

Rural Policing: Change and Continuity

An Oral History

Jan Terpstra, Tetty Havinga & Renze Salet*

Abstract

In this paper changes in rural policing in the Netherlands over the past few decades are investigated. This study is an example of oral history, using interviews with rural police officers. The main changes in rural policing are related to different issues: organization of rural policing, views about police work, local knowledge and commitment, relations with local communities, and style of policing. This study shows that since the 1980s the Dutch police have gradually withdrawn from the countryside. Not much is left of the strong traditional position of the police in rural communities. Notwithstanding these developments, the rural police has partially kept is distinctive characteristic in policing style, which makes it different from the police that is often found in urban areas. Larger social density, less anonymity, stronger sense of community, and more social control are among the factors that have contributed to the continuity in the styles of rural policing. Still it looks as if a shift is being made to a different kind of policing in rural regions: less socially embedded, mainly operating from the outside, not as an integral elements of the local community, and generally operating reactively, only after an incident happened.

Keywords: police, rural, oral history, social change, police culture.

1 Introduction

Over the past years an increasing number of studies in different countries have shown that in many respects rural policing differs from policing in urban areas. Rural police often showed more proximity, had a stronger commitment with local communities, had a broader view of their tasks, with much attention for service, and were better informed about local relations, needs and problems. As a result, rural policing has often been understood as an archetype of community policing (Falcone et al., 2002; Liederbach & Frank, 2003; Payne et al., 2005; Ricciardelli et al., 2020).

This optimistic understanding of rural policing was reason for some researchers to warn against a romanticized view of rural policing, with the famous icon of the

* Jan Terpstra is emeritus professor criminology at the Radboud University, Nijmegen, the Netherlands and fellow at the Free University of Brussels and the University of Leiden (the Hague). Tetty Havinga is fellow professor sociology of law, Faculty of Law, Radboud University, Nijmegen, the Netherlands. Renze Salet is assistant professor criminology at the Radboud University in Nijmegen, the Netherlands.

village bobby as a core element of the stubborn idyll of the traditional, harmonious countryside; a sort of *Gemeinschaft* (Mawby, 2004; Smith, 2010; Yarwood, 2001, 2005). This has resulted in an alternative, less positive, view on rural policing as generally unprofessional and not paying enough attention to 'real police work' (Liederbach & Frank, 2003; Mouhanna, 2011; Pelfrey, 2007; Wooff, 2015).

More important than this partially ideological debate is the question whether this view on rural policing is still correct in an empirical sense. For instance, a Dutch study showed that over the past years the identity of rural policing has been under a strong pressure (Terpstra, 2017). Similar developments were found in other countries, as well. According to Mouhanna (2011), the gendarmerie in France, with its reputation of being a strictly hierarchical, almost militaristic, organization, in practice often operated in line with the principles of community policing. Since the late 1980s, however, a policy of efficiency led to the gendarmerie withdrawing from rural areas and losing much of its strong local position. In Scotland, Netherlands, Sweden, and England and Wales, among other countries, over the past decade, similar developments were found to have taken place, as evidenced by the closure of many police stations, especially in rural areas, and with an increasing distance between the police and rural communities (Fyfe et al., 2013; McLaughlin, 2008; Smith, 2010; Smith & Somerville, 2013; Stassen & Ceccato, 2021).

Because of these conflicting findings, in this study we will try to investigate the changes in rural police and policing over the past few decades. To what extent does rural policing still retain its core elements that were found in the past? We will try to answer these questions by focusing on changes in rural policing in the Netherlands since the 1980s and early 1990s (the years before the large-scale transformations of the Dutch police organization). Our methodological approach can be described as a form of oral history based on interviews with police officers who have been working in rural areas for 30 to 40 years.

First, however, we give an overview of important findings and conclusions of previous studies in the field of rural policing. Next, some methodological aspects will be discussed. Finally, the most important changes in rural police and policing are presented.

2 Rural Policing: Previous Studies

Although most studies in police science have concentrated on policing in urban areas (Decker, 1979; Falcone et al., 2002; Liederbach & Frank, 2003; Loftus, 2009; Mawby, 2004; Mawby & Yarwood, 2011; Payne et al., 2005; Pelfrey, 2007; Ruddell & Jones, 2018), over the past years the number of studies about rural policing has grown considerably. In his overview of studies on rural policing, Mawby (2011) found that general conclusions are hard to draw because of considerable differences in culture and police system. Still international research shows commonality in a number of core elements of rural policing as identified in different contexts.

Some of these elements were already found in the classical studies in this field. For instance, Banton (1964) showed that rural police officers generally act more

like peacekeepers than law enforcers. In his view, this is a consequence of the stronger social control and moral consensus in rural communities. Because rural officers are usually perceived as members of the local community, they can use other strategies than those usually adopted by their urban counterparts. Stronger 'social density' in rural communities has made police officers and citizens often know each other personally. As a result, rural officers can often appeal to the existing moral consensus. In urban contexts with a weaker moral consensus and often a gap between police and citizens, police may use stricter forms of enforcement.

Cain (1973) found that in stable and homogeneous rural communities, police officers are often better integrated and have more thorough and extensive knowledge about the local conditions. Regular and informal chats with citizens are an important element of daily police work in rural communities. As a result, rural officers are often better informed about local problems and needs. Generally, crime is only a minor part of the various issues that are managed by rural police. Cain showed that close relations between police and rural communities may also have negative consequences. For instance, rural police officers are often more dependent on members of the local community. On the other hand, they are generally more isolated from their colleagues: when problems arise, they may be forced to face the situation single-handedly on their own and without any assistance or backup from colleagues.

More than 20 years later, after important changes had emerged in rural society and in the organization of the police, several of the elements depicted by Banton and Cain were found again by Young (1993) in his study. Similar conclusions can be drawn from a large number of studies, especially those conducted in the United States and in England and Wales. These studies showed that police officers in rural areas are often better integrated in the local community also for the reason that they were often born and raised in the rural region and community that they serve (Decker, 1979). As a result, they are often well informed about the dynamics of local community relations. Compared with the city police, rural police officers have a more generalist view of their work, are oriented to a broad range of tasks (Oddsson et al., 2021), with peacekeeping and services to citizens being important elements to the kind of policing that they do (Huey & Ricciardelli, 2015). Rural police officers generally enjoy more support from local citizens. Because of the long travel distances within rural regions, rural officers know that it will take much time for their colleagues to reach their location to provide assistance or backup. This implies that they are more dependent on their own problem-solving capabilities, with much emphasis on communication, verbal persuasion, use of personal authority, and informal ways of problem-solving (Christensen & Crank, 2001; Decker, 1979; Falcone et al., 2002; Fenwick, 2015; Liederbach & Frank, 2003; Mawby, 2004, 2011; Payne et al., 2005; Weisheit et al., 1994; Weisheit & Wells, 1996; Wooff, 2015, 2016). Studies that were conducted in Australia (Jobes, 2003; Scott & Jobes, 2007), France (Mouhanna, 2011), Canada (Oddsson et al., 2021; Ruddell & Jones, 2018; Spencer et al., 2021) and Belgium (Verwee, 2013) came to similar conclusions.

Since the first studies about rural policing, scholars have assumed that the differences between rural and urban policing will soon disappear. Already in the 1960s, Banton (1964) assumed that, over time, processes of urbanization and decreasing cohesion in rural communities would result in stronger similarities between rural and urban policing. In Scotland, for instance, Smith (2010) concluded that with the closure of many local police stations and the loss of skills and expertise necessary to manage rural problems, many of the traditional elements of rural policing had disappeared: "The link with the local community has now been broken as rural beat officers seldom live in the communities they police but attend for their shift only" (p. 378). The introduction of a National Police organization in 2013 has reinforced this process (Terpstra & Fyfe, 2015). In Sweden and the Netherlands, similar processes of reform created much longer distances that citizens needed to cover in order to visit a police station in rural areas than in the cities (Stassen & Ceccato, 2021; Terpstra, 2021).

According to Mawby (2004), in England and Wales, the traditional rural policing as it was described by Cain in the 1960s, has largely disappeared. The improved means of transport and communication have made that the traditional, embedded position of police officers in the rural community is largely gone, just like the traditional isolation of rural officers in their relations with colleagues. Some years later, Mawby (2011) even concluded that the traditional distinction between rural and urban policing had completely disappeared; this, in his view, was an unavoidable development that can only be regretted by those who still believe in the rural idyll.

However, more recent studies in different countries (Ruddell & O'Connor, 2022; Wooff, 2015, 2016) raise the question if Mawby was right in concluding that the specific nature of rural policing had come to an end. These contradictory findings make it relevant to investigate the main developments in rural policing and what is left of the traditional core elements of rural policing.

3 Methods

This study focuses on developments in rural policing in the Netherlands over the past decades. This country is a relevant case for the study of this topic for several reasons. First, the Dutch police have had a process of strong centralization. In 1993, 25 regional police organizations replaced a system with 148 local (municipal) police forces and the national Royal Police, the latter mainly focused on rural areas. In 2013, this regional system was followed by a centralized National Police system, with only one police organization for the whole country (Terpstra, 2013). Second, with a population density of 517 inhabitants per square kilometre, the Netherlands is one of the most urbanized countries in Europe (Compendium voor de Leefomgeving, 2020). Although more than half of the Dutch area is defined as rural, only 18 percent of the population is living there (Steenbekkers et al., 2006), a proportion that has been decreasing over the past decades (Terluin et al., 2010).

Both factors suggest that in the Netherlands especially rural policing has been confronted with drastic changes. If we would find, however, that in the Netherlands

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rural policing has retained much of the core elements of its traditional nature, this could be understood as a more general indication that rural policing still has its own specific elements that render it sharply distinct from urban policing.

The empirical data presented in this paper are mainly based on interviews with police officers who have worked in rural areas for over three to four decades and, thus, have often spent their whole career in rural regions. This study may be seen as a form of oral history, reconstructing recent history of rural policing in the Netherlands on the basis of the experiences recounted by police officers. Oral history is a relevant method of research to reconstruct cultural developments 'from below' and how these are perceived by people at a more or less marginal position (Cockcroft, 2005; Thomson, 2007). This is the case with street-level police officers in rural areas, which increasingly have a position of outsiders in their own organization (Terpstra, 2017). Oral history was used before in some English police studies (Brogden, 1991; Weinberger, 1995), showing the importance of this research method in investigating the often hidden aspects of police history. Oral history can be seen as a relevant approach to understand contemporary institutions and practices from a diachronic perspective. In this study, the concept 'rural' is understood from a social constructivist perspective (Miller, 2017), that means we follow the interviewed police officers in how they define the terms 'rural' and 'rural communities'.

In sum, 12 Dutch police officers were interviewed. These officers had been community officer or patrol officer in a rural area for (almost) their whole career. At the time of the interview, they had worked in the police for periods ranging from 31 to 44 years. Their working area was in different (rural) parts of the country. The open and informal interviews took on average about two hours. The interviews were mainly focused on the impact of the rural context on daily police work and how this had changed since they had joined the police. A detailed report was made of each interview, in some cases verbatim. In the case of 2 of the 12 officers interviewed, their daily work was also observed for 8 and 18 days. The data from these interviews and observations were coded and recoded, both in a deductive and inductive way, and analysed qualitatively.

4 Rural Policing: Core Elements and Changes

Changes in rural policing over the past decades, as described by the police officers interviewed, are related to six different issues: organization of rural policing, internal relations, views about police work, local knowledge and commitment, relations with local communities, and style of policing. The following sections describe the main developments that have taken place over time in relation to each of these elements, mainly from the officers' perspective.

However, it is important to point to the differences that exist between rural communities. Scott and Jobs (2007) found that in local communities with internal and external conflicts, the police are often not able to adopt a working style based on familiarity and personal relations with citizens. Wooff (2015) referred to the

relevance of differences in demographics and in the distance between the rural location and the city.

In the interviews, several of the rural officers refer to differences between rural communities, even within one working area or beat. Some of them adapt their way of working and their contacts to suit the unique dimensions of the lifestyles of inhabitants and demographics specific to each of the villages in their area:

‘Each village in my beat is different. X attracts many tourists, and is dominated by merchants and business people living there. They have a strong impact on the atmosphere. On the other hand, Y is in a very remote area. People there have their own very specific dialect. When I first came there, I could not understand them, although I am also from this region. The village X and Z have a catholic population and that makes them different from the northern part that is more protestant. Z is also a village that has more owner-occupied homes. That attracts another kind of people. But at the other side of my working area there are some villages that are increasingly abandoned; only during summertime they are still populated.’

Rural police officers distinguish several types of rural communities. Some communities are more closed, even with a hostile attitude towards the outside world, especially the police. There are also local communities with clear internal social divisions and conflicts. Other communities are perceived as ‘loose sand’, for instance, because a large number of new residents are from elsewhere or, because of the presence of many second homes, and mobile labour migrants or other temporary inhabitants. In these cases, it may be difficult to maintain the usual way of working with an emphasis on personal and informal relations. In case of conflicts between different groups in a village, the police may decide to stay at a distance to maintain their ‘impartiality’. Differences in social homogeneity, social density, relations with the environment and informal social control may also be relevant for how the rural police operate and the degree to which they meet the traditional image of rural policing.

5 Organization

An important change in Dutch rural policing has been the drastic reduction in the number of officers and police stations. This process, which has been going on since the 1960s, has become much stronger especially after 2013 with the introduction of the National Police.

Between 1945 and 1993, policing in rural areas was a task of the Royal Police. This gendarmerie-like, hierarchical police force had a highly deconcentrated structure. Until the mid-1960s, the Royal Police had a small police station in most villages, recognizable by the famous blue lamp at the front. Situated next to the police station often were two residential houses where police officers lived with their families. In those days, officers of the Royal Police had to live in the village

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where they worked, an obligation that was lifted later on. Officers of the Royal Force normally worked at one location for many years, often for their whole career.

As a result, rural police officers were usually well integrated in the local community. They generally knew many of the people living there and had detailed knowledge about local relations and circumstances. This situation also had some detrimental consequences. Police officers and their families often felt that they were living in a 'house of glass', as it was often called. Rural police officers also reported that they often felt somewhat isolated from colleagues who worked elsewhere.

From the mid-1960s onwards, this situation began to change. The fast growth of new means of transport, such as cars and motorbikes, and the increasing availability of the phone, also in rural areas, made the task of covering distances relatively easier to accomplish. This was the main reason why in those years most of the one-officer posts were closed. These officers often kept their working area, but now from a larger police station in a neighbouring village.

Until the mid-1960s, it was usual that if the local commander was absent, his wife would answer the phone at the police station and would take care of the task of providing food and drinks for a person kept in custody at the local station (see also Cain, 1973).

More radical changes were introduced in the early 1990s. In 1993, the Royal Police was eliminated, and a new regional police system was introduced. This restructuring process made an end to the system with small police stations in most villages. Police stations were now only left in the larger villages and small towns.

The transition to a National Police system in 2013 implied an even greater reduction in the number of police personnel and police stations in the rural regions. Over 200 police stations were closed, especially in the countryside. In many rural places, now, only a couple of community officers remain of the often 30 or 40 rural officers who earlier used to work there. In many rural municipalities, now, there is not a single police station anymore, only a service desk of the police, for example, at the office of the municipality. This service desk is often open for citizens only a couple of hours a week. These changes can be illustrated by the recent history of the police in one rural municipality, as told by two community police officers in the eastern (rural) part of the country.

In this rural municipality A (with five villages and 22,000 inhabitants) until 1993 the Royal Police had three different police stations (one-officer post had already been closed earlier). With the introduction of the regional police system one police station in the largest village remained. About thirty officers worked at this police station that was open for the public seven days a week. Gradually the number of opening hours has been reduced. Since the introduction of the National Police in 2013 this municipality does not have a police station anymore. There is now one police team shared by four municipalities (with 102,500 inhabitants), with only one police station in the central town. Travel distances have increased. A car ride from one side of the team area to the other takes more than one hour. With the 2013 reform, the number of police officers in the four municipalities has been reduced from 132

to 88. In municipality A. of a team of about thirty police officers, only three community officers are now left. Each of them can spend two days a week on community policing in their municipality. The other days they are involved in general patrol work, also in other parts of the area. When doing community work, they can use the police service point in the municipality building as their office. However, if citizens want to visit a police station, they have to go to the police station in the city (a distance by car of about 25 minutes).

The reduction in number of rural police officers and the closure of police stations in rural areas have had direct consequences for citizens. It has become more difficult for them to contact the police, for instance, to report a crime. If citizens want to meet a police officer in person, in some cases they have to travel to a police station for more than one hour, if they travel by public transport.

With the increase in organizational scale, rural police officers have to cover larger distances than they did in the past. This takes much more of their time and may imply that usually in such situations there will be no police officer left in their municipality. For instance, with the introduction of the National Police, central detention centres were introduced. Now it is no longer possible to have a suspect in police custody at a local police station. Police officers have to take an arrested person to the central detention centre by car. In some cases, this may take three hours or more, which is especially problematic if they are the only police officers in the municipality at that moment:

It has become much more difficult. We had three cells for arrested persons here, but we don't use them anymore. A suspect goes directly to the detention centre. If you arrest someone at Sunday morning, we are only working here with the two of us. That means that I have to take him there and must also do the administration work there. Often this may take more than three hours. And in that case no officer is here. I don't like that. And certainly not, because I am the community officer here; it makes you ashamed.

Long distances, poor connections and extra travel time because of rivers and lakes make that in rural areas response times are often not met. Since the introduction of National Police, assistance and specialist police services often have to come from far away. In rural areas, it may take one hour or more before they arrive at the crime scene or incident. All that time, the rural officers have to wait and try to solve the problems on their own as far as they can.

In the Netherlands, community police officers should be able to spend 80 per cent of their time to working in their community. Shortage of officers in most rural police teams makes that in practice they are generally left with only one or two days for community policing. During the other days, they are deployed in patrolling, usually not in their own working area. As a result, contacts with residents are becoming less frequent and local knowledge less up-to-date.

When I started as a community officer, the ratio was 80 per cent community policing, 20 per cent other tasks. Most of my time, I could spend on problems

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in my community. Nowadays it is the opposite. Of course, it means that I cannot do everything that has to be done. At this moment I still know my 'regular customers'. But I have to be honest and must admit that I am less well-informed about what is going on in my community than I used to be.

In some of the rural teams, another solution was created to deal with the issue of shortage of officers. Here the shortage and scheduling problems have been 'solved' by giving community officers much larger working areas than is legally allowed. Instead of the legal limit of maximum 5,000 inhabitants, some community officers now have a working area with up to 15,000 inhabitants, in rural areas with several villages and long distances to be covered.

6 Internal Relations

Rural policing in the Netherlands has not only changed in relation to the organization of the police, the available staff and numbers of police stations, but also in their internal relations. The interviewed officers feel that in the past relationships between officers were far more direct and personal. In their view, this was also an important difference with the police in the cities. The growing importance of e-mail and communication by computer systems has decreased the need for frequent direct and personal interaction and has reduced the number of daily meetings. In the past, relationships between rural police officers were often very close. These relationships which were often not limited to work but also existed in private life and leisure time. Officers in the rural teams were often not only colleagues but also friends. In several interviews, rural police officers recalled that in the past several officers in their team were related, for instance, a father and a son or two nephews working at the same rural police station. In many cases, the wives of the local police officers were also close. During social gatherings and parties that took place frequently, all members of the local police team were present, together with their wives and sometimes even their kids. Some of the members of the rural police team played in the same team of the local football club.

The most important change has been that the close ties that used to be here, the strong unity that we all felt, in my view this has changed Many colleagues were also friends. We also met at home. The wives were often also close. There were often parties with all the members of our team. And it was normal that everyone was there Each year the team organized the party of Saint Nicholas, with the children of all team members. But nowadays this is completely gone. Everyone is more on his own. That police officers also have a relationship as friends, who are regularly visiting each other at home, no, that is something that has become very exceptional.

This familiarity and attachment among members of rural police teams was promoted by the fact that most of them lived nearby the police station, often in the same village. As a result, they often met after working hours, for instance, in a local

shop or at one of the local (sport) clubs. Officers' children were often at the same school.

The strong mutual commitment can be illustrated with how new colleagues were generally received and supported. Members of the team arranged, for instance, temporary housing for a newly arrived officer and his family or arranged 'board and lodging' for a new, often young officer who was single. Over the years, this familiarity has largely disappeared. Processes of individualization have had their impact here too. Colleagues in the rural police teams are now less well informed about the private life and intimate situation of other officers. Separation between work and private life has become much stronger. Nowadays, officers often keep their colleagues more at a distance.

Yes, that has changed. An important difference. In the past, you really knew everything of your mates. You used to know the names of their wife and children. You knew what schools they attended. In the years that I joined the police, it was usual to work with fixed shifts. It meant that you always had the same colleagues in the shift, we shared a lot. While driving around, you talked about so many things, you knew so many details about each other In addition, it was still so normal to live near each other. It was just part of how we lived.

In the rural police, not only the relationships between colleagues have changed; their relationships with the supervisors have changed as well. In the past (and certainly in the age of the Royal Police), although the supervisor was at a higher level of hierarchy and authority, he was still perceived as a member of the local police family. In the past, supervisor and lower-ranked officers used to work at the same small rural police station, often in the same room. Especially for rural police officers who now work at local police service points, their supervisor now works at far-away locations and is not seen regularly. Nowadays, supervisors and higher-ranked staff are more at a distance (both in a social and geographical meaning) but are still perceived as determining the rules, protocols and priorities. This is one of the reasons why many of the interviewed police officers feel that higher-ranked officers do not have the knowledge about what matters in rural policing and how this works in practice.

It looks as if at the top, they are only willing to look at it from a distance, only watching the numbers They don't seem to realize that a smaller number of incidents and problems here still has a huge impact on rural communities. On the other hand, one may wonder if the problems are really so much less here (compared to the city) as they often seem to think. Let me just mention one example, in the past among certain groups here, we had a strong culture of smuggling. Maybe it is still here, with the many empty barns that we have and that give a lot of opportunity (for criminal activities).

They start from how it works in the city and suppose that in the countryside things are going in the same way. But the distances are much larger here; you

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are more dependent on the car. You drive for so many kilometres. It is not unusual to drive more than 300 kilometres in one shift. They don't have that in the city. And then you will get comments on the number of kilometres you have driven And then they ask if you cannot go more often by bike. Yes, that is a great suggestion! Do they know that from the police service point here to my village it is 29 kilometres, back-and-forth. Well, you are not just going to cycle that to meet someone. Only for the biking I would need an hour and a half.

Relationships with specialists, such as the regional crime investigation, forensics or intelligence unit, have also changed. The rural officers feel that these specialists are now more at a distance. Contacting them and engaging with them have become more difficult. The traditional, direct and informal relationships have largely disappeared and have been replaced by the need to communicate using formal systems. This is one of the reasons why rural officers feel that it now takes much more time for the specialists to arrive at the scene.

7 Changing Views

There have also been relevant changes in the ambitions, views and attitudes of rural police officers. Many of the interviewed police officers were born and raised in the region where they are still working. However, the tradition (and in the past obligation) of rural police officers to live in the village where they work has become less dominant. For many young colleagues this is not self-evident anymore. Increasing numbers of young police officers prefer to live elsewhere than where they are working.

Not every officer lives here anymore. Some of them have made the decision to live at some distance from their work In the past that was unthinkable.

In the age of the Royal Police, working at a small rural police station implied that there were no strict working hours. In fact, rural officers were police for 24 hours a day, as it was often called. Although this attitude has lost much of its dominance, in a somewhat less strong version it can still be found among many of the interviewed officers. Although they adhere more to the formal working hours than was considered to be normal in the past, if a fellow villager comes to their home outside working hours, still they will often, more or less, accept this. Many rural community officers also give their mobile phone number to people living in their community. As a consequence, there is still not a strict demarcation between private life and working time. Most of the interviewed officers realize that this practice can have negative consequences for them. But on the other hand they feel that this gives them more opportunities to maintain relationships with citizens and to build up local knowledge. However, they are well aware that many of their younger colleagues have different views and attitudes and prefer more distance between work and private life.

In addition, who is still living here? Nowadays they live everywhere; they come by car to their work and they go when they are finished. In some cases, even outside the region where they have their own life. But I do understand it a bit. For me it never was a problem, but younger people don't want this: living where they work as police officer.

These officers also note important changes in the views about career and how important that is. In the past, after their initial education and training, young police officers were positioned at a location where normally they would stay for the rest of their career. Often this was the place where they grew up. This practice of sticking to one location is almost gone. Young police officers are said to be more oriented to a career. To promote this, they are more prepared to change position, move to a different location or travel more often. In an increasing number of cases, they even take a position outside the police, a suggestion that would have been unthinkable for the older generation which believed in the dictum – 'once a police officer, always a police officer.' The increasing mobility, stronger individualization, larger distances between work and home do not only make relationships between police officers less close but also adversely affect their relations with the community.

8 Local Knowledge and Commitment

In the past, the combination of living and working in the same community, often for a long time, entailed that rural police officers used to have detailed local knowledge. Their impressive commitment to community life often made them feel responsible for public safety in their area. This feeling of responsibility was so strong that in some cases, they decided to start informal actions to solve a problem of crime or disorder even outside their working hours. Later on, a more distant attitude would make such an initiative unlikely:

Just an example of something that I remember very clearly. That is something that later on you could hardly imagine. At a certain moment we had in our village a problem with burglaries, someone who tried to break in using the mailbox in the front door to get in. Investigation did not succeed. At a certain moment six or seven officers of the police station here decided to start observations at times that the burglaries happened. This was just informal, in leisure time, just a spontaneous initiative.

In the past, new officers should gain local knowledge as soon as possible. For instance, in the Royal Police, it was usual in the first few months that new officers had to learn all the street names in their working area. For both rural community officers and patrol officers, nowadays it has become much more difficult to gain detailed local knowledge, because of the vast areas, the closure of local police stations, the limited time community officers can spend on their community, and their higher mobility in moving from one working place to another. This lack of

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local and geographical knowledge can also be found in the centralized control and dispatching room.

Rural community officers also feel that it has become more difficult to maintain their local knowledge. Now they often still can use the knowledge and information that they had built up earlier:

Of course, I still know the notorious persons, but the ordinary people in my community, I really see them less than I used to. Actually, it could not be otherwise How did this man get this large car, how is he able to go on expensive holidays abroad four times a year? As a community officer, it has become much more difficult to notice these things on my own, simply because I am not so often in my neighbourhoods anymore. The only possibility is now that I hear it from other people living there.

Many of the interviewed rural officers are worried that if their generation of community police officers will retire and leave the service, the police will lose much of their local knowledge about communities at the countryside. These officers feel that it has become much more difficult for younger officers at the start of their career to build up such local knowledge and relations.

9 Relations with Local Communities

As was mentioned earlier, previous studies showed that in rural areas, compared with the situation in the city, contacts between police and citizens were generally more informal, based upon familiarity and on regular small talk. In rural areas, the relationship between police and citizens less often led to escalation and conflicts. These elements can often still be found in how rural community police officers operate in practice.

I think that our approach is still the same. You want to have many contacts with the people, go out and meet them, just pass by. Make that they know you in person and that you are well informed about what's going on. That is how you should operate here and how we always used to do it.

In the past, this approach was much more common among rural police officers. Many interviewees tell that in the past every rural police officer used to be 'community officer' and operated in that way:

- The Royal Police did not have community officers. They never had. But maybe it is better to say that in the old rayon every police officer was community officer, despite that it was not called that way. But that was the factual situation in the Royal Police.
- In the Royal Police everyone was community officer I only became community officer in the National Police But if I look back, in 1978 I felt more as a community officer than I am now.

In the past, all rural officers used to have personal relationships with many of the local people, had detailed local knowledge and were strongly embedded in the local community. From the moment the police, with the exception of community officers, have been organized at a distance from local communities, the relationships between police and citizens have changed: more distant, more anonymous, and more dependent on incidents.

The situation has changed especially for patrol officers: now they have much larger areas to patrol, are members of much larger teams and receive local information and local stories less often than was the case in the past. However, community officers also notice gradual changes that are taking place. In the past, they used to know 'everyone in the village', also because they often lived there. They had relationships and information not only through their work but also through their children, the school or a sport club.

When I came to work here, in 1978, there were all these old coppers here. They used to chat with everyone ... just wait a moment, some small talk. That regular personal contact. Even if there was not a specific reason for it. Just the normal social police work, as I see it, that has been eroded Yes, that has fallen so dramatically.

The interviewees expected that the police officers who have not experienced that past will likely be unable to build up such relationships and local knowledge. This will even be more problematic in closed communities especially, because there it will take much time for the police to build such relationships.

In the villages V and O people solve their own problems. They know each other so well. Of course, now and then there is a punch, but they will solve it on their own. They will not call the police. I needed six years to have some trust there. That you get in contact with them because of divorces, some row, a reanimation, and that later on you come back to visit them, just to have a cup of coffee. That is something that they appreciate.

However, community officers feel that it has become more difficult to maintain this approach. Lack of time for community work and increasing distances are among the main reasons why it has become difficult to acquire thorough and more comprehensive local knowledge. Citizens often seem to refrain from reporting a crime or delivering information because of longer distances to travel to get to police stations and higher perceived thresholds to communicate by impersonal means such as internet.

Don't forget, if you come by car from the village of E to the police station in M, it takes about 45 minutes. And maybe they could also do it by internet, but in many cases they want to report in person what happened to them Besides, what they often say is that it makes no sense to report crime anymore, because you never hear anything about it anymore. Sometimes I feel that it has become a vicious circle. Because they do not communicate in person, they have lost

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trust in the police. Because the report of crime by internet is often incomplete, we are not able to do anything with it. And so it is put on the pile. So all these elements make it worse.

In addition, the use of internet to report crime deprives community officers of more opportunities to make new contacts with citizens and to collect additional information.

Especially community officers who live in the same area where they work realize that close relations and proximity to citizens may also create tensions (Buttle et al., 2010). In such a situation, conflicts may arise between the role of law enforcer and those of neighbour, acquaintance or member of a local football team (Fenwick, 2015; Jobes, 2003; Scott & Jobes, 2007). Because of their larger visibility for other community members, the room to manoeuvre is limited. These conflicts were already prevalent at the time of the Royal Police, where not only the police officer but also his family members often felt uncomfortable with the idea that their life was permanently under public scrutiny. These officers were aware that they were being watched by neighbours and fellow villagers. To prevent problems and even rumours, they adhered strictly to the rules, even in their private life.

Everyone used to know you. And that was also because of the kids, through the school and the clubs, like football. And people knew it: he is from the police. Not that it had an impact on each contact, but sometimes they kept an eye on you for that reason. I experienced it myself I was in the football canteen and then I took a beer. When I left, I noticed that someone also walked to the outside to see if I was by bike. If I would have been by car, they would have concluded that they could also do that.

These community officers are aware that as a member of the police, they are a sort of local 'public figure'. For that reason, they adjust their behaviour, if only to avoid any suggestion of deviancy.

To separate work and private life is much harder here. Personally I never had much problems with it. But you have to know how to behave. As a police officer in the countryside, you are a public figure, more or less. They keep an eye on you. I will never drink more than two beers in public. I don't want to run the risk that behind my back they'll say, 'yes, he is a cop,' but meanwhile The same is that in a shop I always want to pay visibly. Once I came back to my car, I found a crate of beer. Good intentions maybe, or maybe not, but that is something that you cannot accept. My position is that I insist on paying, never accept anything. In that sense you are under a magnifying glass.

At the same time, some rural officers try to make a clear separation between work and private life in their relationships with citizens (Fenwick, 2015). This is partly meant to prevent 'wrong expectations' from citizens, partly to ensure that they will not get into trouble in future in their relationships with fellow villagers.

I think it mainly depends on your own attitude. In the early days it was quite usual that villagers came at your door. You know this can happen if you live here. What I do, is: I talk to them in a decent way, but I also say that now I am off duty and that they can always come at the office. As a rule, they do understand that. I will not say this, if it concerns my neighbour or if serious problems happened. But it also depends on how you behave when you are off-duty. If I walk in my village with my wife and I see a car that was parked incorrectly. At that moment I will do nothing. If I would, soon I would have a reputation of someone who is always obsessed by the rules, something you should avoid. And people accept this. The most important thing is, you should be clear. I always wrote a ticket if necessary, even if it concerned someone from my village. People knew this and I think that they also accepted it.

10 Style of Policing

Previous studies showed that the rural police often use methods and styles that differ from those used in the city: more informal, personal, direct, oriented to a broad range of problems, with much attention for peacekeeping and service. Differences in social density and anonymity are important here, just like differences in distance and in the possibilities to provide fast assistance.

Despite important social changes, these differences in style between rural and urban police are still relevant. This is because at many rural locations it can take a long time for police assistance to arrive and local police officers have to create (provisional) solutions on their own, using their communicative capacities, skills for mediation and negotiation, personal reputation and authority, and their relationship with very different kinds of persons (Terpstra, 2017):

That's really different. If you look in the city and there is an incident, within a couple of minutes 5 to 10 police cars will be at the location. Such an escalation is not possible here Here police officers know that they are dependent on their own skills. They have to talk, to appease, to explain to citizens that they are not only there as the fist, but to solve their problem, if possible together with them. And this is the ground for a completely different policing approach than in the city. And you should use the fact that people here know you and that they are aware that tomorrow they may meet you again.

In other words, there is still much continuity in the traditional style of rural policing and in the detailed local knowledge and close relations of rural community officers. At the same time, their organization has changed in important ways: more at a distance from local communities, the loss of locally based police teams and local police station and with police officers working in much larger areas and without strong local orientation. Compared with the past, community officers are now much more isolated.

The work of patrol officers in rural areas has changed even more. Nowadays, they have much larger areas to patrol. In the past, they used to know many of the

citizens who they met during patrol; nowadays, rural patrolling is more like 'strangers policing strangers' (Brogden, 1991). Patrol work is now increasingly dominated by the lack of officers and by problems with meeting response time standards. As a consequence, rural patrol work nowadays is more focused on only dealing with incidents. Preventive work and maintaining relations with the community have almost disappeared from their work. Contacts between patrol officers and citizens are now often limited to what is instrumental for handling the incident and, as a result, are now generally only casual.

In the past, rural police also had to deal with typical problems of the countryside. The nature of such problems differed somewhat between regions, depending on differences in local economy, farming and natural environment. The interviewed police officers mention problems such as poachers, smugglers, unlawful hunting, illegal searches of bird eggs, missing animals or animals in problems (see also Christensen & Crank, 2001; Huey & Ricciardelli, 2015; Terpstra, 2017; Young, 1993). These issues seem to be less frequent than they used to be in the 1970s and 1980s but have not completely disappeared from the rural policing agenda. In addition, there are certain manifestations of rural cultures, such as Easter fire, the ritual riots at new years' eve, or the violence between different youth groups at the annual fair, issues that demanded much time and energy of the local police. Over the past years, these tasks have largely been transmitted to municipal enforcement officers, leading to a situation where the expertise of the police in managing these typical rural problems largely disappeared (Smith, 2010):

We used to have a monthly schedule. For instance, it is now springtime: look out for persons searching for lapwing eggs or duck eggs.... So watch people who are walking in the open field and who seem to be looking for something.... That kind of things. Also for instance fish poachers. We also had to enforce on undersized fish, the boats of those sport fishermen. We had much more policing of green issues in those days than we have now. Green policing is now only a 'hobby' for some individual officer, but not an issue of the police organization as such.

11 Concluding Remarks

Previous studies showed that in general rural police are better integrated in local society, have more local knowledge and a broad view of their task. They are often strongly focused on solving problems by means of direct, personal and informal relationships with citizens.

To what extent can this dominant approach still be found in rural policing in the Netherlands?

Over the past few decades, the Dutch police have gradually withdrawn from the countryside. Not much is left of the earlier strong local position and high visibility of the police. These developments were often motivated by policies of efficiency and by the assumption that transport and communication have strongly improved, also in rural areas. It also looks as if there has been an underestimation

of the importance and symbolic meaning of police and police stations for rural communities (McLaughlin, 2008) and of the negative message that the disappearance of the police has for citizens outside the cities. Also the seriousness and impact of problems in rural areas (Ruddell & O'Connor, 2022) do not seem to be recognized sufficiently. Policymakers seem to have assumed that modern forms of communication and information technology, and the capacities to scale up police forces and to assist local officers from a distance could be used as compensation for the lack of direct personal contact and visibility. For that reason, the developments in rural policing over the past few decades can be understood as the rise of an increasingly abstract police organization (Terpstra et al., 2019). This development may be understood as part of a more general trend in which most attention and resources go to the urban (power) centre, at the expense of the rural periphery.

Notwithstanding these developments, Dutch rural policing has partially kept its distinctive characteristics. Rural communities, despite the differences that may be found here, still 'ask' for another kind of policing than what is usual in the cities. Larger social density, less anonymity, stronger sense of community, and more social control, in addition to larger distances to services and facilities, are important factors here. The conclusions of Wooff (2016) for Scotland are highly similar.

This approach is especially found among rural community officers. Despite their increasing isolation in their relation with colleagues, their style of working is still built upon personal relationship, detailed knowledge, communicative skills and a strong emphasis on services. However, they are also increasingly confronted with a lack of time and other resources, forcing them to cut down on time spent doing community work, frustrating them in their ambitions and negatively influencing their understanding about how they should be doing their work (Terpstra, 2019, 2021).

Most of the interviewed officers are pessimistic about the future of rural policing. All of them feel that the developments of the past decades, such as closure of police stations, reduction in the number of officers, withdrawal of rural police and erosion of local position and knowledge are a serious loss and have led to a decline in the quality of police work in the rural regions. They fear that with the retirement of the current generation of community officers, much of the local knowledge, relationships, skills and experience in rural policing will be gone.

It looks as if with these changes, a shift is being made to a different kind of police, step by step and largely unintendedly: a police organization that is less socially embedded, mainly operating from the outside, not as an integral part of the local community and that will only come reactively, if there is a serious problem or incident (Smith & Somerville, 2013; Wooff, 2015). In such a model, the local anchoring of the police is expected to be realized by community officers. However, they have become more isolated and have only one or two days per week for community work. If this development would continue, it may be expected that rural populations will increasingly feel abandoned by the police. This would fit in the more general, growing gap between urban centres and rural populations in many European countries.

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This development might make it easier for those who have an interest in staying out of sight of the police. Over the past years, there have been indications of increasing problems in Dutch rural communities and areas, such as the use of alcohol and drugs by youth groups, intimate violence, serious problems of social disorder (for instance, farmer protests), outlaw motor gangs seeking some accommodation at remote places, and the use of deserted barns for illegal production of drugs. Each of these signals asks for police who are strongly integrated in rural communities.

The preceding analysis is also relevant for the study of police cultures. It shows that police culture (here, the culture of rural police) is changing constantly. These changes often go unnoticed, but in the longer run they are very clear and related to different aspects, such as the dominating views about police work, the role of police officers, the relationship with citizens, as well as between colleagues. This finding is in contrast with the often mentioned assumption that police culture has essentially remained the same (Loftus, 2009; see also Sklansky, 2006).

This analysis also shows that in the past policing culture was not just an internal element of the police. Several examples show that cultural patterns crossed organizational boundaries. Part of the rural policing culture was, for example, how family members of police officers operated and supported and reproduced a certain system of policing. This was based on certain norms and views about the police and about how family members of police officers should behave and present themselves to the outside world. The dominant style of rural policing was not only visible in how police officers operated but also in the expectations and views of people living in the countryside and how they treated 'their' village cop. In this way, there was and still is an important link between the rural village culture and the culture of rural policing. The question however may be raised if the developments of the rural police over the past decades have made police culture increasingly only an internal phenomenon of the police.

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