officers also highlighted how the harm associated with rural crimes may not be fully appreciated. To illustrate, participants described how the value of some stolen property may be very high in value, something that is sometimes overlooked. For one participant: "Like horse riding, there's a lot of money that goes into buying their tack, which can equate to the same amount of someone being burgled in their house" (T20). In turn, there may be emotional attachment to some stolen items, as one participant explained:

> But what they've never picked up on, was the impact this was having on the farming community. It was utterly devastating to find 20 sheep and often, you know, they can be hand-reared, they have a lot of emotional involvement, and the financial impact on losing these animals is fairly catastrophic. (T3)

As this quote suggests, some items stolen or damaged may be central to a person's livelihood, with their loss keenly felt financially, emotionally and with regard to the ability to actually perform certain job tasks. This participant explained:

> Just a bit of lack of acknowledgement that the equipment that they've got on their sites is worth a lot of money, but also really relevant to their day-to-day work. So if they do go missing, then they're stuck. So, yeah, that is one of the issues that we've come across. (T16)

Consequently, participants drew attention to the need for police organisations and personnel to have better "understanding, really, of the issues that our rural communities face" (T4) in order to ensure that crimes and communities get the appropriate resourcing and responses.

Lastly, rural crimes might not be prioritised because of lack of clarity about who is responsible for dealing with them. This needs to be understood in context that a multitude of state and non-state organisations have responsibilities and powers in this area. This participant explained the issues with respect to fly tipping:

That is actually a Trading Standards issue, but we're interested in it from a criminal point of view, because of the OCG [organised criminal gangs], the organised crime side of it, but if you break it down, it's just, and we have to be careful with language, but it's trespass on private land, and the local authority will say to, for example, [person name] – well, it's private land, you need to clear it yourself – so you might have a large amount of refrigerators in someone's land, that the landowner ends up having to safely dispose of because it's neither a police responsibility nor a local authority responsibility. (T18)

Investigating Rural Crimes

In turn, participants highlighted how certain rural crimes – notably wildlife crimes – can be difficult to investigate, noting that in many cases there is a lack of information about what has happened. As one stated:

But the reality is, it goes on and birds of prey that should be found on grouse moors, aren't. And every now and again we get dead ones reported that have been killed in what appears to be illegal circumstances, but finding evidence to prove is done, it is very, very difficult. (T7)

These kinds of crimes, which often occur in isolated areas, are unlikely to be witnessed, as one officer explained: "Because in the town you possibly got neighbours who might see things, you might have CCTV systems" (T13). For another: "So invariably there's no CCTV, there's very few witnesses, so you're trying to backtrack all the way" (T8). The consequence of these combined factors was that "It's very difficult to get evidence, everything happens in isolated rural locations, nobody sees anything" (T17).

Likewise, other forms of evidence may not be available, as this officer explained: "There's nothing we can do, there's nothing, we've got no got no CCTV, no forensic, no witnesses, no ANPR, no intelligence […] that's probably the hardest job" (T13). Compounding this, there may be delays between crimes being committed and being reported, such as with the theft of livestock, usually because it takes time for a victim to realise their livestock was missing (Harkness, 2017), as one officer put it: "So we have got specialist CSI [crime scene investigators] that can come out, but a lot of times they go into it, and it's happened sometime in six-week window between the last time they checked that set, so it's very difficult to investigate" (T13). Even when forensics are recovered, analysis of artefacts might not be prioritised owing to resource constraints, as one participant noted: "Wildlife crimes are really, really low down on that priority list. So we are probably 12 months into a couple of investigations where we still have samples at the laboratories waiting for analysis" (T17). Another participant noted:

The forensic side of it, it's so painfully slow, it's even slower because of COVID as well, because they initially shut the labs down and then they're looking at social distancing in the lab, so I think on some days, there's so many people in the office

doing the lab work, and then on another day, it's a different set of people. So kind of staggered but again, they provide really slow capacity at the moment and it makes it worse than normal. (T8)

Participants also drew attention to how legislation, especially related to wildlife crime, can be complex, difficult for officers to understand, and challenging to implement: "Investigating wildlife crime is a nightmare, the legislation is horrible, it's so difficult to enforce" (T17). The consequence is that investigating these crimes "does require a lot more specialist knowledge of the offences" (T16). However, interviewees highlighted how, due to their specialist nature, many officers might not have the knowledge and skills required to investigate rural crimes, as one explained: "Because it's such a specialised sort of set of crimes, there's not a lot of officers that are aware of what offences are taking place or even if an offence is taking place" (T6).

This has to be understood in the context of limited training for officers in how to identify and investigate rural crimes, as one interviewee mentioned: "There are only, now, three on the Rural Taskforce that are currently trained, and four or five other officers across the whole of the force who are active in investigating wildlife crime" (T17). Even for those in specialist rural crime roles, participants outlined how knowledge was developed experientially. As one put it: "I'm not highly trained, I'm picking up bits as I go along, since I haven't got much training at all, really, so I'm learning all the time" (T15). Similarly, another participant explained that: "I think it's more a case of building those skills as you go along" (T9). Generally, participants argued that there was a lack of training in matters to do with rural investigations, with one noting: "A lot of what we do with the rural stuff, that's picked up as we go along, same as any other role, but the big one, we do need a train course in wildlife crime […] There is a big training issue for, I would say all of rural and wildlife crime, right across the country" (T8; see also Eck & Rossmo, 2019 for a broader discussion of officer opinions of the importance of adequate training).

In turn, participants suggested that ongoing training was needed in this area since, as one explained: "I think you get a level of training and then unless you use it, you know, you get a level of skill fade, I think that's just natural' (T4; see Fenwick, 2015). Likewise, interviewees noted the challenges of "keeping it refreshed when we get a turnover of staff there as well" (T4). In the absence of systematic training for most officers, participants highlighted the importance of raising awareness of rural crimes amongst officers and the importance of the advice and support provided by specialist officers, as one put it: "A tactical advisor, an officer that does have that knowledge, so if a newbie or recruit or somebody has forgotten, and they're at a job and they're not quite sure what they're doing, they've got a point of contact" (T4). In sum, a key theme noted by our participants was how officers with the specialist skills to investigate rural crimes were few and far between and that more training was needed in this area.

Capacity

A key issue for participants was the limited policing capacity within rural areas, noting that rural teams were often small, as one observed: "Because at the moment it just feels a little bit like we're fighting fire at the minute, we're just trying to get everything done which is difficult to do when there's only two of you" (T5). This influences what is achievable, a problem compounded by the removal of rural officers to urban areas when the latter teams are under pressure. One participant explained that "if something happens, I'm called upon to come away from the rural stuff" (T6). Small teams mean that specialist officers may not be available to investigate or address rural crimes, as one interviewee noted: "Because the team is small, it can't be a 24/7 coverage. So, we do have to rely on others to deliver, especially on the proactive patrols" (T3). Consequently, participants tended to argue that "there's a huge amount of investment that needs to go into it [rural policing]" (T5).

In explaining this limited capacity, participants suggested that withdrawing resources from rural areas was a significant factor (see also Rantatalo, Lindberg & Hallgren, 2021). Presently this can be understood in the context of general retrenchment of police officers in England and Wales over the last fifteen years or so – a consequence of government cuts to public sector funding following the financial crash of 2008 (see Millie, 2014). As one participant outlined: "We used to have more obviously before, before the financial crash out in the 2008 and we had to make the austerity cuts, we used to have a lot more officers out in rural section, we don't have as many now" (T9). More specifically, this links to decisions about prioritisation. As noted earlier, rural crimes and rural areas tend to be lower priority in risk assessments and receive fewer resources than urban areas (Harkness, 2017), as one participant suggested: "But with, you know budget cuts in policing, as it is at the moment, especially with COVID, rural crime probably falls lower on the kind of risk level" (T5). For another: "In terms of priorities from a force point of view, it's a little bit further down the line, such things, such as drugs and county lines and things" (T9).

It was also noted that there has been an emphasis on rebuilding capacity within rural areas: "I think forces are realising that because a lot of crimes are becoming quite urban centric, that the rural areas are getting neglected" (T8). Another interviewee explained that: "I also feel like we've made huge bounce forward in the last two years, and we've had so much traction, and so much support from our chief, and everyone above us has been so supportive" (T5). Clearly, some chief constables and some Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs) are investing significant time and resources. Indeed, the significance of PCCs – elected positions since 2012 with oversight of a particular police force who set police and crime objectives, set the service budget and determine the precept (see Rowe, 2020) in shaping the level of capacity in rural areas – should not be underestimated. Officers also realised that this support might not endure because of changes in leadership and consequently priorities. One participant advised that they had:

> … been very lucky in securing funding for all of this; at the moment we've been able
> to tap into resources that I think it's the right thing to do to give back to the rural

communities. But the political tables will turn. I know we weren't the flavour of the century, and there'll be something else that you know people want action on and we'll drop down that political radar. The police, it's sad to say we shouldn't be motivated by politics, but we're very much influenced by them. (T3)

Additionally, interviewees mentioned how building capacity in rural areas was influenced by officers' willingness to work in the countryside. Historical literature documents close relationships between rural officers and rural communities (see, for example, Banton, 1964; Cain, 1973), with these relationships being the consequence of officers living in rural areas and coming to understand them well. This has become less common with the closure of rural police stations (Smith & Somerville, 2013), as elsewhere in the world. Interviewees further noted the difference between rural and urban roles and that rural police work might not suit all. As has long been documented, rural policing has tended to emphasise informal and service-related tasks where "chatting" is "an intrinsic part of the job" (Cain, 1973, p. 35). Hence rural policing has been seen historically as more akin to 'peace keeping' than law enforcement (Banton, 1964; Cain, 1973).

This emphasis on prevention, engagement and communication contrasts with a 'crime fighter' role (Wilson, 1968; Reiner, 2010; Loftus, 2012) and may not be perceived by all officers to be 'proper policing'. As one participant put it: "I suppose you join to be a crime fighter, as a police officer you join to catch baddies. I can't think of a better way of phrasing it, we join to, to make that, you know, make that difference" (T3). Another explained that: "They've got a preconception of what a rural officer will be and it's just somebody that goes around with wellies, talking to farmers and dealing with sheep theft. You know, they've got a rather old-style view of rural crime" (T5). However, as that participant went on to suggest, this perception was seen as misleading: "A lot of the time it's really proactive, it's engaging in warrants and it's the stuff that every officer wants to do, which is kicking in doors and arresting people, and that's what a lot of them join for" (T4). This misconception led one participant to state of rural policing that: "It's an undersold area of policing" (T18). In turn, interviewees stated a need to develop better understanding of what rural officers and rural teams do, as one put it: "So I'm having to do a bit of a PR [public relations] campaign within my own organisation to make people realise it isn't that dull and boring as you think, you know, if you invest the time and you get the intelligence" (T3).

Interviewees explained how other features of the rural role may not be attractive to some in the organisation, with much of this linking to the isolated nature of rural policing teams (Fenwick, 2015; Houdmont, Jachens, Randall & Colwell, 2021). In describing this, participants noted how the isolation of rural teams – in terms of relationships with other officers and geography – may not suit all, with one suggesting that "it's natural really for people to want to work in a team with other, with other colleagues around them" (T7). Rural officers, then, may not have the colleagues to support them – both informally and formally.

In respect to the latter, officers may also get less supervision, especially within the context of rural teams being dispersed throughout large rural areas. As one participant

declared: "One of the challenges from a managerial point of view in terms of managing day to day things from a police point, is getting to see my staff. So you have to make a concerted effort to get out and to drive and to go see staff" (T9). Additionally, several interviewees noted that isolation may heighten concerns about safety (Fenwick, 2015; Buttle, Fowler & Williams, 2010; Houdmont et al., 2021). As one put it: "Always in the back of your mind is that when you're stopping that van with two or three lads in there, with dogs and stuff, and you're on your own, you're a long way away from support. So, there is an element of personal safety to it" (T9). Another advised that: "Because when you're out there, you don't necessarily have the backup or even a radio or telephone signal, so you really need to know what you're doing" (T10).

The geographical isolation of rural policing teams may also be unappealing to some officers in other ways, too, increasing the stress upon officers and their families (see Houdmont et al., 2021; Buttle, Fowler & Williams, 2010; Donnermeyer & Barclay, 2005). Since officers are less likely to live in the areas that they police than they were in the past (Mawby, 2003), participants felt that for many officers, rural postings would mean an increased commute. Due to these features, it was noted how it was common for rural officers to have personal commitment to or association with rural crime or places, with some, in contrast to the point made above, clearly being settled for a long while in rural areas, as one stated: "From my experience the people on the rural, the really rural patrol, you know, the [place name] and moors and those sorts of areas, they tend to be officers that have been there for years" (T10). For another: "I think a lot of people that may be found in sort of rural postings tend to be those that live locally" (T9).

Perhaps more common, though, was for rural officers to have an affinity to or interest in rural affairs. This affinity may result from, for example, a keenness for, or experience with, working with animals/wildlife, a history of living or working in rural areas, or a background in farming. As one stated: "Well I come originally from [place name], which is quite rural in itself, and I have always been interested in wildlife […] Prior to joining the police, I worked on a farm, I left school at 16, I spent five years working on a farm […] so I got that kind of background" (T16). For another: "I kind of relate to it and I think a lot of people that relate to it, probably got a rural background, or you've got an interest in wildlife, or you come from a farm […] me personally, I've always lived in a rural area, I really relate to it, I like wildlife and I want to do something about it [wildlife crime]" (T8).

Discussion and Conclusion

In this article, we have utilised the views of police personnel in rural areas of England to assess the characteristics of rural crime and how such crime is policed. We looked at the linked issue of how identifying and reporting rural crime, the prioritisation and investigation of rural crime, and capacity for dealing with the phenomenon. In this section we draw together our findings and discuss implications.

Whilst the identification and reporting of all crimes presents challenges, there are certain unique challenges for rural crimes. Some rural crimes are in effect victimless, with people not recognising that they have been victims, and it can be difficult to pinpoint rural crimes in police crime recording systems. More work needs to be done to help members of the public understand rural crimes and for crime reporting systems to isolate them.

The investigation of rural crimes is influenced by the character of rural spaces and rural crime. The unique nature of some rural crimes such as livestock theft was noted, and it was suggested that the police's job was made much harder by how long such crimes can take to be noticed by those targeted and how this delay in noticing and then reporting impacts upon the amount of evidence available (see also Smith, 2010; Rantatalo, Lindberg & Hallgren, 2021; Harkness, 2017). These factors, coupled with the lack of forensics as well as such evidence-gathering methods as CCTV and ANPR (automatic number-plate recognition) in rural areas, make the policing of some rural crimes more difficult.

In addition, prioritisation was a dominant theme and the priority given to investigating rural crime can be low with, for example, vehicle theft and harms to animals not seen as being of equal importance to those that involve harm to humans (see also Nurse, 2003; Wellsmith, 2011). This can compound the under-reporting of rural crimes, leading to a perpetuation of the vicious cycle of low priority being given to investigating rural crimes owing to a lack of evidence of a significant problem (see also Wellsmith, 2011).

Other factors, such as an under-appreciation of the damage to livelihoods caused by farm vehicle theft, and confusion with regards to which of a myriad of organisations was responsible for dealing with an incident, caused further policing complications. The specialist knowledge needed for officers to deal with some rural crimes coupled with a lack of training in how to identify and investigate them, exacerbated these problems still further (Rantatalo, Lindberg & Hallgren, 2021). Public sector funding cuts, especially since 2010 have also affected capacity in rural areas. However, it was also noted that it was by no means a wholly bleak picture, with some PCCs and Chief Constables investing more significant resources into tackling rural crime.

One key issue that was raised was officer perceptions of the role of the rural officer, with some participants suggesting that a common view was that it lacked the status of more traditional police crime fighting roles that are valued by many within the police (see, for example, Reiner, 2010; Cockroft, 2020). Instead, the rural officer role was perceived to be an old-fashioned one in which the 'softer' policing skills of communication and community engagement were needed, something that was less attractive for those officers to whom the more 'dynamic' side of policing appealed.

Of course, rural policing is not immune to the difficulties affecting urban forces, including the current crisis in the legitimacy of policing that was precipitated first by the murder of George Floyd in the United States in 2020 and then by the backlash following the murder of Sarah Everard in London in 2021 by a serving police officer. Other scandals in the

United Kingdom have followed, while the content of Baroness Casey's (2023) report further tarnished the image of the Metropolitan Police Service in the eyes of the public. How much the public associates these characteristics with forces other than the Met is open to debate, and it could be the case that those living in rural areas see the types of problems associated with the Met as being typically 'urban ones' that are not present in the countryside. If this is the so, then this does give rural forces the opportunity to further deepen community engagement in the rural with an image less tarnished than that of urban forces. This may then provide a key stepping-stone to building confidence in rural forces, thus helping to improve the policing of rural crime.

We acknowledge various limitations to the research. The sample size is small, and the scope of rural crimes is large. As such, the ways that some crimes committed in rural places come to be investigated warrants further interrogation. However, we argue that the policing of rural areas is influenced by an interaction of features of the rural environment (the nature of rural crime, the situational characteristics of rural spaces, and the ways in which rural spaces are used), and ways that resources are organised and managed. This interaction contributes to an under-recognition of the scale and nature of rural crime problems, a failure to prioritise rural crimes, and present challenges for the processes and practices of investigation and crime prevention. It is suggested that that rural spaces and rural crimes are distinctive, and consequently the way that policing is delivered, organised and managed needs to be distinctive.

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