

# Green and pleasant? Policing rural England

R I Mawby reviews research showing that residents of rural areas want a more localised police force.

Debates over the role of the police in contemporary Britain largely centre on urban policing. Despite recent criticism from the countryside lobby and concern at the time of the trial of Tony Martin, the nature of policing in rural areas has raised little debate. This is partly because rural areas have lower crime rates (Nicholas *et al* 2005). There is, additionally, perhaps a lingering assumption that rural Britain is policed by locally based officers who are a part of the community, as portrayed in the recent TV series *Doc Martin*.

This is, of course, a culturally bounded image. In many societies with traditions of centralised police systems, rural policing was either very similar to urban policing or even more likely to be imposed on local communities by a totalitarian state. In France, Italy and Spain, for example, rural policing has traditionally been the responsibility of paramilitary police, with officers routinely housed in barracks and segregated from local influence. Similarly, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police holds jurisdiction over most of rural Canada, with local forces more common in the cities (Mawby 1990). In contrast, policing in much of rural USA is community based and falls under the jurisdiction of small local forces (Thurman and McGarrell 1997): the typical police officer works for a metropolitan force, but the most common police force is a small local one, as caricatured in the *Dukes of Hazard*.

Nevertheless, research on rural policing, and how it differs from its metropolitan counterpart, is notable for its absence. In England and Wales, for example, the key study was carried out by Maureen Cain over forty years ago, since when new technologies have dramatically changed the nature of rural policing and police organisation. Cain (1973) underlined just how distinctive rural policing was at that time. While police in urban areas operated as a team, in rural areas officers were isolated from their colleagues and more dependent upon their neighbours; and, living in the area where they worked, their families were accorded a distinctive status within the community. Now, the situation is very different. Police officers no longer live in 'tied housing', local stations have closed, officers are generally deployed from a central station and are in regular contact with their colleagues by mobile phone, and calls to the police

are generally routed to a central, force-wide call centre.

So how do the public view the way the police operate in rural England? On one level at least, citizens appear favourably disposed. Thus the *British Crime Survey* annually reports that more rural than urban respondents feel that the police do a good job (Sims 2003). However our own research in Cornwall as parts of the 2001 and 2004 *Crime and Disorder Audits*, paints a slightly different picture.

## The research

As part of the audit process, a postal survey of a random sample of electors from the county, the *Cornwall Crime Survey* (CCS), was conducted in 2001, and repeated, with some modifications, in 2004. This resulted in 3752 completed questionnaires in 2001 and 2214 in 2004.

In 2001, local people were presented with a Likert-type scale of statements that drew comparison between policing in Cornwall and elsewhere (Mawby 2004). The findings revealed a degree of ambiguity. On the one hand, respondents tended to think that the police were "more aware of local issues than are big city police", that the "police in areas like Cornwall are known as people as well as officers" and that the "police here are more approachable than in cities". On the other hand, they were also inclined to feel that the police were less accessible than in urban areas and that the police took too long to respond to emergencies. Over half also thought that the police in their area were no longer a part of the local community, and no more than a quarter thought that "the police here play a big part in the community". Finally, few thought that, "the police in Cornwall are part of the local community first and members of the police service second."

These findings suggest that residents of Cornwall hold fairly favourable views of their local police and feel that in many respects they are better than their urban equivalents. However, they are under no illusion where officers' loyalties lie, seeing them as police officers first and neighbours second. Additionally, they identify disadvantages to rural policing, particularly in terms of the inaccessibility of the police on both a formal and informal level.

This theme of inaccessibility was echoed

elsewhere in the 2001 survey and reiterated in 2004. Unlike in more urban areas, a large minority (29% in 2004) lived at least five miles from their nearest police station. Although 36% thought that it was easy to contact the police at their local station in person, 29.% felt it was difficult. This underlines the importance of satisfactory phone contact, but only 24.% felt they could contact their local station easily by phone, whereas 39% disagreed. Verbatim comments in both 2001 and 2004 also focused on distance to the nearest station, limited opening hours and the central call system. Most worryingly, the feeling that the police in Cornwall were socially and physically distanced from local communities was felt most widely by the most vulnerable and isolated, including recent victims of crime.

Residents were very positive about many recent developments. The adoption of neighbourhood policing, the expansion of neighbourhood watch, and the introduction of community support officers were welcomed. However, they saw additional officers – in cars and particularly on foot – as preferable to multilateralization or plural policing, be this through the private or public sector.

The contrast between urban and rural policing that Cain (1973) described some thirty years ago is no longer evident. Advanced communications systems and a reliance on patrol cars have meant that police officers are no longer isolated from their colleagues. At the same time, better transport and the closing of rural stations means that they are no longer 'marooned' in the areas where they work, enmeshed in a local structure whereby their identity as a police officer balances precariously with other local identities. Nevertheless, the perception remains that rural police are in some ways a part of the local community, and citizens in our surveys tended to distinguish between rural and urban police, seeing some advantages in the former. But the distinctions they drew were neither extreme nor wide ranging. At the extreme, very few felt that their local police identified more readily with the local community than with the police organisation.

In other respects many Cornish residents identified disadvantages to rural policing. The imposition of a centralised call system and the gradual closure of local substations, with no stations open to the public on a 24-hour basis, meant that access to the police was an issue. Residents felt that their main recourse to the police was through phoning headquarters, whereas ideally they would have preferred more local substations and telephone access at local level.

The message here, quite clearly, is that if the police are to maintain and strengthen their links with rural communities and to provide reassurance to the most vulnerable, this is more than a matter of extra patrols. It implies improving the accessibility of the police. It is not merely a matter of 'more bobbies on the beat'; it is a call for more police substations and, when they are unmanned, telephone response from

someone who knows the area and its problems, rather than an anonymous voice at police headquarters. The notion of policing as a local enterprise should be reinforced rather than diluted.

**R I Mawby** is Professor of Criminology and Criminal Justice, University of Plymouth.

## References

Cain, M. (1973) *Society and The Policeman's Role*. London: Routledge.

Mawby, R.I. (2004) 'Myth and Reality in Rural Policing: Perceptions of the Police in a Rural County of England', *Policing: An International Journal of Police Strategies and Management*, 27.3, 431-446.

Mawby, R.I. (1990) *Comparative Policing Issues: The British and American Experience in International Perspective*. London: Routledge.

Nicholas, S., Povey, D., Walker, A. and Kershaw, C. (2005) (eds) *Crime in England and Wales 2004/2005*. London: Home Office (Research Development Statistics 11/05) (also available at [www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs05/hosb1105.pdf](http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs05/hosb1105.pdf)).

Sims, L. (2003) 'Policing and the Public', pp 105-118 in Flood-Page, C. and Taylor, J. (eds) *Crime in England and Wales 2001/2002: Supplementary Volume*. London: HMSO (HO Statistical Bulletin 01/03).

Thurman, Q.C. and McGarrell, E.F. (1997) (eds) *Community Policing in a Rural Setting*. Cincinnati, OH: Anderson.