

The impact of rural policing on the private lives of New Zealand police officers

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ABSTRACT

This article is concerned with perceived differences between rural and urban policing in New Zealand. More specifically with how officers view the effect that rural and urban policing has on their private lives and those of their family members. Using grounded theory as a research method because of its reflexivity in regard to generating questions from emergent data, 16 participants were interviewed. Seven of these participants were stationed in an urban location while nine were recruited from rural stations. The results suggest that rural policing has a greater and often more stressful impact on the private lives of police officers and their families. This suggests a need for the New Zealand Police as an organisation to engage in policy-making that

gives greater recognition to the rural aspects of policing, with a particular focus being the provision of support for the families of rural officers.

INTRODUCTION

It has often been argued that debates regarding policing are essentially constructed from an urban perspective that focuses on the inner city experience, while ignoring the experiences of rural police officers (Crank, 1990; Falcone, Wells, & Weisheit, 2002; Kuhns, Maguire, & Cox, 2007; Loader & Mulcahy, 2003; Maguire, Fulkner, Mathers, Rowland, & Wozniak, 1991; Mawby, 2004; Sims, 1988, Weisheit, Falcone, & Wells, 2006; Wolfer & Baker, 2000). This urban focus to the study of policing is due to the metro-centric emphasis placed on the understanding of crime by the media, academics and, more importantly, policy-makers (Buttle, 2006; Schafer, Burruss, & Giblin, 2009; Reiss, 1992). Many of those involved with law enforcement policy-making live and work in, or near to, the city that contains the seat of government. Also, with media constructions of crime as well as academic research being embedded in the urban experience, it comes as no surprise that most police policy

has been formulated with the city in mind. Indeed it is often assumed that rural policing is the same as urban policing and what works in large urban areas will transfer to all rural contexts (Schafer et al.) and that nothing can be learned from rural policing (Falcone et al.). This is especially the case in New Zealand where law enforcement is the purview of a unified national policing organisation (Winfree & Taylor, 2004), which is strongly centralised (Young & Trendle, 2007) and often favours a one-size-fits-all approach to police policy. Therefore, research that provides a greater understanding of how the countryside is policed may illuminate some practical applications to be considered for future national policing policy in New Zealand.

While some authors support the view that policing a rural area is similar to policing in an urban setting (Bittner, 1974; Winfree & Taylor, 2004), the majority of literature indicates that rural experiences of policing are qualitatively different from policing experiences in urban settings. Rural settings often provide police organisations with a number of inherent problems associated with rural geographical attributes. With rare exception, the most striking contrast between urban and rural policing is distance, where rural police officers find themselves serving remote and isolated households, often with fewer human and financial resources available (Pennings & Clark, 1999). It is generally accepted that response times to public calls for assistance will be slower in rural than in urban areas as a consequence of officers having to travel greater distances (Yarwood, 2001). This distance makes it harder for police to keep the peace effectively. Similarly, urban officers often rely on timely support from colleagues when making arrests, but in rural locations this backup takes considerably longer to arrive. In this way, rural officers often find themselves physically isolated

while on duty (Weisheit et al., 2006). Therefore, the rural officers' concerns about safety are also influenced by this geographical expanse (Buttle, 2006). To further this point, the policing of rural space situated adjacent to urban centres is often quite different from how a rural region with a low population density is policed (Buttle, 2006; Jobes, 2003; Lee, 2008; Weisheit et al.). This indicates that the more geographically isolated the rural area the greater the observable difference may be between urban and rural policing styles (Schafer et al., 2009).

Rural police officers often have only themselves or a limited number of colleagues to rely on when policing. Therefore, rural police officers are called upon to render a wide variety of services and often resort to informal methods of resolving disputes, in comparison with their urban counterparts who are more likely to resort to arrests (Cain, 1973; Carrington & Schulenberg, 2003; Decker, 1979). Indeed, Marenin and Copus (1991) considered rural policing to have less to do with traditional crime-fighting and to have a role similar to that of a social worker. It is often the case that rural officers who make too many arrests are perceived as being unable to handle the problems informally and that this is not good for the community (Weisheit et al., 2006). This supports Meagher's (1985) findings indicating that smaller rural agencies are more concerned with crime prevention, while large agencies focus on crime-fighting approaches to policing. The complexities of rural policing often require officers to maintain close relationships with the public, have a generalist approach to policing, and be able to respond by solving assorted social and community needs, as opposed to the urban focus on specialisation (Maguire, Faulkner, Mathers, Rowland, & Wozniak, 1991; Payne, Berg, & Sun, 2005; Weisheit, Wells, & Falcone, 1994; Weisheit,

Falcone and Wells, 2006; Wells, Falcone, & Rabe-Hemp, 2003).

Due to the comparative isolation of many rural communities, the legitimacy of rural policing is predicated on the physical presence of a police officer in the area. In short, rural communities seem to prefer being policed by someone who lives locally (Mawby, 2003; Yarwood, 2001). The legitimacy of the police is also dependent on the perception that the rural police officer shares the values and social morals of the community that is being served, while treating the public with dignity and fairness (Jackson & Sunshine, 2007). Cain (1971) indicated that rural officers, unlike their urban counterparts, are capable of embracing the social norms of the communities they serve and they are also interested in conforming with them. Taking into account the local values seems essential for safe and effective policing of isolated rural areas where the officers are more reliant on the goodwill of the community. There is evidence to suggest that urban officers believe that they are given less respect by the community than their rural counterparts (Kowaleski, Hall, Dolan, & Anderson, 1984). Decker (1979) indicated that rural communities were more likely to perceive their police officer as an individual citizen, while urban communities show respect only for the position. This is indicative of the tendency for rural communities to take greater ownership of their police. This is supported by Mawby's (2004) observation that public respect for rural policing in the United Kingdom has been eroded due to a gradual move towards centralising police around urban areas, which has led to the removal of the 'Village Bobby' from the countryside.

That rural communities feel a strong sense of ownership over the local police is often expressed in their expectations regarding what the police should be able to do for them. It is often the case that rural

officers are called out to handle incidents that their urban counterparts would consider trivial (Kuhns et al., 2007). For example, in the United Kingdom rural police have received calls to find a lost duck and to help a nine-year-old child get to sleep (Yarwood, 2001). Payne et al. (2005) indicated that problems associated with dogs, drunks, disorder and dysfunctional families were a large part of the mundane task of rural policing. Furthermore, this sense of community ownership of local policing makes it awkward for the serving officers to escape their role (International Association of Chiefs of Police, 1990). Members of the public are likely to have close relationships with the officer serving their community (Weisheit et al., 2006) and the various different tasks that the officer undertakes while off duty become blurred with their role of police officer (Decker, 1978; Jobes, 2003; Schafer et al., 2009). Payne et al. observed that many community members would elect to make complaints to the police in an informal manner, often phoning the rural officer when they are at home and off duty. Likewise, Weisheit et al. describe the loss of the rural officer's private life, with examples such as not being able to drink in local bars without starting rumours in the community, and being approached with complaints by members of the public when walking around town with their family.

The evidence suggests that rural police officers undergo additional job-related stress because they cannot participate in the social activities of the community they serve without being treated like a police officer on all levels (International Association of Chiefs of Police, 1990). It is the challenges faced by rural officers in maintaining their private lives that is the focus of this article. Given the difficulties in policing a rich and diverse countryside, the formation of the appropriate responsive policies must be

informed by a body of independent research. The current study seeks, in part, to provide an understanding of rural policing in New Zealand. This study acknowledges a gap in the rural policing literature by focusing on how the private lives of rural police officers differ from those of their urban counterparts and considers the impact that this may have on the police officer and their family.

RESEARCH METHOD

Grounded theory was chosen as the best approach for this study due to its data-driven emphasis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The exploratory emphasis of this approach facilitated the use of questions led by those aspects of the participants' working life that they perceive as most significant to them. The initial question asked of the participants was, from their perspective, 'are there any differences between rural and urban policing?' And the interview's progression then depended on how the officers answered. One of the themes that emerged early in the interview process focused on differences experienced by urban and rural officers in maintaining the distinction between being on and off duty, and how this affected their private lives. This was a strong theme throughout the study.

Once the authors had gained the permission of the New Zealand Police (NZP) to conduct the study, participants were recruited via email and after the initial interviews by referrals. While this is an opportunity sample, by using the snowballing technique access was gained to urban and rural officers interested in taking part in the study. The participants were interviewed in the police station that they worked from and the interviews lasted between 45 and 150 minutes. Data were collected from urban and rural officers over a period of four months, mainly due to the

need for the researcher to identify participants, schedule interviews and travel considerable distances to interview rural participants.

The participants in this study consisted of front-line police officers. They ranked no higher than sergeant because these were the people deemed to be close to the street-level experience of policing and therefore most able to inform us about urban versus rural differences. This study had a total of 16 participants, 1 female and 15 male. The average age of the participants was a mean of 38.5 with the mean number of years in service being 14. There were 14 participants who identified themselves as Caucasian and 2 who identified as Maori.

This is a study situated in the rural Northland district of New Zealand, where the city of Whangarei (population 78,200) is the largest urban expanse, which is relatively small in comparison to neighbouring Auckland (population 1,414,700), the largest city in New Zealand (Statistics New Zealand, 2008). In order to maximise our ability to compare perspectives, participants were recruited from urban and rural police stations. A total of seven participants were sampled from the main urban station in Whangarei with one of these officers being female and six being male. Only one officer who identified as Maori participated in the urban subset of this study. For comparison, a total of nine male participants were recruited from outlying rural stations that functioned with three or fewer officers present. In this subset of the sample there were no female officers and one participant who identified as Maori.

Many of these officers had, over time, been stationed in urban and rural settings, which also qualified them to make the appropriate comparisons. Some participants made comparisons between rural Northland and Whangarei, while others used Auckland as their urban reference point. In line with grounded theory, the interview

process continued until such time as no new information emerged (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). However, given the small size of the sample and the possible variations in different rural policing experiences, serious consideration should be given to any attempt at generalising this research to other policing districts in New Zealand or other jurisdictions.

Rural policing is a life spent on duty

Punch (1979) described the police as the only fully mobile 24-hour social service because the public expect them to be able to deal with any number of different social problems that often have little to do with crime. This is especially the case where rural officers are concerned (Payne et al., 2005). In this study rural and urban participants gave expression to the permanent nature of their policing role. However, for rural officers this was particularly intrusive because they never felt that they were off duty. These rural officers talked about the public and police having access to them at all times. Many expressed the feeling that they were always working and that having a personal life was difficult:

You are never left alone by the public. They always think that your house is open 24/7. You can never get away. (R3)

I worked from 7 to 11, 18 hours one day, then I worked 7 to 5.30 the next day, I just sat down, literally walked in the door and sat down and the phone rang and I had to go to a domestic, and that was another three hours on top. So there are times when it can be frustrating, finally I got home, I can relax for five minutes and the phone rings. (R6)

This supports the findings of Falcone et al. (2002) who suggested that there was potential for conflict between the countryside

community and rural officers. They indicated that the consequences of creating a professional distance or boundary between officers' private and working lives may result in community mistrust of the rural police. The officers interviewed in the present study believed that a balance between community service and their home life is difficult to achieve because the legitimacy of rural policing was, to no small extent, a matter of being available to their community.

Another rural officer spoke about the NZP's 'catch me if you can' policy whereby every police officer is obliged to attend a serious incident if required. This caused more issues for rural officers, as they are not paid for their attendance:

1–2–3 man station officers can't claim stand-by allowances, or on call allowance. Technically they are not supposed to be on call. But can be called on, the police association calls it 'catch me if you can'. If they can get hold of you for a priority one job then you are obliged to respond, because all policemen in NZ are supposed to respond. (R8)

The impact of this is illustrated by the case of Jonathon Erwood who, in July 2006, attended a serious vehicle crash in the rural area of Mokau. He drove under three kilometres to the accident scene with the town's only oxygen tanks, and was found to be over the legal limit for alcohol consumption (Woulfe, 2006). This resulted in Constable Erwood being discharged without conviction. It also contributed to the change in police duty guidelines, stopping officers who have consumed any alcohol from attending or intervening in any incidents ('Police draft guidelines', 2007).

Conversely, urban officers expressed that they had little difficulty developing distinct boundaries between when they are on and off duty. As one urban officer commented on rural policing:

I like to go home at the end of the day and not be a policeman. Whereas they [rural police] go home at the end of the day and they still are policemen. (U2)

It seems that town and city police enjoy a certain amount of anonymity because the public are unaware of the location of their residence, while rural officers often live in or adjacent to their local station, which is common knowledge to needful members of the community.

Negotiating privacy with the community

Officers participating in this study stated that the only time to be considered as truly their own was annual leave. For rural officers this was exacerbated by the fact that they were always on call, even if it was unofficially. Therefore, annual leave for rural officers was the only time they could relax. As one rural officer recounted, any time off still needed to be negotiated with the community:

I had a few people come to the door, I had a note on the station that I was on leave . . . and that, 'listen I am not going to talk to you, I am on leave, you are going to have to talk to X'. That's it, I am not even going to start taking the complaint or giving you advice, that's it, that's where the line is. Obviously you can't do that so much when working, even on days off you can't do that so much, but I was on leave, and I don't want to get in the situation where I have to leave my house to take a week off. I think that is kinda pointless. (R9)

Yet some rural officers found that the only way to get some uninterrupted time off work was to vacate their house and their community during their annual leave. As two rural officers described it:

I like my leisure time to be completely separate from my work time and I don't want people from my town here. (R2)

I mean if you take a few days off and try and do something around your home, you can'. You have to bugger off somewhere and hide basically so that you can have time away . . . Well I have a hobby of motorcycling, so I get away with that and if going on holiday then I will take my motorcycle and go for it, just ride away, once I am dressed up in my leathers they don't know who I am. (R3)

For rural officers, ensuring privacy when not working involved the negotiation of free time with the community. They indicated that members of the community could utilise other stations in their areas for out-of-hours enquiries. Rural officers realised the importance of attempting to instruct the community to have realistic expectations in regards to their private life. However, the effectiveness of teaching the community to respect the officers' private life is called into question because of their other main coping strategy, which was avoidance. In short, officers also sought to physically avoid community members by leaving the area to seek relaxation in the anonymity of another place.

This contrasted with the urban officers' aim to not take work home with them, and not going into work on days off, which can be interpreted as a psychological means to detach from the job. As a couple of urban officers stated:

You can't take work home with you, you have to switch off. (U3)

I switch off pretty quick. The odd little thing in the job may worry me. Generally, once I have done the days work, and I'm not on call, I forget about it. I forget about the job. (U4)

For urban officers the actual physical intrusion of the public into their home life, as experienced by their rural counterparts, was of little concern in comparison with the need to refocus the officers' attention on the demands of their family and friends.

It must be noted that both rural and urban officers commented on how difficult rural policing was on personal and family lives. Some of the participants described how the reliability of being a good officer often paralleled unreliability with family, friends and even hobbies, as one rural officer stated:

Small town policing it's hard to have another hobby, because you work longer hours, you don't just work your eight hours, you are inevitably working two to three hours overtime, and if something happens you have to follow it through, and so you are really unreliable in a lot of senses. (R4)

It would seem that becoming accustomed to rural policing is not just a matter for the officer concerned but also for family and friends who may have to endure a relationship with a person who has no choice when it comes to being preoccupied with their professional life.

Fear of crime and family safety

Rural officers commented that their full-time role sometimes affected their own safety as well as that of their families. They mentioned that family members expressed concern regarding their work, and in turn they had concerns about the safety of their family. Rural officers spoke about the uncertainty of the situations they get called to deal with and when they will return home. As one rural officer noted:

It's just, again, the unreliable factor. You can't even tell your wife that you will be home at a certain time. My wife is

paranoid, we spent 3000 dollars on a burglar alarm, and got a German shepherd and she still wouldn't sleep at night. (R4)

Other rural officers described concerns about gang members knowing where they live because of the possibility of reprisals. Also, having members of the public knocking on their doors can at times be disconcerting to family members. Furthermore, the problem of being assaulted while on duty becomes more salient to the families of officers who police small rural communities because there is a higher possibility that a family member may be present at the time of such an incident. As one rural officer reflected:

We had a few situations when I was living here that upset my family. I had an incident a couple of years back where my boy saw me get knocked over, and that sort of upset them, it obviously does affect you. (R2)

In rural communities it is often the case that family life becomes more entangled with the officer's professional existence than would be the case in an urban setting.

Family members doing policing

The rural officers reflected on the impositions that their professional career often put on their private lives and especially on their partners' private lives. One rural officer described how his wife helped out at accident scenes, and dealt with people coming to the station or police house when he was not there. Another spoke about the community assuming that his partner was a secretary, leaving messages and even items with her, and the possible consequences of that. As he stated:

My wife started to take messages, and then she actually took a found wallet,

and I put my foot down on that because that just gets ugly. If there's money in it and it goes missing, it could come back on her or me. Obviously we have quite a strict protocol regarding found property especially cash. So I stomped on that and said don't take it, if someone wants to hand you a wallet say it's not safe for me to take it, give me your details, or ring and leave a message and he will come and get it from you. (R9)

From the perspective of both rural and urban officers it was acknowledged that rural officers' partners are being used, whether consciously or unconsciously, as an extension of the police without financial remuneration or other recognition from the NZP. Many rural officers spoke about how the public assume their partner or children can be used as an officer substitute, and the impact that role has on them in the community. Officers commented that their family needed to be accommodating and unimpeachable in attitude, as one rural officer recounted:

The wife has to be a little bit different, in sort of respecting the public, taking phone numbers and being the secretary type person, until I get home . . . and the kids are the same. (R3)

An urban officer reflected:

You would be the 'cops' wife, wouldn't you. You would have to be squeaky clean as well. So it would be harder on them definitely, and also people are knocking on their door in the middle of the night. If the cop's not there, you would be answering the door, answering the phone, things like that. It would be tough on a rural cop's wife, and I am talking a single man's station, definitely be tough on them and kids as well. (U4)

Subsequent to the interview, a participant indicated that rural officers are now trying to get some acknowledgement for their wives/partners from the NZP with respect to the unpaid services that they perform for the community. He stated, as have others in this study, that when the officers are not available, their families are expected to fulfil administration roles by taking messages and comforting people in need. Also, it is expected, and perhaps taken for granted by the NZP, that when something happens in the area the partners assist the officer at the incident as a second officer whilst waiting for further assistance from colleagues.

There is also a certain stigma attached to being a police officer's partner, and this can place pressure not only on the partner's relationship with the officer, but also on the officer's willingness to continue working for the NZP:

A lot of these guys leave because of their partners. They come out here and there is nothing for them to do. There is no major employment, so they become bored and there is a stigma that goes with being a policeman's partner, as far as forming friendships is concerned. Plus they are always concerned if they form a friendship with someone that, if we are arresting the husband, arresting family members, it becomes embarrassing for them, so there is a lot of pressure on partners and that's a lot of reason why some of the guys leave. (R8)

This corresponds with the findings of Jobes (2003) on role conflict in rural policing, where it was also reported that there were problems with developing friendships in the community, due to potential arrests of acquaintances. There is tension between the wish to socialise and an awareness of potential critics in the community. In this study it is certainly the case that rural officers' partners and other family members are strongly

identified with policing by the community, which will often place constraints on their behaviour as well as the ability to establish long-standing friendships in the community. Therefore, being a member of a rural police officer's family can be an isolating experience for those involved.

DISCUSSION

This study indicates that there are qualitative differences between the experience of being a rural and an urban officer regarding the impact on the personal life of these participants. It is the rural officers' perception that they are never off work, because community members have an intimate knowledge of where they and their families reside. Therefore, their partners and families were seen as an extension of themselves, and were often considered as *de facto* police by the community and, to some extent, by the NZP. This contrasted with the urban officers who benefited from the anonymity that urban areas provide to the officers' families when it came to distinguishing between when they were on or off duty. Unlike their rural counterparts, an urban officer and his or her family need not be concerned about community interference with their private lives.

The idea of a police officer who lives locally as part of the community is a popular notion (Mawby, 2004) that resonates well with the New Zealand public, due to connotations of better community care than is provided in cities and towns. However, the impact of living in a closed and often relatively isolated rural community can be stressful for the officer's professional and private life. There is a need for the NZP to acknowledge the difficulties experienced by those who police rural areas and enact policies that are sensitive to these aspects of rural policing. Specifically, this study indicates that the NZP needs to show a greater

sense of responsibility to the families of rural police officers.

There are a number of relatively simple ideas that may be used to alleviate some of the stress that rural policing places on serving officers and their families. There may be some wisdom in providing information to police officers and their families prior to officers being posted to an isolated rural station. This would prepare all concerned with knowledge about the difficulties which rural police officers and their families face in regards to maintaining the boundaries between policing and private lives. Perhaps being forewarned would make the transition from urban anonymity to rural visibility less of a problem for officer and family. Given that rural police officers are always on call, it would be appropriate to pay them a callout fee as recompense for the interruption in their private life. The NZP employ a considerable number of non-sworn staff to handle administration in support of police work. In some rural areas it may be possible to employ and train appropriate family members to fulfil these roles, rather than just assume the family will provide this service pro bono. Measures such as these will not change the nature of rural policing in a way that will damage the officers' relationship with the community, but will make the intrusions into the private lives of officers and their families more tolerable.

While initiatives such as these would improve the lives of some rural police officers and their families, other rural districts may require different strategies. For example, in some districts officers police rural areas while based in urban towns and enjoy the relative anonymity that they share with their urban colleagues. Any policy developed with provision for greater quality of life for rural officers and their families must be flexible and tailor-made for specific rural settings. The main barrier to this type

of flexible provision is the centralised organisation of the NZP, which perceives policing to be metro-centric. While rural district commanders may have considerable discretion, it is the Wellington-based central command structure that provides funding, sets policy objectives and dictates what aspect of policing should be focused on in any given financial year. This means that funding has to be allocated in a manner that provides measurable outcomes, which are rarely influenced by the needs of any given district. Therefore, the provision of initiatives to improve the quality of life of rural officers and their families are often passed over due to the need to provide measurable outcomes for metro-centric policing policy.

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