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Policing the pandemic in rural America: experiences from Pennsylvania

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Abstract

Purpose – This study explored the effects of the coronavirus pandemic on rural municipal police in Pennsylvania.

Design/methodology/approach – The authors surveyed rural police chiefs and sworn officers to inquire about their intra-department organizational capabilities, police-community relations, well-being practices, and how these strategies may have developed since March 2020.

Findings – The pandemic affected rural police officers and rural policing strategies in many ways. Moreover, existing challenges to limited rural police budgets were exacerbated suggesting a need for more flexible budgetary capacities, access to wellness resources were limited suggesting better access to these resources and preparation for responding to public health emergencies was limited suggesting more complete training is warranted.

Originality/value – This study draws attention to the unique experiences of rural municipal police across one state by capturing specific areas of concern throughout the coronavirus pandemic.

Keywords Rural policing, Coronavirus pandemic, Police management, Police-community relationships, Public health emergencies

Paper type Research paper

A growing body of literature provides insight into the multidimensional effects the coronavirus pandemic had on American policing since March 2020. Studies have focused on the immediate effects of the pandemic on policing within major cities across the United States (Ashby, 2020; Lum *et al.*, 2023; Maskály *et al.*, 2022; Nix and Richards, 2021) but less attention has been given to how the pandemic affected policing rural jurisdictions. The research presented here documents how rural police agencies cross one state navigated administrative, political, social, and personal challenges that altered their roles during various stages of the pandemic using Laufs and Waseem's (2020) framework on the ways in which police traditionally have been impacted by public health emergencies.

Theoretical framework

In their systematic review examining the effects of public health emergencies on policing, Laufs and Waseem (2020) found that, historically, there are four major areas in which the police are largely impacted including (1) changes to intra-agency operations, (2) challenges to interagency collaboration and communication, (3) strains on police-community relations, and (4) adverse effects on officer well-being.

Public health emergencies have affected intra-agency operations, and because of the quickly evolving states of conditions, some police agencies have been ill-equipped to respond, suffered from staffing deficiencies because of illness, experienced operational declines, underwent interruptions to routine training, lacked necessary supplies, and were forced to

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rely on external agencies for police services (Laufs and Waseem, 2020). Similarly, public health emergencies challenged the ability of police agencies to engage in interagency collaborations. These challenges include identifying and understanding new hierarchical command structures, collaborating with members outside of law enforcement, establishing trust, expanding duties across agencies, and establishing effective methods of communication (Laufs and Waseem, 2020). Responses to public health emergencies strain police-community relationships because of expanding police responsibilities (Laufs and Waseem, 2020). Confrontations with community members and gaps in communication complicate existing relationships and adverse effects include changes to officer wellness psychological distress and substance use (Laufs and Waseem, 2020). When this occurs, police have participated in peer networks offered by supportive organizational cultures that were equipped with other resilient approaches to help them cope. Precrisis training has impacted officer well-being positively during times of elevated emergencies (Laufs and Waseem, 2020).

In addition to outlining these historical challenges, Laufs and Waseem (2020) provided recommendations for police responses during the coronavirus that encompassed changes to routine interactions, encouraging police institutions to offer appropriate resources related to mental health, enacting work-from-home policies, adopting a national system for intra-agency and interagency communication capabilities, and improving collaborative efforts. This framework for police operations became the focus of the present research to identify if rural police agencies were similarly affected by the coronavirus pandemic.

Review of literature

The effects of the coronavirus on American policing

The pandemic affected routine policing (Shjarback and Magny, 2022), including initiating new policies related to the demand for and supply of police services (Lum *et al.*, 2023). Early assessments of police practices during the pandemic suggested that police departments lacked PPE, had different experiences with policing mandates, experienced reduced calls for service (Lum *et al.*, 2023) in general and increased calls for specific types of incidents, such as domestic disputes (Ashby, 2020; Hansen and Lory, 2020; Nix and Richards, 2021; Richards *et al.*, 2021), and altered or delayed police academy operations (Gaub *et al.*, 2022; White *et al.*, 2022).

Importantly, several studies have investigated perceptions of police officers and the direct effects of the coronavirus on their institutions and themselves. Generally, officers indicated that there were many institutional changes that affected their routine operations, some increase in proactive strategies, mixed frequencies in calls for service, and decreasing arrests for minor offenses (Maskály *et al.*, 2022), but officers reported mostly positive attitudes their agency's ability to protect them from contracting the disease (Gaub *et al.*, 2022; Maskály *et al.*, 2022). Policing is recognized as a high-risk occupation, but the pandemic presented new concerns about officer wellness (Edwards and Kotera, 2021).

Police agency websites and social media platforms have become increasingly popular as a mechanism for the police to communicate with the public. Existing police department social media pages are informative, and recent inquiry into their utility during the pandemic suggested that social media assisted departments' ability to quickly disseminate crisis-related information (Laufs and Waseem, 2020). Across larger police agencies, Farmer and Copenhaver (2022) found that 73% of departments had an official website, 33% included the types of services offered, and 42% used their site to communicate with the public about changes to law enforcement operations. Hu *et al.* (2022) identified police use of social media to educate their communities about the virus, but during the early months of the pandemic very few posts were pandemic-related suggesting that as the pandemic worsened, the utility of posting more specific information increased.

It could be expected that negative public attitudes toward the police were exacerbated by the challenges of the coronavirus pandemic, but evidence is mixed and appears to be dependent upon sentiments about the police that existed prior to the pandemic. Nix *et al.* (2021) found mixed public support for police to enforce social distancing policies and that support was reflective of views on the coronavirus and other matters related to policing. Similarly, Sandrin and Simpson (2022) found that preexisting notions of procedural justice affected public attitudes. Specifically, the public viewed positively the use of personal protective equipment (Sandrin and Simpson, 2022). White and Fradella (2020) found that members of the public who viewed the police as legitimate obeyed statewide issuances of stay-at-home orders, while those who did not were more likely to violate them irrespective of the police powers of enforcement. Nouri and Kochel (2022) used household surveys to assess perceptions of public safety in St. Louis before and during the pandemic and found that more than 50% of residents did not feel that the pandemic affected safety in their neighborhoods, but the perceptions of safety were driven by perceptions of positive police interactions. Edwards and Kotera (2021) suggested that public confidence in communities has reached an all-time low and dedicated efforts at rebuilding and establishing trust need to be developed.

Policing rural spaces during the coronavirus

Rural policing has unique challenges and encompasses decentralized models, disparities in resources, varying public safety concerns, and stigma surrounding officer well-being (Scott, 2004) compared to other jurisdictions. Research on the effects of the pandemic on rural areas is limited (Hansen and Lory, 2020) across the United States. Officers interviewed in California and Texas shared minimal concerns over the effects on policing but expressed concerns about individual and familial well-being. Despite experiencing specific training, officers lacked general preparedness (Helfers and Nhan, 2022). In Indiana, sheriffs' departments reported both negative (e.g. officer fatigue) and positive effects (e.g. fewer arrests) from the pandemic (Gallagher *et al.*, 2023). Similar struggles were experienced by police chiefs who oversaw departments across Pennsylvania (Gibbs, 2021). Prior to the pandemic, police chiefs expressed concerns about reliance on part-time staffing, salaries, technological capabilities, and mental health resources (Gibbs, 2021). Specific to the pandemic, 88% of chiefs stated that their departments were impacted across multiple aspects of policing (e.g. decrease in calls for service, suspended training activities, proactive traffic enforcement, community communication, arrest reduction). Mrozla (2022) explored policing matters in areas with an average population of 3,700 residents and found that less populated areas (i.e. 2,501–5,000 residents), and those with more sworn officers on staff had departments with a pandemic-specific policy to aid in their police response. Consistently, rural police departments experienced a shortage of personal protective equipment (PPE) due to limited financial capabilities (Gibbs, 2021; Helfers and Nhan, 2022; Mrozla, 2022). Historically, rural law enforcement and social services agencies have been underfunded, understaffed, and often neglected (Hansen and Lory, 2020), and how these conditions interacted with the pandemic is worthy of investigation.

Despite several studies on policing during the pandemic, few have attempted to seek the experiences of rural police. This study presents descriptive findings on the effects of the coronavirus pandemic on rural municipal police in Pennsylvania. The objectives herein were to assess the experiences of police leaders and police officers during what is defined as the peak pandemic period (March 2020–June 2020), and compare this to the post-peak pandemic period (July 2020 and beyond) with regard to the nature of police-community relationships, officer well-being practices; and to understand the experiences of rural police to propose best practices for future public health emergencies.

Methodology

Sample selection

Police in Pennsylvania have an overall decentralized model specific to diverse levels of jurisdiction (e.g. municipal, county, regional, and state). In some rural areas, municipal police do not exist, and local police services are provided by the Pennsylvania State Police. Pennsylvania is mostly rural with 48 rural and 19 urban counties as defined by the Center for Rural Pennsylvania (CRP, 2023). According to the Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development (PCED, 2023), there are more police departments in Pennsylvania than in any other state and 83% of municipal police departments have fewer than ten officers. The present study followed the operationalization provided by the CRP such that a rural police department exists within a rural municipality in a rural county with a population of less than 2,500 residents (CRP, 2023).

A directory of active police chiefs across Pennsylvania was obtained from the CRP and municipal population data were retrieved from the 2020 United States Census. Eligibility for participation in the study included all police chiefs who oversaw at least one rural municipal police department located in a rural Pennsylvania county. A total of 177 police chiefs met the established conditions representing over 200 rural municipalities across 37 rural counties, with residential populations that ranged from 109 to 2,472 residents. In addition to surveying rural police chiefs, attempts were made to gain a sample of rural police officers who were not employed as police administrators or supervisors. These officers were sampled by asking chiefs to share information about the study (e.g. an informational flyer) in a public space within their department. Approval from the authors' Institutional Review Board was obtained in November 2022, and survey administration began shortly after.

Data collection

Separate surveys (one directed to police chiefs and one to police officers) were administered in the winter of 2022 using multiple modalities to increase participant response rate (Dillman *et al.*, 2014). Surveys were mailed and emailed to police chiefs who met the established criteria. Among the distributed items were a cover letter stating the purpose of the study and participant confidentiality, a flyer to share publicly to recruit officer participation in an online survey, and instructions to complete or return the survey with prepaid postage. Of the 177 eligible participants, ten chiefs could not be contacted due to invalid or outdated contact information. After verifying valid addresses, 167 surveys were mailed to chiefs and 122 surveys were simultaneously emailed. Follow-up emails were sent over the next 6 weeks to all valid email addresses on file.

Measures

Survey items included open- and closed-ended items that aimed to capture (1) department characteristics (e.g. officer demographics), (2) department communications and collaborations (e.g. tools routinely used), (3) police-community relations (e.g. existence of community representative), (4) effects of the pandemic on departments (e.g. how police departments were affected throughout different periods since March 2020), and (5) effects of the pandemic on the individual (e.g. self-initiated wellness). The surveys administered to chiefs and officers were almost identical and attempted to capture the major themes of this study. Surveys for officers included up to 54 items and a maximum of 92 items for chiefs, depending on a respondent's eligibility to answer a set of filter questions.

Supplemental items related to department characteristics that might be beyond the typical awareness of routine officers were included in the survey created for chiefs. Items about department characteristics were drawn from Gibbs (2021) that captured chiefs' agreement with their department staffing adequacy, morale, and salary sufficiency for officer retention.

Items were constructed to capture variation in agreement about statements relevant to experiences throughout the coronavirus pandemic (e.g. March 2020 to September 2022). Six open-ended questions prompted chiefs to consider how their departments were impacted biannually since March 2020. Each question provided specific events in Pennsylvania (e.g. the Governor's initiation of a statewide lockdown) to situate the respondent in a specific time to improve the accuracy of their memory. An additional six questions asked both chiefs and officers to share how the coronavirus impacted them individually (i.e. outside their professional responsibilities).

Findings

Sample characteristics

The sample includes 35 police chiefs, a majority who self-identified as White (88.6%), one as Black and Hispanic/Latino (2.9%), and three (8.5%) indicated no race/ethnicity. Most chiefs were men (91.4%), but few (8.6%) reported no specific gender. Chiefs reported an average of 15 years with their current department and ten years in leadership. The highest level of education among chiefs varied, with 60% of chiefs completing some college education, obtained a bachelor's degree, or an advanced degree. More than half of the responding chiefs (51.4%) reported annual salaries of $50,000 to $74,999. Five police officers responded to the survey request. These officers self-identified as White men with an average of five years in their current role, and all reported having some college education, earning a bachelor's, or an advanced degree. Officer salaries varied with 40% earning $50,000 or less, another 40% earning $50,000 to $74,999, and 20% reporting a salary of over $100,000.

Department operations

Chiefs were queried about their department's implementation of vaccine mandates, ability to work remotely, and offering of public health emergency response training. A majority (91.4%) reported that their departments did not implement vaccine mandates through early 2023, while only 8.6% said that their departments did require vaccinations. Only 2.9% of chiefs had any member of their staff (i.e. sworn, or non-sworn) work remotely during the peak pandemic period and this remained consistent at the time of survey. Most chiefs (88.6%) and officers (80%) said their departments did not implement training related to the pandemic; however, 54.3% of chiefs and 40% of officers believed training to be beneficial.

Chiefs were asked to report their level of agreement toward department staffing, salary sufficiency for officer retention, and morale throughout the pandemic. To capture variability across pandemic stages, chiefs were asked to report on the availability of resources during specific annual quarters (e.g. spring, summer, and fall of 2020; winter 2020/2021; spring and fall of 2021; winter 2021/2022; and spring and summer of 2022). On average, less than half of chiefs (45.7%) agreed that their departments were staffed adequately from 2020 through 2022. It is important to note the staffing question was broad and captured both sworn and non-sworn personnel. Over the same period, only 28.5% of chiefs agreed that existing salaries were enough to retain officers. Although, about half of chiefs (51.4%) agreed that their department had good morale. This indicates that chiefs recognized important staffing issues related to the pandemic, but officers were not asked about their perceptions of staffing adequacy.

Communication capabilities of rural departments varied throughout the pandemic. Chiefs and officers alike reported the use of technological tools for intra-department communication. During the peak pandemic period, 77.1% of chiefs and all sampled officers utilized multiple methods of communication (e.g. emails, face-to-face, two-way radios, department-issued mobile phone, personal mobile phones, instant messaging system, social media, and internal memo distribution). Among chiefs (62.8%) and officers (100%), the most frequent type of

communication was daily, face-to-face interactions with other sworn officers in their department. These communication practices remained steady after the peak period of the pandemic. However, there was a 3% increase in chiefs who reported being the sole officer in their department after March 2020, suggesting a loss of personnel or changes to the administrative structure within those rural departments. Communication via social media platforms had a strong presence in rural policing. More than half of chiefs (62.9%) reported that their department had a social media account. Moreover, the use of these accounts was substantial and included matters related to public safety (e.g. road closures), community affairs (e.g. scheduling of events), and best practices related to the pandemic (e.g. responses during lockdown mandates).

According to chiefs, the most common department-wide adjustment was the implementation of PPE. It became common during the preliminary stages of the pandemic for officers to minimize contact with residents and resolve calls for service over the telephone. Some municipal officials questioned the number of arrests and other quantifiable outcomes (e.g. arrest, ticketing offenses) related to police work that departments produced, in opposition to pre-pandemic expectations.

> It was hard. Borough officials reported department numbers went down and were informed that it was due to less person-to-person contact. Residents were used to us arriving at their location to discuss and handle their problems face-to-face instead of via telephone or other electronic means.

Some chiefs were uneasy about increased professional responsibilities. Chiefs strategized about how to implement new protocols that required use of PPE and sanitizing equipment (e.g. shared vehicles). Staffing also became a concern as officers and chiefs alike became infected with the coronavirus. Several officers found themselves in periods of quarantine, and this caused several reports of staffing shortages. Thus, allocation of sufficient officers for each shift to maximize jurisdictional coverage became challenging and some departments shared responsibilities with the Pennsylvania State Police. As a result, several respondents who were not infected reported working overtime to keep up with the demand of calls for service for medical-related assistance during the peak pandemic period. Chiefs also expressed concerns of understaffing that predated the coronavirus pandemic.

> Retention and hiring have become more difficult than any other time in our department's history.

Around early 2021, some chiefs and officers in rural municipalities were given the opportunity to obtain vaccination against the coronavirus. However, there were reservations that vaccination would become mandatory. One officer was offered a cash incentive to obtain the vaccine, but it was unclear whether the officer complied. Another growing concern among chiefs during this time stemmed from a lack of financial support.

> Prices of everything went sky high, even for police equipment. Smaller departments struggle, while larger ones get grants and better services.

In summer 2021, chiefs reported normalcy in their work as calls for service began to increase, specifically traffic enforcement and drug-related offenses. While one chief expressed overall dissatisfaction with the profession and enforcement of pandemic control mandates, a majority were relieved to reengage with residents in their rural municipalities, grateful for their colleagues, and optimistic that the worst of the pandemic was over.

> It was challenging but all the officers stepped up and we got through it.

Chiefs experienced a return to pre-pandemic policing by the spring of 2022. Monitoring how departments were responding to domestic violence calls became a customary practice for chiefs. Compared to 2020, there was a decrease in domestic violence calls related to conflicts stemming from pandemic lockdowns in 2022.

In early to mid-2022, officers were still hesitant about vaccines, while chiefs reported feelings of reassurance to engage with citizens face-to-face upon vaccination. Some chiefs reported that their local borough officials tried to mandate vaccines, in opposition of officer attitudes. This resulted in grievances filed by local police unions. Less than one-third of chiefs and less than half of officers reported no professional challenges related to the pandemic. Some chiefs reasoned that even in times of public health crises, it is their responsibility to protect the public.

> [The pandemic] didn't [affect the department], we have a requirement to provide public safety and continue with our duties albeit somewhat restricted.

A few respondents said the coronavirus was fake, tied to political gain, and that the enforcement of statewide mitigation mandates infringed upon individual constitutional rights.

> The pandemic was bullshit. A scare tactic used to continue [facilitating] weak-minded people and interfere with an election.

Police-community relations

Respondents shared experiences about changes in their communication efforts. Chiefs (48.6%) and officers (60%) reported multiple methods of communication daily with the public during the peak period of the pandemic, while 25.7% of chiefs resorted exclusively to face-to-face or other forms of reaching the public. The most common form of communication with residents reported by chiefs was face-to-face (62.8%), followed by social media (34.2%), and emails (31.4%). Among officers, emails and face-to-face (30%) and social media platforms (40%) were the most common methods to communicate with residents. In gauging current practices, chiefs shared information about whether their departments had a designated community representative (i.e. an individual who shared information from the police back to its community and vice versa) to facilitate community interactions. Only 14.3% reported having a community representative and 2.9% of chiefs were unsure whether such a position existed. In departments that had a community representative, the position was held by an elected official (e.g. the mayor) and one department had a sworn officer that led community meetings regularly.

Enforcement of lockdown measures and resistance to enforcement. The relationship between rural residents and rural police experienced some tension when the pandemic began. Ties with community members were tense in several rural municipalities for differences related to the acceptance of statewide mandates during the peak period of the pandemic. During this period, departments had less face-to-face contact with members of their community to maximize protection of residents. More than half of chiefs (60%) but less than half of officers (40%) reported resistance from municipal residents. In response to such resistance, chiefs (60%) and officers (40%) reported using de-escalation tactics (e.g. verbal reasoning) as opposed to other compliance tactics (e.g. issuing monetary fines or making an arrest). However, there were reports of uncooperative residents.

> I believe this [minimizing face-to-face contact] hampered the relationships we built up years prior. Residents were used to us arriving at their location to discuss and handle their problems face-to-face instead of via telephone or other electronic means.

Chiefs expressed concern about whether additional lockdowns would occur during the fall of 2020.

> I believe people were still confused and somewhat controversial with their beliefs on mask mandates, especially with their use in certain public places and businesses. Students were trying to get back to a new normal, with anxiety running high, and a lot of people [were concerned] on when things could be shut down again.

However, as time went on, there was an influx of community members out in public during the summer of 2021 and interactions increased. Chiefs expressed that these face-to-face encounters increased morale and positive relationships among police and their communities.

> Morale picked up again. Community was happy and treated us better.

Community engagement grew further in 2022. Mask mandates were lifted and allowed rural police to engage in events with local youths and other municipal residents. In June 2022, rural municipalities held community functions, allowing for visible engagement between police and residents. Yet, some chiefs maintained that community ties were diminished.

> Public relations with the police were not the same. Two years were basically lost, we were working close with the public creating a better rapport.

Officer well-being

Respondents reported their physical (e.g. walking) and mental well-being (e.g. ability to cope with normal stresses of life) practices. Practices varied among respondents. Less chiefs (80%) reported self-initiated physical exercise, compared to officers (100%), and respondents expressed use of multiple methods of physical exercise. Among chiefs, the most common type of exercise was walking (57.1%), followed by weightlifting (51.4%), running (20%), farming or other employment (8.6%), and yoga (2.9%). Similarly, most officers reported walking (60%) as their most usual form of exercise, followed by weightlifting (40%), running (40%), and yoga (20%). Respondents described exercising mostly at home (60%), followed by work (34.2 and 40% respectively), and a local fee-based gym (31.4 and 40% respectively). Less common among respondents was the use of a local public or department-sponsored facility, and neither chiefs nor officers reported department-sponsored event(s) as a source of physical exercise for themselves. Chiefs (17.1%) and officers (20%) reported self-initiated practices of mental well-being. Among chiefs, physical exercise was the most usual form of mental well-being (11.4%) followed by counseling (2.9%), and an unspecified practice (2.9%). One officer indicated engagement in meditation daily. Compared to pre-pandemic times, chiefs and officers reported their engagement with mental well-being remained equivalent to levels experienced post-pandemic.

Department offerings and use of mental health services. Respondents reported their individual use of department and/or private services. Most chiefs (62.9%) confirmed that their department offered of mental health services, some (17.1%) stated they were absent, while a few (5.7%) were unsure whether such services existed. Comparatively, only 20% of officers confirmed that their departments offered mental health services, and a majority (80%) did not. Some chiefs (17.1%) and officers (20%) reported use of private mental health services (i.e. counseling) about 2–3 times a week. Among respondents who used private services, most reported less frequent use at the time of survey, compared to the initial stages of the pandemic.

While 62.9% of chiefs and 20% of officers expressed having mental health services offered in their departments, none of these respondents reported ever using such services. Some chiefs shared the sorts of services rural departments offered.

> There are inquiries about officer well-being at all council meetings . . . the mayor meets with officers and superior officers . . . we have open discussions and are presented research with current best practices.

Chiefs provided insight into the initiatives their departments should conduct to ensure officer wellness. Although, chiefs recognized that not all officers need these services. Several respondents reported that the pandemic took a toll on their individual experiences since March 2020.

> While on duty, I was infected with COVID-19. I was concerned that my children would be infected. [Therefore] I lived in the basement to avoid contact with my family.

When the pandemic began and chiefs implemented mitigation policies, they also reported spending more time at home and with family.

> We had to adjust our employment hours to assist with our own children who were now being schooled virtually . . . children seemed to be worried more about a parent getting sick and or dying from the virus.

Chiefs were concerned for family, childcare, the quality of remote education, and the difficulty of children adjusting to the rapid shift of an online learning environment.

> [My] childcare needs [were affected]. Remote school was poor. Children had a hard time learning.

As time passed, chiefs expressed frustration with members of their social circles and with residents about the lack of interest in obtaining vaccinations that might promote public safety. Chiefs who opted to get vaccinated reportedly experienced shame from members of their communities. Overall, respondents provided insight into current self-initiated ways to cope with the increased workload of first responders during a public health emergency.

Discussion

The coronavirus pandemic had measurable effects on rural policing. Yet, even in one state, experiences across police departments and officers were not universal. First, rural municipal police experienced many operational challenges including chiefs' reports of officer morale throughout the pandemic. Department morale became an area of concern, and this is likely due to the effort exerted by first responders during public health emergencies. However, almost half of chiefs agreed that morale was relatively good in their department throughout the pandemic and steadily improved between spring 2020 and summer 2022. This study focused on experiences during the pandemic, but it is unclear whether variations of morale can be associated with social movements and sentiments of law enforcement occurring across the globe before or throughout the pandemic.

As expected, staffing shortages played a role in department operational capacities during the pandemic with great concern among chiefs during winter 2021/2022. Declining attitudes related to officer salaries and retention peaked in winter 2021/2022. Across Pennsylvania, part-time policing is common and thus, perhaps these roles are supplemental to full-time employment. It is also possible that smaller municipalities genuinely do not command a large police force based on population density when compared to larger jurisdictions. Overall, challenges with officer recruitment and retention appear to be a growing area of concern unrelated to any pandemic effects. Future studies might consider assessing motivations for seeking the profession itself and evaluating the attraction to police work in rural areas.

Contrary to prior public health crises, respondents reported no conflict communicating effectively within their communities. Existing communication practices (e.g. face-to-face interactions) were beneficial for most respondents. Given the population sizes and rural nature of the jurisdictions included in this study, even without PPE, encounters between the residents and police continued because they were likely limited in frequency and interpersonal proximity. Like past analyses of social media use among major metropolitan police departments (see Farmer and Copenhaver, 2022; Hu *et al.*, 2022), over one-third of chiefs and officers used social media platforms. As the value of social media continues to expand, future studies could examine rural community attitudes towards the significance of social media generally and in times of crisis. Do rural police have the capacity to add this mechanism to communicate with residents? Is this beneficial for residents in various rural

areas? These questions can be a part of a systematic approach to further understand the needs of rural police across the United States.

Additional areas that should be considered operational concerns, such as intra-department communication protocols and the availability of resources necessary when policing during a public health emergency yielded interesting findings. Unlike prior emergencies, most rural police did not experience difficulties with intra-departmental collaboration, but rather, relied on state police for support. The decentralized police model of rural policing in Pennsylvania might have led to greater adaptations of operational independence that are practical in times of crisis. Future examinations must pay attention to how small rural police departments support one another regularly and the extent of their operational partnerships. Findings could provide practical details about reimagining geographical allocation for police officer recruitment, training, and jurisdictional responsibilities.

Service needs and pandemic preparedness that were lacking in several other parts of the country were evident in rural Pennsylvania. Respondents indicated that calls for service decreased during the peak period of the pandemic (with exceptions to domestic disputes and medical assistance) but then gradually increased over early 2021 and into the summer of 2022. Practically, expecting changes in demand for rural police during times of crisis can encourage police leaders to contemplate the best ways to prepare and direct individual officers. Maintaining adequate materials for police departments in times of crisis continues to be an ongoing challenge in most rural agencies across Pennsylvania and requires budgetary attention and additional training. Other concerns expressed by chiefs included pressure from municipal officials to meet operational outcomes and learning to navigate vaccine mandates. During a public health crisis, non-law enforcement municipal officials must account for the shift in police demands that could alter traditional law enforcement workloads and measurable policing outcomes (e.g. issuance of citations or prioritizing different types of calls for service).

Second and consistent with prior inquiries, police-community relations experienced some challenges. Rural chiefs reported declining relationships specifically tied to the enforcement of statewide pandemic mitigation mandates. During the peak period of the pandemic chiefs experienced resistance to enforcement, but gradual improvements in public sentiments toward the police occurred through 2022. To prepare for future public health emergencies first responders must consider anticipated resistance and introduce responses in ways that help to mediate public concerns. Moreover, the findings in this study indicated that in some rural municipalities, local elected officials serve as the voice of residents regarding police matters. This leads to a proposed line of inquiry – how do rural officials navigate the relationships they hold with rural police and residents? What happens when the municipal officials have conflicting demands from rural police and residents? Ethnographic work that allows for an in-depth understanding of the rural dynamics of these relationships and an appreciation for multi-faceted social contexts can best explain these questions.

Another aspect of police-community relationships is related to how some chiefs described the enforcement of statewide pandemic mitigation policies. Reluctance to enforce pandemic mitigation policies could be related to an individual's political ideology. Throughout the pandemic, public discourse on appropriate responses to the pandemic was heated and presumed best practices often aligned with very personal and political beliefs. The extent to which these systems of beliefs affected officers' decisions to enforce pandemic mitigation policies is unknown. It would be reasonable for future investigations to directly assess how the influence of political belief systems and other personal characteristics are related to this form of police discretion. According to respondents, enforcement mandates were usually delivered by local public officials and these messages may have been different from those provided by the state government.

It is possible that rural police chiefs and officers respect the opinions of those with whom they have more intimate relationships, and the discrepancy in messages about pandemic mandates could affect their decision to enforce emerging strategies. Personal decisions about enforcement are likely to be related to officers' appreciation for community relationships and other unmeasured factors. The extent to which these decisions are affected by perceptions of self-legitimacy was not examined here, but it is possible that an officer's measure of self-legitimacy dictates their resilience and ability to make tough decisions or act in ways that are unsupported by popular opinion. Prior work on self-legitimacy suggests that individual officers view their police authority in relation to how they are recognized by their supervisors (Tankebe, 2022), peers (Tankebe, 2019) and public support (Bradford and Quinton, 2014). Thus, future scholarship could build on the findings presented here by examining the political dynamics of rural communities and how they impact officer-community relationships and officer's self-assessment of their professional value.

Third, officer wellness continues to be an area of concern. In prior public health emergencies, officers reported an array of wellness concerns (Laufs and Waseem, 2020), and support for officers to openly address their well-being is expanding. During the pandemic, chiefs reported that officers in their departments engaged in group discussion and were informed about best practices. Examining existing voluntary wellness practices was informative. While most respondents said they exercised regularly, very few reported self-initiated engagements with mental well-being practices. Rural police agencies might be restricted by budgetary limitations or convenient access to appropriate health care. Notably, no respondent who reported having departmental mental health services available ever used them, so a different concern might be related to existing stigma with seeking adequate help. Respondents also shared how the pandemic impacted their personal lives. This should draw attention to attempts that facilitate meaningful approaches to creating a better work-life balance. Furthermore, future studies should consider examining the dual roles officers hold as professionals and as members of their own community, related to issues of self-legitimacy mentioned above.

Stogner *et al.* (2020) argued that leadership must account for training that fosters environments where mental health is a priority. Some aspects of police organizational culture have historically discouraged individual officers from seeking help. A shift in culture by officers is evident, but such a shift is difficult, gradual, and requires internal support from line officers and their administrative leaders. Coordinating regular workshops or seminars on mental health for police leadership may be a good first step to building awareness. Most respondents indicated self-initiated physical well-being practices, but raising awareness about mental well-being to the status of physical well-being could produce better departments and officers through enhanced morale with ancillary benefits that extend to improvements in police-community relationships. The extent to which this is necessary during heightened periods of stress such as public health emergencies is unknown.

The limitations in the present study could be remedied through different methodological approaches. Findings from this study do not represent all rural municipal police across Pennsylvania, or anywhere else. It is possible that the sampling strategy may not have captured the totality of eligible members of the chief and officer population in rural areas of the state (e.g. outdated contact information). Guided by a narrow conceptual framework, this study may have ignored other effects that public health emergencies might have on officers, chiefs, and their institutions. Finally, the study was exploratory and descriptive, and future work should include a combination of survey strategies that allow for advanced statistical analyses combined with fieldwork (e.g. direct observations and interviews) that can capture broadly the experiences of multiple stakeholders.

Conclusion

Public safety and public health officials frequently find themselves in crisis response (Wood and Griffin, 2021) and this was evident in rural Pennsylvania. As the pandemic appears to be in the past, considerations must be given towards improving multiple components of rural policing experiences during public health emergencies. Using Laufs and Waseem's (2020) framework this study explored the effects of the coronavirus on rural police in municipalities across Pennsylvania. There are several issues in policing that precede the coronavirus, were inflated by the pandemic, and will surely still be apparent in a post-pandemic world.

Challenges to police-community relationships originated from disagreements about attitudes towards the enforcement of statewide public health mandates. However, several rural municipal chiefs reported optimistically that the relationships within their municipalities improved after the peak pandemic period (i.e. March 2020–June 2020). Continued assessments of officer wellness are essential for rural municipal departments and for rural citizens. In addition to developing a culture that accepts services for officer well-being, assessing the current rural mental health services and initiatives across police institutions is imperative. More information is needed on whether current strategies are available and accessible, utilized, and effective at improving the well-being of police officers. Widespread training should be considered for rural officers to identify what challenges they can expect and how to respond to them. Funding for such training is also necessary at multiple jurisdictional levels for such an endeavor. Police organizations should consider implementing policies that mandate budget reserves for potential public health emergency responses. Future decisions about responses to national emergencies must include members of the community who equally have a stake in how police officers react during public health emergencies.

Lastly, this study also uncovered unknown issues specific to rural policing in Pennsylvania. While the sample was not one of probability, departmental concerns across police leadership seemed almost uniform. Rural municipal departments like their non-rural neighbors are experiencing challenges related to police officer recruitment and retention. Some chiefs were concerned with maintaining competitive salaries for recruiting officers and hiring quality candidates. Other issues plaguing other organizations are with private sector security industries and federal law enforcement agencies offering full-time employment opportunities perceived to be better with hiring bonuses, wholistic benefit packages, and reimbursement for relocation. While the rural police context is a unique line of inquiry, policing as an institution suffers from consistent hurdles that require further empirical and practical assessments.

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