

Introduction to Volume 7, Issue 1 (Special Issue)

Police officers and agencies in the twenty-first century garner significant attention from politicians, researchers, journalists, and the general public alike. Much policing research aims to evaluate the effectiveness of police while highlighting opportunities for reform. Largely missing from the mainstream discussion and literature, however, is attention to these issues in rural communities. Significant portions of the world's population reside in rural communities and rely on rural police agencies for access to formal justice system processing. The context of a rural setting uniquely affects the way in which police operate, engage community members, and more.

Rural police studies have increased in the past few decades, but comparative research is still lacking. This special issue addresses this gap in the literature by drawing on the work of both researchers and practitioners in the field. Part I of this special issue includes five research articles, three research notes and one note from the field that empirically and theoretically explore various aspects of rural policing. With work from Australia, North America, Europe and Africa, rural communities across multiple countries and regions are represented. Topics of discussion include police-community relations, use of technology, police officer safety and general challenges faced by police practitioners working in rural spaces as well as those engaging in rural field research.

In their article, James J. Nolan, Walter S. DeKeseredy and Henry Brownstein draw on the results from local crime survey data in West Virginia in the United States to examine the importance of community dynamics and atmosphere in rural policing. Taking a critical criminological approach – and applying a left realist perspective that has previously been applied almost exclusively in urban settings – the authors empirically illustrate how the traditional law enforcement focus on following law and policy, regardless of circumstances or community outcomes, fails to keep communities safe, uphold police accountability and account for context in which crime occurs. On a similar theme of police-community relations, Kyle Mulrooney, Alistair Harkness and Huw Nolan present data from farm crime victimisation surveys conducted in the states of New South Wales and Victoria in Australia. They discuss the significance of positive relationships and collaboration between rural farmers and police in combatting farm crime, as well as the importance of officers possessing rural-specific knowledge – such as that of local culture and agricultural industry – to build trust with rural residents and improve crime-reporting behaviours.

The next article dives into the ways in which rural police work in a technologically advancing world. Jenny Wise and Nathan Wise provide a historical account of the introduction of fingerprinting in Australia and the challenges and limitations of adapting such technologies in rural agencies of New South Wales, Australia. They discuss the initial inequitable concentration of resources in urban areas that have left rural and remote areas limited in their abilities to



combat crime using what is now one of the most widespread forensic identification tools in policing.

Also on the theme of technology, Michael Adorjan, Rosemary Ricciardelli and Laura Huey interviewed police officers in Canada and focus on rural police understandings and responses to online mediated harms. They discuss the increased use of social media platforms in both the commission and reporting of crime – particularly among youth – and the added challenges that rural agencies face in addressing such issues. Turning to the effects of context on police officers themselves, Jess Rogers and Nicole L. Asquith interviewed and observed police officers in Tasmania to consider unique challenges to officer safety and security in rural and remote spaces. They discuss policy implications and provide possible ways to mitigate risks and harms encountered by officers in such communities.

Some authors in the special issue focused on police interactions with specific under-represented segments of the rural population. In her research note, Tariro Mutongwizo discusses the entanglement of patriarchal state structures and police in rural Africa and Zimbabwe. She discusses the challenges that this entanglement presents for victims of crime and illustrates key issues with policing in the rural developing world. In a similar vein, Finex Ndhlovu, Tariro Mutongwizo, Kyle Mulrooney and Alistair Harkness in their research note discuss how police in certain increasingly diverse rural settings in Australia can improve intercultural encounters with residents from multilingual communities. They provide new insight into police communication protocols and approaches that can improve trust between police and diverse rural populations, while inviting scholars to join this important discourse.

For those wishing to embark on research in rural spaces, the research note by Jessica Rene Peterson discusses the unique challenges, as well as advantages, that field researchers may experience working with rural law enforcement. Using examples from her work in rural Texas, Peterson provides insight on how researchers can prepare for – and overcome – challenges presented by the rural context in order to successfully complete meaningful projects. Finally, in a note from the field, readers can learn about key challenges and innovations in rural policing from rural police practitioners in Australia, Europe, and the United Kingdom. The note consists of a condensed transcript from a virtual roundtable that was hosted by the International Society for the Study of Rural Crime (ISSRC) in 2020, where three panelists answer key questions about policing in their respective rural areas.

While each contribution is unique, further broadening our understanding of rural policing, the works included in this special issue speak powerfully to the role and importance of ‘space’ in theorizing about crime and its control, as well as in political and policy efforts which seek to respond to crime. The rural is not static, nor is it universally uniform. Indeed, the contributions in this special issue are evidence of this. Farm crime, for example, is shaped not

only by its occurrence in rural spaces, but by the specific features of a particular space such as the presence of agricultural operations and, in the case of stock theft, cattle to steal. Likewise, issues evident by the influx of refugees and migrants in rural spaces speak to changing times and present-day political circumstances which impact upon the rural and contribute to an ever-changing rural environment.

While our understanding of rural policing is still emerging and evolving, a common theme throughout this special issue is that attempts to understand rural policing must be considerate of how location, geography, history and culture combine in the present and distinctly shape crime and its control in rural spaces.

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