



# Relationships and responses: Policing anti-social behaviour in rural Scotland



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## ABSTRACT

Rural policing, with a few notable exceptions, has been largely absent from the geographic and criminology literature. Yet, examining rural policing is important for revealing details about rural society, and the role that the police play in controlling rural space. Using participant observation and interview data collected as part of a wider study exploring anti-social behaviour (ASB) in rural Scotland, this paper calls for a more nuanced understanding of rural policing. In order to fully conceptualise the response of the police to ASB in these rural locations, the role of discretion, negotiated order maintenance and police–community interactions need to be considered. These dimensions are considered to lie at the core of the response of the police to ASB in rural Scotland. Existing urban-based policing typologies are helpful for beginning to understand the multiple ways that the police control territory. Yet they are of limited relevance to some of the challenges identified with policing rural contexts, namely the scale of the environment, the lack of back-up and the forms of ASB that are common in rural locations. This paper concludes by arguing that the rural needs to be (re)conceptualised as a distinct, challenging and variable policing environment, with particular contextual factors that need to be considered.

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## 1. Introduction

Rural studies and geography more broadly have largely neglected scholarly work examining the police and policing (Fyfe, 1991; Mawby and Yarwood, 2011). A number of papers have, however, recently sought to shed light on the varying dimensions of rural policing (see for example Gilling, 2010; Yarwood and Gardner, 2000; Yarwood, 2007), and perhaps, most notably, Mawby and Yarwood's (2011) edited collection *Rural Policing and Policing the Rural*. Rural locations are a key area of study in relation to policing and the police in Scotland, not only because 94% of the country is classed as rural using the six-fold urban–rural Scottish Government classification (Scottish Government, 2010a), but also because examining rural policing reveals important details about rural society and the role that the police play in controlling rural space (Mawby and Yarwood, 2011). This paper focuses on the police (rather than the broader plural policing agenda which takes into

account other criminal justice partners) and argues that understanding the nuance of the rural context is of central importance for understanding the response of the police to anti-social behaviour (herein ASB) in rural Scotland, something which has hitherto been largely missing from the geographic and criminology literature.

The existing rural literature provides a helpful way of contextualising the responses to ASB which is legally defined as someone acting 'in a manner that caused, or was likely to cause, harassment, alarm or distress to one or more persons not of the same house hold as himself' (Home Office, 1998). Recent years have witnessed a body of work which have sought to move beyond clichéd representations of the rural, and instead treat the rural as 'dynamic, fluid and multi-experiential' (Yarwood and Charlton, 2009: 194), where the rural context is dependent on the everyday life of the individual living it (Cloke, 2003; Halfacree, 2006). As Woods (2009) highlights, work on the production, reproduction and contestations of rurality continue to be prominent within the discipline of 'rural geography', with Rye (2006: 409) stating that 'rather than asking what the rural 'is', the pivotal question has become: how do actors socially construct their rurality?' The everyday life, combined with the rural locality and

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representations of the rural, make up what Halfacree (2006) terms 'the totality of rural space'. This three-fold model is based on Lefebvre's understanding of spatiality, where spatial practices, representations of space and spaces of representations combine to form a three-part dialectic where space is perceived, conceived and lived (Halfacree, 2006; Lefebvre, 1991). Halfacree (2006) argues that the lives of the rural, representations of the rural and the rural locality triangulate to define rural space (see Fig. 1):

Understanding rural space in this manner enables a more complex analysis of the police response to ASB at the local scale and provides a basis for contextualising this response. The triad is intrinsically dynamic, with each facet 'being in relationship with the other two' (Halfacree, 2006: 51), meaning that theoretically understanding the rural depends on the 'totality of rural space'. In their book 'Rural Criminology', Donnermeyer and DeKeseredy (2014: 4–6) define the rural as: having smaller population sizes and densities; where there is closer collective efficacy (Sampson, 1988); where there is less autonomy between rural communities than before and where cultural, social and economic divides are much more obvious than before. Although these points may accurately nominally describe what makes a location 'rural', Halfacree's (2006) analysis enables the rural to be examined without fetishizing particular rural representations. This paper seeks to offer a nuanced discussion of the different responses of the police to ASB in rural Scotland by engaging with Halfacree's dialectic. In turn, it is important to challenge the existing ASB policies which typically treat 'the rural' as a single dimension where (urban) policy gets enacted with little consideration for local context and scale.

Against this backdrop, this paper attempts to understand a set of key practices which structure the response of the police to ASB in rural Scotland. These practices relate to the use of discretion, police–community interaction and the situated knowledge that rural police officers tend to have of the community in which they police. While these features are also important to urban police responses to ASB, they acquire heightened importance for the way that the police in rural locations manage their response to ASB. Indeed, responding to ASB represents a significant resourcing challenge for the police, with large rural policing beats being covered by a small number of officers based in police stations which are often geographically removed from the communities for which they are responsible. In order to fully understand the response of the police to ASB in these locations, it is therefore important to understand the context of the policing responses in rural locations. In exploring these issues, this paper aims to contribute to the evidence base around rural policing and argues that a more nuanced understanding of 'the rural' is necessary for conceptualising the response of the police. After outlining the context of the research, this paper proceeds by examining the role of discretion, police–community interaction and situated community knowledge play in structuring the police response in two

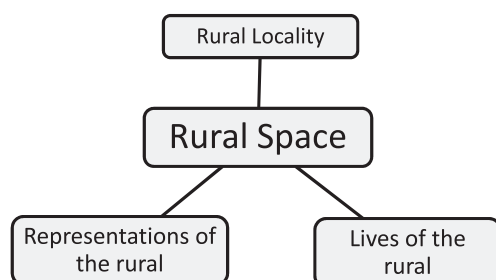


Fig. 1. The totality of rural space (Halfacree, 2006).

contrasting rural communities. The paper concludes by arguing that the distinctiveness of the police response to issues of ASB in rural areas means that the term 'rural policing' is a better conceptualisation of the distinct challenges facing rural officers than 'policing in rural areas'.

## 2. The research context

This paper draws on data collected as part of a research project which explores the nature and impact of, and responses to, ASB in rural Scotland. ASB is a vague and contested term which has been critiqued in the literature (Burney, 2009; Home Office, 1998; Millie, 2009; Squires and Stephen, 2005). Although England and Wales and Scotland initially had convergent policy responses to ASB, these have since diverged with the 2007 and 2011 elections of Scottish National Party. Despite having similar punitive powers, the Scottish Government have focussed more specifically on prevention and intervention through the Promoting Positive Outcomes Framework (McAra and McVie, 2010; Scottish Government, 2010b). This paper does not seek to analyse the details of the framework, rather use ASB as a lens through which the response of the police in rural locations can be explored. In order to get an understanding of the ways in which ASB differs between types of rural locations and because ASB is typically associated with multiple deprivation (Millie, 2009), two case study areas were selected by combining the Scottish Government six-fold urban–rural classification and the Scottish Indices of Multiple Deprivation. The village of Abanoch, a pseudonym, is classed as a remote rural location by the Scottish Government 6-fold urban rural classification, being located a fifty minute drive from the nearest town of 10,000 people or more. With a population of 1895, it is a small, affluent community with a thriving tourist trade and low levels of reported crime (Scottish Neighbourhood Statistics, 2013). The second case study setting is the village of Crian. Located a twenty-five minute drive from the nearest town of 10,000 people or more, it is classed as accessibly rural by the Scottish Government 6-fold urban rural classification, and the local area wards report higher levels of crime than in Abanoch<sup>1</sup> (Scottish Government, 2010a; Scottish Neighbourhood Statistics, 2013).

The data drawn upon in this paper emerges from: eighty hours of participant observation conducted with the police and young people across the two communities; thirty-three interviews conducted with people living in and organisations associated with Abanoch and Crian and eight focus groups conducted with young people and organisations in both locations. The research took place between August 2011 and January 2013 and because of the temporality of ASB, fieldwork was undertaken at different times and days of the week. The urban contrasts examined in this paper emerge from the wider policing literature rather than primary data collection. This paper focuses on the police responses to ASB and draws primarily on the thirty hours of police ride-along data and the five interviews conducted with officers of different ranks. Data was transcribed verbatim as soon as possible after the interview and uploaded into a software for qualitative data analysis. The analysis of data was carried out to identify patterns and develop codes and themes occurring across the interviews, focus groups and participant observation.

The aim of this research methodology was to understand both the 'formal and informal work practices which, together,

<sup>1</sup> The Scottish Government class 'remote rural' as areas with a population of less than 3000 people, and with a drive time of over 30 min to a settlement of 10,000 or more. They class 'accessibly rural' as areas with a population of less than 3000 people, and within a 30 min drive time of a settlement of 10,000 or more.

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