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Abstract policing, Covid-19 and the 'rural idyll' in Scotland

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ABSTRACT

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on rural 'policing' (broadly defined to include a range of institutions involved in order maintenance) remains relatively under-discussed and under-theorised. The pandemic created particular challenges for these services in rural areas, particularly in the context of increasingly abstract forms of policing following the creation of Police Scotland and other forms of service provision, and the interaction of these with rurally-contingent inequalities. These were especially felt in rural areas, as were concerns about tourism as a possible (social and epidemiological) threat to rural life. Drawing on qualitative data from two projects, we use a novel interdisciplinary synthesis of theories of 'abstract policing' and the 'rural idyll' to show how the pandemic acted as a flashpoint for a range of concerns about policing and social order in rurality.

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Introduction

Covid-19 unfolded in the wider context of long-term pressures on public services in Scotland and the wider UK, shaped by public spending cuts imposed in response to the 2008 global financial crisis, the impact of the UK's exit from the European Union and rising costs of living. Covid-19 intensified longer-standing concerns about social inequalities, service centralisation and the impacts of austerity. While the policing of this crisis has been discussed elsewhere (Hufnagel *et al*. 2023), including Scotland (Gorton *et al*. 2022, Murray *et al*. 2024), less attention has been paid to the ways in which it played out in rural contexts; furthermore, the discussion of 'policing' has centred on the public police rather than the wider range of structures, organisations and practices involved in the maintenance of social order.

Scotland is a devolved administration within the UK, which has long maintained separate criminal justice, health, education and local government structures. Covid-19 'lockdown' measures imposed in Scotland reflected those elsewhere in the UK, but with restrictions largely devolved to the Scottish Government and sometimes 'stricter' than in England. Public discourse about the pandemic in Scotland centred on differences between the Scottish and English/UK approaches – though Scottish exceptionalist narratives about Covid-19 (Morrison 2022) and generally (Brangan 2019) have been critiqued.

Since 1996, Scotland has 32 single-tier local authorities, ranging from moderately large cities to sparsely populated rural areas. When our fieldwork took place, it had been ten years since the Christie Commission (2011) on public service delivery in Scotland recommended 'the prevention principle'; that Scotland's local authorities adapt to austerity and rising demand through better

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partnership working practices and reorienting services towards preventing rather than reacting to adverse outcomes. In 2013, eight Scottish local police forces and two national agencies were merged into the national service Police Scotland, accompanied by increased centralisation and an increased distance from local communities both in terms of local democratic governance and in terms of actual interactions (Terpstra and Fyfe 2014).

These two institutional structures – 32 local authorities, and a single national police force – are key to our analysis, as they were to lockdown in Scotland. Local authority borders were used to enforce travel restrictions, with 'tiered' restrictions introduced on a local authority basis in early 2021, while local authorities administered much of the support for people affected by Covid-19 and lockdown. The police meanwhile were granted new powers to enforce compliance with lockdown restrictions (Hufnagel *et al*. 2023, Gorton *et al*. 2022). Both of these were deeply affected by ongoing centralisation and a trend towards reliance on communication technologies.

This article uses an interdisciplinary theoretical synthesis to make sense of findings from two empirical projects respectively exploring policing and interagency partnership in Scotland during the pandemic. Both projects use a broad definition of 'policing' (Reiner 2010) to include a wide range of institutions and activities involved in the maintenance of social order. These entailed formal multi-agency partnerships in the public sector (including between police and local government) and more informal coordination involving voluntary or community groups.

We begin with a brief outline of the conceptual resources we draw on later in the article – the 'rural idyll', overtourism and abstract policing – to make sense of both the thematic similarities of each project to provide a foundation for the more generative discussion. We then proceed with a brief methodological overview and an outline of relevant local contexts. We discuss the geographic literature on the 'rural idyll' (Cloke 2003) – a hegemonic social construction of 'the countryside' as verdant, homogeneous and (as yet) unspoiled by 'urban' problems. The context here was one of growing concerns about the threat posed to the 'rural idyll' by urban 'others', and the increasing abstraction of services including policing. These were then dramatically reconfigured by the troubling mix of the intangible risk of Covid-19 transmission, alongside an upsurge in tourist activity as restrictions were lifted (though the impacts of the pandemic in Scotland's tourism sector were complex). These issues were crystallised in concerns about rural (over)tourism.

This theorisation of rurality is then used to underpin a discussion of the 'abstraction' of policing and public service in Scotland – the increasing geographic and social distance between these services and the communities they serve, especially following the centralisation of Scottish policing (Terpstra and Fyfe 2015, Terpstra *et al*. 2019).

This appears particularly problematic in the long-term context of rural deprivation, 'digital divides', and austerity policies which have had impacts not only on 'frontline' policing but also on less visible systems and institutions of order maintenance.

We argue that the pandemic brought into focus the underlying trend towards abstraction in policing, order maintenance and public service delivery, and the implications of this for local confidence and trust (particularly in rural areas) as these organisations become disembedded from local knowledge and community engagement.

Theoretical background

Rural idyll

The 'rural' has traditionally been imagined as idyllic, providing an opportunity for living and lifestyle which is happy, cohesive and healthy – a pace and quality of life unavailable in cities. This is a hegemonic construction of the countryside that elides and homogenises a complex range of settings into a verdant locus of a simpler, more traditional way of life, untouched by capitalist excess and 'urban' problems (Cloke 2003). Cloke (2003, p. 1) notes that 'the long fingers of idyll reach into our everyday

lives via the cultural paraphernalia of film, television, art, books, magazines, toys and traditional practices'; without realising it, we live out and reproduce this construction through popular imagery.

Although binary to some extent, this theoretical critique serves to contextualise the countryside, highlighting that rural areas are dynamic and heterogeneous. Traditionally 'urban' issues like mental health (Parr *et al* 2004, Philo and Parr 2004), homelessness (Cloke *et al*. 2002) and importantly for us, crime and policing (Yarwood and Gardner 2000, Wooff 2015, 2017, Somerville *et al*. 2015) are in fact present in rural settings. The rural idyll is also shaped by dynamics of inclusion and exclusion – it is underpinned by inequality and implicitly racialised. People may live in idyllic settings while remaining excluded from idyll by their socioeconomic position and the tendency towards the maintenance of a 'middle-class countryside' (Woods 2023).

(Over)Tourism and disorder

The 'idyllic' image of the rural is one feature that attracts tourist activity to the Scottish countryside. However, our fieldwork sites were characterised by longstanding concerns about 'overtourism', defined by the UNWTO (2018) as:

> [T]he impact of tourism on a destination, or parts thereof, that excessively influences perceived quality of life of citizens and/or quality of visitors experiences in a negative way.

'Overtourism' is widely used in academic and increasingly in popular discourse (Capocchi *et al*. 2019); while most prominently discussed in relation to European cities (notably Barcelona), the phenomenon may also take specific rural forms which we discuss in a Scottish context.

The issue is not just the (inherently subjective) judgement of the 'correct amount' of tourism, but the capacity of a place's services and infrastructure to support its level of tourism, and the variable perceptions and experiences of residents. We discuss below the impacts of this in the context of Covid-19 for policing and the maintenance of social order.

Abstraction in policing and public service provision

'Abstraction' as discussed here stems from Terpstra *et al*.'s (2022) work on 'the abstract police', as an 'ideal type' or sensitising concept that allows us to emphasise and understand important changes in contemporary police organisations (Terpstra *et al*. 2019). These changes reflect a shift away from bottom-up community-oriented work shaped by and with local people through personal relationships, and towards a more top-down, distanced model designed for administrative convenience and enabled by (dependent upon) organisational centralisation, computerised bureaucracy, and telecommunications, underpinned by a managerial ethos of rationality and efficiency.

These changes, an evolution from previous 'knowledge work' (Ericson and Haggerty 1997), impact the internal and external organisation of policing. Relationships between police officers, their employer and its management have become more 'abstract' – less personal, more distant, and formalised. Similarly, the relationship between police and the policed is more abstract. Despite the statutory requirement for local engagement enshrined in the Police and Fire Reform (Scotland) Act (2012), the pandemic accentuated the degree to which those engagements were filtered through technologies and processes of abstraction. Centralised systems and knowledges take primacy over conventional local community relationships, to enhance effectiveness and efficiency in resource allocation, call handling, and making specialist capacity nationally equitable while privileging specialist policing over traditional order maintenance (Terpstra and Fyfe 2014, 2015, Terpstra *et al*. 2019, p. 343).

As Scottish policing was being centralised, there were also concerns about a 'cluttered landscape' of provision in other services (Commission on Women Offenders 2012) – geographically non-coterminous public services across different sectors and specialisms creating confusion for the public and hindering partnership working. These services have remained locally organised – with the exception

of fire and rescue, the centralisation of Scottish policing was not accompanied by other centralisations. However, even in the absence of actual centralisation, the idea of abstraction remains relevant to the local partnership working and service delivery examined in the partnerships project.

The historic neglect of rural places and spaces in the context of increasingly centralised and technologically-dependent 'abstract' systems of public service became an increasingly salient feature of our participants' accounts. It is important to note here that while we suggest the concept of 'abstract policing' is useful for understanding how recent institutional and organisation restructuring and reorganisation is playing out in the experiences of our participants, we also acknowledge that it neglects the statutory obligations for local engagement enshrined in the Police and Fire Reform (Scotland) Act 2012. However, as Henry *et al*. (2019) have noted, the arrangements for practically meeting these obligations were underspecified and underdeveloped, leaving a gap in local accountability in the early years of the new service. In spite of those obligations, we suggest that, during the pandemic-induced restrictions, the prominence of technologies enabling further abstraction had significant effects on local rural communities' experiences. This suggests that shifts in police-community engagement towards one means of engagement over another (e.g. centralised 999 call centres in lieu of closed local police stations) have scope to erode the value and spirit of localism those obligations were intended to protect.

Methods

This research reported here reflects two separate projects conducted by different teams (with one author in common) at the same university. Both centred on the social impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic, particularly on public services and institutions of policing and order maintenance.

The first project, Policing the Pandemic in Rural Scotland (PTP; Wooff *et al*. 2021) explored how policing of rural communities was impacted by the Covid-19 epidemic, with the aim of identifying any likely long-term implications for trust and confidence in public policing in these communities. The project employed a case study design (Yin 2009), taking as its sample two contrasting Scottish remote rural communities. This allowed comparison across cases, enabling a clear picture of similarities and differences in experiences to be developed, while also highlighting the importance of specific local contexts in rural communities' experience of policing. The project adopted multiple methods to generate a nuanced understanding of these communities' sensibilities, while also complying with Government guidelines and research integrity code of practice at that time. Data were generated using interviews and focus groups during the second national lockdown (March-April 2021) with individual and group interviews across both case study areas ($n = 38$). The sample consisted of senior and mid-level police managers and community constables across both case study areas ($n = 10$), as well as interviews and focus groups with 15 elected local officials who were collaborated with local police in the case study areas during the period of study. We supplemented these interviews with a targeted selection of interviews with actors identified involved also in social order maintenance through the fieldwork. These interviews included: three national parks employees, eight local authority employees, one mountain rescuer, and one Forestry and Land Scotland employee. The interviews and focus groups explored their experiences of maintaining social order, sharing information, promoting safety and wellbeing, and more general sensibilities towards the police and policing during the pandemic across the both locations. This enabled us to generate a detailed picture of the 'policing' of each site and local sensibilities towards it.

The second project, 'Locked Down, Locked Out? Local Partnership Resilience in the Covid-19 Pandemic' (LDLO; Buchan *et al*. 2022) investigated the impacts of Covid-19 on local multi-agency partnerships in Scotland. The focus was on how the pandemic was affecting their everyday operations and their strategic role, especially efforts to embed the 'prevention principle' advocated by the Christie Commission (2011) in the context of persistent social inequalities. This was a mixed-methods project which began with an online survey of staff in partnerships across Scotland; although it was used partly to gather quantitative data, recruitment for the survey was lower than expected

($n = 31$), so quantitative data is not representative; it included 11 local government employees (from seven local authorities), 7 NHS employees (from four boards and national), one member of a national public sector organisation and the remainder from (mostly local) third-sector organisations. Free-text responses from this survey also contributed qualitative data, and the survey was used to recruit for the second stage of the project, comprising interviews ($n = 24$) with employees involved in various types of local partnership working: five in Community Learning and Development (comprising adult education and some youth work), five in partnerships with third-sector agencies, three in community planning, seven in criminal justice, four in resilience, and with some work centred on specific sectors including health and employment (it was common for interviewees to be part of more than one partnership and/or to have more than one 'specialism'). Interview participants were drawn from 12 Scottish local authority areas (nearly all rural – data from two urban interviewees are not included here) and some regional and national organisations.

Both projects received ethical approval from the Edinburgh Napier University Ethics Committee (application numbers 2706920 (PTP) and 2710046 (LDLO)). All participants gave informed consent through consent forms stored by the research team. Interview and focus group data were imported into nVivo QDAS package for coding and thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006). We were then able to identify thematic commonalities and points of distinction across case studies, revealing the centrality of 'place' and local social, cultural and historical context in sense-making of policing and being policed. Our inability to physically visit the communities and reliance on online media means that the picture presented here is inevitably partial, and we acknowledge important voices are absent (e.g. tourists and visitors, residents without internet access, local business owners). Through informal conversations in a shared institutional context (and with a co-author in common), we identified commonalities in the projects' findings. We then drew direct comparisons across thematic analyses of datasets via nVivo. In order to avoid losing the specific contexts which shaped the original projects, we did not combine the data into a single dataset. Centrally, the importance of place and of the interaction between places and place-based 'local' institutional structures, and the ways in which these were affected by the move towards 'abstracted' services and, in more immediate ways, by the pandemic itself and its complex social impacts.

While the institutional foci of the projects were different, these institutions' activities – particularly in the atmosphere of the pandemic – were similar. Not only did local public and third-sector organisations and the police engage with each other through formal partnership arrangements and informal working relationships, there are also similarities in their role – a significant amount of the work of both centred on maintaining social order. This is in line with the wider acceptance that policing is not the sole preserve of the police (Shearing 2005, Schuilenberg 2015). Our focus here on the overlap of these different projects means that other findings from both must remain unexplored in this paper (but see the reports by Wooff *et al*. 2021, Buchan *et al*. 2022). Still, we suggest that the overlap of concepts and ideas here are generative particularly when 'policing' is broadly conceived as outlined above.

The two studies also use different 'scales' of case study area, with LDLO working at the level of local authorities – which may cover single cities, or thousands of square kilometres of sparsely populated land – and PTP centred more on specific towns and areas within local authorities. However, the themes of abstraction and rurality apply across these scales and across the types of institutional contexts. Our study therefore draws on human geography as well as on criminology and policing, reflecting the varied research backgrounds of the authors. The overlap between human geography and criminology is most relevant in the place-focused field of policing, though as Bloch (2021) notes, there remain significant opportunities for geography to engage further with policing.

Local contexts

Our fieldwork addressed a range of locations, although lockdown meant that interviews and focus groups were carried out via Microsoft Teams. While the PTP project was always intended to explore

rural areas, in the LDLO project, the rural focus was an unintended but beneficial consequence of the use of remote interviewing methods.

We have largely followed the everyday definition of 'rural' to refer to areas that are not cities or large towns and with low overall population density; we recognise however that this may elide considerable within-area variation (especially at the level of local authorities, which may be predominantly rural but contain one or more densely-populated towns) and note Cloke's (2003) critique of everyday conceptions of 'the rural'. However, the areas in our study do have some specific social and economic features in common, which we outline below.

We also sometimes use the term 'remote rural', in line with National Records of Scotland (2023): 'Settlements of less than 3,000 people and with a drive time of over 30 min to a settlement of 10,000 or more'. In order to avoid compromising anonymity, it is necessary to give only an approximate sense of any of the case study sites discussed here.

Pandemic policing project areas: 'Craignorth' and 'Glen Roy'

The policing project (Wooff *et al*. 2021) focused on two small case study sites, pseudonymised as 'Craignorth' and 'Glen Roy'. Craignorth is a remote rural area with a sparse population. The study of Craignorth centred on two community councils and two main towns, each served by a police station. Glen Roy is a rural town of a few thousand people in the Central Belt of Scotland. There is a small local police station comprising both response and community officers with leadership and management operating remotely.

These areas were selected as comparators because they share similar challenges of place and policing despite their geographic differences. Both are demographically mixed. In terms of deprivation, Craignorth has greater levels of deprivation on the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation 2020 than the Scottish average for rural areas. Some areas of Glen Roy are in the 5% least deprived in Scotland and some in the top 5%. Tourism is important to both areas, accounting for a significant proportion of employment. Craignorth sits on a popular tourist route while Glen Roy contains several National Scenic Areas[1] including mountains, glens and lochs.

Partnership project areas: 'Abertairn', 'Benross' and 'Cullenshire'

The partnerships project (Buchan *et al*. 2022) was not case study-oriented, but within its data collection sought to develop deeper pictures of local context by focusing interview recruitment on three local authority areas which enabled the development of case studies within the wider data: 'Abertairn' (3 interviews), 'Benross' (5 interviews) and 'Cullenshire' (5 interviews).

Abertairn is mostly rural, with several large towns and a diverse geography including mountains and a stretch of coastline, and some very prosperous towns and villages. Benross is large, rural and sparsely populated, spread over a varied geography including some mainland and some islands, with large sparsely populated areas and some towns. There are pockets of intense poverty in Benross and much of it is remote, with limited public transport coverage raising problems for accessibility; many people in Benross also lacked access to digital connectivity even before the pandemic. Cullenshire is similarly sparsely populated and predominantly rural, with a few moderately large towns. Even before the pandemic, unemployment and rural poverty in some areas of Cullenshire were compounded by geographic isolation caused by patchy and limited public transport and gaps in digital connectivity.

All three include at least some datazones assessed as among the most deprived by the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD); interviewees in all three reported generally successful partnership arrangements and working relationships, although only in Benross was digital and hybrid working commonplace before the pandemic. Like Craignorth and Glen Roy, Benross and Cullenshire both had significant tourism industries which accounted for relatively large shares of local employment.

All the case study areas are located outside the Central Belt – the heavily urbanised and well-connected (and -researched) zone between Glasgow and Edinburgh – and in all, specifically *rural* forms

of deprivation appear as a key contextual element. While sharing many features with other forms of deprivation, rural deprivation is characterised by poverty of access resulting from longer distances between people and services. SIMD attempts to capture poverty of access by measuring journey times to access services by car or public transport, but does not measure the availability, effectiveness, frequency or cost of using public transport, or the fact some living costs (notably food prices) may be much higher in rural than in urban Scotland. Poverty of access is not easily separated from more straightforwardly economic forms of poverty – precarious rural employment may lead to low incomes, which then interact with higher costs of food and transport (Farrington and Farrington 2005). A further form of poverty of access particularly relevant (though not exclusive) to rural areas is the continuing 'digital divide' which we discuss further below.

Making sense of the rural idyll, (Over)tourism and rural policing in the pandemic context

Both research projects considered the impact of the pandemic and lockdown restrictions on order maintenance in rural Scotland. We needed to make sense of contrasting field sites and empirical data, while also holding explanatory purchase on the commonalities and differences that connect the projects. Below we set out conceptualisations of rurality and the changing role of tourism in the pandemic, using the concept of the 'rural idyll' (Cloke 2003) to frame some of the challenges of the pandemic.

The partial lifting of 'lockdown' in summer 2020 led to widely publicised discussion of a boom in UK domestic holidays (often, erroneously, termed 'staycations'). In fact, levels of domestic tourism in 2020 remained lower than before (though high relative to international travel). Amid the Covid-19 pandemic, the rural idyll was mobilised and constructed by policymakers as a desirable object of leisure tourism – a legally and epidemiologically acceptable destination for tourism without the costs, risks, inconveniences and environmental impacts of international travel. The idyll was articulated not only as pleasant but as 'healthy' – not only because of the availability of outdoor activities (hiking, camping, etc.), but also because of lower risks of transmission associated with low population density.

(Over)tourism and economic impacts

Overtourism at various sites around the UK was highlighted as a concern and as posing a threat to the same idyllic characteristics that had first attracted it. Many rural locations experienced an influx of tourists who were sold an imaginary of open green space, clean air, and escape from urban confinement – amplified by public health advertising of national tourism as a safer alternative to foreign destinations.

Several respondents noted the importance of tourism in their local economies; while tourism is also a major part of Scottish urban economies (especially Edinburgh), specific local rural economies are more likely to be *dependent* on it. Respondents described the initial impact of the pandemic lockdowns on these economies as very damaging, particularly in tourism and hospitality (Allan *et al*. 2023), and especially in Cullenshire. These sectors were seen as vital for providing entry-level employment for new entrants and re-entrants to the labour market, including school leavers and former prisoners, so damage to tourism could have knock-on effects on local employment.

> So a lot of our employment is temporary, you know, or part-time and you know a lot of is dependent on these hotels or these cafes or whatever else, you know, supporting young people. What's happened this year […] we had a lot of people who would traditionally go out of [Benross] and go to University or whatever didn't. You know, so they've stayed and they're then taking jobs that the ones who are maybe less academic would usually have taken […]so that's been a kind of consequence of people not going to uni and taking a year out because of the pandemic'
>
> [Community Learning and Development, Benross]

In practice, visitors were often confronted with a conflicting reality: local rural communities were not homogenous in their sensibilities towards restarting the tourist industry amidst continuing viral

'waves'. The encouragement of rural tourism created significant economic benefits for many rural communities, but these were unevenly distributed.

> [I]t's been great to see tourism back open again. But when you then have an influx of visitors to an island, and **they** take their pick from the supermarket, that leaves nothing for residents and where there are then short supply […] much as we love to have people come and visit us, it does then further put pressure on our fragile food supply chain.
>
> [Food procurement, Benross; emphasis in original]

> Half of the community wanted the tourists for their income and the other half of the community wanted the police to get rid of the tourists because they saw the tourists as super spreaders of the virus.
>
> [Police Officer, Glen Roy]

During Covid-19, the issue of (over)tourism in rural Scotland appears as a 'flashpoint' for old, new, and future-oriented concerns amidst a reconfigured risk assemblage of rural life. While acknowledging the economic importance of tourism, residents did not accept it uncritically; yet the economic role of tourism had created a relationship in which much of the social order (particularly employment) depended on idyll-seeking tourism, while also posing a threat to that social order and to the idyll itself. The encouragement of domestic rural tourism progressed with little visible or felt consideration for existing capacities.

This tension generates inevitable knock-on effects for those tasked with order maintenance, where certain voices may be privileged over others.

Overtourism, the 'rural idyll', and public order

Participants outlined a perception within their communities – which in some cases they clearly shared – of an 'invasion' of visitors from urban areas, who failed to understand the 'countryside' and how to use it, creating visible reminders of neglect by centralised power and authorities of rurality and its occupants. These included illegal camping, littering and environmental degradation, as well as straining of emergency services by ill-equipped or unskilled outdoor enthusiasts (e.g. hill walking, mountaineering). These also entail usage not necessarily unacceptable in itself, but at a level that exceeds the capacity of local infrastructure, such as (in the quote above) purchases which deplete the food available for local people to buy. Particularly germane to our sample areas were complaints of tourist road use, which included dangerous driving, increased congestion and illegal parking (with knock-on effects on local services and economic activity). Covid-19 and the 2020 'domestic holiday boom' were seen as having two interrelated impacts on rural experiences of overtourism.

First, the tangible impacts of overtourism were joined by the intangible risk of Covid-19 transmission in areas which had few or no cases. It is worth remembering that at this point, Covid-19 transmission, impacts, and treatments were poorly understood, and vaccines unavailable. This caused considerable anxiety particularly to police officers and others dealing with the public on an everyday basis. This was exacerbated by relatively limited healthcare accessibility in rural areas, where discussions often referred to the danger of small rural hospitals being 'swamped' with cases in the event of an outbreak. In this narrative, Covid-19 is seen as something not only dangerous but also a 'dirty' and 'impure' threat brought by urban outsiders; one briefly prominent example centred on the author Neil Gaiman's 11,000-mile trip from New Zealand to his home on Skye (Flood 2020).

> [T]here was quite a lot of concern about, you know […] tourists are going to come into the area, and they're going to spread, you know Covid and all that kind of fear […]
>
> [Community Learning and Development, Cullenshire]

> There's a consequence to all this promotion of tourism and we need that investment in the infrastructure to say 'yeah, great, come here and we'll be providing all of this, but we need to manage you and we need to help you

all be responsible by education but also infrastructure.'
[Local Authority Employee, Glen Roy]

Second, the preceding risks of overtourism were perceived as evolving and intensifying. This was attributed not only to a perceived increase in domestic holidays but also to the character of the visitors – urbanites out of step with rural ways of life. Accounts were sometimes overtly classed, reflecting the construction of the rural idyll as a 'middle-class countryside' (Woods 2023):

> And I think post-July [2020] when we started having the visitors, we got a different type of tourist. The big problem that's happened in the past […] pre-pandemic, was that with the advent of cheap holidays to Spain etc, etc., and all the rest of it, they all went there. And it felt like we met the risky part of the population … we had a very concentrated type of person and actually quite a lot of these people had never really visited our sites before. That risky group of people created a huge wave of problems for us because they didn't know how to be respectful about the countryside. It's their first time, they were treating it like an urban area, like there's a street cleaner going to come and pick up everything after them. Why isn't there a litter bin on top of the hill, sort of thing … So, the way it's generally put across to me in a very crude manner that I've heard people say is 'well they're basically coming here instead of buggering off to Ibiza'.
> [Visitor Services Manager, Glen Roy]

In this context, policing and the maintenance of public order included advising visitors on good practice, but also came to involve responses to 'vigilante' activity by local residents seeking to protect their area from 'outsiders', including by using hay bales to block access to roads and putting up signs discouraging visitors. In this narrative, the urban visitor manifests as an impure 'other' threatening the rural idyll through well-established but also intangible (epidemiological) risk. The picture then is a complex one, supporting more granular 'spatial justice' framing over a straightforward 'rural recovery' narrative which elides local variation and spatial complexity (Woods 2023).

The example of responding to (over)tourism in Scotland is interesting in relation to abstraction, since despite the increasingly online and mediated character of much tourist activity, it is *dependent* on place in the physical world. Although it has never been easier to view distant places at a technological remove, the demand to visit and experience real places remains – and as noted above, domestic tourism was incentivised partly through the rural idyll as a source of security and feelings of 'normalcy' at a time of national crisis. Tourism has been reshaped by some of the same developments underpinning abstraction of public services; as well as the rise of platform-based accommodation and travel, the use of social media to post generic, self-similar photographs of well-known landmarks and views, or to engage in ephemeral 'experience' trends, has been decried as abstracting from the 'real' experience of the place itself (and implicated in overtourism). For example, the summits of Yr Wyddfa and Ben Nevis typified how remote and wild places attracted crowds during the pandemic who came in search of photographic social media content, sparking criticism from local communities and environmental organisations who raised questions about who these places are 'for' and whether pandemic-related tourism was ecologically or infrastructurally sustainable (Flint and Hartley 2021). While tourism may be ever more documented online, it does not *happen* online. These tourists still travel to and have tangible impacts on the places themselves; tourism exemplifies that some activities cannot be abstracted away from place.

We situate shifts in risk perception during Covid-19 in the context of the persistence of notions of the rural idyll as something itself 'at risk' from the pandemic, and increasingly complicated (perhaps threatened) by the socioeconomic realities of rural life. Covid-19 reconfigured the social order of rural communities by adding novel risks – the transmission of a little-understood contagion in areas with limited healthcare provision (RSE 2023) – while, despite the prominence of a 'local' language in Scottish policy discourses (Matthews 2013), consequential decisions about lockdown were taken at the centre. Restrictions on international travel and the exploitation of Scotland's rurality in public health-oriented promotions of domestic holidays, exacerbated tensions and ill-feelings towards central government and centralisation more generally. These concerns are crystallised in discussions of tourism in rural Scotland and the perceived threat to the 'rural idyll' posed by

irresponsible urban 'outsiders'. We begin now to unpack how this intersected with previously discussed particularities of rural 'policing' broadly conceived (see Souhami 2020, 2023) and the context of abstraction in policing and public services.

'Abstracted' services and digital divides in lockdown

Below we illustrate that accounts of abstraction (Terpstra *et al* 2022) allow us to also make sense of shifts in local multi-agency partnerships (e.g. community safety, community planning), thus extending the concept's utility while also revealing the interconnectedness of rural communities' views of policing with their views of the state generally. This accords with the broad definition of 'policing' noted above. We suggest that concerns about community relationships with 'abstract' police need to be understood as bound up with other sensibilities towards centralisation of other state services in rural contexts (e.g. NHS, social services). Abstract policing sits alongside abstracted health, social care and other public services, which during the pandemic became increasingly felt.

Below, we use 'abstraction' to explain rural communities' and organisations' experience of social regulation during the pandemic, siting it amid declining relationships between rural communities and centralised government. At the local level, there was a common feeling that remote rural communities were neglected or forgotten by central government in its decision-making. This was not induced by the pandemic; it emerged from prior centralisation of service provision and political power in Scotland, but the pandemic functioned as a flashpoint which accentuated a sense of alienation and declining agency among rural communities. These communities were increasingly defined by their relationship to central hubs rather than as places in themselves.

Abstract policing in rural Scotland

Much of the criticism of the 2013 nationalisation of Scottish policing has centred on its effects on police-community relations (Terpstra and Fyfe 2015) and the perceived disconnection of Police Scotland from local communities, including by replacing formal mechanisms of local authority governance with a new *national* body, the Scottish Police Authority (Malik 2022). The decline in public confidence that resulted from service abstraction became evident in both projects' data.

The withdrawal of 'in-person' service delivery had significant impacts on the relational dynamics between the organisation and the community, most overtly in relation to police call handling.

While the pandemic exacerbated this feeling, the erosion of rural police-community relations by 'abstraction' evidently had a longer history. In focus group discussions participants discussed frustration at some structural and procedural changes which were collectively eroding local confidence in Police Scotland. These included the closure of many small, single-officer local police stations (see Millie *et al*. 2024); reduced opening hours for the larger remaining stations; and the shift to a 'Multi-channel Model' (Terpstra *et al*. 2019, p. 347) for contacting the police, comprising 'contact points' mounted on the front walls of police stations; the national 101 non-emergency telephone number (with increasing delays in the answering of calls); and online contact forms. These refinements became a double-edged sword – they could enhance organisational effectiveness, efficiency and value, (Terpstra and Fyfe 2015; Terpstra *et al*. 2019) but had resulted in a perception that the public were being funnelled into a more 'abstracted' and distanced relationship with the police service. Centralised call handling had already been implicated in the high-profile scandal around the deaths of John Yuill and Lamara Bell in 2015 after the failure of police call handlers to direct a response to their crashed car, and more recent concerns over the use of 'dummy' call signs in call handling centres to manipulate response time statistics (Terpstra *et al*. 2019; Daly 2023).

Souhami (2020) implicitly positions the more community-oriented style of policing in small Scottish island communities as a counterexample to (or holdout against) the move towards 'abstraction', arguing that *apparently* extraordinary features of rural island policing are in fact essential to *all* policing. Our participants elsewhere in rural Scotland echoed this view; for them, the loss of a local

physical police presence meant the loss of valuable local knowledge and a meaningful and functional connection with the community. This sentiment was not merely a symptom of a visible policing vacuum but was consolidated by the very nature and quality of interactions with the abstract police. Participants expressed frustration that remote call handlers based in Dundee, Edinburgh, or Glasgow had no local knowledge or understanding of where they were calling from, were unaware of key community figures or established problems previously reported. These real conversations were also a symbolic reminder of the dislocation of the police from the people and places they were grading calls and allocating resources to – a feeling explicitly connected to the recent history of police centralisation.

> Yeah, on the police side of things we have to go back quite a number of years when Police Scotland came in. Prior to that we had bigger numbers of police in the town, we had more officers. We had a police station that was 24/7, you could just walk in and speak to them. When Police Scotland came along, they certainly restricted the hours that you could go into a police station and it had to be done on the phone … when you phone the police now, it's someone at [location remote from call] that answers … the rapport is gone straight away. So, in one way we're quite used to being a bit more distanced from the Police than what we were [pre-Police Scotland].
>
> [Craignorth Community Councillor]

This supports Terpstra *et al*.'s (2019, p. 399) suggestion that 'citizens and communities became more at a distance' and perceived themselves as being kept 'at arm's length' (Welch *et al*. 2004, in Terpstra *et al*. 2019) by a system which was primarily 'a convenient way for [the police] to manage their workload'. Even some local officers were dissatisfied – not only with the changes to contact channels, but by a perceived reduction in frontline first response officers:

> It is frustrating that as a police officer I can't offer the public exactly what they want. Contacting the police is very, very difficult and cops are not always there to respond apart from the most urgent of cases.
>
> [Craignorth Police Officer]

In the context of policing the lockdown, the disconnect between senior officers' decision-making and the experience of officers on the ground in negotiating with the community became increasingly clear, with officers expected to rationalise operational strategies and maintain public confidence with little perceived direction or central guidance:

> Police got asked repeatedly why they are not doing more, why are they not doing roadblocks, and a lot of the time operational police officers had to try and come up with an answer but a lot of the time the honest answer was that senior officers had told them that they weren't doing it but the operational cops never fully understood why. Whilst cops were satisfied that the rationale would be sound, it wasn't communicated to junior officers who were then unable to provide a clear and concise explanation to communities … there was a disconnect between the national messaging and local action by the police.
>
> [Police Officer, Glen Roy]

Centralised decision-making about responses to the pandemic (nationally and locally), alongside rapidly changing and sometimes ambiguous or contradictory rules and guidance, left police in rural areas to renegotiate their role and relationships with those communities (Hufnagel *et al*. 2023). Public agencies were increasingly required to respond to a growing range of issues and concerns that would previously have been considered beyond their remit, while navigating new patterns of working. Therefore, the abstraction away from local communities was felt especially keenly and posed particular challenges for policing.

> I know from officers that their workload in relation to mental health matters has just soared. They're way up to 80% to 90% of their work […] unfortunately we don't have NHS services here that can deal with it, and it's left basically to them and they admit themselves they're not the ideal professionals to deal with it, but they will never walk away from it. We've had people with mental health problems actually ending up in a cell because there's nowhere else for them to go[…] So that's been a big, big strain on the police.
>
> [Community Councillor, Craignorth]

However, there was a degree of understanding and acceptance among participants that urban areas might have more serious problems or a greater need for rapid response services. To some extent the

pandemic eased frustrations, where the public became more empathetic to 'frontline' responders, and acknowledged the expanded role of the police in filling in for other services that had been redirected to national public health response. Public confidence in the police response to the pandemic increased from wave 2 (42%) to wave 4 (48%), despite a general decline in public perceptions of police effectiveness since 2012/13 (Scottish Police Authority 2021). However, confounding variables of this observation lie both in the framework of measurement (how 'the pandemic was policed', rather than confidence in the police in general) and the expanded frontline presence enabled by the emergency mobilisation of backroom staff. The overall narrative was that the context of abstraction created particular challenges for local policing in the pandemic.

Abstraction in local services

Since the 1990s, UK local authorities have increasingly moved to online modes of delivery for services including council tax payments, booking leisure facilities, refuse collection, etc. This has been convenient for many citizens and often enabled significant savings for local authorities (Harvey *et al*. 2023). The Covid-19 pandemic accelerated this development, extending it to direct provision of services previously carried out in person. Community engagement events shifted from 'village hall' to online environments, as did everyday local partnership meetings. Some participants in the LDLO project highlighted the value of online engagement, particularly in terms of access and participation (where previously, the distances involved had limited in-person engagement).

However, this is rendered problematic by a continuing 'digital divide' – inequalities in access to technology and online services, arising from a combination of unequal resources (to pay for devices and connectivity); a lack of technological skills and confidence; and inequalities in connectivity infrastructure, particularly affecting rural areas (McKay 2021). Although our participants had long been aware of the digital divide, its persistence and impact sometimes came as a surprise:

> Lots of people talk about inequalities, but at the same time we do lots of things where we reinforce that inequality. So many services have moved online – to get your benefits, to make a GP appointment, everything, you've got to be digital, you've got to be online. And what the pandemic demonstrated was the huge number of people that we work with who have to choose between feeding themselves, or having data. And, and, and I don't think the predominant working – or middle-class element of the country really appreciated that until the pandemic. Really appreciated there is a whole swathe of society who can't self-school because they can't afford a computer, or they've got three kids trying to do their homework on a phone.
>
> [Criminal justice, Cullenshire]

Rural deprivation and digital exclusion are both in a sense poverties of networks – whether these are social networks (with social isolation noted by several interviewees as a major concern during the pandemic), transport networks, or technological/infrastructural networks. Both pose problems for increasingly 'abstract' public services, but this abstraction has developed in different ways shaped by local contexts, and by pre-existing patterns of digital and wider inequalities.

Although not emergency services, local authorities and partnerships may still be needed urgently by those they serve (such as people in mental health crisis or facing homelessness). Such organisations engage in forms of 'policing' in the sense of 'order maintenance' (Reiner 2010), not only through partnership with the public police. This directs us towards the ways in which our projects and findings shed light on one another. Discussions about police abstraction and community dissatisfaction appeared to be complexly entangled with wider sensibilities towards the Scottish Government, whereby changes to the health service, policing and local tourism development have led to a widely held perception of neglect of the rural – reflected in the failure of SIMD to capture the full complexity of rural poverty of access.

Abstraction, centralisation and lockdown

This line of analysis has surfaced the centrality of 'place' to the experience of policing, crime and disorder in rural spaces during the pandemic. The increasing abstraction and centralisation of public

services poses a problem of 'imbalance' and hence a threat to public trust and confidence in institutions. This is salient across Scotland, but especially in rural communities given their relatively sparse populations and (geographic, social, symbolic) distance from centres of power, where decisions about the pandemic response seemed to occur with little regard for those affected by or charged with implementing them.

For citizens and police 'on the ground', there was significant ambiguity arising from the speed of decision-making, differences between UK jurisdictions, and the difference between 'rules' and 'guidelines' (Hufnagel *et al*. 2023). Police officers described a deep sense of uncertainty about Covid enforcement (Gorton *et al*. 2022; Murray *et al*. 2024).

> You know the legislation has been drawn up on the back of a fag packet to be honest with you, and it changes every two minutes […]. And how do you manage that? So, I'll give you an example. The legislation when it initially came out, we'd been given a PowerPoint briefing which was thirty slides when it came out. It is now at ninety slides and that's all of the legislation and all the exemptions, it's impossible to manage, it's a moving target.
>
> [Police Officer, Craignorth]

Local authorities described acting like 'conduits' for decisions taken higher up at short notice. The longer-term context was one of sometimes tense relationships between the UK Government, Scotland's devolved central government, and its local governments. Several participants raised concerns about centralisation not only *away from* but also *within* local authorities, particularly large areas, where council headquarters may be very far from some of the places they serve.

> There's certain things within [NHS Board] that [Craignorth] is fighting for because we're second-class citizens basically. They've centralised so many things, they forget that we are 120 miles away from [main town], that road is a dangerous […] and the potholes are ridiculous. In winter it is just treacherous, we're the forgotten county basically when it comes to NHS [area]. Especially the mental health side of things.
>
> [Craignorth Community Councillor]

> [P]rovision for almost crisis response mental health happened, from a much more […] quite a centralised place. That meant all the usual pathways to support locally were severed. And the meetings themselves, you know, essentially, ourselves and [local mental health partnership] and a couple of other third sector said that we can't, we're kind of being told that – not being told anything actually, but we're being told that the meetings are not going to happen, and we cannot imagine a pandemic not affecting people's mental health.
>
> [Participant E, third sector]

In the first quote, centralised decision-making rendered the police the only proximate state service for people in mental health crisis, leading one officer in Craignorth to remark; '*We have become a mental health service*'. Demand on both police and voluntary organisations for immediate help from those in mental health crisis rose exponentially (Peters 2020), while those local authority services which remained available in-person (notably social work) became helpers of last resort in other issues.

As well as underpinning the abstraction of services, the increasing reliance on digital technology before and during the pandemic, in the context of the digital divide, adds further to this sense of abstraction. Although not a prominent theme in the data from the policing project – due largely to the nature of the sample, and the reliance on online interviewing – this issue is relevant to policing especially when citizens (and police officers) are expected to communicate digitally with the police.

When we combine rural community reflections on the historical and contemporary trajectory of public policing in their locales with wider discussions about the withdrawal of services from rurality, the police appear as a figurehead for the amalgam of sensibilities outlined here. Police Scotland served as the public face of criminal justice *and* of government, since many local authority employees were working from home. Discussion about the police became a receptacle for more nebulous sensibilities about the state, with Police Scotland coming to symbolise both an increasingly abstract service (even when physically present), and a national government distant from rural communities, their problems, and needs.

Drawing on Meares (2017), we suggest the abstraction of policing and other local services in Scotland contains a 'hidden curriculum' for rural communities, communicating to them something about their 'value' in the eyes of the state. The pedagogical properties of 'abstract policing' appear to communicate to participants in our studies the primacy of 'the centre', urbanity, service efficiency and cost-effectiveness over and above the particularities, feelings or experiences of the people in rural communities. All of this takes place in the context of a wider sense of neglect of the everyday social and economic needs of rural areas, 'idyllic' though many of them may be, and crystallised in discussions about overtourism in rural communities.

Concluding remarks: risk, tourism and abstract policing

This article has argued that the pandemic amplified the community experience of abstract policing, which is felt as only the most visible aspect of a wider distancing of public service delivery in rural Scotland. The adaptation of agencies to Covid-19 measures, how they were experienced by the public, and their effects on police and government legitimacy can only be understood when situated within recent structural changes to local public services and the formation of Police Scotland in 2013. Here, risk is experienced through interactions with increasingly abstract institutions, and through more locally contingent risks to the rural 'idyll', with tourism appearing, by way of its relationship to place, as a focal point for these anxieties.

Our findings illustrate the continued importance of place in opposition to the trend towards abstraction of services and policing accelerated during the pandemic. The new Police Scotland strategy *Vision 2030* (Police Scotland 2024) promises an expansion in community policing – but this is to be achieved alongside more use of data science and streamlining of back-office roles. As Scottish policing continues to embrace digital engagement and even seeks to prevent crime through online targeted advertising (Horgan *et al*. 2024), the persistence of the digital divide raises questions about who is left behind by these developments (McKay 2021). While digital technologies provide opportunities for greater 'precision' in policing (Egbert and Esposito 2024) and engagement opportunities for more dispersed and remote communities that don't necessitate 'abstraction', they imply a shift in the material qualities of those relationships. This is accentuated in the context of our studies, where abstraction and austerity have already led to changes in the physical policing presence. Looking forward, as emerging technologies like AI chatbots are considered as possible means of further enhancing service provision, the attraction of these 'innovations' should be weighed against a growing body of evidence of the value and quality of 'human' relations in police-community interactions (see Bradford *et al*. 2025).

Through our interdisciplinary theoretical synthesis, we have contributed to the still limited literature on the social impacts of Covid-19 in rural areas, and to understanding how communities distant from the centres of power adapt to major exogenous risks amid changing institutional structures. We also highlight the place-specific impacts of social inequality and policing, arguing that place remains vital to understand how risk and abstraction play out 'on the ground' and using the experience of Covid-19 as a 'lens' through which to view the dynamics of abstraction.

The pandemic is one, admittedly lengthy, event which sits along a further extended timeline of structural change and reform, ostensibly justified by a need to enhance efficiency. These changes cannot be separated from the austerity politics and the drive to 'do more with less'. While the pandemic appears to have provided an unexpected grace period from decreasing legitimacy of the frontline in some rural contexts where services and relations were strained, this is inherently tentative. Furthermore, we suggest the public experience of abstract policing cannot be disentangled from the wider trend of public service delivery at a distance, where policing functions as a receptacle for rural sentiments towards centralised public services more generally. This has implications for communities' trust in the police and in social order maintenance more generally.

Since the empirical research reported here, an overlapping social and economic 'polycrisis' has been adduced as justification for further-reaching and deeper austerity measures in the UK, with neither of the main political parties willing to commit to a radical departure from austerity. However, our research took place in a brief moment of (qualified) optimism that the pandemic would bring renewed attention to social inequality and the importance of public services to rural communities, and build support for a political settlement that rejected both austerity and abstraction.

Note

1. Approximate Scottish equivalent to Areas of Outstanding National Beauty (AONBs) elsewhere in the UK.

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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of the LDLO project are openly available via UK Data Service at https://doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-856055, reference number 856055.

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