

# Criminal Investigation in Rural Areas: How Police Detectives Manage Remoteness and Resource Scarcity<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract** This article addresses how rural environments characterized by remoteness impact the work of police detectives in their casework. It reports on an ethnographic study of two investigative departments (working on volume crime and domestic crime) located in Northern Sweden. Interviews ( $N=27$ ) and participant observations ( $N=56$ ) were conducted in order to examine how investigators approached and managed rural conditions in their daily work. Findings indicate that police investigations in rural areas are characterized by constraints, such as resource shortages, extended set-up times (due to travelling), and challenges in multitasking. The findings identify two main practices for investigating crime in such settings: ‘rural investigation’ that entails a decentralized approach in which investigators are embedded locally; and ‘investigating the rural’ that entails a distanced, centralized approach. This article discusses trade-offs and predicted outcomes in crime investigation and highlights how the urban/rural binary divide encompasses a paradoxical tension that investigators must manage continuously.

## Introduction

This article addresses how criminal investigation in rural contexts is conducted and how geographical conditions such as remoteness impact on the work of police detectives in Northern Sweden, specifically. Urbanization, in Sweden and in other societies, makes rural and remote areas even more ‘remote’ as people move away from them to live in urban areas. Remoteness is something that also

impacts the demography of rural areas. From a strictly economic perspective, on the one hand it makes increasingly less sense to tie resources to these remote areas. On the other hand, for democratic and demographic reasons, such areas cannot and should not be left to their own fate. Therefore, for rural areas and society at large, it becomes increasingly important to understand how investigative work is performed in practice.

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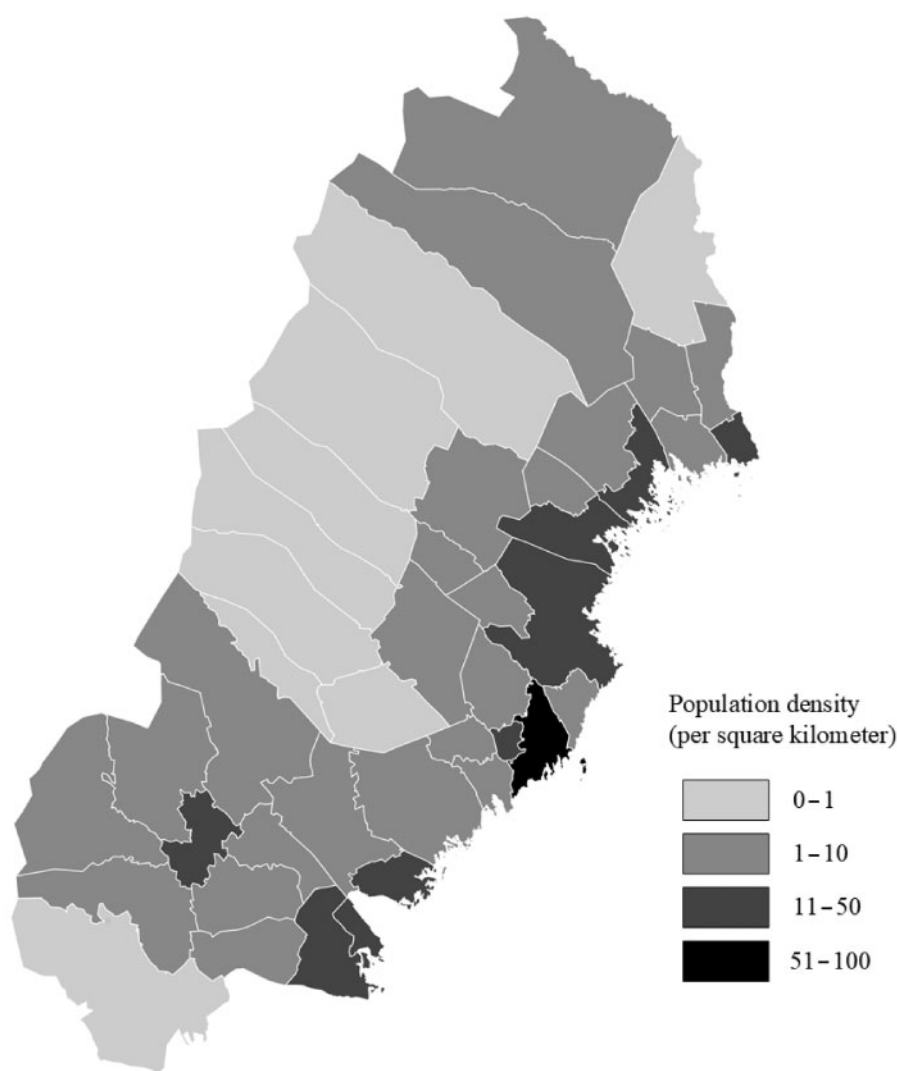
In recent years, there has been an increasing interest in the challenges and strategies associated with policing in rural communities. Studies have shown that rural contexts are heterogeneous, and police forces need to be receptive to variations in local conditions. For example, in rural contexts crime rates as well as numbers of victims and offenders vary with deprivation, unemployment, and seasonality (Lindström, 2015; Mawby, 2015). Likewise, geographical factors such as remoteness or isolation, or conversely, proximity to metropolitan areas, are associated with different criminogenic patterns that call for variation in response and crime preventive strategies (Ceccato and Dolmen, 2011, 2013; Lindström, 2015). In research on policing, this variability has been mirrored by the insight that police in rural contexts need to be mindful of local conditions as well as knowledgeable about them and, incorporate this knowledge in their dealings with local communities (Wooff, 2015). In so doing, local police in rural communities face the challenge of being 'in' and 'of' the communities in which they work (Fenwick, 2015). Other challenges in rural policing include resource scarcity and deskilling of police (Smith, 2010); isolation (Loftus, 2010; Ricciardelli, 2018); and role strain (Huey and Ricciardelli, 2015). This literature has contributed great insights about the significance of geography in crime management, and how knowledge of the local context is of key importance for successful rural, uniformed day-to-day policing. However, as noted by (Brodeur, 2010) there is a significant difference in practice between uniformed policing and investigative police work. This article provides insights about the latter, and thereby contributes to the present theorizing of rural policing by focusing on the specific problems and challenges of criminal investigations. Some research does exist. Smith (2010), for example, discusses how investigation of rural crime might be more time consuming than urban investigations as detectives must cover large geographical distances in order to process cases. Duke (2014) highlights problems with competence

development, specialization, and temporarily high workloads for the individual detectives and investigative units involved. In regard to domestic violence specifically, Squire and Gill (2011) highlight problems such as social control in 'tight knit' small communities; barriers to reporting; and hardships in accommodating a multi-agency approach due to lack of resources in rural contexts. Owen and Carrington (2015) argue that many of the issues originate in an 'urban-centric' structural bias where policy is modelled on urban conditions. Such modelling does not consider resource scarcity, differing basic societal infrastructure, or differing help-seeking behaviours from victims. In sum, factors such as these can be expected to complicate the investigative process, and they require specific strategies on the part of the detectives who are working on cases in rural areas. Therefore, our aim is to provide insights into the particularities of police investigations in rural areas. Specifically, we contribute to the literature on policing by describing and analysing the conditions and case management strategies of detectives in rural areas. This objective means that we are interested in aspects of rural crime investigations (i.e. when investigations are conducted in rural contexts), as well as investigations of rural crime (where rural dimensions in an investigated situation are of importance for the detectives' processing of the case) (c.f. Mawby and Yarwood, 2011) as we examine how the daily work of rural investigative policing is performed.

### Northern Sweden

This article draws on fieldwork collected as part of a larger research project of investigative work in Swedish policing. The study is situated in the most northern police region of Sweden, see Fig. 1.

This region covers more than 50% of Sweden (an area approximately the size of UK) and has about 877,000 inhabitants. The average population density is less than five people per square kilometres and in total, the region is policed by 1,478 police officers, who on a yearly basis deal with



**Figure 1:** Population density in the northern Swedish police region.

about 99,500 reported crimes (Polisen, 2018). In their studies of crime in rural Sweden, Ceccato (2016) and Ceccato and Dolmen (2011) discussed a south–north divide in victimization rates, where the highest proportions of victims were found in southern rural areas. This is indicative of significant geographical differences between the northern and southern parts of Sweden. The south is close to the European main continent and offers frequent logistical opportunities across the waters.

The northern part of the country does not have the same logistical opportunities, but shares borders with rural areas in Norway and Finland. There are also significant differences in remoteness and inaccessibility between the north and the south. Using a definition by The Swedish National Rural Development Agency (2008), Ceccato and Dolmen (2011, 2013) made a distinction between municipalities: remote rural (RR—defined as >45 min by car from the nearest urban areas with

>3,000 inhabitants); accessible rural (AR—defined as areas with between 5 and 45 min by car from urban areas with >3,000 inhabitants); and urban areas (UA—defined as municipalities with >3,000 inhabitants and reachable in less than 5 min by car). With this typology, the northern police region includes 20 of 22 remote rural areas in Sweden; 15 of 156 accessible rural areas in Sweden; and 9 out of 119 urban areas in Sweden. Remoteness and large geographical distances are therefore the pre-existing conditions in which policing is performed.

## Methodology

To investigate how criminal investigation in rural contexts is conducted and how geographical conditions such as remoteness impacts on the work of police detectives, we have chosen to do a 3-year ethnographical study involving police detectives in Northern Sweden. Drawing upon Mawby and Yarwood's (2011) differentiation of 'rural policing' and 'policing the rural', the Northern region of Sweden is a good example for understanding dimensions of rural policing as 20 out of 22 rural areas are found in the region, representing more than 50% of the country's geographical area (Polisen, 2018).

The organization of investigative resources in Sweden is based on geography where specialized resources are centralized. One of seven regions in Sweden, the northern region consists of four 'police districts' that are organized into 12 'local police areas'. At the local level, the police investigate minor crimes, including unlawful driving, burglaries, and theft. At the police district level, specialized investigations are performed, including but not limited to cybercrime and environmental crimes, murder investigations, and domestic violence cases involving children. Finally, at a national

level, there are development centres and support functions to the different organizational levels.

Crime investigations in Sweden are commonly led either by a police senior investigating officer (SIO)<sup>2</sup> or a public prosecutor for more serious crime. Police-led crime investigations are structured differently depending on the timescale of an investigation. In the initial stages of the process, an on-duty SIO would have responsibility for the case and would make decisions regarding investigative measures. The on-duty SIO would also be an important filter for deciding case write-offs. After initial processing, the case is transferred to one of several investigative units and the responsibility for leading the investigation shifts to an ordinary SIO. This structural organization of investigative work is modelled primarily on the investigative processes applied in urban areas. The particular characteristics of the northern police region in Sweden do not constitute such an area and thus, northern Sweden is a suitable context for theory-building purposes about how rural detective work is practiced. Specifically, the case affords opportunities to explore systematically how and why formal organizations interrelate with rural specifics and lead to particular practices.

## Data collection

To ensure sufficient detail about work practices, the primary data for our analysis is based on fieldwork comprising 287 h of observations in which we followed detectives, SIOs, and officers in charge of two units in their daily activities. Adding nuances to the observations, we conducted 19 semi-structured interviews (25 h in total; 80 min in average) with detectives, SIOs, managers, and uniformed local police.

The units we observed consisted of a minor crime investigative unit (literal translation 'volume' crime) and a domestic violence investigative unit. The minor crime unit has approximately 25

<sup>2</sup> SIO, as it is used in this article, refers to police officers who have an organizational role and responsibility to lead investigations. Sweden has a system where investigations are led either by prosecutors or SIOs, depending on the nature and classification of the case.

**Table 1:** Empirical sources of data.

Type of data	<i>N</i>	Total extent
Participant observations	56	Approximately 287 h
• (Volume crime department, domestic crime department, and surrounding functions (i.e. patrol units and management))		
Semi-structured interviews	27	Approximately 30 h
• (Patrol officers, on-duty SIOs, managers, investigators)		

investigators working mainly on crimes such as theft, burglaries, unlawful driving, etc. The ‘domestic crime’ unit has about 12 investigators, dealing mainly with domestic violence and crime cases involving children. Complementing the observations of the detectives’ work, we observed patrolling officers who work closely with detectives and administrative functions that support them. In a typical day of observations, we observed a cross-section of activities, as detectives were on average involved in 8–15 cases at any given time. By continuously following individual detectives, we could in many instances track progress in specific cases. Interviews targeted the local organization of policing, as well as collaboration across functions. We followed the field work recommendations of [Van Maanen \(2011\)](#) and [Spradley \(1980\)](#). Specifically, individually the researchers made detailed notes of the detectives’ working conditions on paper and on mobile phones. The notes were then transcribed into full narratives within 24 h. Finally, pauses were incorporated to avoid research fatigue and for intermittent analysis to identify possible analytical patterns. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. In the findings section, all names and identifying details of detectives have been changed to protect the identity of participants. See [Table 1](#) for a summary of the data.

## Analysis

To analyse the conditions and strategies of the detectives we followed a grounded theory inspired approach ([Langley, 1999](#)). Gradually, we transitioned from a more activity-centric analysis

towards theorizing of emergent empirical findings ([Charmaz, 2006](#)). In the first phase, our analysis focused on mapping the investigative process. This mapping was based on interviews and initial observations. Specifically, we focused on the case process, identifying the main stakeholders, interfaces between stakeholders, and the main activities of the detectives. For example, we followed investigators through observations, and in interviews we asked detectives to draw typical case flow-charts for explaining the investigative process. This process was further facilitated by a police officer embedded within the research team.

In the second phase, we conducted open coding of the material based on instances in which research participants referenced, talked about, or in other ways dealt with ‘the rural’ in a broad sense; for example, how scheduled ‘no-show’ investigative interviews were mitigated. This coding is naturally flexible as it included explicit rural storylines from interview data and more subtle examples as well, such as field notes from fairly long drives (2–3 h one-way) to rural areas.

Following the open coding, we conducted axial coding in a third stage of analysis. This stage of the analysis aimed to construct core themes out of open codes by relating and contrasting conditions, contexts, and actions related to rural crime investigation ([Strauss and Corbin, 1998](#)). Based on overlaps, consistency, and explanatory power we broke down the codes into categories to structure the findings. Next, we mobilized the literature on rural policing ([Fenwick, 2015](#); [Mawby and Yarwood, 2011](#)) to situate and explain theoretically the

conditions and strategies used by the detectives. The analytical approach enabled us to elaborate on how a tension between efficacy and legitimacy manifested itself in a context of rural investigation. This tension is in the findings unpacked and discussed in terms of a conflict between differing preconditions for rural investigation, which leads to choices between different practices of rural investigation. Using this disposition, we then move to discuss the predicted outcomes of the various ways investigators deal with this tension in their work. The analysis is further detailed in the results section that follows.

## Findings

In the following, we start by describing identified preconditions to detectives' work, where we specifically identify a conflict between the formal organization of investigative work and its associated resource allocation model on the one hand, and on the other, the specific challenges facing crime investigation in rural areas. Next, we describe examples from the practices (process) of rural investigation, where we trace that conflict in the choices detectives had to make in their daily work in rural areas.

### Preconditions in rural crime investigation

A key issue for investigative policing is how to apply centrally developed bureaucratic structures in rural contexts. We identified a principal conflict between how the investigators were supposed to work according to organizational schemes, rules, and structures predominantly designed for crime investigation in urban areas, and what was possible under the specific conditions in rural areas. Essentially, in rural settings a tension arises between the formal, centrally controlled systems and the local conditions. This tension was manifested in several ways and in the following we give three examples: First, how cases travelled, secondly, how investigations were led over large distances, and thirdly, how resource allocation was structured.

*Cases (and investigators) that travel.* In our fieldwork, a specific manifestation of the tension between centralized bureaucratic organization principles of crime investigation and rural specifics was when cases had to 'travel' long distances in order to be investigated. For example, a serious crime in a rural area would often be investigated far from the incident due to the organizational structure and routines of the police. As expressed by an officer in command of one investigative unit:

... If some kid in [Rural village] puts a paper on fire at his school, wanting to burn it down, this would be considered arson. Well, arson is classified as a serious crime, and needs to be investigated by a serious crime detective at [town 400 km away]. We can't have detectives travelling that distance by car to investigate. Rather, it should be handled by local police with support [from detectives]. (Interview 24, Thomas)

In contrast to practice in an urban setting, classification as a 'serious crime' would be an administrative decision that would affect which unit is given responsibility. In the case of the rural region being studied, classification of the crime as a serious one had the consequence that the investigation was conducted approximately 400 km away (or 5 h by car) from the incident. Thus, what makes administrative sense (namely that a specialized detective should work on a serious crime) makes less sense in practice when the geographical conditions—specifically the remoteness of the region—were taken into account. Indeed, geographical conditions are important to the setting of any incident, but in the rural area of northern Sweden, they imply long distances between an event and police personnel. Hence it is not surprising that in northern Sweden the fieldwork revealed activities taking place over large distances and in remote locations.

**Leading investigations over large distances.** A second example of how the tension between centralized investigative routines and rural conditions was made visible concerned the question of how investigations were led over large distances in various phases of the investigation. With remoteness as a defining feature of the rural northern region of Sweden, conditions forced SIOs to account for distances and collaborate with various local police in the case investigations. As an illustrative example of the distances involved, a single on-duty SIO working a night shift in rural northern Sweden would regularly have an area of responsibility that covers the whole Swedish northern region (about 232,500 km<sup>2</sup>). Within this area of responsibility, the SIO would take calls from local police and based on the incoming information decide what early investigative measures to take. As a consequence of the distances involved, the on-duty SIOs cannot rely on local knowledge of the jurisdiction in their decision-making.

This was commented upon by the SIOs as problematic, but part of the responsibility. The distance, however, made the SIO reliant upon the local police personnel and their activities. For example, the SIO would devote much time to asking the local police to clarify specifics regarding what measures to take, and why. An experienced on-duty SIO explains the process:

Typically, I'll get a case registered from a patrol basically outlining what happened. Then, I'll decide that, yes, I will take over the case. Now I am the SIO in charge, so I want some measures to be taken: I want the witness to be heard, I may need a K9 patrol to work overtime trying to track down a suspect, maybe to an isolated house. If I have an address, I'll issue a search warrant. If the case involved aggravated assault with a weapon, or if there are some other

kinds of tools involved, I might want to issue a search for those. If there is an identified suspect, I'll want the person to be brought in. The same goes for witnesses. I need to make these decisions about who to detain, arrest and so on. (Interview 18, Simon)

As mentioned, these decisions would basically be taken without any situated knowledge of the case but would instead be based on the available information from the patrol. SIOs regularly joked about the importance of getting correct information. For instance, if SIOs issued a house search on a particular street address, they would stress the necessity to ensure that the street was located in the right village or community. During the fieldwork, we observed many and lengthy conversations about such matters. The application of an organizational and bureaucratic routine regarding on-duty SIO jurisdictions makes more sense in urban areas where the problem of remoteness is not an issue.

**Lack of resources and underreporting of crime.** A third set of circumstances for criminal investigation in rural areas, and one that creates a clear conflict where the formal organization and the rural specifics do not align, is the issue of resource allocation. Specifically, a major concern for the police investigators with whom we came in contact during fieldwork was that criminal investigations in rural areas suffer from resource shortages relative to the area they are supposed to cover. This resource shortage was a result of resource allocations being calculated on the population density in a manner that does not account for vast distances. From a management perspective, this shortage translates into a staffing challenge and constitutes what could be described as a rural paradox: the significant geographical distances and dispersed living imply that such regions need more staff on average than urban areas, not fewer. For instance, if a scheduled investigative interview



with a potential suspect is voided in a rural area, much investigator's time is wasted as a result of the necessity for police personnel to drive long distances. In an urban area, less time is wasted changing to an alternate task. At the same time, rural areas are characterized by relatively small population quotas and relatively few disturbances. The small population in rural areas, the people's tendency to mind their own business, and their reluctance to report, mean that compared to urban regions a smaller average number of are reported. As a consequence, if the numbers are examined in isolation from these other factors, it would seem to make sense to allocate fewer resources to rural areas. As stated by one union representative on the topic of staff ratios of SIOs and shift commanders in rural areas:

At the baseline, it's about crime per capita. But then there is this tendency ... well, let's be honest, people living in remote rural villages tend to solve their problems by themselves to some extent – rightly or wrongly – so all the things that happen do not come to our attention. (Interview 21, Mathias)

This paradox—where in rural conditions on average more resources are required at the same time as fewer crimes are reported—was well known and present in detectives' daily work. As we will demonstrate, investigators managed the resource shortage with strategies such as standing in for each other if they happen to be closer to the incident. They therefore worked in a more generalist manner due to geographical circumstances. Another workaround involved the use of technology, for instance by having distance briefings, and reporting over 'video link' when using local personnel was not an option.

### Investigative practices in the rural context

The conflict between centralized organizational routines and rural specifics that surfaced in

various ways in investigative work also translated into investigative practices, as well as decision-making by investigators on a day-to-day basis. We identified several occasions where investigators had to manage dilemmas arising from this conflict, which leads us to the two identified practices of rural investigation. Paraphrasing Mawby and Yarwood's (2011) distinction between 'rural policing' defined as the work of the police in rural areas, and 'policing the rural' as the conditions entailed in rural contexts, we discuss below 'rural investigation' in terms of investigative work practice located in rural spaces, and 'investigating the rural' as crime investigations in which rural specifics are of importance. This allowed us to not only distinguish but also describe the choices, the relation, and the impact of organizational structures and work processes as they are influenced by, or have an influence on, rural investigative policing.

**'Rural investigation'.** As discussed in this article, this entails working on cases in remote localities, where cases depend on investigative measures such as the interrogation of suspects, documentation, property seizure, or house-searches being done 'on site'. Typically, detectives would visit local police and small part-time open police stations where they would set up shop temporarily before moving on.

[Yesterday] there was a guy held in custody in a locality in Lapland, the local police owned the investigation initially. Peter and I were ordered to go there, pick him up and bring him back here for further questioning. I had done most of my day already and had to do it on overtime ... well, it's a 250-kilometre one-way trip [about 3 h by car]. We probably won't be home until 2:00 - 3:00 am, and then it's just a few hours to my next dayshift starts. (Joan, detective)



The above field note excerpt points to a recurring problem for crime investigators working in remote rural areas. In the exemplified event, it turned out that the crime investigators only had to travel 127 km one way, as the local uniformed police incidentally had a slow day and could meet them halfway, a regional practice commonly known as 'relay driving'. This is one example of how vast geographical distances impact on the work of crime investigators in rural areas. In the example above, the distance slowed down work because it increased the set-up time for detectives who have to travel.

Another characteristic of crime investigation in remote areas was that it is complicated multitasking. For example, in several cases, activities had to be performed simultaneously. Whereas multitasking is generally seen to improve efficiency, in this case it made detectives more vulnerable for rescheduling due to non-cooperative victims or suspects. For example, detectives could plan for set-up, and travel to rural localities to conduct an interrogation with a suspect, only to experience a no-show. While cancelled appointments are not uncommon for detectives, the costs in terms of time and effort to reschedule are considerably higher in a rural setting, as is apparent from the excerpt below:

We [observer and two detectives] are on a day trip to a small rural municipality to do various casework at the local (temporarily opened) station. They are having a really slow day where no one they hoped to talk with turned out to be home, or showed up for investigative interviewing ... The detectives discuss how it's ironic that while a pile of cases is waiting for them back home, they haven't made any progress at all during the day. (Fieldwork)

As the excerpt indicates, travelling was a common element of the work day for the detectives, who often tried to coordinate their travels so that they could visit many rural areas in the same trip—a practice known locally as 'going on tour'. A common example of this concerned the detectives who work with child witness interviews in remote areas. Interviewing child witnesses is a competence not possessed by all local police areas because it requires special training. In consequence, a detective with that specialization would often travel and do a number of interviews with children in a coordinated manner, sometimes in multiple cases. As would be expected, this meant that interviews sometimes are left pending until an investigator could fit it into his or her schedule.

The above point touches on the dilemma of how to secure a specialized competence among detectives in rural and remote areas where investigative units could be relatively small, and therefore vulnerable to 'workload peaks'. In contrast to urban areas where specialized competence is more readily available, we noted that investigators could often be involved in types of investigations outside their primary specialization. Consequently, many investigators in rural areas worked in a rather generalist manner. For instance, investigative units would regularly borrow personnel from one another, and group leaders of each investigative unit would regularly have meetings discussing workloads and potential to provide support. Another not too common (but still noteworthy) aspect of the necessity for investigators to have a generalist mindset was that they could also get involved in other types of policing when on site in remote rural areas. Detectives who travelled long hours by car might sometimes get involved in traffic policing, for example, called out by the central dispatch office to take care of minor traffic incidents in remote localities because no other available resource was in the proximity.

*'Investigating the rural'*. 'Investigating the rural' signifies investigations that could be conducted and led from an administrative centre (such as the central town of a police area), but as they contain a rural dimension, they call for specific knowledge from the detective working the case. This type of 'centralized' rural investigation was common when detectives were working cases in accessible rural areas; were involved in more specialized investigations; or when coordination was of key importance, such as when investigating marauding criminal networks, wherein the local uniformed police did much of the work on site, with coordination managed from a specialized resource. One example of this type of complexity was when an investigator worked on a case in which property was stolen in one large rural district, found in another large rural district, and the suspects were encountered in a third.

Another example of a 'centralized' rural investigation concerned a case of suspected child maltreatment in a small reasonably accessible rural village. To safeguard the interests of the children involved, the investigators used a multi-agency approach wherein police collaborated with social and medical services, and utilized specialized equipment and locales for interviews of the child witnesses. These measures presupposed that the investigation was led from a city, while being mindful of the 'rural' components of the case, which in this case involved an understanding of the informal social control that characterized the local village life. As commented by the lead detective:

This is a hard one ... It concerns a small village and due to this, the accusations we are investigating are unraveling, impactful and will have far reaching consequences. From the point of view of the investigation it is also difficult because everybody knows each other and have been talking to each other. It makes it hard to untangle exactly what has been done to whom

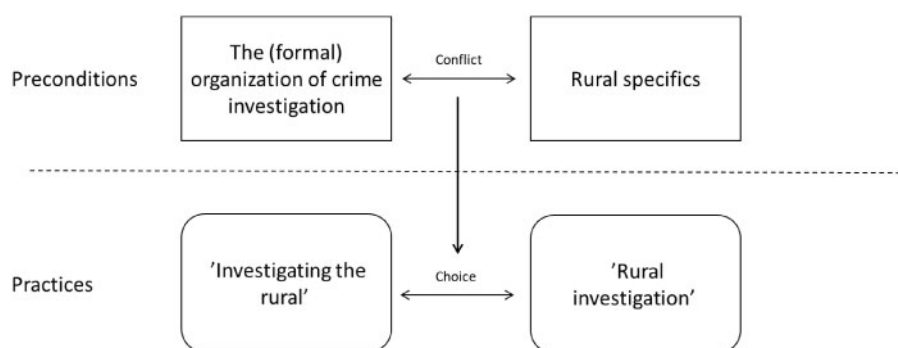
and when. Memories become mixed up over time. (Fieldwork; Mia, detective)

Such a case exemplifies many previously reported specifics of rural crime. In addition to the social bonds between the witnesses, victims, and suspect described by the lead detective, there was the characteristic tendency to suppress problems for a long time before involving the police, as the social cost of accusing a member of the village can be high. The investigator stressed the importance of understanding local circumstances. This type of knowledge about specific rural and geographical conditions was something that was regularly observed as an organizing principle shaping detectives' expectations and activities. One example of this type of framing is presented below in a field note excerpt describing a road trip where two detectives visited an accessible rural area to do witness interviews:

The police investigators are waiting for a booked witness interview. Fifteen minutes go by ... Eva concludes "She won't show up". Carl takes a look at the paperwork and says that the witness lives in a nearby village. "Let's go see if she is at home". The place in question is the "rusty village" – previously a factory village that deteriorated into a run-down community with about 800 inhabitants after it shut down. Both detectives seem well aware of the place.

You know their welcome slogan is "just don't come here". The crows fly upside down when they pass above the place [i.e. to avoid seeing the misery]. (Fieldwork; Carl)

This excerpt highlights the mobilization of situated knowledge about a 'rundown' factory-village,



**Figure 2:** A model explaining the conditions of rural investigative practice.

but depending on the geography, crime investigators would discuss rural areas in varying ways. Some seemed genuinely calm. As one senior police director phrased it: ‘The only thing we [police] ever chase is our own tire tracks when we are out and about’ (Interview 3, Arnold), while other seemingly calm areas were regarded with suspicion as a lack of crime might be due to under-reporting. Yet other rural areas yet were characterized by seasonality, where tourism in particular could affect the amount of crime that could be expected. An initial conclusion and a somewhat intuitive finding therefore confirm that locally situated knowledge of rural context was valued by detectives in their daily work routines. As stated by one manager of an investigative unit:

... In some sense, crime is always local. Crime occurs somewhere, at specific localities, so there is always a local component to it. (Interview 24, Thomas)

More precisely, knowledge of the different rural environments could mean that investigators had previous personal knowledge about suspects as well as their interests and daily lives. They could use such knowledge to build rapport when working on cases that involve many witness interviews and interrogations. A specific example of this type of rapport concerned a bilingual locality in which

an official minority language was spoken in addition to Swedish. Local anchoring to that area often meant that the investigators could quite literally speak the same language as victims and suspects.

Thus, experiential knowledge guided detectives in adjusting their expectations and interpretations when working on cases. In contrast to their uniformed colleagues, however, investigators were not often embedded nor in continuous dialogue with the local community as they worked from a more distanced position in the police organization. In addition, the more specialized the investigation, the less the investigator could rely on this type of situated knowledge.

### Understanding rural investigations

Based on the presented findings, we propose a model for understanding rural investigation in terms of preconditions and practices (Fig. 2).

As is visible in Fig. 2, an inherent conflict exists between a central formal way of organizing criminal investigations and the local rural-specific context. The formal organization has both organizational and legal aspects, containing central directives on how to lead and conduct investigations as well as legal boundaries about who is authorized to make certain decisions (such as arrests, house searches, confiscation of property, etc.). The rural specifics involve both the nature of crime (e.g. under-reporting and strong local

communities); the scarcity of resources (e.g. few police employees); as well as geographical conditions (e.g. large distances).

Regarding practices, we distinguished between 'investigation of the rural' and 'rural investigation'. The former is biased towards central and formal organizational requirements, deploying investigators from central municipalities with more resources and specialized units. This means that investigators are working from a centrally placed position utilizing rural knowledge and resources. The latter practice, 'rural investigation', entails working in the rural setting, and necessarily involves travelling to or being positioned in the rural area in question. This practice leans more towards adapting to the specific rural preconditions and drawing on local knowledge to carry out the work. As we see both these practices utilized in the departments studied, we argue that investigators are facing a choice between them. Making that choice requires investigators to navigate. They must assess the nature of the crime, the practicalities such as location, and the degree of organizational leeway. In the following discussion, we consider how these differing practices also lead to different sets of predicted outcomes.

## Discussion

Drawing on Wooff's (2015) assertion that it is important to be knowledgeable and mindful of the working conditions in rural areas, as they generally differ from the working conditions in urban ones, we have investigated how rural environments characterized by remoteness affect the work of police detectives in their casework (see also Ceccato and Dolmen, 2011, 2013; Lindström, 2015; Mawby, 2015). To add to the extant theorizing of rural detective work (Duke, 2014; Owen and Carrington, 2015; Squire and Gill, 2011), we have done *in situ* fieldwork with two investigative units in the Northern Sweden police district, where 19 out of 22 remote areas are located (Polisen, 2018).

Based on the data, we identified three characteristics of the performance of criminal investigation in rural areas: cases (and investigators) that travel; leading investigations over large distances; and lack of resources and underreporting of crime.

The findings in our study of investigative policing share several similarities with other research on rural, 'uniformed' policing. Similar to previous research on rural policing (Duke, 2014), we identified how remoteness poses a challenge to investigative policing, not least because such geographical conditions can increase set-up time and complicate staffing as well as specialization. As with many other accounts of rural life, our study also showed how a recurrent problem in rural areas concerns resource shortages and pressure to adapt systems and models of work that are primarily suited to urban life (Ricciardelli, 2018). This complicated the work of criminal investigators in many ways. For one, following previous research on rural policing, we identified how locally situated knowledge was an important and highly valued resource for the police in their interpretation of situations and cases (Wooff, 2015). This knowledge was however not easily acquired or maintained as investigations became more specialized and hence centralized in character. To describe the various approaches to criminal investigation in rural geographies, we adopted the distinction made by Mawby and Yarwood (2011) between 'rural policing' and 'policing the rural'. Applied in a context of crime investigation, we used this dichotomy to highlight a variation in how rural investigations can be led and conducted (as either more distributed in character or conversely centralized). These various themes were selected and analysed as they brought about dilemmas, tension, and challenging conditions for the participants in their daily work.

## Working with rural investigative tensions

Extending the insights presented above, we now turn to a reflection on how the choices made

during policing in a rural context can also be expected to influence criminal investigations, and how investigators make sense of the tensions that arise. In this sense, an approach in which investigators are ‘investigating the rural’ with a more detached, centralized, and urban-centric approach can, based on our findings, be expected to lead to higher degree of resource rationalization and efficacy as detectives have more resources available, higher levels of specialization, and are able to deal with multiple cases simultaneously. However, as our findings as well as a previous studies on policing have shown (Buttle *et al.*, 2010), a problem for centralized approaches to rural policing is that the physical presence of the police is minimized, and tightly knit communities avoid further interaction (Squire and Gill, 2011). Altogether, the absence of police personnel impacts legitimacy within the local community. As proposed by Fenwick (2015, p. 237), an important component of rural policing is the question of how the police can ‘win trust and establish legitimacy’ with the local communities that are being policed. This entails the establishment of a negotiated ‘psychological contract of local legitimacy’ that builds consent. Fenwick puts forth that local presence is of key importance for the police to gain acceptance in rural communities. Applied to investigative practice, we conclude that without the possibility of being on location and without specific local knowledge to draw on, investigative work might face less legitimacy in the public eye in rural areas.

Conversely, a decentralized and distributed approach to investigation (what we called a practice of ‘rural investigation’) comes with a scarcity of resources, problems regarding specialization, and losses in efficacy, as detectives are more likely to be tied up in fewer cases and as each case becomes more complex with increased set-up time and commitment to long travels. On the other hand, from a legitimacy perspective, this investigative practice brings investigators closer to the public in the geographical jurisdiction and might also sensitize them to

local criminogenic conditions. These seem to be important factors, not least because rural geography is not a coherent unity but is rather characterized by variation in aspects such as deprivation and informal social conditions (Wooff, 2015).

We contend that detectives regularly have to make choices regarding how to approach the conditions of the geography they work in, and that these choices are done in an ongoing manner because the dichotomies of urban/rural, centrum/periphery, and efficacy/legitimacy cannot easily be resolved. In this sense, the conflicting preconditions and the choices between investigative approaches we have outlined can be understood as paradoxical tensions flowing from binary conceptions of urban–rural when such conceptions function as an organizing principle (sometimes pronounced and other times unspoken) in detective work (c.f. Owen and Carrington, 2015). Consistent with thinking about the situation as a paradox, detectives navigate and emphasize different aspects of the situation. Sometimes the paradox becomes salient, but most of the time it remains hidden as one side is considered, and the other one is not, depending on what the situation requires.

This way of viewing rural investigative work has similarities with Giacomantonio’s (2014) work on intra-organizational, police-to-police boundaries. Giacomantonio puts forth that policing is shaped through negotiations which is going on at the boundaries and interstitial spaces between units within (and between) police organizations. In our case, the different perspectives on rural investigative policing (i.e. a resource rationalization perspective on the one hand and local presence on the other) are resulting from conflicting views regarding how priorities and mandates should be distributed. Indeed, several examples from our findings regard negotiations over intra-organizational boundaries. Examples include that of ‘file ownership’ and resource distribution over geographical areas.

We conclude that detectives have to navigate these different perspectives and approaches to investigative practices and that these decisions are situated. Thus, there is some leeway for the detectives, where one side can be used to rationalize the decision above the other. The point we wish to make is that there seems to be no final resolution to this situation, as tensions will always be present as long as the idea of organizing is systemic rather than multiple subsystems with their own rationales and cultural variations.

In other words, the tension between local specifics and central systems is a challenge that detectives in rural areas must navigate, broker, and find workarounds to in order to manage their daily work. Although an understanding of this tension does not solve the problem, it does make it visible and can, therefore, inform investigators who need to deal with geographical complexity in making decisions on the best approach for a particular case.

## Practical implications

We propose that treating the police authority as one system (for example, create one administrative body to cater to the whole organization) with similar preconditions are destined to create and recreate the tensions that we outline in our findings. We point to the fact that operations can be effective only because of the leeway the detectives have in deciding how to enact a specific situation. If unity within the authority is prioritized, the tensions should be allowed to be latent rather than salient by avoiding letting tensions surface by bringing too much attention to them by excessive use of rules.

To the individual detective, we offer the reflection that he or she has to be confident in his/her way of enacting any given situation. The confidence requirement suggests that detectives have to know their way around the system, a knowledge that only emerges by experience.

We can also, through extending our findings, reflect on some policy implications. We observe

that rural conditions are likely to be on the losing side as arguments around resources tend to lean on population density and frequencies of reported crime. There are only two possible ways of avoiding this—either through an active policy (re-)direction to avoid such bias towards urban conditions or that the idea of centralized authority is abandoned. Both options are equally problematic, albeit for different reasons. With limited resources, it makes sense to consider population density, and for efficient use of limited resources, it makes sense to have a centralized body of authority. Thus, a policy to avoid bias is best argued for from a fairness point of view rather than a resource rationalization perspective.

## Conclusion

In this article, we have addressed how police detectives investigate crime in rural areas. Based on detailed fieldwork of two investigative units in the Northern Swedish police district, we find that investigations were conducted in conditions of resource shortage and remoteness that bring about extensive set-up times, force travelling (of both cases and investigators), challenge specialization, and complicate multitasking. On a practical level, investigators in rural areas had to balance the conflict between the requirements specific to the rural location and the routines and regulations available for criminal investigation. In essence, they had to make choices between ‘rural investigation’, which was a decentralized approach to casework, and ‘investigating the rural’, which entailed a centralized model of investigation. We discussed these findings and identified a paradoxical conflict between the geographical conditions of rurality and an organizational system for crime investigation modelled according to urban environments.

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