

# **‘Facebook is the Devil’: Exploring Officer Perceptions of Cyber-based Harms Facing Youth in Rural and Remote Communities**

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### Abstract

Policing research, still largely concentrated on urban contexts, is increasingly recognizing the unique features of police work in rural regions. Beyond notable differences such as lower overall levels crime and fewer (though more sporadically distributed) people, little is also known regarding rural police understandings and responses to online mediated harms, including relatively serious forms of cyberbullying, non-consensual ‘sexting’, and other forms of crime mediated online. Interviews with police officers (N = 42) here focus on their views regarding police work in response to cyber-mediated harm facing youth in rural and remote Atlantic Canada. Responses center on how rural regions play a role in mediating the nature of online conflict and police respond to such conflict. Officers highlight several related challenges, such as lack of parental support, and how some youth ‘define deviancy down’, referring to a lack of recognition regarding the harm caused by cyberbullying and non-consensual sexting (including issues related to the distribution of child pornography). Implications are discussed for research on rural policing where evidence-based practices remain lacking.

**Keywords:** rural policing; rural youth; cyberbullying; online harm and crime; focus groups

In Canada, there remains no formal criminal law for ‘cyberbullying’ or ‘sexting’. Rather, a range of informal and formal responses primarily from schools and law enforcement govern behaviours that produce conflict and harm related to online communications. Where particularly serious, existing Criminal Code violations ‘cover’ cyberbullying and related harms (such as non-consensual redistribution of intimate images related to sexting). Charges may include the sharing of intimate images without consent, criminal harassment, uttering threats, intimidation, and mischief in relation to data, among others (<https://www.canada.ca/en/public-safety-canada/campaigns/cyberbullying/cyberbullying-against-law.html>). In essence, supporting, assisting or doing online acts of harm are often equated to criminal charges which may (or may not) result in conviction.

Often, police responses to online conflict and harm link to reporting of incidents from parents and schools. School awareness campaigns aim to help instill digital citizenship among student cohorts and safeguard against potentially serious charges, including child pornography in relation to sexting (Bailey & Steeves, 2015; Fisk, 2016). The campaigns formalize definitions of cyberbullying and sexting for students, geared to pre-empt online conflicts and harms not only related to immediate parties involved, but wider bystanders who may witness harassment and abuse through social network sites (SNS) and other online forums. Schools appear to struggle to find the right balance between school-based ‘in house’ disciplinary responses that may involve parents and formal police involvement to incidents deemed more serious; a struggle related to definitional understandings of cyberbullying among administrators and students as well as parents (Campbell et al., 2019). However, research on how schools and law enforcement are responding to cyberbullying, as well as student perceptions and experiences with cyberbullying, remains centered on urban areas (boyd, 2014; Livingstone, 2009; Patchin et al., 2020). In Canada studies on rural crime and policing with a focus on youth is still emerging (e.g., Ruddell & O’Connor, 2021; Adorjan & Ricciadelli, 2017], and even less attention has been given to police responses to *cyber* conflicts in rural regions.

Our focus in this article is on police perceptions of rural cyber crime and community impacting youth, and related problems of responding to these crimes, particularly with youth, parents and schools. Rural areas continue to be a blind spot beyond the epistemological horizons of many criminologists, perhaps fueled by universities being centered in larger cities (Ruddell & O’Connor, 2021). Yet, it remains crucial to explore crime perceptions and responses in rural regions given their relatively higher rates of crime versus urban areas and sporadically distributed populations that challenge efficient police responses. Moreover, rural communities are often governed by informal practices that produce different role dynamics for police and opportunities to respond in ways often unavailable in urban regions (Donnermeyer & DeKeseredy, 2013; Huey & Ricciadelli, 2015].

In this article, we explicate key themes from focus group interviews with Royal Canadian Mounted Police (B Division) Unit Commanders, including corporals, constables, sergeants and staff sergeants, centered on perceptions of digitally mediated conflict and harm, primarily

in the forms of cyberbullying (i.e., understandings in relation to ‘traditional’ offline bullying) and sexting, and connections with issues of police response related to rural communities. The interviews were part of a wider project examining the rural policing of youth more broadly. In the current study, participants responses center on how rural regions play a role in mediating the nature of online conflict and how responses to such conflict. Officers highlight several related challenges, such as lack of parental support, and how some youth ‘define deviancy down’, referring to a lack of recognition regarding the harm caused by cyberbullying and non-consensual sexting (including issues related to the distribution of child pornography). Implications are discussed including directions forward considering the lack of best practice and evidence-based practices for rural policing.

### **Policing Cyberbullying and Sexting in Rural Regions: Communities, Social Ills and Online Harms**

Despite no formal criminal law against cyberbullying in Canada, some provinces, such as Nova Scotia, recently drafted a legal response to combat cyberbullying. Their legal response, however, was subsequently deemed unconstitutional given recent amendments to the Criminal Code (i.e., to respond to the distribution of ‘intimate images’ without consent); although some provinces have now developed civil responses.<sup>1</sup> Despite the ostensible clarity that the Criminal Code may provide, school and law enforcement responses to cyberbullying remain quickly troubled by issues of balancing formal and informal responses, as well as concerns related to the definition and reception of cyberbullying among young people. We now center our overview of research on definitional ambiguities related to cyberbullying, sexting and other forms of ‘cyber-risk’ and harm. As community dynamics and reception are key here, we explore the role of schools and police in response to the rather ambiguous space that is online harms. Much of the research we highlight, we caveat, is centered in larger cities, although we will gravitate our focus to the little that is known about police perceptions and responses to cyberbullying and sexting in rural regions.

Expanding upon previous definitions of offline bullying, cyberbullying may be operationalized as “willful and repeated harm inflicted through the use of computers, cell phones, and other electronic devices” (Hinduja & Patchin, 2015, p. 11; Olweus, 1978). Sexting may be defined as “sexual communication with content that includes both pictures and text messages, sent using cell phones and other electronic media” (Wolak & Finkelhor, 2011, p. 2). While cyberbullying and sexting retain distinct elements, both became central themes in discussions with police, when asked about responding to youth involved in online crime and harm.

Research on youth understandings of cyberbullying reveal how, despite sometimes strongly negative associations with cyberbullying instilled by school-based cyber-safety

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<sup>1</sup> In April 2013, Rehtaeh Parsons, a 15-year-old Nova Scotian, was taken off of life support three days after an attempted suicide by hanging in response to relentless cyberbullying and ‘slut shaming’. The Nova Scotia government introduced the new anti-cyberbullying legislation four months after her death (see Chiu, April 6, 2018).

programs, students may dismiss or not identify their actions as involving cyberbullying. For instance in cases where the harms of online aggression are dismissed or re-appropriated as ‘jokes’ or ‘pranks’ or ‘trolling’ (Fisk, 2016; Vandebosch & Cleemput, 2008; Walton, 2005; Adorjan & Ricciadelli, 2018]. In other words, cyberbullying denials may be another form of gaslighting (Holstein & Miller, 1997; Sweet, 2019), a rather hermeneutically based discord that troubles how schools may effectively respond, whether police should be involved, and related challenges. Students who do not identify cyberbullying as harmful (and possibly illegal) are not likely to be proactive in alerting educators, parents, or police about incidents.

Another factor complicating how schools decide to respond is that cyberbullying incidents may emerge outside the spatial and temporal boundaries of schools (i.e., before or after school hours, sometimes in response to offline incidents at school (Roher, 2012; Tokunaga, 2010). Nevertheless, schools in both the United States and Canada have been able to discipline students who engage in cyberbullying outside of school hours based on digital citizenship agreements and covenants aiming to responsabilize school communities (Hinduja & Patchin, 2011; Steeves, 2010). However, the ‘blurring of lines’ for schools, between what is versus is not within their purview of response, further troubles how schools should respond, including when police should be involved (Fisk, 2016; Livingstone & Sefton-Green, 2016), and points to difficulties related to students feeling those in positions of authority are unwilling, or unable to respond effectively (Li, 2010; Smith et al., 2008). Said differently, too often students feel unprotected from online harm. Given these challenges, school administrators may harbour jurisdictional uncertainties; for instance, clear awareness of the circumstances to which administrators are able to respond and that should involve parents and police (Young et al., 2017).

Despite many students not having *direct* experience with cyberbullying, sexting or related forms of harm and victimization (Hinduja & Patchin, 2015; Mitchell et al., 2012), these harms detrimentally impact the wider school culture, both with offline and online implications (Shariff & Gouin, 2006; Stewart & Fritsch, 2011). Questions about effective responses to online conflict and harm raise related questions about community perceptions and responses. Research on cyberbullying, however, is often focused on urban regions, with certain presumptions about transportation, population density, average school size, police resources and presence, internet access, and so forth (Reason et al., 2016).

While students in rural regions may use many of the same SNS as their urban contemporaries, the community dynamics in small towns and rural regions may fuel and exacerbate the stigma and harm produced by cyber conflict and aggression (see Jones, 2002; Wenham, 2020). Indeed, not all rural areas have widespread internet access available to residents, which changes dynamics and spaces around online engagement and thus harm. Perhaps in part of this reason – the lack of connectivity – Burkell and Saginur (2015, p. 145) found that female teens living in rural Canada had “smaller, more interconnected offline networks”, facilitating the “primary importance” of “offline relationships” (Burkell & Saginur, 2015, p. 145). These offline networks conceivably provide stronger social capital and sense of community than found in larger cities, though they may also play a strong role in

amplifying stigma and ostracization for youth targeted by cyberbullying (or any bullying, for the matter).

Reason et al. (2016) found conflict among older high school students living in rural Georgia centered on romantic relationship jealousy; intolerance of culture, religious, or sexual orientation; feelings of helplessness escaping cyberbullying, including feelings of rage. The students also expressed how the online affordance of anonymity led to more “bold and brazen” cyberbullying; cyberbullying that teachers, school administrators, and parents (who did not understand technology) were not equipped to help quell or respond (Reason et al., 2016, pp. 2337-2340). For instance, students who turned to teachers for help experienced being turned away, resulting in a lack of trust and likely stymying any possibility of further reporting (Reason et al., 2016, p. 2341). The same happened with police, as “When asked whether school officials or law enforcement officers could do anything to put an end to cyberbullying”, Reason et al. (2016, p. 2342) found “the unanimous response from the participants was a resounding ‘no’”. Some students, moreover, expressed that reporting cyber-incidents would only “exacerbate the problem” (Reason et al., 2016).

In Canada, the frequency and distribution of cyberbullying and cyberstalking is retrieved through Statistics Canada’s General Social Survey (GSS), the national crime victimization survey issued about every five years. The latest report we are aware of was issued in 2016, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. The report indicated that “in 2014, about 17% of the population aged 15 to 29 (representing about 1.1 million people) that accessed the Internet at some point between 2009 and 2014 reported they had experienced cyberbullying or cyberstalking” (Hango, 2016, p. 1).<sup>2</sup> The report also identified a higher risk prevalence for internet victimization among those 15 to 20 versus those 27 to 29 (20% versus 15%) (Hango, 2016, p. 4). The GSS report also indicated that, overall, household income was “fairly strong[ly]” related to the proportion of those who reported being cyberstalked, with “11% of individuals from households that earn less than \$40,000 said they were a victim of cyberstalking in the last five years, compared with about 5% for all other higher-income groups” (Hango, 2016).

Although studies on the prevalence of cyberbullying in rural regions is still emerging, the GSS report did not explore urban versus rural differences in depth, though there were some statistical trends more generally. For instance, in comparing the proportion of Internet users, aged 15 to 29, in rural versus urban areas reporting experiencing cyberbullying or cyberstalking in the prior five years, the reported percentage who were *neither* cyberbullying nor cyberstalked is 84 percent (rural) and 82.9 percent (urban) (Hango, 2016, p. 5). A slightly

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<sup>2</sup> The report defined cyberbullying as “typically consist[ing] of electronic messages that are intimidating or threatening for the recipient” and cyberstalking as “the repeated use of electronic communication in order to harass or frighten another person” (Hango, 2016, pp. 1-2). However, this operationalization strikes us as redundant given previous definitions that emphasize cyberbullying’s repetitive (if not relentless) nature and the requirement that it involve a power differential (Adorjan & Rocciadelli, 2018; Olweus, 1978). The operationalization is further troubled by the hermeneutic challenges of the term ‘reception’, especially among parents, educators and students.

greater percentage of respondents reported being both cyberbullied and cyberstalked in rural regions versus urban (5.8% versus 5.1%, respectively). Those reporting having been cyberbullied but not cyberstalked was higher in rural areas (6.6% versus 5.9%), while those reporting having been cyberstalked but not cyberbullied was higher in urban areas (6.1% versus 3.7%) (Hango, 2016, p. 5). Whilst beyond our scope in this current article to examine these trends, we suspect that much depends on the operationalization of these terms and how respondents identify with them or not.

Beyond official GSS data, a handful of studies have examined cyberbullying among youth in rural settings. Surveying 349 students between the ages of 12 to 16 years old in three rural schools in Australia, McLoughlin et al. (2009, p. 182) found 22 percent to have direct experiences of cyberbullying, with 71 percent of these cases involving other school students. Their findings accord with research in urban schools indicating conflict related to cyberbullying linked back to school cohorts (i.e., rather than anonymous strangers online) (Hinduja & Patchin, 2015). McLoughlin et al. (2009) also examined to whom young people were most likely to report cyberbullying. Most frequently, cyberbullying was reported to friends (approximately 45%), followed by parents (approximately 30%) and least of all teachers (15%) (McLoughlin et al., 2009, p. 184). Aycock (2020, p. 38) (see also Merikangas et al., 2011) also underscores the fact that:

rural students also have less access to community-based partners who might be able to help them address the mental health issues that often arise with cyberbullying. Due to the systemic challenges faced by rural schools, more than two thirds of students with mental health needs receive limited or inadequate care.

Perhaps the differences between urban and rural youth lies in the diverse internet access in the home and choice of SNS (i.e., which are most popular) between the two populations, differences that are decreasing overtime but remain noteworthy (Burkell & Saginur, 2015). Surveys conducted in 2009 and 2010 indicate almost 70 percent of rural households in Canada had home internet access versus just under 80 percent for their urban counterparts (Burkell & Saginur, 2015).

Yet, researchers also indicate that rural areas do often feature different community and policing dynamics when compared to urban. A recent survey (N=1791) of Saskatchewan residents (with the highest rate of rural crime, especially violent crime, in Canada) found “rural residents complain that police response times are slow and it may take hours before officers arrive after receiving urgent calls for service” (Ruddell & O’Connor, 2021, p. 107). Researchers have also found police to take on more informal roles in rural areas, including often responding to calls related to non-crime issues. This especially occurs when police reside in the same area as the communities they police; communities which get to know officers informally as much as in uniform (Jiao, 2001; Payne et al., 2005; Taylor & Lawton, 2012; Weisheit et al., 1994). In addition, youth residing in rural areas express greater distrust and negative perceptions than adults, sometimes expressing doubt about police effectively responding to and preventing crime in their area (Hurst, 2007; Nofziger & Williams, 2005;

Adorhan & Ricciadelli, 2017]. Ruddell and O'Connor's (2021, p. 116) sample of Saskatchewan rural residents also found that:

Males, younger respondents, rural residents, victims of crime, people who thought crime was increasing, and those who thought their communities were unsafe, all rated the police as doing a poorer job.

Moreover, Ruddell and O'Connor (2021, p. 115) found that individuals who expressed feeling 'unsafe' or 'very unsafe' were less likely than those indicating feeling safe to agree that police 'did a good job' in fulfilling their occupational responsibilities.

An ongoing challenge for those seeking to respond to cyberbullying among youth in rural areas is determining the 'definition of the situation' regarding school and police responses. For instance, police in rural areas are often perceived in more informal roles, including as peace keepers and social workers as much as law enforcement officials (Huey & Ricciadelli, 2015). Research based in the United States with police has found police express uncertainty regarding their role in responding to bullying (Patchin et al., 2013).

Patchin et al. (2013) found school resource officers and law enforcement leaders attending the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) National Academy agree a law enforcement response is warranted in situations involving physical harm; however, they also argue that police should not ignore or dismiss cyberbullying in jurisdictions without criminal statutes on cyberbullying. In a follow-up survey of 1,596 law enforcement supervisors attending the FBI's National Academy program, Patchin et al. (2020, pp. 144-145) found increases in the number of officers who felt the police had a role to play in responding to cyberbullying, "especially for non-crime behaviors". However, more informal incidents of online harm were dismissed as not warranting police action; for example, "students making fun of a principal online". Their findings may result from having more engagement and experiences with youth being cyberbullied over time (the researchers found a 60% increase in understanding of the role of police in online incidents). "This suggests," Patchin et al. (2020, p. 145) argue, "that knowledge of the context and environment within which these behaviors occur may be a determinant of the type and amount of social control (informal vs formal) that is exerted in response to such acts".

Patchin et al. (2020, p. 145) conclude that "future research might explore actual officer responses to cyberbullying incidents to supplement what was learned about perceptions". Similar research is emerging in Canada. Broll and Huey's (2015) interviews with Canadian police and school resource officers sought to ascertain what police thought constitutes the best law enforcement responses to cyberbullying. They recruited officers from both a medium-sized city and smaller rural communities in southwestern Ontario. Overall, their participating officers did not support criminalization of cyberbullying (i.e., the creation of laws specifically to combat cyberbullying), with "concern[s] about the burden that such laws will place on already strained criminal justice systems. In particular, eight of 12 participants were concerned with the prospect of having to charge youth for being mean to



one another” (Broll & Huey, 2015, p. 163). Police also expressed frustration over parents who called to report incidents deemed inconsequential. From the officers’ experience, schools should only call police for relatively serious incidents of cyberbullying.

The research we explicate in our article zeros in on police responses to youth involved with online conflict and harm (specifically cyberbullying and sexting) in rural Atlantic Canada. We turn first to our study methodology. Findings center on police understandings of cyberbullying and sexting – i.e., how they define cyberbullying and compare it to offline bullying, and the sort of incidents of cyberbullying and sexting to which they have responded. We then turn to broader views of community, specifically rural community dissolution and the role of parents in mediating online harm.

### **Methodology**

We conducted, between 2013 and 2015, 14 focus groups with officers (N = 49) and 104 one-to-one interviews with officers, including unit commanders and officers at the ranks of constable, corporal, staff sergeant and sergeant. The full dataset includes 134 officers, as some participated in both focus groups and interviews. The federal police service in Canada, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, employed all participants, who were posted to detachments in rural, remote, Northern or Indigenous communities in the province under study.

The areas under the jurisdiction of each detachment, for which our participants were responsible to police, varied in size, with some being upwards of over 2,200 square kilometers. Given the vast geographic diversity that structured our data collection, we conducted focus groups at three distinct multi-day meetings/training sessions held in the capital city. For interviews, we made trips to detachments, including a cross province road trip. Participation was all voluntary; most participants were not working in their home community, worked fulltime hours, and their ages ranged from early 20s to late 50s. In total, over 90 percent of participants self-identified as white; others as Indigenous (e.g., Mi’kmaq). Fewer participants were self-identifying as women versus men, which is consistent with the gender composition of the police service.

We conducted semi-structured, in-depth, focus group and interview discussions, each lasting approximately one hour. All focus groups and interviews occurred in private spaces at headquarters or at detachments. Interviews were one-on-one, while focus groups included three to five participants and were also designed to elucidate insight into group experiences and interaction; i.e., to encourage conversation about participants’ shared experiences and move beyond opinions to collective interpretations (Morgan, 1998, p. 20). Interviews were designed to elicit personal perspectives, experiences, and interpretations. Together the dataset is complementary and provides a comprehensive ‘picture’ of policing youth in terms of online harm in rural communities.

We employed a guide of open-ended items, although this only served as a checklist and guide as we prioritized the conversational paths as each emerged in conversation. The items focused on police work in rural, remote or Northern areas, youth policing needs and experiences, as well as experiences of occupational stress and risk. Our focus, however, was determined by the interest of the participants and what they choose to disclose – we privileged their voices and sought to learn from them (Marshall & Rossman, 2014). To this end, during focus groups we tried to ensure all participated and shared views and experiences. We recognized that focus groups arguably impose a “minimum of artificiality of response”, but also “have a certain ecological validity not found in traditional survey research” (Stewart et al. 2007, p. 39). Thus, we used the method to elucidate more hermeneutic factors and situate lived experiences (Girling et al., 2000; Stoutland, 2001).

All data collection was in English, digitally voice recorded, and transcribed verbatim. We coded all transcripts using a constructed semi-grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006; Ricciadelli et al., 2010). Constituting a central emergent theme was occurrences where multiple participants described interpretations and experiences. We relied on NVivo software for the initial coding, but subsequent recodes occurred manually; i.e., we did axial coding and ensured the shared qualities of responses were grouped (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). We quote participants verbatim to demonstrate the themes but use pseudonyms for participants and locations. We also removed speech fillers, as they are not relevant to the quotes.

Our results proceed with first unpacking police perceptions of cyberbullying, including physical bullying versus cyberbullying, and the changing understandings community members have, especially youth who ‘define deviance down’ and the implications for police response. Related challenges such as the relatively limited resources police have in rural regions are also discussed. We then highlight concerns police have with students not recognizing online mediated conflict and harm, including the implications for youth who do not recognize the implications of sexting, especially given implications for youth to be charged with child pornography. These issues are discussed with implications for small rural communities, including stigma and community dissolution, and the appropriateness of responding to relatively ‘minor’ conflicts that may be responded to in other ways beyond formal police action. The discussion which follows highlights key themes, study limitations and directions forward.

## Results

### Rural Police Understandings of Cyberbullying

Independent of the rural context, some officers articulated that online bullying, despite recognizing the online medium reshapes communications, does not necessarily change the nature of bullying; i.e., that it becomes ‘old wine in new bottles’ (Li, 2007). For instance, Mary and Reese reflect on the ‘new visibility’ of cyberbullying. Mary says “because you see it, right? Things like bullying. It used to be kind of behind closed doors and no one would see it. Now it’s all over Facebook”. Reese agrees:

That's right. The physical bullying is probably exactly the same. All we as a society [have done] is given them another avenue in which to bully people. That's through the cyberspace world. I don't think that you've found new bullies. I think the same bully that would have bullied you 15 years ago is the same one that was bullying you online. I don't think you've created a new class of bully. It's just the same people; they've just found a different outlet in which to reach into your life.

Here, Reese and Mary articulate that bullying has not really changed; instead the methods have changed as well as the visibility of bullying.

The police role is intricately embroiled in responding to cyberbullying, as cyberbullying involves ascertaining if calls to police reporting cyberbullying qualify according to criminal code violations. Our interviews revealed tension regarding the reporting of cyberbullying incidents that some of the officers felt did not warrant a serious concern. For instance, an officer reflects on cyberbullying on Facebook:

Oh it's unreal. Facebook harassment, unwanted text messages and it's just childish stuff too. Someone will call you and be like well so and so is calling me names I want them charged. Well first of all, I'm not going to charge them for that because they are not threatening you. It is slander and that's civil. But they expect us to deal with all their problems, whereas 10-15 years ago you would deal with that yourself. Or parents would deal with that themselves right.

The officer's words suggest a process of 'defining deviance down' operating in rural Atlantic Canada with respect to community perceptions of what constitutes cyberbullying, referring to previously innocuous or less serious behaviours and transgressions coming to police attention. A similar point is raised by Jack:

And I'm finding now that you know I've been in this particular spot for almost four years now and I'm finding a big difference. I got that initially, because even the people before me didn't do [investigations into bullying]. And now I get you know people calling me, all the principals are on speed dial. All I got to do is, you know I get a phone call constantly, constantly. Like my phone goes from 6 o'clock until 11 o'clock in the night just constantly picking it up talking to kids.

Such remarks suggest tensions within rural police forces who feel they are unable to effectively respond to incidents they perceive to be relatively innocuous; incidents that are placing stress on their time and resources. In addition, at times, police referred to the issue of defining deviance down related to more general issues germane to young people reporting incidents. For instance, Pat said "you get a few of the kids around here that are just constantly calling because they don't know how to deal with stuff on their own". The officer makes a more specific reference to online mediated conflict and harm in their interview when asked what youth call in for:

Interviewer: Yeah. What do they call about?

Pat: Ah, just like... A lot of times it's just petty stuff, right? "So and so took my bike", or "So and so said they're going to..." The big thing now is just ... I mean social media.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Pat: Oh, "So and so is saying that I'm a fucking slut on Facebook", or, "They're spreading rumours about me", and this and that, and I'm like...

Interviewer: It's not criminal.

Pat: No, no.

Here, Pat expresses a distinction between criminal activity online and harm online that is hurtful but not criminal, which policing resources (and processes) do not allow for investigative support. Some of the behaviours identified as 'nuisances' for police to respond to here, moreover, involve 'slut shaming' on Facebook, which is often linked to more serious, criminal cases of 'revenge porn' (Bates, 2017; McGlynn, Rackley & Houghton, 2017). We will return to the significance of police response to the 'continuum' of image based sexual violence in the discussion below. On the topic of limited resources to respond to technology-related crime, Mark reflects:

Well you got one tech crime [unit] you got it here in [the town], that's based in [the town] where every file that involves an electronic device where this was transmitted, or forwarded or taken goes here for processing. So I mean you look at it and they only have three members in that unit so their work is piling up. So this one little picture that Johnny took in my town, bottom of the list.

Jack agrees, adding:

And again, like we were saying earlier, rightfully so for the intent of what it was for. So you can go after the creatures, creeps that are actually abusing it right. Like I said it's not designed for the 15 year old girl who sends her 17 year old boyfriend a picture.

The limited resources for processing online harm, including the need for advanced technological supports and expertise hinder the investigation of all reported online incidents, impacting the police role and their obligations and desires.

One of the challenges facing those wishing to respond effectively to cyberbullying are those regarding how young people understand cyberbullying. Researchers on youth understandings and experiences of cyberbullying often find that students are receptive to messaging about the severity of cyberbullying, though may not acknowledge their own harmful actions online as cyberbullying. Rather, students may discursively rationalize

behaviours that cause harm to other students as ‘trolling’, or ‘just jokes’ and other forms of gaslighting (Adorjan & Ricciardelli, 2019). Gaslighting refers to “a type of psychological abuse aimed at making victims seem or feel ‘crazy,’ creating a ‘surreal’ interpersonal environment” (Sweet, 2019, p. 851). Our interviewees reveal police in rural Atlantic Canada are experiencing this same phenomena with young people in their communities. For instance, Mickey reflects on their work with the Violence Action Committee in their community:

We’ve had a little, cyberbullying has come up as issues... we’ve got members from the school and of course it’s a committee so all aspects of the community. And it’s been brought up that cyber bullying is an issue. I’m surprised the kids don’t, do they not see it or do they not, but they don’t think it’s as big an issue as [unclear].

Here, Mickey explains the disconnection between perceptions from committee members versus youth of their interpretations of cyberbully. In this sense, cyberbullying is arguably becoming so common place, some youth are finding it palatable rather than always abrasive. Another focus group of officers further discuss youth deflection of responsibility in the context of both sexting and cyberbullying:

Craig: And the sexting just, they don’t see anything wrong with it. They don’t realize what it’s going to mean later on.

Rick: In some cases cyberbullying led to suicide.

Dick: It just adds fuel to the fire right.

Craig: You talk to the kids about that, especially the older ones will go, [they] *think it’s a big deal about nothing*, that’s what a lot of them say. Like they’ll go, *this [isn’t] cyberbullying*.

Dick: That’s more deflecting than anything. [added emphases]

These officers express how some youth fail to see the problem and harm that comes from cyberbully – which was particularly pronounced, as we will now turn, in discussions of sexting and the sharing of nude images.

### **Sexting, Naïve Teens and (Challenging) Gendered Responsibilities**

While discussing the various online mediated forms of harm experienced by youth in their detachments, officers referred to youth as naïve, especially in the context of sexting and not recognizing their actions as constituting child pornography. In one focus group Matt refers to some problems involving sexting in the community: “we’ve had some sexual assault things with, we’ve had some incidences with video, guys are into videotaping and doing stuff with girls. Or not videotaping but taping, video recording on their phones and stuff”. Asked by the interviewer “Do they recognize that constitutes child porn?”, Matt responds:

Not until they get in front of me or in front of one of our members and they're like, *like a deer in the headlights*, you've just made child pornography and distributed it because you sent it to all your buddies. And we haven't had a lot of complaints of it but I have been told by members of the community that it's happening more frequently than is getting reported. Sometimes you know with the consent of the girls, but the girls are, *I don't know if they realize* really or if they got it figured out, what they're doing, you know, what you're doing here.

Trent agrees, adding:

The majority of what we're dealing with is sexting, Facebook threats, cyberbullying and it's pretty prominent here too with regards to the underage people sending sexual photos. Like 14-15 year olds taking pictures of themselves naked and send to their boyfriend. And *it's child pornography by definition but they don't understand that*. [added emphasis]

Youth here, teenagers in particular, are framed as naïve to the realities of sending nude images online, not aware of the criminal charges they may, technically, incur as a result of doing so under child pornography laws. In Canada, there is some evidence to suggest police are often reluctant to charge youth with child pornography even where evidence exists to press charges (Broll & Huey, 2015; Dodge & Spencer, 2018). Nevertheless, nudes and sexting are cyber-risks facing youth; understandings of which are embroiled within larger cultural discourses related to patriarchy and gendered norms often 'responsibilizing' female teens much more than male teens (Angrove, 2015; Ringrose, Harvey, Gill & Livingstone, 2013).

Another important dimension regarding Mike and Terry's remarks is the focus on, what appears to be, female teen naivety and their untested but apparent considerable trust in whom with which they sext. Absent, among police, are remarks about male partners' responsibilities in the context of consensual relationships—the acts of males who breach trust. While Terry does not explicitly refer to "girls" as Mike does, his statement likely mediates a heteronormative presumption of "14-15 year olds" sending nudes to their "boyfriends". Researchers examining teen understandings of sexting often find a gendered double standard where female teens feel blame for sending nudes while rarely held accountable are male teens – or even considered in the wider discourse of responsibility (Adorjan & Ricciadelli, 2019). However, the trend of blaming female teens for sexting was not ubiquitous, even in the same focus group. Following Matt and Trent's remarks, Jack offered this reflection:

Year before last, the last school year (not last year's but the one just at the end of the school year), one of the guidance counselors was walking down the hall and the boys were ogling a nude picture of a girl. She happened to see it. They didn't see her. She grabbed the phone and looks at one of the students. Grade 7. She was home alone. Excellent family. Very nice people. *Know them personally*. She took a nude selfie of

herself in the mirror and texted it to her grade 8 boyfriend. *What do you think the fucking dough head did?* Click – send all ... You can't get it back. [added emphasis]

Jack's words indicate a rather pejoratively and strongly phrased castigation of a boyfriend for being a "dough head" and non-consensually sending out a nude image of his girlfriend. Not an isolated example of a young male being blamed for non-consensual redistribution – his behaviour is excused almost for being a "dough head", Jack offers another illustrative example:

I had another one, a kid in grade 9. They had a little game between five or six of the guys to go around and take pictures of the girls' breasts. And they were going around coaxing them, right? And these girls were flashing them. Give them a flash, take a picture. The guy who won actually had 60 pictures! This was a junior high... You know what he did? *He posted it to his Facebook page.* Well you know that lasted five minutes and oh the phone lines lit up and everybody blew up!

While the behaviour of (ostensibly naïve) teen girls is referred to, the emphasis placed by Jack is on the male perpetrator; that is, the arguable insensitivity of the youth who engaged in violating action. The officers' words collectively support that among RCMP in Atlantic Canada, there is not a singular focus on blaming girlfriends over boyfriends in heterosexual relationships where non-consensual sexting occurs. However, evidenced is a shared remarkable astonishment among police about what they are forced to deal with when policing youth who sext.

Our interviews with police revealed frustration over responding to sexting incidents where teens may 'define the situation' of sharing intimate images as consensual, coupled with a disregard for child pornography laws which, if they are aware of, they are likely to think either that the law does not apply to them, and/or that they do not risk any serious criminal justice consequence. Nevertheless, frequently, there are severe and stigmatizing impacts for youth, especially female teens, who have their nude images non-consensually redistributed (Angrove, 2015; Ringrose et al., 2013).

Perhaps, in rural, closely knit communities characterized by everyone knowing each other – and those who do not being 'outsiders' – brings an acute focus to the stigma experienced by young people compared with those residing in urban regions. For instance, discussing sexting and the potential of child pornography charges being applied to youth, one officer refers to community curiosity, stating: "everybody here wants to know about it".

Another officer, Shawn, echoes the argument that cyberbullying is 'old wine in new bottles' but also refers to the impacts on rural communities based on this new visibility. They say:

Twenty years ago parents didn't know half of what was going on because it wasn't broadcast. If you got called some nasty name at school, your best friend's parents

none of them knew that it had ever happened. But now it's on Facebook and the kids are bouncing it back and forth in texts and the entire community knows by supper time. That creates the illusion that the kids are rampant with crime and they're out of control, but they're not. In fact, well, almost 22 years now, I don't see any more youth crime now than I did when I started 20 years ago. It's just way more visible now.

Thus, what Shawn is speaking about is how far reaching cyberbully can penetrate in rural areas due to familiarity and knowledge between, among, and beyond community members. It is possible that youth feel such online violations, not differently, but with impacts in such communities.

### **Rural Community Dissolution**

A number of officers voiced concerns over wider community dissolution that included discussions regarding youth cyberbullying. For instance, Jesse remarks:

I find that there is a breakdown of the community I guess [rural community]. Unfortunately, there is no face-to-face interaction anymore, and I think that is inborn in a lot of youth as well. You see the increase of online cyber bullying and stuff as well because you can sit behind your computer and watch the assaults and there is no ramification whereas back in my day if you said something that someone didn't like there would be a punch to the face. The dynamic is completely changed. I even feel that with some of the adults now too that there is no community. People are less likely to deal with their problems; they end up calling us to deal with some fairly minor stuff that really they should be dealing with themselves.

Jesse's statement highlights numerous facets of rural policing. There are, perhaps not surprisingly, references to concerns over cyberbullying incentivizing harm through its disconnection from offline social interactions and the aggrandizing effects of bystanders failing to take action. These concerns, among police but also parents and youth themselves, emerge regularly in research on cyberbullying sampling urban populations (Harder, 2021; Hinduja & Patchin, 2015). Also telling here, however, is that the problem is not isolated to youth but involves a wider community breakdown involving adults as well. Adults are blamed for 'bothering' the police with "fairly minor" conflict that the police officer here considers a distraction for police and potential waste of police attention and resources.

Research on rural policing often indicates the ability of police to attend relatively informally to their communities in ways that are neither solely reactive nor responsive to serious criminal incidents (Jiao, 2001; Weisheit et al., 1994). In other words, rural regions often stave off the neoliberal impulse of 'downloading' responsibility to individuals to manage their conflicts and harm (where not serious to warrant police response). Police in urban regions, under conditions of limited resources, may become incentivized to begrudge "fairly minor stuff" as resources are better focused on serious crime (Broll & Huey, 2015). The remark above, however, suggests that rural police may face similar, arguably



exacerbated (Ricciadelli, 2018) resource constraints – involving a jurisdiction that covers vast rural areas and spread-out populations, and perhaps the omnipresent and intractable influence of neoliberal discourses of prudentialism.

In addition, social network sites (SNS) such as Facebook may also be shaping the reporting of crime, with wider affects in rural areas. Quinn, reflecting on the advent of Facebook's popularity, states:

Facebook has been coming for what now, since I've been up in Nunavut when it started, we didn't even have the Internet for awhile but you know in the eight years it has fundamentally changed the types of calls for service we get. The routine call now is reporting threats over Facebook.

In the same group, Jordan adds:

A lot of bullying on it [Facebook], a lot. Like I know just out in the little community in my place and we used to get I don't know a couple, two or three calls a month because somebody from inside the town is bullying this one from out here and it's just a snowball.

In the same group, discussing the serious implications of cyberbullying, the case of Rehtaeh Parsons, the Nova Scotia teen who took her life after her nude images were distributed among her classmates (see Chiu, 2018), prompted Jody to exclaim with emotion – “Facebook is the devil!”. Thus, there is a need to further unpack how Facebook is experienced in rural versus urban areas, but what became apparent here is that the impacts of social media in rural areas, where simply said, everyone knows each other, may be more forcefully and personally experienced.

Often characterizing the rural policing of youth is informal police-school engagements, with ‘talks’ given by officers that sometimes are recognized in the schools’ community outside of their role as a uniformed officer. The more informal rapport that develops, ideally, helps instill trust and legitimacy between police and youth in ways more difficult to achieve in urban regions due simply to disconnection and population (Huey & Ricciadelli, 2015). However, the dynamic may be changing given the increasing saliency of online mediums of communication between police and their communities, and how new online communication shapes crime reporting. For instance, Jack finds increasing frequency in calls placed to police through Facebook:

I believe that it is the frequency, where I'm in the schools every single day, I don't have those issues anymore. I'm actually completely the opposite, I got kids calling me in the nighttime saying you got to look at this Facebook page, someone is getting bullied, got to look at this.

Despite, as Jack puts forth, the increase in Facebook related complaints and contacting, police retain a role in how they are able to respond to online conflict and harm that may not involve the commission of a crime. In the same group, the interviewer asks “but even if it’s like, someone posted [online] something about another kid and it’s ruined her reputation or his reputation and caused a lot of personal stress. It’s not actually criminal right, so would you still contact?”. Al responds:

We possibly would speak to the complainant and let them know what their concerns are. And, then often there are times when we would go and talk to the person, the subject of the complaint and just say ‘look, this is what’s going on. We had someone call us about this. It’s not a criminal matter right now, but it’s of concern to us right that you know’.

The ability Al articulates to mediate, as an officer, between online reporting and behaviours discovered on social media, and responding in an informal manner, suggests the ongoing saliency of informal community policing dynamics in Atlantic Canada.

Discussing police initiatives in response to cyberbullying, officers referred to experiences engaging schools with anti-bullying initiatives, including raising awareness among students about online crime and cyberbullying as well as social dynamics that may be affecting their mental health and well-being. Marcy illustrates:

We do talks in the school I mean about, I did one out in, like Glenwood had an anti-bullying day and I did from grade 6 to grade 12 and I did one hour on internet safety and everything about Facebook. Kids that got a thousand friends, I mean to me that’s impossible, you’re linking up everybody who, I tell them, I have this personal thing, if I can’t phone them and talk to them, they’re not my friend. So I have people all the time, I go delete, delete, delete. So kids get all these, like I don’t know, it’s just, they’re acquaintances, they’re not friends.

Here Marcy recalls interacting with students about dynamics linked to the affordance of SNS such as Facebook, which incentive users to maximize their number of ‘friends’. For youth such acts come with risks such as the fear of missing out, and linking success and happiness to the front stage projection of popularity (Oberst et al., 2017; Scott & Woods, 2018; Adorjan & Ricciadelli, 2019). Following from Marcy, Pem adds their own experience:

We’re doing a lot of that in schools, we’re doing a lot of like cyberbullying, we’re doing a lot more presentations. Like what we find are like police-community relations, like our numbers have gone up a lot in regards to, like we need a Community Police Officer in our area, we really do because we’re doing so much of it now because of all the bullying that’s going on. A lot of it is starting in grade six, grade seven, and like early grades too. So we’re getting in the schools a lot we’re, with regards to the cyberbullying and we’re very active in the bullying, like three

weeks of [engaging students about] bullying, whatever. And, but a lot of it is because nobody's, I think, guidance at home, parents at home.

Both Marcy and Pem's reflections on their engagement in schools suggest community policing in rural areas plays an important role in youth outreach regarding online mediated conflict and harm. Pem's remarks also indicate that as community members themselves, police struggle when other stakeholders in the community, especially parents, are not engaged with their children about their online activities, risks and potential harms. Here, a consistently recurring theme was animosity towards what officers perceived as negligent parenting, which made responding to cyberbullying and related incidents more difficult.

Some officers expressed the desire for parental involvement (i.e., reporting of incidents from parents) only when serious enough to warrant a police response. Chris expressed this point: "We get a lot of calls from parents being like well my child is being bullied in school. Okay well did you talk to the school? Nope. I want charges." The preference for a 'tiered' response values more informal responses from schools where possible (which may include disciplinary actions from the school) and police intervention only given a criminal code violation involving a chargeable offense. Echoing the preference for more serious charges is an exchange between Jack and Jeff:

Jack: And you know what the hardest thing to deal with is the parents because you got Johnny's iPad, Johnny wants his iPad back and you're trying to explain listen this is a lengthy process where we have to do this. No Johnny wants his iPad back, I don't even care anymore just give him the iPad.

Jeff: Or the phone.

Jack: Oh my god the phone.

Jeff: Mother calling, grandfather calling [unclear]

Jack: 'How do you expect my 12-year-old to go without his cell phone', it's ridiculous, give it back now.

Perhaps indicating a 'flip side' to greater informal community involvement, Jack and Jeff here are seemingly frustrated with parents who engage police for putatively irrelevant transgressive behaviours of their children, where police get caught up in disputes about access to technological devices. As such, at times parents are perceived as contributing to or being 'part of the problem'; in essence failing to support messaging that counters or at least hopes to prevent cyberbullying or harm (e.g., "their parents say 'Oh that's stupid, don't listen to that. Do whatever you want anyways, the cops can't stop you'. So, a lot of it stems from home").

## Discussion

The gravitation towards ubiquitous social media adoption over the last decade has led to impacts affecting urban and rural regions alike. Youth often use the same popular social networking platforms, and both cyberbullying and image-based sexual violence remain serious problems facing youth, with equally pernicious challenges for school authorities, police and parents regarding how best to respond. This article contributes to knowledge regarding police understandings and experiences responding to cyberbullying and sexting in rural Atlantic Canada. Our interviews revealed agreement that Facebook and other social network sites have changed the nature of reporting incidents to the police, both in terms of the types of calls received and their frequency (i.e., some officers pointed to increasing number of calls related to incidents formally not under the radar of police). This may evidence social processes where deviance is ‘defined down’, presenting particular challenges for police in rural settings. Police expressed that cyberbullying contains at root the same caustic, harmful behaviour as offline bullying, though the technology produces new challenges given its increased visibility and potential for redistribution (leading to serious criminal behaviours such as ‘revenge porn’, criminal stalking, and so on).

An oft repeated challenge at the center of questions of police role and best practices of response is reporting that involves what police see as harmful, but not criminal behaviour. Some expressed that such behaviour (for example, name calling among youth or parents calling about difficulties managing their children’s technology) involves at most civil violations, and often does not constitute any formal infraction, making it exceedingly difficult to respond. Moreover, police underscored that limited resources in their communities made answering these ‘defined down’ incidents even more problematic – one officer expressing how their community had only a single unit devoted to technological crime.

Rural communities do often possess strong social ties among community members, where police and residents know each other by name, and police may take up alternative roles (i.e., away from law enforcement, including social work, peacekeeper, etc.) permitting more informal responses to a wide array of transgressive behaviours (Huey & Ricciadelli, 2015). That said, our interviews indicate the extent to which neoliberal frameworks of community-police relations have come to impact rural regions (or, we are merely reporting how they have always done so). Stated differently, youth are ‘on their own’ to ‘deal’ with cyberbullying and sexting unless incidents are particularly serious and may warrant the police pressing criminal charges (Li, 2010).

Where this becomes further problematic is where instances such as (non-criminal) ‘slut shaming’ – a particularly misogynistic form of bullying – are seen by police as among the behaviours that should not warrant their attention. The police may, in fact, have an important role to play in responding relatively informally to such behaviours, especially where the harm experienced by targets of ‘slut shaming’ and other forms of misogyny may well be dismissed by youth involved as pranks or ‘just jokes’. While the impacts of sexting are often highly gendered (with male teens redistributing nude images often not held

responsible to nearly the same degree as female victims (see Ricciadelli & Adorjan, 2019), our interviews revealed promising directions for police responses given that officers often referred to youth being naïve in these contexts without a singular focus on blaming female teens.

Overall, we argue that police discretion places a prominent role in how best rural police may respond to online conflict and harm (Dodge & Spencer, 2018). Stigma and gossip among tightly knit rural community members creates potentially greater risks for youth regarding ostracization and harm than those living in urban areas. This, combined with what police perceive to be problems related to rural community breakdown, including negligent parents, underscore the pressures rural police are under to ‘get it right’. Police preferred informal responses, including in local schools where possible but abjured these at the same time given limited resources stretched too thin; ultimately circling back to youth, and parents, being left to their own devices (so to speak) for non-criminal incidents.

Research on best- and evidence-based practices on rural policing is still lacking (Ruddell & O’Connor, 2021). Ruddell and O’Connor (2021, p. 118) note that “identifying evidence-based strategies may prove to be a significant challenge for researchers because at its core, rural policing is a local endeavour that defies a one-size-fits-all approach”. Perhaps the ability for police to respond to more idiosyncratic conflicts, especially those related to online communications, is a strength worth harnessing. Looking again at Huey (2015, p. 166), one officer is quoted: “it depends what’s in the message and what they’re saying... If they’re just constantly harassing them about stupid things, then criminal harassment, right. If there’s threats involved, then uttering threats”. Charges may well be warranted in such instances. Yet informal response to “stupid things”, even where behaviours do not align with Criminal Code violations, may benefit those who experience distress and harm at the receiving end of what is anything but inconsequential.

Unlike in urban regions, our interviews also reflect the challenges of role conflict facing rural police officers. Community policing and informal police responses are germane in rural regions not due to progressive initiatives but because these are *required* for policing large rural areas, where police are heavily reliant on resident cooperation and communication. Yet embroiled in the informal nature of policing rural areas are challenges in determining how best to respond to ‘minor’ forms of conflict and harm which police may at times feel oversteps their mandate, and moreover, siphons already limited resources they have available to them. Cyber-based conflicts in rural regions also take up distinct social properties versus urban regions. Closely knit communities that rely upon each other may well accrue strong social capital among residents, but the dark side of high social capital, especially facing youth, is high degrees of stigma and ostracization where ‘deviant’ behaviour is at issue.

As with any qualitative project, our study has limitations based on the relatively small sample of RCMP officers interviewed, whose perceptions and experiences should not be taken as representative of other police officers assigned in rural regions. Focus groups may also elicit certain responses while censoring others – that is, police officers may not share

some personal stories with other officers present in a formal focus group interview. The interviews were also conducted several years ago (2013-2015), and the conditions in the community officers referred to may well have changed (although we would argue, based on some of us residing in these same rural areas, that conditions have not changed very much at all). The particular forms cyberbullying and sexting take may have changed over time too; that is, new social media platforms may have become more popular than the ones referred to by the officers, different informal norms and behaviours among youth may have emerged, and so forth. Nevertheless, the responses of our participants here, when considered alongside other research with rural police, suggest the problems and concerns raised are ‘deep’ and ongoing.

Further research from the perspective of youth, as well as parents and other community leaders, is crucial to help complement research with police – this includes a focus on diverse rural racialized communities’ experiences with police. Conversely, additional focus should include disambiguating difference in experiences of women and racialized officers working with youth in rural areas. Overall, the study of online risk remains in its infancy as does the study of how online risk is policed, impacts police, and affects youth—all areas requiring further inquiry and attention.

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