

An ethnographic study of police culture in a rural Kansas police agency

Police culture
in rural Kansas

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Received 27 November 2023
Revised 31 January 2024
Accepted 6 February 2024

Abstract

Purpose – The study examined rural police culture in one Kansas police agency.

Design/methodology/approach – This study used a qualitative ethnographic approach using in-depth interviews and non-participant observations to construct and interpret the culture of rural police through the lens of officers working in one rural police agency.

Findings – Five themes were found that described the complexities rural police officers face at this research site, including the law being at the center of officers' actions, the nature of crime, officers serving as jack of all trades, community relationships and enforcement of crimes by teenagers, and how outside pressures from the community and increased concern for citizens' safety affect officers' daily lived experiences.

Originality/value – There is a dearth of scholarly literature addressing rural and small-town policing. This study is the first known qualitative study to be conducted on rural Kansas police, allowing a snapshot of the workings of rural Kansas police.

Keywords Police culture, Rural policing, Kansas, Ethnographic study, Small-town policing

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Police officers are often tight-lipped about their feelings and rarely talk to outsiders. Skolnick (2002, p. 7) referred to this as the “blue code of silence.” He argues that as an outcome of the “blue code of silence,” a police culture develops. Officers typically only speak to other officers, not relying on their families or outsiders. They do not usually talk with others due to the stigma associated with outside help (Rose and Unnithan, 2015; Skolnick, 2002). Officers have developed ways of dealing with their thoughts and feelings individually or within the police agency.

Researchers have previously conducted studies on police culture and its effect on different aspects of policing, primarily in urban departments (Cordner, 2017; Demirkol and Nalla, 2019; Kutnjak Ivković *et al.*, 2016; Paoline, 2003; Paoline and Terrill, 2014; Trautman, 1990). However, fewer studies have carried out ethnographic examinations of rural police culture, interviewing and observing officers directly, in their own words. Studies in Kansas centering on ethnographic interviews and non-participant observations of rural police officers regarding their perspectives on police culture are sorely lacking. This study partially fills that void by focusing on police members in one rural Kansas police agency.

This study explored the question: What is police culture described and constructed by rural Kansas police officers?

Literature review

Rural police agencies have unique challenges. Officers often work alone and rely on assistance from nearby towns or county police. Liederbach and Frank (2003) found that rural



officers engage in a more comprehensive range of activities during their shifts. In addition to their police duties, rural officers provide citizens with different “service functions, crime prevention, and problem-solving” (p. 57). A dated but relevant study by [Cain \(1971\)](#) found that police in rural areas, while not as busy, spend more time interacting with citizens on their shifts. [Flanagan \(1985\)](#) found that citizens determine police duties and the community size determines how to meet the community’s needs. This means citizens interact with officers, influencing the issues they want the police to address. These issues may range from a crime report to a wild animal complaint or a neighbor with too many weeds in their yard. One study of rural officers in the United Kingdom found that the police are called to address some crime issues like their urban counterparts, but they also were called on to address “uniquely rural aspects,” including “dealing with escaped farm animals; dealing with the theft of tractors and other farm equipment; and responding to stolen horses and badger baiting” ([Loftus, 2009](#), p. 89).

Officers are often tasked with citizen interactions and community policing initiatives such as presentations and service events. One chief requires his officers to be involved in volunteer activities outside of their police activities to understand better the community in which they live ([Weisheit et al., 1994](#)). Officers must quickly change a flat tire or provide other resources to citizens at their request. [Liederbach and Frank \(2003\)](#) found that officers only spent 1.2% of their time away from the public during an eight-hour shift. Others have also found that rural officers spend more time with citizens ([Kuhns et al., 2007](#); [Liederbach and Frank, 2003](#); [Pelfrey, 2007](#); [Weisheit et al., 1994](#)).

[Weisheit et al. \(1994\)](#) investigated the community policing practices of rural police and found that they have better relationships with citizens. However, working so well in the community presents certain drawbacks. One such drawback is that officers have no privacy. In their study, the team spoke to several officers. They write, “one chief and a number of others had observed that when off duty, they could not have a beer at the local bar without starting the rumors in the community” (p. 566). The officers rarely have downtime in a rural community. They are always on duty, even when they are not on shift. It is not uncommon for citizens to contact officers during their off-duty hours to report crimes and ask for information. This creates an always-watching-one-back mentality and leads to stress ([Ricciardelli, 2018](#)). Officers who cannot get away from their jobs may lead to additional career stress.

[Ricciardelli \(2018\)](#) concluded that rural officers need a “greater work-life balance” (p. 443). The officer’s ability to do their job safely can be put in danger, and there is a tremendous strain on the officer that may undermine their ability to do their job. [Ricciardelli \(2018\)](#) argued that strain can come from a lack of resources, demands by administrative forces and legal consequences if something happens and there is no police coverage and noted, “constrained policing conditions leave officers with very little downtime, which impacts their emotional and mental health, relationships at or outside work, and can lead to stress leave” (p. 434). How these conditions might influence officers’ judgment when carrying out their duties is unknown.

Rural officers deal with more specific types of crime when compared to urban officers. One study found that they are more likely to encounter property offenses, drug-related crimes, violent crimes and domestic violence situations ([Kuhns et al., 2007](#)). This same study concluded that property offenses were a rural officer’s most challenging aspect of crime investigation.

Police remain a tight-knit community. Again, [Skolnick \(2002\)](#) refers to this as the “blue code of silence, which is a normative injunction, but an unwritten one” (p. 7). The code consists of loyalty to one’s fellow officer, ignoring police misconduct and not reporting it. The “blue code of silence” dictates that when an officer is investigated for police misconduct, other officers are to remain silent.

Methodology

This study used a qualitative ethnographic approach using in-depth interviews and non-participant ride-along observations with a select group of rural Kansas police officers. The ethnographic approach to qualitative research involves studying a cultural sharing group (Creswell and Poth, 2018). According to Bacon *et al.* (2020), ethnographies of police help the outside reader understand the internal workings and reasoning of officers and the police organization. They argue, “as a methodological approach, ethnography has proven unparalleled for penetrating the inner world of police organizations and examining the working rules, tacit understandings and underlying assumptions that operate beneath” (p. 4).

Participants

From March to May 2023, interviews were conducted with police officers at the site and casual conversations occurred during ride-along observations. The authors conducted the observations over multiple shifts and weeks, spanning every day of the week and covering every shift. Observations varied between half and full shifts. Extensive field notes and in-process memos were written to record observations during ride-alongs. To achieve accurate data for interview transcriptions, participants consented to have their first interview recorded by audio. In those interviews, officers were asked about being a rural police officer, how the public views them, the relationships with their fellow officers and how these compared to other relationships in their lives and, finally, to describe the culture of rural law enforcement. These topics often led to follow-up questions in which the officer elaborated on their responses. Follow-up conversations were also held with participants to ensure interpretations of the data were correct.

The research site

A small community of approximately 1,000 citizens is nestled in the plains of Kansas. The median household income is \$79,000 per year. The community is active in the agricultural industry. Most citizens identify as Caucasian, while only 7% identify as another ethnicity. There are two schools in town: a combined elementary and middle school and a high school. There is one Catholic Church located near the edge of town. It also has one bank and two gas stations. One gas station has a convenience store, and the local co-op operates the other. The city operates its water tower, sewer plant, lagoons and city dam. There are two restaurants in town. One restaurant is a café, which has limited its hours of operation since the COVID-19 pandemic and is now only open a few days a week during the mornings and early afternoons. The other is a restaurant/bar combination. The bar can stay open until 2:00 a.m., but most nights, it is closed by 10:00 p.m. The town also has a grain elevator, a lumber yard, a metal shop and an auto repair shop.

City Hall, a large red brick building with a brown facade near the town center, houses the city offices and the police agency. Each department has its separate location within the building. To protect the identity of the police agency, a pseudonym was used: Sunflower Police Department, hereafter referred to as Sunflower PD. Sunflower PD employs three full-time police officers, the chief and two officers, who support 21-hour coverage Monday through Friday from 6:00 a.m. to 3:00 a.m. The hours on Saturday and Sunday vary, with most coverage happening in the afternoon and at night. If an officer is not on duty, such as someone calling in sick or on vacation, one officer is on call for the community. If this cannot happen, the county police agency supports Sunflower PD with coverage.

Pseudonyms were also used to protect the identities of the three Sunflower officers. Chief Tanner, Sunflower PD Chief of Police, has nearly 20 years of combined police experience as a police and corrections officer. He has been chief of Sunflower PD for eight years. Sergeant Burke is the department's administrative sergeant with eight years of experience. He also

works for two other police departments near Sunflower. The final officer is Officer Paul. He holds multiple college degrees and has over 20 years of police experience. He has served at Sunflower PD for three years, serving his other years at an agency in a neighboring county.

Sunflower PD only investigates crimes classified as misdemeanors due to their size. Because they lack an investigative division, they have limited jurisdiction over crimes and juvenile offenders. The county's police agency investigates cases involving child abuse, bullying, or sexual assaults of children for Sunflower PD. The county police agency also handles crimes involving adults classified as a felony. Sunflower PD relies on the support of the county police agency.

Data analysis scheme

Because the initial interviews of Sunflower PD officers were recorded, transcripts were completed and became, in part, the raw data for analysis. While there are various ways to code and analyze qualitative transcription data, the schema used in this study was a modified technique outlined by [Moustakas \(1994\)](#). Data analysis was carried out using a six-step process as follows:

Step 1: All audio-recorded interviews were transcribed and became the raw data for analysis.

Step 2: The transcripts and in-process memos were read to ensure they contained adequate data for analysis.

Step 3: The data were examined, and relevant information was separated. All relevant information was broken into small segments of significant statements reflecting a specific thought.

Step 4: The significant statements were re-read and overlapping, and repetitive statements were eliminated.

Step 5: Segments were then coded and grouped into meanings that depict how participants described police culture.

Step 6: Clusters of themes were then organized from the formulated meanings. Specifically, the data examined, and the various ways police officers describe police culture were considered. The objective of this analysis stage was to allow for the emergence of themes common to all the participant's descriptions.

Trustworthiness of the data

Two strategies, as advanced by [Creswell and Poth \(2018\)](#), were used to maintain the trustworthiness of the data. These strategies were corroborating evidence through triangulation of multiple data sources and member checking. Throughout the research process, data was triangulated through multiple interviews and ride-along observations and constantly taken back to officers to gauge the correctness of developing themes.

Results

Five common themes emerged from the data analysis that described rural police culture and officers' lived-on-the-job experiences. While each officer approached their job and daily tasks differently, they each provided a glimpse into the shared lived experiences of Sunflower PD members.

The law is at the center

The first theme, "The Law is at the Center," describes how officers operate as a cohesive unit. Each officer works their shift independently, but they work toward the collective order of the

agency. Chief Tanner describes the officers by saying, “You have three different officers, you have three different ways of doing things, three different personalities . . . they don’t understand why they each do the things that they do.” The application of the law depends on the officer. Some officers prefer a more laid-back approach, while others interact more with the community. Officer Paul provides further insight, “our approaches are different, [it] doesn’t mean they are wrong; they are just different.” The key to understanding Sunflower PD is that each officer could approach things differently than their counterparts. Sergeant Burke spoke of how the officers conduct their business differently, but “we do enforce similarly.” The three elements that make up the culture of Sunflower PD are the officers, the personality of each officer and the enforcement methods, as characterized in Figure 1.

Through field observations, it was clear that each officer acted independently when performing their police craft. The officers were like two ships passing in the night. The day shift officer, typically the chief, and the nighttime officer would often go days without seeing each other. Officer Paul stated, “I might go five or six days without seeing him [the chief] in person.” During one observational ride-along, Sergeant Burke said he rarely sees Officer Paul because they work different shifts and nights. Sergeant Burke implied they would speak on the phone but rarely see each other. Sergeant Burke and Officer Paul also tended to associate with the officers in nearby communities during their shifts, and Chief Tanner tended to associate more with Sunflower’s maintenance department.

Nature of crime

The second theme was named “Nature of Crime.” Like all police agencies, Sunflower PD deals with reported crimes, non-reported crimes and areas of concern, all of which make up the “nature of crime.” However, areas of concern are the crimes Sunflower PD knows occur but are not reported. Citizens in Sunflower also have an aversion to reporting crime by contacting 911. Shown in a circular pattern, Figure 2 represents all aspects of crime that officers of Sunflower PD deal with when policing their community.

By April 2023, officers had taken only 25 case reports. These cases involved runaways, non-injury accidents, thefts, auto thefts and one forgery case. Every officer said they know crime occurs, but citizens will not always report it. Chief Tanner explained that “oftentimes it’s weeks or even months later before they learn a crime has occurred.” Officer Paul reported that many cases have come from one family this year, more cases than Sunflower PD typically has taken by this time of year. He continued, “half of them were from one family. It would be 15 [cases] if we didn’t have that family to deal with.”



Culture
Source(s): Figure by authors

Figure 1.
Sunflower PD culture



Source(s): Figure by authors

Figure 2.
Aspects of crime in
sunflower

Sunflower PD does not hear about many cases because it may lead to embarrassment for a family. According to officers, many families have called Sunflower home for over 100 years, and some of the original families still live there. Reports of domestic violence and sexual assault are lacking from the case files. Sergeant Burke explained, “not all things are reported, but statistically, we know DV’s [domestic violence] occur, but we don’t get calls about it.” Chief Tanner places informational pamphlets about the county’s sexual assault center in the post office. No reports are made about this crime, but the pamphlets are often missing. This leads officers to believe this crime occurs.

Officers also have concerns about other crimes and community issues, such as illicit narcotics. Sergeant Burke acknowledged the drug fentanyl, stating, “fentanyl is here; it is going to be more and more of a problem.” He recalled how the community recently lost a school-age student to a fentanyl overdose. He said the student died in a nearby town but had attended school in Sunflower. Sergeant Burke stated it is his most significant concern for the kids of the community and articulated that educating students about the risks is the only way to prevent deaths.

The officers also expressed concerns about the lack of protective measures citizens will take to protect and secure their property, including leaving their vehicles and houses unlocked and recounted many stories. Officer Paul recalled a situation in which he responded to a citizen’s house where a group of friends were returning from the bar one night. One friend became lost from the pack, walked into another citizen’s house, sat on the couch and passed out while the homeowner watched television. Officer Paul recalled how the young man was shocked when he woke up with Officer Paul standing over him. His friends, who had noticed his absence from the group, quickly returned to collect him. Officer Paul said, “he [the citizen whose house was entered] locks his door now.” Officers also recalled how citizens do not lock their vehicles, so thefts of items happen occasionally. In a few instances, Sunflower has transients come through town in the middle of the night, and they open the vehicles and see what they can find. Vehicles that are locked are not touched, implying that the individuals searching for valuables are looking for a quick steal.

Another concern for the officers is the school system. Chief Tanner interacts the most with the schools because he works the most day shifts. Sergeant Burke and Officer Paul typically work overnight hours when the schools are closed. However, they affirmed the schools were a concern if Chief Tanner said they were a concern. School authorities typically do not let the

police know what is happening in their schools. Chief Tanner said, “it depends on the last name” of the student. Students from prominent families in the community get away with incidents, and police reports are not made.

During one ride-along observation, the chief received a report of a student driving at high speed through town. Chief Tanner located the truck at the high school, but when he informed the principal of the incident, the principal did not recall which student drove the vehicle. Upon leaving the school parking lot, Chief Tanner said, “he [the principal] knew, and he will probably make an announcement and speak to the student.” It was clear to the chief that the principal did not want to give up the information on whom the truck belonged. Chief Tanner shared another story of hearing a report that the school’s baseball complex was burglarized, and the concession stand lost over \$500 of merchandise. Upon speaking to the school about the theft, they informed Chief Tanner they would “write it off” and “it wasn’t a big deal.” The chief said, “they know who did it, but it’s someone with a name.” The school, at times, will call the chief’s cell phone but never call the 911 call center, and according to the chief, it is only when the school wishes to share information. Chief Tanner said it is typically for someone without a name.

The crime reporting by the school and many other citizens in Sunflower rarely goes through the county’s 911 call center. Chief Tanner explains a reason citizens will not call 911. He states, “they are afraid of bringing shame to their families,” and reporting a crime will bring that shame. Chief Tanner reiterated as he did several times, “some of these families have been out here for 100-plus years, and some are related to the original founders of the town.” According to officers, citizens take pride in their town and do not want their private lives to be known. Sergeant Burke recalled a story about a citizen who wanted to report suspicious behavior in his neighborhood and drove around for 45 minutes before finding him to report the incident. Sergeant Burke said the suspect was long gone. Upon sharing this story with the other officers to see if they had similar experiences, Officer Paul said, “it happens all the time.” He said, “it’s frustrating they won’t report incidents to 911.”

Jack of all trades

This study’s third theme was “Jack of All Trades.” This means officers take on many nuanced roles to serve the citizens. Reminiscent of the service style, one of three organizational styles of police departments discussed in the classical work of [Wilson \(1975\)](#). Officers in Sunflower PD tend to watch, exercise a great amount of discretion and focus on keeping the peace instead of heavy-handed policing. The “Jack of All Trades” tasks are shown in [Figure 3](#).

One evening, while one researcher was on a ride-along with Sergeant Burke, he stopped a young boy riding his bicycle to talk with him about the lack of reflectors and light on his bike. The sergeant explained to the boy that traffic on the road is heavy, and without the proper illumination gear on his bike, he may get hit by a car. Sergeant Burke said, “it’s about promoting positive relationships with community members.” He surmised the young boy would know the officers care about his safety and would be more likely to approach police in the future.

Sunflower PD also enforces state laws and city ordinances but exhibits much discretion and flexibility. For example, the vast array of enforcement is shown by giving warnings, simply informing the public of the laws, or acknowledging citizens’ attempts to follow the law, like in the case when one citizen attempted to stop their vehicle at a stop sign but did not come to a complete stop.

Sunflower PD officers strive to be visible in the community. They believe their visibility reduces the amount of crime in the community. Sergeant Burke and Officer Paul regularly parked their patrol units in visible areas so citizens and community visitors knew where they were. Officer Paul usually parked his patrol car near the town’s busiest intersection, where

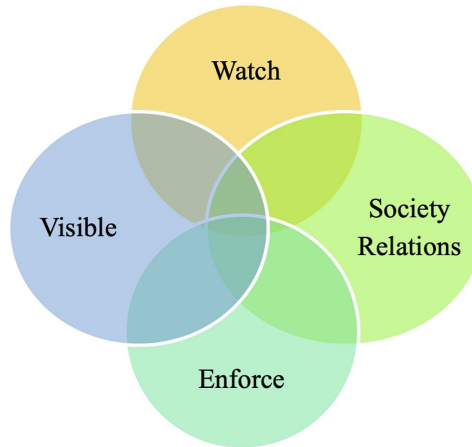


Figure 3.
Jack of all trades

Source(s): Figure by authors

those coming into Sunflower would see him. He said his approach was to be visible and community members would do the correct thing. Sergeant Burke had a similar approach but preferred to sit in front of the high school on what he felt was the busiest road in town.

Both officers who worked the night shifts wanted to be visible when cars entered the community. Sergeant Burke explained, “if someone was going to do something wrong, this may prevent it.” The officers believe being visible would prevent anyone wishing to commit a crime in Sunflower from doing so. Sergeant Burke said, “I turn off the lights and the car, roll the windows down and listen. You can hear a lot. If glass is breaking or people need help, you’ll hear it.” Officer Paul also sat with his lights off in another part of town, but he kept his patrol unit running. On the last ride-along observation of this research, he was excited to try out a new dashboard cover to cover the internal lights of his patrol vehicle when he had his unit blacked out. He said, “the lights in my unit are so bright, so I got this piece of felt to try and black out [the lights] more.” He later said, “I can hear more when people don’t see me right away.” The officers of Sunflower value visibility; however, at night, they take a more reserved approach to visibility. Chief Tanner and Sergeant Burke commented that the day shift was about community relations, and once people went inside at night, they switched to crime deterrence.

The officers of Sunflower PD constantly seek to stay informed of what is happening in the community. One day, Chief Tanner went to mail a letter at the post office and informed the researcher he would be right back. However, upon leaving the post office, a citizen approached him to discuss various issues. Mailing the letter took 45 minutes. The chief also enjoys meeting with a local group of community members who have coffee every morning. Chief Tanner said, “this is how I find out about things, if the community is talking about it, these guys will know.” One citizen often likes to tell the latest conspiracy theory, while other farmers tend not to say much and listen to everything. Chief Tanner enjoyed meeting with the group, “no matter how crazy the conspiracy theories are, it’s good to know what the community is talking about. I stay informed this way.”

Community relationships

The fourth theme in this ethnography was named “Community Relationships.” In Sunflower PD, the community can be divided into three groups: (1) the public of Sunflower, (2) the police

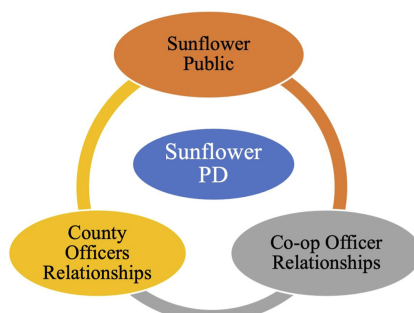
officers in the cooperative to which Sunflower PD belongs and (3) the officers of the county police agency. Sunflower PD operates in the cooperative with three other towns, serving as the backup to officers in these communities. The relationship between Sunflower PD, the public of Sunflower, and the other police agencies is depicted in Figure 4.

Officers have a dynamic relationship with the community. Officer Paul describes the job of Sunflower PD as a job of service: “we’re here to protect and serve, but we have an opportunity to really serve the citizens of this community, but it doesn’t mean we are going to make everyone happy.” Officers often irritate teenagers in the community. Chief Tanner described how teenagers typically avoid officers. He explained that teenagers would text their friends and tell them where the officer was sitting in town. The teenagers on their way to school will then take an alternative route depending on where the officer sits. While on one observation ride-along, a report of reckless driving alerted the chief. When the driver could not be located, Chief Tanner contacted students outside the school to see if they could identify the vehicle in question. The teenagers were unaware of the vehicle, and the chief declared, “students will act like they don’t know but will spread the word to the reckless driver he is being looked for.” Since Chief Tanner is the only officer working during the day, he finds the maintenance department helpful. He commented, “they will let me know if they see something.” Chief Tanner told a story about how the Sunflower maintenance department caught individuals drag racing in front of the maintenance shop with their security cameras one evening.

Officers also talk with community members of Sunflower. At times, this could be a group gathered for coffee, citizens who have heard something outside of the post office, or children who will approach the patrol units of the officers. Citizens appeared to enjoy speaking with the officers. Officer Paul said citizens are “always engaged, always aware, always looking” at what the officers do. Officers commented that many citizens were more than likely trying to figure out who one of the researchers was during a ride-along.

Chief Tanner describes the officers’ actions as trying to “assist them” [the citizens] in whatever they have going on. He spoke of how officers assist citizens in filing police reports or on a traffic stop and about their role in the community. The chief quickly dismissed the word educate when asked if officers educated the public. He remarked, “there are smart people out here. To educate could come across as offensive.” Relationship building with citizens is vital for Sunflower PD. Officer Paul explains, “I think we all do that well [talk to people]. We all have people to talk to, and that helps build up [relationships] with others.”

Officers of Sunflower PD also have relationships with their neighboring police agencies. Sergeant Burke works for two of those agencies part-time. He described the cooperative as a “bubble,” explaining that everything stays within the smaller community. Sergeant Burke and Officer Paul talked about meeting with older or more experienced officers in the other



Source(s): Figure by authors

Figure 4.
Sunflower PD's
community
relationships

communities. They also communicated with other officers throughout the night via text messaging or phone calls. Chief Tanner's job as the chief of police and constant interactions with citizens made it difficult for him to meet up with the officers in other communities during the day. When officers met with their counterparts in the neighboring towns, they discussed what was happening in the other departments and with fellow officers and shared information about cases or events. Officers regularly shared a meal and made dinner plans for additional nights when both would be working. The officers appeared to have a lighter demeanor with fellow officers rather than with the public.

The younger officers who worked in the neighboring departments and county police agency members were missing from these meetings. The officers of Sunflower PD had critical words to say about younger officers who work for other agencies. Sergeant Burke explained, "they want to enforce more than a mature-experienced officer." Sergeant Burke commented how the younger officers in the cooperative constantly ran traffic; in other words, they continuously looked for traffic violations to perform traffic stops. The sergeant commented how this upset many officers in the cooperative. He was asked why the younger officers ran so much traffic instead of engaging in community policing activities, and he said, "they have justification under the law," but implied they did not understand how to inform citizens instead of issuing citations. Later, he commented, "they use words like 'boredom' when they are looking to stop someone. It's not good to have younger officers in a rural community. Other officers are not wanting to even do a traffic stop with that [a younger] officer." Sergeant Burke thought many new officers were looking for action and not the life of rural policing. Officer Paul states that younger officers "are not going after crime, and they make the job of law enforcement harder."

The frustration with younger officers also applies to the younger county officers. Sunflower PD has an agreement with the county police agency to work cases involving juveniles or cases classified as a felony. However, this is where the relationship ends. Sunflower officers candidly discussed how many older county officers would stop and talk to them, but many younger officers do not engage with Sunflower officers and the community. According to the officers, gone are the days when information and phone numbers would be shared with a county officer on the side of the road. Sergeant Burke explained:

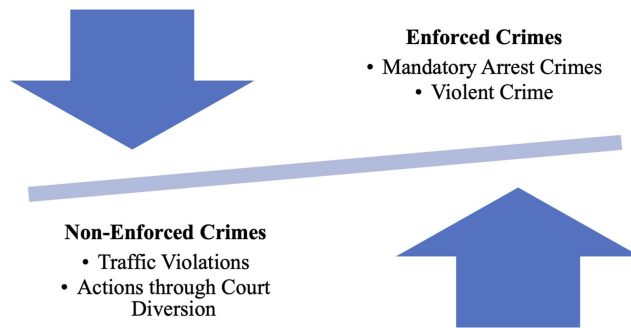
If an [older] officer [from the county] was driving through [Sunflower], they would stop and talk to you. Now, the new graduates of the [county's police agency] will drive by and not introduce themselves to the officer, which would have never used to happen. If they [the younger officers] are not doing it to us [the officers], they are not doing it to their fellow citizens.

Selective enforcement of crimes for teenagers

This study's fifth theme was "Selective Enforcement of Crime for Teenagers." According to officers, the goal is to educate teenagers, a term they would not use with adult citizens. Chief Tanner said they would let teenagers slide with a crime or find another way of making restitution instead of "ruining their lives." Officers focusing on education over police action is a nuanced balancing act, as depicted in [Figure 5](#).

Officers are not quick to issue traffic citations to teenagers. They are, however, quick to educate the youth on the issues of proper traffic laws. Sergeant Burke explained, "we want to change the habits" of the drivers, and the goal of Sunflower PD officers is to "enforce safe habits." Part of that mission is being visible to drivers during peak traffic without issuing citations. Officer Paul explained that he has more of a deterrent effect on teenagers by sitting in his patrol vehicle at a busy intersection than writing tickets. He believes "teenagers are the worst drivers" because they are not used to traffic laws and "that's why they cut them a break."

On the other hand, Sergeant Burke believes stopping vehicles is his "primetime to engage in community policing." Explaining the laws to teenagers is an essential job of officers during



Source(s): Figure by authors

Figure 5.
Selected enforcement
of teenage crime

traffic stops. He also talked about rewarding the effort of trying to follow the law versus actually following the law. While on one observation ride-along, a car slowed down and came to a rolling stop before proceeding through an intersection. In this instance, Sergeant Burke said they tried, so there was no need to pull the teenage driver over. While not made public, his philosophy is that officers reward citizens' efforts to follow the law.

For Sunflower's younger residents, the nature of the crime and their age may have benefits to breaking the law. They might get away with it, depending on the offense. During one traffic stop, Officer Paul spoke to a young lady about her expired vehicle tag. Returning to the patrol unit, he recanted, "mom got thrown under the bus on that one." He acknowledged, "I'm sure that will be taken care of by tomorrow." He further explained that the young driver said her mom was the one who paid for the tag registration, and she did not know the tag was expired. Officer Paul said, "the driver probably went home and told her mom immediately." He believes citizens respond quickly to complying with the law when they realize they have violated it. Chief Tanner describes these actions as the citizens policing themselves. He noted:

They don't want embarrassment brought to them or their family heritage. They don't want that embarrassment, so nine of ten people out here want to do what [is] right. Not only for themselves but because they know it is a rural area.

With crimes that are not violent or designated mandatory arrest by state law, officers try to find other ways to make restitution to victims. Officers believe that taking a young person to juvenile detention increases the chances of that individual continuing down the path of crime. They pointed out they did not want to start a young person's criminal record. The commonly held belief is that if an officer charged a younger person with a crime, this would affect the outcome of the teenager's life trajectory. Officers explore informal options when dealing with juveniles. One example of this involved a teenager who tossed a rock at a school bus window when it set out overnight, breaking the window. Chief Tanner said the goal is to "try and keep them out of court if the victim agrees." In this case, the victim, the school district, allowed the teenager to reimburse the school district for replacing the bus window. No charges were filed, and the student avoided the criminal justice system.

Summary and conclusion

This ethnographic study presents a glimpse into one small rural Kansas police department. We captured the emic view of their culture, how they went about their jobs, their interactions in the community, and their trials and tribulations in performing the police craft. Sunflower PD represents a team of officers who keep the law at the center of what they do and, in many

cases, a very informal center. Each officer varies in personality and the way they carry out the policing craft. They fully address crime when it is reported, as well as crime not reported but learned of through informal community networking. They keep close ties with citizens.

Citizens in Sunflower informally guide police priorities. Sunflower officers, in turn, are very aware of the citizenry's expectations. We found that informal accountability of sorts was implicit in Sunflower. [Weisheit et al. \(1994\)](#) described informal accountability as the process when police are made aware of citizens' concerns and priorities. Police learn what citizens deem as important police priorities both within community networks and internally within the police department. This may be a unique feature of rural and small-town police, or as [Hurst \(2007, p. 123\)](#) argues, policing in rural areas is organized around "interpersonal relationships" with citizens and "informal social control." Regarding citizens guiding what they believe the police should focus their attention on is reminiscent of one feature of the community-oriented policing strategy, that is, citizens are involved in the process of co-producing the setting of police priorities ([Terpstra, 2009](#); [Glaser and Denhardt, 2010](#)). In a similar light, [O'Shea \(1999\)](#) found that police in rural and small towns are more likely to engage in partnerships with the community in crime prevention efforts to a greater extent when compared to urban and metropolitan officers.

Sunflower police officers often resolved problems with juveniles informally and with much discretion so as not to damage their future. We learned they would go to great lengths to not place juveniles in the criminal justice system for minor crimes. These incidents are often handled informally. While the literature addressing interactions between rural police and juveniles remains sparse, two previous studies found the decision of rural police to arrest a juvenile was largely situational, involving many factors, with less severe crimes handled informally while more serious crimes may involve an arrest ([Decker, 1979](#); [Skaggs, 2017](#)). Our findings seem to be similar. This may be another unique feature of rural, small-town policing.

Officers expressed genuine concern about the community's welfare. They noted issues such as illicit narcotics, especially the growing fentanyl problem, and they were adamant about educating the community about the drug. Their policing role was often a "jack of all trades" or a generalist intertwined with serving the community. Officers navigated a fair amount of discretion while employing informal problem-solving approaches rather than heavy-handed policing. One of the more salient discoveries was the lack of domestic violence cases reported, although Sunflower officers know they occur. An undertheme here, with not only domestic violence but other issues as well, seemed to center on families not wanting their business publicized. News travels fast in the town of Sunflower.

[Wilson \(1975\)](#) described three distinct styles of police behavior, and one is especially germane to this study: the service style. With the service style, the police pay attention to the police function and maintain order and peacekeeping in the community. Officers are much less likely to make arrests for minor infractions of the law while serious crime is dealt with immediately. [Wilson \(1975, p. 200\)](#) writes about the service style, "the police intervene frequently but not formally." Service to the citizens and maintaining public order is a centerpiece. Sunflower officers performed many service activities. For example, the police chief spoke of cleaning gutters on citizens' homes and shoveling snow from their sidewalks and driveways. Sunflower officers took their service role seriously. In addition, officers were always courteous and regularly engaged citizens, whether in the local coffee group or in front of the post office. As described earlier in this paper, citizens seemed drawn to officers to engage them in conversation. Perhaps this is the status quo for small-town and rural police ([Liederbach and Frank, 2003](#)). Again, the service style may be another unique feature of rural small-town policing ([Flanagan, 1985](#)).

Rural policing is complex and challenging. This study demonstrates how one small rural police department balances and embraces the concerns of its citizens and operates within their own unique culture. There is no one-size-fits-all when it comes to policing. While small

rural police may share some nuanced features with large urban police departments, small and rural policing is unique, and the temptation to overgeneralize large urban and metropolitan policing as the norm for all policing should be resisted (Maguire *et al.*, 1991). This leads us to a more pressing observation: because of the minimal scholarly literature addressing rural, small-town policing, research into this venue must be energetically advanced. A growing body of rigorous evidence-based research, whether it be qualitative, quantitative or mixed methods designs investigating rural, small-town policing, has the potential to guide new theory development, broaden our understanding of the complexities of rural and small-town policing and inform fundamental police policy and practice.

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