Partnerships between police and GBV service providers in remote, rural and island communities in northern Scotland before and during COVID-19.

PEDERSEN, S., MUELLER-HIRTH, N. and MILLER, L.

2023

Original Article

Partnerships between police and GBV service providers in remote, rural, and island communities in northern Scotland before and during COVID-19

Sarah Pedersen[*], Natascha Mueller-Hirth[**], Leia Miller[**]

Abstract COVID-19 exacerbated challenges that already existed in the policing of Gender-Based Violence (GBV) in remote and rural northern Scotland. Victims' direct access to the police and third-sector organisations was impeded by social distancing while the pandemic exacerbated extant issues relating to staffing, particularly in relation to female police officers. On the positive side, the flexibility that already characterised rural and remote policing continued, and police officers and third-sector organisations worked together to support victims. The move to videoconferencing was hailed as a positive move in an area where travel to meetings or court can be difficult and expensive. A lack of training for officers with no specific GBV role was identified as particularly problematic during the pandemic when officers on the ground in rural and remote Scotland had to take over work usually undertaken by specialist task forces.

Remote, rural, and island communities offer particular challenges for the policing of gender-based violence (GBV). However, much scholarship on GBV tends to overlook the different realities and experiences of rural women and girls (DeKeseredy 2015; Little 2017). GBV in rural areas is typically underestimated. This has been attributed to the character of gender relations in rural areas, which might remain particularly conservative and patriarchal (Terry 2020) and involve a blurring of boundaries between violence and non-violent behaviour in the home (DeKeseredy *et al.* 2007). Victims can often live many miles from the nearest third-sector support organization, while the pressures of a small community mean that they can be wary of approaching the police, aware that they will still have to live in the vicinity of those they have reported and their wider family members.

Such challenges were only heightened during the COVID-19 pandemic when lockdown typically led to perpetrators of abuse spending more time with their victim, with more opportunities for monitoring and control of their behaviour (Lyons and Brewer 2021). People were forced to live together continuously, with stress factors such as concerns about money, jobs, and health impacting on mental health and tempers. In fact, lockdown conditions were often used by perpetrators of abuse to intensify

[*]School of Creative and Cultural Business, Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen AB10 7QE, United Kingdom. E-mail: s.pedersen@rgu.ac.uk
[**]School of Applied Social Studies, RGU, Aberdeen, United Kingdom

Advance Access publication: 28 July 2023
Policing, Volume 17, pp. 1–12
doi: https://doi.org/10.1093/police/paad045

or conceal their violence, coercion, and control (Hohl and Johnson 2021). In addition, GBV in rural communities has been linked to a decline in farming and other rural industries and the associated loss of traditional rural masculinity (Carrington and Scott 2008)—it is therefore not surprising that a crisis such as COVID-19, further threatening rural communities and livelihoods, led to incidents of GBV.

This article reports on a qualitative study investigating partnerships between police and GBV service providers in remote, rural, and island communities in northern Scotland both before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. We suggest that—despite its obvious challenges—the pandemic and its associated lockdowns offered a moment when those working in rural and remote policing in Scotland were able to take a more flexible approach to working with GBV victims and third-sector organizations, and that many of the innovations introduced at that point are continuing into a post-pandemic world. However, it is also clear that the pandemic and associated lockdowns exacerbated existing problems for the policing of GBV in remote and rural communities in Scotland, particularly in relation to already strained resources and court delays. We also identify a need for more training on the subject of GBV, particularly Continuous Professional Development (CPD) training, for non-specialist officers based in such communities.

Context

The project uses the Scottish government's classification of remote and rural locations. Accessible rural areas are defined as areas with a population of less than 3,000 people and within a 30-min drive time of a settlement of 10,000 or more. Remote rural areas are defined as areas with a population of less than 3,000 people with a drivetime of 30–60 min to a settlement of 10,000 or more (Scottish Government 2018). The majority of remote rural areas in Scotland are found in the north of the country and in the Scottish island groups of Shetland, Orkney, and Inner and Outer Hebrides. 9.7 million British people, and 17% of the Scottish population, live in rural areas (Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs 2021; Scottish Government 2021a).

Police Scotland was formed in 2013 and is responsible for policing some 28,168 square miles in the north of the UK. The number of police officers employed by Police Scotland dropped from a high of 17,431 FTE officers in March 2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic arrived in the country, to 16,610 FTE by August 2022 (Scottish Government 2022). In June 2022, concerns around officers' welfare, stress levels, and burnout relating to COVID-19 were raised by the Scottish Police Federation (STV News 2022). In addition, in April 2022 it was reported that 140 police stations had been closed in Scotland since the creation of Police Scotland in 2013, many in rural and remote parts of the country (Herald Scotland 2022). The majority of these closures were related to buildings being in poor states of repair with staff being re-located to shared buildings, including council headquarters.

Police Scotland recorded 65,251 incidents of GBV in 2020–21, which was an increase of 4% compared to the previous year. Eighty percent of incidents involved a female victim and male accused, 16% a male victim and female accused, and 3% same-sex victim and accused (Scottish Government 2021b).

There is also a high incidence of gun ownership in northern Scotland. In 2022, there were 18,960 active gun certificates issued via Police Scotland's Inverness office—serving the Western Isles including Skye, Highlands, Orkney, and Shetland—which amounts to the equivalent of one in 16 people. In comparison, the permits from the Glasgow office amount to one in 116 people for the west Central Belt (Aberdeen Press & Journal 2022). This greater prevalence of firearms in remote locations constitutes a serious concern for police officers responding to incidents of GBV, especially given the greater staffing pressures they faced during the pandemic.

The challenges of policing GBV in rural communities

Policing in rural and remote areas poses particular challenges that are distinct from those of urban policing, where evidence-based practice is typically developed (Mawby and Worrall 2011). It has

been noted, moreover, that several factors have to be addressed in order to develop an evidence base of local policing in Scotland (Aston 2013): the inclusion of a wide range of policing priorities that includes not only crime reduction but also community engagement and partnership working; the utilization of a wide range of research methodologies encompassing experimental, non-experimental, and conceptual research; and an emphasis on steps to implementation.

The challenges faced by police in rural communities include issues around distance and mobility, resourcing and back up, potential role conflicts for officers, and unique community expectations (Fenwick 2015; Fenwick *et al.* 2012; Oddsson *et al.* 2021; Yarwood and Wooff 2016). Policing teams in rural areas can be small, but the geographical area they are required to cover may be hundreds of square miles and very remote. Rural police officers also tend to have limited backup from other officers or specialized police units as well as from support services and other essential social service providers, such as GBV support organizations (Oddsson *et al.* 2021). Therefore, rural police officers have a more extensive range of tasks than urban officers, and might be called on for non-police issues (Spencer *et al.* 2022). The literature on rural policing moreover notes that there can be role conflicts, in smaller communities where officers often live where they patrol, between their participation in the local community and their roles in relation to law enforcement (Fenwick *et al.* 2012). What is more, rural areas may have distinct cultural and community norms and values, which might include particular histories of community engagement with police and with those that are seen as 'outsiders'. At the same time, these particular contexts also provide opportunities for police to engage in different ways. There is likely to be a greater degree of community power, and greater flexibility in police responses (Souhami 2020; Yarwood *et al.* 2021). 'Soft' policing is a non-coercive discretion-focussed policing style that is often associated with rural environments. In these environments, community engagement, situated knowledges, and negotiation are important in building community acceptance and allowing police responses (Fenwick *et al.* 2012; Wooff 2017). As spaces that are acknowledged to require and enable partnership approaches, rural and remote areas are thus important to study as examples of multi-agency working on complex issues. Rural police officers 'must take on leadership roles in the community and embrace the role of peacekeeper and service-provider' (Oddsson *et al.* 2021: 131). However, research into soft policing in rural contexts remains rare (Oddsson *et al.* 2021). This is particularly true of studies of rural policing during and after the COVID-19 pandemic (Mrozla 2022; but see Hansen and Lory 2020).

Rural areas clearly vary significantly both within countries and between them (Cordner, 2011, cited in Oddsson *et al.* 2021). Nonetheless, they are frequently conceptualized as crime-free romantic idylls, when many have a high incidence of deprivation, drug abuse, and poor health, while sections of rural society can be homophobic and misogynistic. In particular, entrenched traditional gender roles can mean a lack of sympathy for men suffering domestic violence. All of these issues can impact on the policing of GBV.

Previous studies of GBV in remote and rural communities have identified a 'cloak of silence' and surveillance culture around incidents of GBV (Little 2017). For example, Fikowski and Moffitt (2017) discuss the challenges relating to anonymity and confidentiality when reporting GBV in small, tight–knit communities in remote, rural northern Canada. There are also suggestions from Australia that women who live in remote and rural areas are more likely than women in urban areas to experience GBV (Campo and Tayton 2015) and from US studies that such violence might be at higher levels of severity (Peek-Asa *et al.* 2011). Access to formal support mechanisms can be difficult in remote and rural communities, whether victims are based in rural Zimbabwe (Chadambuka and Warria 2022) or Texas (Ravi *et al.* 2022).

Turning to the Scottish context, while opportunities for soft policing have been examined with a view to policing low-level order and anti-social behaviour in rural Scotland (Wooff 2017) and in other contexts, they have not been explored in relation to GBV to date. Wooff (2015) argues the need for a more nuanced understanding of rural policing and the need to reconceptualize the rural beat as distinct, challenging, and variable. Souhami's

(2020) study of policing on Shetland finds that remote island police work engenders a style that emphasizes under-enforcement, transparency, and in particular a striking empathy and humanity. Both note that studies of rural policing are rare. In addition, the practical difficulties of accessing support can be compounded by the close-knit nature of communities, where avoiding perpetrators of abuse and their supporters can be difficult (Scottish Women's Aid 2019).

Methodology

An interpretivist approach was employed since pre-existing knowledge and participant experiences were used to understand the reality of partnership working between police and third-sector organizations. Fifteen qualitative interviews were undertaken with representatives of third-sector organizations and police officers of various experience and ranks, from community and response officers to members of specialist task forces. Of these 15, 10 participants represent police officers and 5 participants represent GBV third-party service providers.

Interviews followed a semi-structured interview guide. While debates exist around data saturation and the appropriate number of interviews to achieve repetition (Sanders *et al.* 2018), interviews were conducted until no additional information was offered by participants.

The interviews were undertaken online through Microsoft Teams or Zoom, according to participant preference, as these platforms have readily available recording services that could be used for transcription. Zoom provides poorer auto-transcription. While being aware of this disadvantage, a previous study with GBV service providers undertaken by the three authors had demonstrated a clear preference for Zoom, so it was felt necessary to offer this option. This potential disadvantage was countered by careful reading and editing of the auto transcript (and this kind of editing was also undertaken for transcripts of interviews conducted on Teams).

In line with the COVID-19 pandemic and associated social-distancing measures, virtual interview methods have been embraced by qualitative researchers (Lobe *et al.* 2020). This approach to interviews promotes connectivity where face-to-face contact is not possible through the video facilities offered by online platforms. As online interviews allow for instantaneous connection to others across vast geographical areas (Dodds and Hess 2020), this suited the geographical demands of this research and allowed connectivity with officers and service providers in places that may not have been possible otherwise. This approach also suited the demands of police and service provider workloads, as they were able to arrange online interviews more easily than if they were to allocate time to a face-to-face interview.

Police officer participants were recruited through Police Scotland's Strategy, Insight, and Engagement Office. Overall, 10 officers were recruited: six female and four male officers. These officers covered a variety of different locations across rural, remote, and island Scotland and included a range of rank, experience, and length of service. More detailed demographic detail is difficult to provide given commitments to anonymity for interviewees—because of the limited numbers of police officers in remote and rural locations in northern Scotland, particularly female officers, more detail would open the possibility of identification.

Five additional interviews were carried out with representatives from GBV service provider organizations in the same geographical area, including representatives of local branches of third-sector organizations such as Rape Crisis, Women's Aid, and AMIS (Abused Men in Scotland). All service provider organization respondents were female. The third-sector representatives varied in their roles, with some holding managerial posts, some holding support roles, and one transitioning from a support role to a managerial position during the pandemic.

The interviews were undertaken by our research assistant, following a semi-structured interview guide created by the whole research team. These interviews covered a range of topics, including officers' community, area, and position, understanding of the policing of GBV, good and best practice in working in partnership to support victims of GBV, challenges to working jointly to support victims of GBV and an open-ended question to conclude which allowed participants to add any further information to the research. In addition, third-sector

representatives were interviewed about their interactions with the police.

Participants were made aware prior to the interview that they could take a break at any point during the interview should they wish to do so. As the interview unfolded, participants were asked further probing questions to encourage in-depth discussion and seek clarification where required. The nature of online interviews resulted in some connectivity issues, especially due to the rurality of participants. However, this did not present as a significant issue and questions were repeated where the signal dropped. Each of the interviews lasted approximately 45 min in length and were audio-recorded using the facilities on Teams or Zoom in preparation for transcription. Thematic analysis was from the transcribed interview data, as this theoretically flexible technique catered to the interpretivist, qualitative research design. This process supported the identification of key themes in the research through reading and coding of the interview transcripts. The research assistant and the other two team members initially each analysed the interview data separately and then jointly refined the themes and developed a coding index.

Policing GBV in remote communities during COVID-19

As has also been noted in a study of rural policing in the USA (Hansen and Lory 2020), the geographical challenges of policing in rural and remote Scotland were only enhanced during the pandemic. With 'stay at home' orders in place and the closing down of ferry and air services, specialist GBV task forces situated in large towns such as Inverness were less able to travel around the country and had to rely more on officers in remote and rural areas to conduct interviews and gather evidence for them. As one officer based in a domestic abuse task force explained:

> So we have to work very closely with them [local officers] and buy in their assistance to assist our investigations. For example, in Orkney we've had two cases in the pandemic time where we've had to rely on them to engage with survivors and to then note statements and gather evidence and then once we've then sort of collated the evidence from them and the information, we've then had to rely on them to arrest the perpetrator and sometimes interview them and deal with it fully (Interview with Participant 2, 1 June 2022).

In the opinion of one high-ranking officer, the direct impact of lockdown was more felt by regular police officers than in the specialist GBV task forces, who were able to continue their work investigating serious and serial perpetrators of abuse with comparatively little disruption apart from a switch to using videoconferencing and telephone communications. However, in remote and rural communities, local policing was already reliant on very small teams, which were heavily impacted during the pandemic whenever an officer became ill or had to isolate. This meant officers were required to deal with situations in remote locations without back up, sometimes in areas where even radio signals failed. One female police officer described an occasion where she had needed to travel on her own to a small island by private boat and then quad bike in order to intervene in a domestic dispute with no access to back up. There was also increased concern about firearms. Lynch and Logan (2022) note that, in the USA, the number of perpetrators of abuse threatening to shoot victims or others increased during the pandemic and advise on the need for safety planning around firearms when victims are isolated with a perpetrator of abuse at home. One officer interviewee described the situation in the community where she was based: '[T]here's a lot of males with firearms over here.… If there's any domestic incidents, you know that's the first thing I'm checking—if they've got firearms' (Interview with Participant 6, 27 June 2022).

At the same time, it became even more difficult for victims to gain access to support from either third-sector support organizations or the police. The offices of organizations such as Rape Crisis and Women's Aid were closed, with support and advice moving online or via the telephone. However, if victims were in lockdown with a perpetrator of abuse, accessing such support could be difficult if not

impossible. While Police Scotland and third-sector organizations worked together to use national and local media to make victims aware that it was lawful for them to leave their home to escape abuse, interviewees acknowledged that lockdown made it more difficult for victims to reach out for help. In addition, both the police and third-sector organization interviewees were aware that some victims worried about coming forward because their abuse had happened in circumstances that broke lockdown—either at parties in another person's home or because the perpetrator of abuse had visited their home in defiance of lockdown rules. One interviewee also suggested that surveillance culture in these communities had increased due to lockdown, 'because there was nothing else to talk about and everyone would have noticed everything going on' (Interview with Participant 4, 14 June 2022). This culture of surveillance came across strongly in our interviews, with the majority of interviewees remarking that it can be very difficult to encourage a victim to speak to the police about GBV because they would still have to live in the same community as the perpetrator of abuse and their family and friends. Several police officers suggested that this meant incidences of GBV were severely under-reported in rural and remote communities. Third-sector interviewees explained that victims could be concerned about their stories being published in the local press if they reported abuse to the police or worried about neighbours seeing a police car outside the house. One police interviewee, based in a small island community, remarked: 'It all comes back to the almost secretive nature of small communities where something is very much happening behind closed doors and even if everybody on the island knows about it, we don't' (Interview with Participant 4, 14 June 2022).

Interestingly, there was also a suggestion that lockdown offered a space for reflection on events that had happened in the past. Several third-sector support organizations noted an increase in people contacting them to talk about historic abuse incidents that had happened up to 40 years ago, although it was noted that these victims were less likely to want to talk to the police and more in search of mental health support and advice from third-sector organizations.

Flexible 'soft' policing

A clear finding of our project relates to the flexibility of approach adopted by police officers on the ground, particularly when supporting vulnerable victims in remote areas. Officers shared stories of working with both third-sector organizations and concerned family and friends to offer victims a safe way of talking to the police and gaining support—here 'safe' relates to both concerns about a perpetrator of abuse and about social distancing during the pandemic. This included advising third-sector organizations on anonymized cases off the record and using videoconferencing and telephones to interview victims wherever they were situated in lockdown, including outside Scotland. It might also stretch to working outside their official remit, for example, helping a victim to pack their belongings and move to a place of safety, because of the lack of other support agencies in particularly remote areas. This supports Spencer *et al.*'s (2022) findings that rural police officers can be called on to deal with non-police issues.

There were frequent mentions in our police interviews of the way in which policing rural areas offered more time to simply chat to local people—suggesting that there was still some concept of rural areas as idylls. Several police officers stated that being a local helped gain the trust of communities, with one even suggesting that a local accent helped break down barriers. However, social-distancing regulations obviously impacted on this type of interaction, including the way in which police officers interacted with individual GBV victims. During the pandemic, victims were not encouraged to visit a police station to speak to the police—instead, the police were supposed to interview them over the telephone or, in urgent cases, visit them at home. However, relating to the culture of surveillance described above, many victims were concerned about both the perpetrator of abuse and neighbours seeing such a visit. Several officers spoke of interviewing victims through open windows, standing outside their homes while wearing goggles and body suits, making their visit highly visible. They were very aware that the public nature of such interviews was not good practice and might open the victim up to public scrutiny and perhaps pressure not to speak to the police. To deal

with these circumstances, local third-sector support organizations such as Women's Aid arranged with the police to make their offices available as a safe space for interactions between police and GBV victims—although at the height of the pandemic this was difficult because of the rules about the number of people being allowed in the same rooms. One third-sector interviewee spoke about the way in which this enabled them to offer 'more trauma-aware surroundings' for victims, making it easier to offer breaks or meals during an interview, and describing this flexibility as 'a real step forward' that was continuing post-pandemic (Interview with Participant 12, 22 August 2022).

In one, perhaps extreme, example, a female police officer on a particularly remote beat described how she had dressed in plain clothes and arranged to meet with a victim in a wooded area on a small island as though they were both just out walking. The victim's perpetrator of abuse worked on the island ferry and she could therefore not leave the island without his being aware of her movements. She was also aware that her neighbours were watching her. It was thus not possible for her to meet with the officer in a more formal setting and the officer's meeting with her was arranged through a third-sector support organisation who were supporting the victim.

The pandemic exacerbated staffing shortages that were already constraining policing in these communities, particularly in relation to a lack of female police officers. As noted above, lockdown meant that local officers were more relied on by specialists in Domestic Violence and Rape Investigation units to investigate cases and undertake interviews in remote communities. However, third-sector organization interviewees suggested that this could cause issues when staff shortages meant that female police officers were not available locally.

> I think that sometimes the difficulty is that when a report comes in, and that's been dealt with by local officers and local desk staff, it isn't always possible to get a female officer, if that's what you want, and you still have to explain to that person that it's a sexual offence or domestic violence offence that you're coming in to report.… [I]f you don't get that sympathetic response or your preference would be to be to speak to a female officer, then that isn't always possible at that initial stages and some people say they've walked into the police station, they've realized it was all male officers on duty or they couldn't speak to a specialist officer and then they might turn around and walk out again (Participant 12, 22 August 2022).

Both police and third-sector organization interviewees referenced the problems that could be caused by victims' preference for female police officers because of the smallness of the rural and remote policing teams. One female officer based in an island community remarked that there was 'a severe lack of female officers' and that, in her opinion, it was the biggest challenge they faced operationally. The lack of a suitably trained officer might also be problematic for male victims of GBV or those in a same-sex relationship. One third-sector interviewee suggested: 'The police are not always aware, not all officers are aware, of how best to deal with a male victim of domestic abuse anyway, but it did feel as if things got a bit worse during lockdown' (Interview with Participant 11, 16 August 2022).

On a more positive note, both police and interviewees from third-sector organizations spoke enthusiastically about the increased use of videoconferencing and telephone for meetings and as a way of sharing information between the two groups. In agreement with findings from a similar study based in England and Wales, interviewees agreed that moving meetings online, for example, for Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conferences, was beneficial for both police and victims (Walklate *et al.* 2021). In remote, rural, and island communities, the use of videoconferencing saved both time and money that otherwise would have been spent on travelling potentially hundreds of miles to attend meetings. A police officer noted that the use of videoconferencing meant that meetings about high risk or emergency cases could now be convened quickly between representatives of different agencies, describing this as 'brilliant' and 'a huge benefit'.

A senior officer expressed surprise at the speed of change in this regard:

> [W]hat I absolutely couldn't get over and I'll never forget was, the pandemic came along and suddenly within a week they're looking to change, and I say 'they' in terms of most of the areas of the public sector, were prepared to change everything they did and have done for decades at the drop of a hat and took the associated risks and learning along the way. Normally, actually, that would have to be undertaken through multiple different years of committees (Interview with Participant 8, 7 June 2022).

While the use of videoconferencing had been a necessity during COVID, it was clearly something that interviewees planned to continue in a post-pandemic world.

The use of telephone and videoconferencing was not just beneficial for communications between police and third-sector organizations. An interviewee from an organization that supported male victims of GBV noted that during the pandemic their all-Scotland telephone line was particularly used by men based in rural and remote communities. In another reference to the surveillance culture of such communities, she suggested that this was related to the fact that there was nowhere else for these men to go for support and advice—'and even if there was, if they live in a small community, they don't want to be seen going into the building marked "Abused Men in Scotland"—you know what I mean?' (Interview with Participant 11, 16 August 2022). Referring to some of the smaller northern islands, such as North Ronaldsay in the Orkney Isles, one third-sector interviewee noted their inaccessibility and the fact that there are no police or support services based there—a police officer interviewee told us they will take a boat out to the outer islands once every six weeks for a routine visit unless there was an emergency. This of course makes it difficult to strike up a relationship with those in abusive relationships. The use of videoconferencing and telephone during the pandemic, however, allowed residents to access support without having to travel off island.

However, other officers offered a word of caution about interviews that were not conducted face to face. There were concerns that telephone interviews made it difficult to develop a good relationship with victims since it was not possible to see their reactions and it was more difficult to pick up emotions. There were also deeper concerns that, out of sight, victims or witnesses might be coerced or coached into responding to questions in a certain way: '[I]t's always something in my mind, if you're speaking to someone over the phone, is like, who's actually sitting beside you during this telephone call?' (Interview with Participant 1, 30 May 2022).

The increased use of training via videoconferencing was also seen as a pandemic innovation that would be continued in the future. A third-sector interviewee explained that her organization had worked with others, including the police, to roll out training around child sexual exploitation awareness and that this had been a cost-effective and efficient way of delivery for both the organizations and participants:

> [I]f we'd done that in person, we'd only have 16 people as a max[imum] for a whole day in face-to-face training, but we've been able to deliver double the amount of sessions to, you know, probably more than three times the number of folk, you know. Each session has between … 30 to 50 folk in it and it's only for half a day.… People are not so tired when they come out of that session as well and when people are really anxious about their capacity, it's shortened the length of time for training as well, so that's been something that's been really good and it doesn't cost so much (Interview with Participant 12, 22 August 2022).

Nonetheless, a key finding from our research is the need for more training related to GBV, particularly CPD training, for non-specialist officers based in remote, rural, and island communities. A number of our police interviewees based in such communities noted that they had little training in GBV beyond their original training on joining the force unless an

officer became a specialist such as a domestic abuse or sexual offences liaison officer. Several interviewees suggested that any training they received was 'very much learn as you go' or 'on the job', while others suggested that there was a need for training relating to a more victim-centred approach, to be offered on a CPD basis:

> [I]f there's anything that can be improved overall in the police service it's actually rolling out more training to actually help people deal with victims more appropriately. To get the full back story and not just what's happened just now you've been slapped, but actually get all the story. Because there's always a really, really big story that's gone on in the background and people they sometimes even struggle to articulate what they've been through or what they're still going through (Interview with Participant 1, 30 May 2022).

One officer, who had received such training because of the nature of his specialist role, spoke specifically of training he had received from Scottish Women's Aid and Safe Lives relating to the cycle of abuse. He noted that this type of training would be particularly valuable as CPD for first responders and that it was a pity that it had not been targeted at them. There was also a clear need for more training relating to male and same-sex victims of GBV. One third-sector interviewee who specialized in supporting male victims commented:

> I would love to take more time training the police, but the total time we get just now is about 20 minutes once a year when there's new police officers who are becoming domestic abuse specialist officers when they're in their training. They get 20 minutes from us to tell them about male victims, that it. It's really not enough. They've told me quite often when I'm speaking to them that, when they go, they're just assuming it's going to be a female victim (Interview with Participant 11, 16 August 2022).

Backlog and delay in the courts

One of the issues that was raised in interviews by both police officers and representatives of third-sector organizations was the impact of the pandemic on the time taken for a GBV case to reach court. Lockdown restrictions, which closed courts throughout the country, have resulted in a backlog of tens of thousands of cases. A report by the Virtual Trials National Project Board in January 2022 noted that, in Scotland, there were about 33,000 summary trials outstanding, compared with about 14,000 pre-pandemic, and that about one-quarter of all outstanding summary trials were GBV cases (BBC Scotland News 2022). In February 2022, the Scottish Government estimated it would take 'several years' to manage the backlog and return to waiting times of 10 weeks for GBV cases (*The Vision for Justice in Scotland,* 2022). Interviewees shared concerns that these delays continued to influence victims' willingness to follow through with a case. As one third-sector interviewee expressed it: 'I've had people withdraw their charges, their claims. You've had people who just couldn't wait any longer with that hanging over them and pulling away, disengaging' (Interview with Participant 10). Another described the situation as a 'nightmare', with court dates being postponed multiple times, adding to the stress on victims. A third support worker explained how the delays shaped the work done by her organization, with case workers being required to offer emotional support for victims over an extended period of time, which affected the limited resources of small organizations. At the same time, police officers who were interviewed emphasized the need to be honest with victims about the resulting backlog and to keep victims' expectations realistic, with one interviewee explaining:

> I think it's quite commonly known now at this point that the courts have got a massive backlog, as being well sort of documented in the media. So, victims are aware of that. If they're not aware, they will ask around timescales, which it is important we are honest with them about that because you know, that's how you basically build trust with someone

> who's been a victim is through the honesty and having that open, honest conversation and if we start telling them, aye well give a statement it will probably go to trial in six months. A year and a half later, it's not even set up a preliminary. What credibility does that give the police? You know? So we have to be honest with them (Interview with Participant 3, 8 June 2022).

Another noted that the backlog of cases also impacted on officers, who could be summoned to court to give evidence for a case that happened over a year ago. In the opinion of one senior officer, the courts had been slow to adapt their process during the pandemic, meaning that a large number of extensions had been instituted to manage cases coming to court. However, at the time of our interviews (summer and autumn 2022) many of these extensions were now ending, meaning competing demands for action on a high number of cases.

It was particularly the smaller local courts that had been closed during the pandemic, adding distance to the challenges of seeing a case through trial for those in remote and rural communities. As one police interviewee explained: 'It was definitely a bit of an issue because they [victim or witness] would have to go to Inverness to go to court or in a video link—there seemed to be kind of a lot of sticking-points with that' (Interview with Participant 1, 30 May 2022).

Giving evidence by video link, for participants based in remote and rural locations, can lower costs and the time taken to attend trial (Song and Legg 2021). It can also allow vulnerable parties such as children or intimidated witnesses to give evidence in relation to sensitive matters (Song and Legg 2021). One of the third-sector interviewees, based on a small island, explained that, because of the need to keep as many people out of the courtroom as possible, her clients had been able to answer questions via video link from another part of the court building, 'and that was far less triggering for them than actually being in the same room as the perpetrator' (Interview with Participant 11). She also noted that some victims had not even had to travel to High Court in Glasgow or Edinburgh—which could take several days—but had been able to give evidence locally instead, 'without all that stress of travelling', which she felt was 'far less traumatizing'. Another third-sector interviewee agreed that the possibility of giving evidence from their own home could be much less stressful for victims:

> They're sat in their own homes. They've got support workers with them. They're feeling relaxed, a bit more relaxed.… They've not got the whole worry of seeing the perpetrator at the court. You know, when you go into court, their main concern can be: Is he standing there? Is he going to be waiting outside? You know, the anticipation. So one of my colleagues actually said today they've found it was less for the woman that she supported because she can sit at home, she's got her slippers on, she didn't have to dress up, you know, she could be sitting quite calm beforehand not worrying that he's going to walk in the door (Interview with Participant 13, 21 September 2022).

During 2021, a trial of virtual courts for domestic abuse cases took place in Aberdeen and Inverness. It is probable that some of the experiences described above were part of this trial. Based on the outcome of the trial, the Virtual Trials National Project Board has now recommended that every sheriffdom in Scotland should have a dedicated virtual domestic abuse court. Commenting on the trial, Victim Support Scotland chief executive Kate Wallace stated that this way of giving evidence can be more appropriate and more trauma informed, putting choice and control back into the hands of the victim (*BBC Scotland News,* 21 January 2022).

Conclusions

It is clear that the COVID-19 pandemic and associated lockdowns exacerbated the challenges that already existed in the policing of GBV in remote and rural northern Scotland. Even before the pandemic, police in such communities faced challenges relating to a culture of silence and surveillance, limited

resources, and the physical challenge of policing large, geographically remote, areas. During the pandemic, victims' direct access to the police and third-sector organizations was impeded by social distancing and 'stay at home' orders while concerns about being seen to speak with the police increased as neighbours had very little else of interest to catch their attention. Perpetrators of abuse were also able to use lockdown to increase their coercion and control, despite police, third-sector organizations, and the media collaborating to get the message out that lockdown could be broken by those seeking to escape GBV.

On the positive side, the flexibility that already characterized rural and remote policing before the pandemic continued to allow police officers and third-sector organizations to work together to support victims of GBV. In particular, the move to videoconferencing and telephone support was hailed as a positive move in an area where travel to meetings can be difficult and expensive and police presence can be limited, especially for those on remote islands. The trialling of videoconference facilities in courts has also helped to tackle the backlog of cases that built up during the pandemic. It is clear that the use of communication technologies was overall perceived by both police officers and third-sector organization interviewees as beneficial in improving communication between organizations and with victims, despite some concerns about not being able to see victims and their circumstances on telephone calls.

On a more negative side, the pandemic has exacerbated already extant issues relating to staffing, particularly in relation to female police officers. The closure of police stations since the creation of Police Scotland in 2013 and concomitant relocation of staff had already raised concerns about access to police in remote and rural areas of Scotland. This was exacerbated by the decline in police numbers during the pandemic, which the Scottish Police Federation linked to stress and burnout relating to COVID-19. Third-sector interviewees made it clear that victims might choose not to report their abuse if they were unable to speak to a female police officer. There were also suggestions that a lack of training for officers with no specific GBV role was problematic during the pandemic when local officers had to take over work usually undertaken by specialist task forces. The officers we interviewed are all committed to policing GBV and many had sought out roles that allow them to do this. However, all commented on the lack of CPD for regular officers and the need for victim-centred training. The pandemic has demonstrated that training can be successfully delivered online with cost efficiencies and no need for travel for those living and working in remote locations. This may well be one of its most important legacies. There is a need for further training amongst officers based in rural and remote locations, but also a will to undertake such training, and now a way to successfully deliver it without the need to travel.

References

Aberdeen Press & Journal (22 January 2022). Gun Laws to be Discussed at Westminster in Wake of Skye Incident (pressandjournal.co.uk).

Aston, E. (2013). 'Developing an Evidence-base for Local Policing in Scotland'. *Scottish Institute for Policing Research*: 12.

BBC Scotland News (21 January 2022). Virtual Courts Plan for Scotland's Domestic Abuse Cases. BBC News.

Campo, M. and Tayton, S. (2015). Domestic and Family Violence in Regional, Rural and Remote Communities: An Overview of Key Issues. Australian Institute of Family Studies, Child Family Community Australia (aifs.gov.au).

Carrington, K. and Scott, J. (2008). 'Masculinity, Rurality and Violence'. *The British Journal of Criminology* **48**(5): 641–666. doi: 10.1093/bjc/azn031.

Chadambuka, C. and Warria, A. (2022). 'Intimate Partner Violence: Understanding Barriers in Seeking Formal Support Services in a Rural Area in Zimbabwe'. *Journal of family violence* **37**(3): 521–532.

Cordner, G. (2011). 'The architecture of US policing: Variations among the 50 states.' *Police Practice and Research: An International Journal*, **12**(2): 107–119.

DEFRA (2021) Rural_population__Oct_2021.pdf (publishing.service.gov.uk).

DeKeseredy, W. S. (2015). 'New directions in feminist understandings of rural crime'. *Journal of Rural Studies*, **39**: 180–187.

DeKeseredy, W., Donnermeyer, J. F., Schwartz, M. D., Tunnell, K. D., and Hall, M. (2007). 'Thinking Critically About Rural Gender Relations: Toward a Rural Masculinity Crisis/Male Peer Support Model of Separation/Divorce Sexual Assault'. *Critical Criminology* **15**(4): 295–311. doi:10.1007/s10612-007-9038-0.

Dodds, S. and Hess, A. C. (2020). 'Adapting Research Methodology During COVID-19: Lessons for Transformative Service Research'. *Journal of Service Management* **32**(2): 203–217.

Fenwick, T. (2015). 'Learning Policing in Rural Spaces: "Covering 12 Foot Rooms With 8 Foot Carpets"'. *Policing: A Journal of Policy and Practice* **9**(3): 234–241.

Fenwick, T., Dockrell, R., Roberts, I., and Slade, B. (2012). 'Rural Policing: Understanding Police Knowledge and Practice in Rural Communities'. *Scottish Institute for Policing Research* **26**.

Fikowski, H. and Moffitt, P. (2017). 'A Culture of Violence and Silence in Remote Canada: Impacts on Service Delivery to Address Intimate Partner Violence'. *Northern and Indigenous Health and Healthcare*. https://openpress.usask.ca/northernhealthcare/chapter/chapter-15-a-culture-of-violence-and-silence-in-remote-canada-impacts-on-service-delivery-to-address-intimate-partner-violence/

Hansen, J. A. and Lory, G. L. (2020). 'Rural Victimization and Policing During the COVID-19 Pandemic'. *American Journal of Criminal Justice* **45**: 731–742.

Herald Scotland (5 April 2022). Staff *From Several Stations* have been *Relocated* to *Shared Buildings, Including Council Headquarters*. Glasgow: Herald & Times Group.

Hohl, K. and Johnson, K. (2021). Police Recorded Domestic Abuse and Police Responses to Domestic Abuse During the Covid-19 Pandemic. https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/22280/html/

Little, J. (2017). 'Understanding Domestic Violence in Rural Spaces: A Research Agenda'. Progress in Human Geography **41**(4): 472–488. doi:10.1177/0309132516645960.

Lobe, B., Morgan, D., and Hoffman, K. A. (2020). 'Qualitative Data Collection in an Era of Social Distancing'. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* **19**(19): 160940692093787–160940692093788.

Lynch, K. R. and Logan, T. K. (2022). '"Always Know Where the Gun Is": Service Providers' Perceptions of Firearm Access, Violence, and Safety Planning During the COVID-19 Pandemic'. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* **37**(21–22): NP19827–NP19856.

Lyons, M. and Brewer, G. (2021). 'Experiences of Intimate Partner Violence During Lockdown and the COVID-19 Pandemic'. *Journal of Family Violence* **37**: 969–977. doi:10.1007/s10896-021-00260-x.

Mawby, R. C. and Worrall, A. (2011). '"They Were Very Threatening about Do-Gooding Bastards": Probation's Changing Relationships with the Police and Prison Services in England and Wales'. *European Journal of Probation* **3**(3): 78–94.

Mrozla, T. J. (2022). 'Policing in the COVID-19 Pandemic: Are Rural Police Organizations Immune?'. *Policing: An International Journal* **45**(1): 23–41.

Oddsson, G., Hill, A. P., and Bjarnason, T. (2021). 'Jacks (and Jills) of All Trades: The Gentle Art of Policing Rural Iceland'. *Nordic Journal of Criminology* **22**(2): 129–148.

Peek-Asa, C., Wallis, A., Harland, K. et al. (2011). 'Rural Disparity in Domestic Violence Prevalence and Access to Resources'. *Journal of Women's Health* **20**(11): 1743–1749. doi:10.1089/jwh.2011.2891.

Ravi, K. E., Rai, A., and Schrag, R. V. (2022). 'Survivors' Experiences of Intimate Partner Violence and Shelter Utilization During COVID-19'. *Journal of Family Violence* **37**(6): 979–990.

Saunders, B., Sim, J., Kingstone, T. et al. (2018). 'Saturation in Qualitative Research: Exploring Its Conceptualization and Operationalization'. *Quality & Quantity* **52**(4): 1893–1907.

Scottish Government (2018). Scottish Government Urban Rural Classification. 2. Overview - Scottish Government Urban Rural Classification 2016 - gov.scot (www.gov.scot).

Scottish Government (2021a). People and Communities - Rural Scotland Key Facts 2021 - gov.scot (www.gov.scot).

Scottish Government (2021b). Domestic Abuse: Statistics Recorded by the Police in Scotland - 2020/21 - gov.scot (www.gov.scot).

Scottish Government (2022). Police Officer Quarterly Strength Statistics Scotland - gov.scot (www.gov.scot).

Scottish Women's Aid (2019). Participating in Equally Safe in the Highlands and Islands. Participating-in-Equally-Safe-in-the-Highlands-and-Islands-Consulting-Women-Digital.pdf (womensaid.scot).

STV News (7 June 2022). Report Finds Stress Levels Within Police Scotland at 'Critical Level' as Officers Experience Burnout. STV News.

Song, A. and Legg, M. (2021). 'The Courts, the Remote Hearing and the Pandemic: From Action to Reflection'. *University of New South Wales Law Journal* **44**(1): 126–166.

Souhami, A. (2020). 'Understanding Police Work in the Remote Northern isles of Scotland: The Extraordinary Ordinariness of Island Policing'. *Edinburgh School of Law Research Paper*. doi:10.2139/ssrn.3673425.

Spencer, D., Ricciardelli, R., and Silva, D. (2022). 'They Call Us for Everything: Cynicism, Rural Policing and Youth Justice'. *Policing and Society* **32**(6): 699–714.

Terry, A. N. (2020). 'The Architecture of Rural Life: The Dangers of Dense Collective Efficacy for At-Risk Girls'. *Rural Sociology* **85**(3): 780–805. doi: 10.1111/ruso.12325.

Walklate, S., Godfrey, B., and Richardson, J. (2021). 'Innovating During the Pandemic? Policing, Domestic Abuse and Multi-agency Risk Assessment Conferencing (MARACs)'. *The Journal of Adult Protection* **23**(3): 181–190.

Wooff, A. (2015). 'Relationships and Responses: Policing Anti-social Behaviour in Rural Scotland'. *Journal of Rural Studies* **39**: 287–295.

Wooff, A. (2017). '"Soft" Policing in Rural Scotland'. *Policing: A Journal of Policy and Practice* **11**(2): 123–131.

Yarwood, N., King, M., and Henshaw, M. (2021). 'Expanding the Range of Metrics Used in Response Officer Dispatch Decisions'. *Policing: A Journal of Policy and Practice* **15**(2): 1062–1079.

Yarwood, R. and Wooff, A. (2016). 'Policing the Countryside in a Devolving United Kingdom'. In Donnermeyer, J. (ed), *The Routledge International Handbook of Rural Criminology*. Abingdon: Routledge, pp. 375–386.