

Written evidence from Robert Gordon University [EOV0008]

I am submitting evidence on behalf of a team of researchers at Robert Gordon University. The focus of our evidence is the question:

How effective is (a) the police service and (b) the criminal justice system at responding to these behaviours and offences and how might those responses be improved?

Our team – Professor Sarah Pedersen, Dr Natascha Mueller-Hirth and Leia Miller – has studied the policing of Gender-Based Violence (GBV) in remote, rural and island communities in Scotland and the impact of COVID-19. Funding for our most recent project was provided by the Scottish Institute for Policing Research.

Context

Gender-based violence in rural, remote and island locations tends to be underestimated and the unique experiences of women and girls from rural communities are rarely captured in GBV scholarship. Moreover, rural, remote and island communities offer particular challenges around the policing of GBV and around support for victims. The geographical profile of rural communities means that victims often live miles from their nearest third-sector support organisation or police station yet face pressures where approaching the police is concerned due to the tight-knit nature of rural communities. Victims additionally face issues speaking out about GBV as they are aware of the proximity they have to perpetrators and those associated with them.

The challenges experienced by GBV victims in rural communities were further heightened during the COVID-19 pandemic when lockdown typically led to abusers spending more time with their victim, creating further opportunities for monitoring and control of their behaviour.

Our research has identified the following challenges for the policing of GBV in rural, remote and island communities that were exacerbated by the pandemic:

1. The secretive nature of Gender-Based Violence

Victims are reluctant to speak out where they must live in close proximity to their perpetrators and their family and friends. This contributes to the serious underreporting of GBV in these areas. During the pandemic, identification of police outside of the home was more noticeable, as the social-distancing measures required officers to adopt drastic measures, such as taking statements through windows wearing very visible PPE equipment, thus opening victims up to public scrutiny.

2. Geographical challenges

The geographical challenges of policing GBV in rural and remote Scotland were further exacerbated during the pandemic, with 'stay at home' orders and closure of vital ferry and air services substantially impacting the policing of domestic abuse. Transport limitations increased the workloads of local officers, who were required to support city-based Domestic Abuse and Rape Investigation units where they could not access rural communities. This caused local officers to be stretched as they were needed to act as both community and response officers.

3. Staffing

The closure of police stations since the creation of Police Scotland in 2013 and concomitant relocation of staff had already raised concerns about access to police in remote and rural areas of Scotland. This was exacerbated by the decline in police numbers during the pandemic, which the Scottish Police Federation linked to stress and burn-out relating to COVID-19. Limited staff numbers meant that officers were occasionally unable to attend outer island calls and there was a lack of female officers available to support GBV victims. A particular challenge identified by our research is the limited number of female officers available to victims from rural communities. This can be a deterrent for victims to engage with the criminal justice system and thus can contribute to further under-reporting of GBV in these communities.

4. Backlog and delay in the courts

The impact of the pandemic on the time taken for GBV cases to reach court means that delays continue to impact on victims' willingness to follow through with a case, as the backlog generated during the pandemic has caused many cases to be postponed multiple times.

Police and third-sector organisations were able to overcome some of these challenges by:

- Implementing videoconferencing and telephone communication as a contingency strategy for their multi-agency relationships.
- Working together to use national and local media to make victims aware that it was lawful to leave home to escape abuse.
- Responding flexibly to support victims in rural, remote and island communities.

We make the following recommendations:

1. Continued use of videoconferencing and telephone communication

The use of video links has been shown to be effective in managing the backlog of GBV court cases amidst the pandemic. We also recommend that digital communication is considered where GBV specific training is concerned. The pandemic has demonstrated that training can be successfully delivered online with cost efficiencies and no need for travel for those living and working in remote locations. There is a need for further training amongst officers based in rural and remote locations, but also a will to undertake such training, and now a way to successfully deliver it without the need to travel.

2. Victim-centred training

CPD training should be considered for non-specialist officers based in remote, rural and island communities. Findings from our research suggest that most non-specialist officers have received little to no specific training relating to GBV beyond their onboarding training.

3. Female Officers

More female officers should be trained to deal with GBV cases in rural, remote and island areas in order to encourage a greater number of victims to engage with the criminal justice system.

4. Flexibility in Responses

The flexibility shown by officers during the pandemic should continue to be used as best practice, with special measures, like the use of third-sector office locations to take statements, considered in communication between the police and third-sector organisations.

Further reading

Pedersen, S., Mueller-Hirth, N., & Miller, L. (2023). Supporting victims of domestic violence at a distance during COVID-19: the impact of the pandemic on service providers in remote, rural and island communities in North-East Scotland and Orkney. *Island Studies Journal*.

<https://doi.org/10.24043/isj.423>

Pedersen, S., Mueller-Hirth, N., & Miller, L. (2023). Partnerships between police and GBV service providers in remote, rural, and island communities in northern Scotland before and during COVID-19. *Policing: a journal of policy and practice*, 17, paad045. <https://doi.org/10.1093/police/paad045>

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