

# LIFTING THE LID ON 'DISRUPTION' AS AN APPROACH TO CONTROLLING SERIOUS AND ORGANISED CRIME

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## 1. Why research disruption?

'Disruption' has become central to the state's response to serious and organised crime, a framework for rationalising, directing and accounting for the work in this important area of policing. In public policy it is presented as a distinct mode of crime control, however, the specific nature of the activities or outcomes encompassed by disruption remain unclear. It is comprised of an eclectic mix of policing activity for targeting the diverse criminality that falls within the scope of the serious and organised crime policy framework (HM Government, 2018). And it has been subjected to little external scrutiny, with limited coverage in the existing research literature. The lack of conceptual clarity and gaps in empirical evidence are not simply academic concerns, they obscure the efficacy, accountability and legitimacy of disruption policies and interventions and their real-world value.

The aim of this paper is to unpack the concept of disruption so to better understand its characteristics as a distinct mode of crime control. The paper reviews the existing literature to examine the nature of disruption and highlight the gaps in evidence and understanding. It identifies a number of key questions to be explored in our wider ongoing research to examine the meaning, application, and value of disruption for tackling serious and organised crime. These findings will be published in a subsequent Police Foundation report.

## 2. Why 'disrupt' serious and organised crime?

The emergence of disruption as a category of police activity deployed in response to serious and organised crime is reflective of wider developments in law enforcement policy over the last 20 years. This includes a shift to policing that uses systematic methods of data (or 'intelligence') collection and analysis to identify and proactively target the most serious and prolific offenders (Maguire, 2008; Tilley, 2008). While historically the emphasis was on the procedural response and 'clear-up' rates for crimes that have already occurred, the value of intelligence-led policing rests more on the identification and pre-emptive intervention against priority individuals to address their offending behaviour. Furthermore, it marks a reorientation away from reactive criminal investigation towards a broadened scope of interventions aimed at mitigating the risks of harm associated with offenders and their offending (Harfield, 2006; Innes and Sheptycki, 2004). In short, stopping serious crime from happening in the first place began to

take primacy over responding to serious criminal events after they have happened.

'Disruption' has flowed from this reorientation in the business of policing, but in tandem with these changes (or perhaps as a result of them), the serious and organised crime problem has also changed. Most significant is the increase in volume. Law enforcement in the UK has identified 4,772 organised crime groups that are operating in the UK, and the number of offenders continues to increase, reaching nearly 70,000 by 2020 (NCA, 2020; NCA, 2021a). These only represent the offenders that have been identified; the scale of offending and the impact attributable to serious and organised crime is much greater still (Crocker et al, 2017). This is especially apparent in cyber and economic crime which are now the most prevalent crime types in the UK (ONS, 2022). Online child sexual abuse is now the foremost priority on the serious and organised crime agenda (HM Government, 2018), with the National Crime Agency (NCA) estimating that there are up to 850,000 individuals who present a risk to children (NCA, 2021a). The internet has lowered the barriers to perpetrating serious crime at scale.

Disruption offers one answer to the challenges faced by the government and law enforcement on multiple fronts. First, criminal investigation and prosecution is usually difficult, if not impossible in some cases, especially when crimes are perpetrated from overseas or facilitated by online encryption technology (for example, Campbell, 2014; Levi et al, 2015; UNODC, 2015). Second, at any point in time the serious and organised crime caseload needs to be managed with finite law enforcement resources, and the volume, growing complexity and cost of doing so means that it is not viable to prosecute all known offenders (Kirby and Penna, 2010). Disruption encompasses diverse interventions that are less resource-intensive and can draw on the resources and capabilities more widely available across the police service and other organisations in the public sector (College of Policing, 2016). Finally, there are characteristics intrinsic to serious and organised crime that give it a resilience to conventional law enforcement (see the list below), and in an organisational context where risk mitigation is the priority (i.e. the focus is on preventing harm), disruption may offer more instrumental and effective means to achieve this outcome.

### **Crime control in the context of serious and organised crime**

Disruption has emerged out of police practice, born from pragmatism rather than from research and theory

(Kirby and Snow, 2016). However, the principles of disruption have their roots in several key criminological theories that are commonly used to explain the occurrence of crime. First, that all offenders are 'rational actors', and the decision to commit a crime is the product of a (mostly implicit) set of considerations that balance the prospective reward against the effort required to achieve it, and the risk of subsequent punishment (Cornish and Clarke, 2003). Building on this, crime is the product of wider conditions in an environment, where there is a convergence of a motivated (potential) offender, a suitable target, and the absence of sufficient guardianship to stop or deter that behaviour or activity (Cohen and Felson, 1979).

From this perspective, the dynamics underlying serious and organised crime are not viewed differently from those of any other type of crime: if you remove opportunities in the environment to perpetrate or benefit from crime, or at least make it more difficult and introduce greater risk (e.g. of police arrest), people will be less likely to offend (Brayley et al, 2011; Bullock, 2014; Ekblom, 2003). This would seem entirely appropriate, considering that organised crime is seldom impulsive, but rather highly planned and purposeful, and primarily motivated by financial gain; in this sense, organised crime is 'rational crime par excellence' (Cornish and Clarke, 2001).

Importantly, the above theories of crime do less to explain the underlying reasons for *why* someone may be motivated to offend (McCarthy and Chaudhary, 2014), focusing instead on the situational factors in the immediate environment that give shape to criminal behaviour and determine when and how crime can manifest. The question it poses for law enforcement is how to close off criminal opportunities, and meaningfully direct the choices of highly motivated offenders, often with a high risk-appetite (choosing to perpetrate serious crime), and who operate as one part of a wider group or network (HM Government, 2018). Below is a list of some key defining characteristics of serious and organised crime offenders and offending that add layers of complexity and challenge to conventional crime control:

- **Determined:** these are persistent and highly motivated offenders who seek out opportunities to offend and are able to adapt to different environments and controls (Ayling, 2009). They are commonly engaged in multiple forms of offending (Savona and Riccardi, 2015). Imposing controls on specific activities may therefore produce only short-term advantages for law enforcement, with offending

being quickly displaced to other environments or settings (Ekblom, 2003). Therefore, there is a need to focus specifically on the offenders themselves and their patterns of behaviour, including the full range of criminality and other rule-breaking they may be involved in (Hancock and Laycock, 2010).

- **Embedded:** these crimes do not exist in a 'social or cultural vacuum' but rather emerge out of environments that facilitate the growth and durability of criminal networks (Kleemans and Van de Bunt, 1999; Von Lampe, 2016). The popular image of organised crime as an external threat in conflict with society overlooks several complexities, notably the public demand for the illicit goods or services they provide (May and Hough, 2001; Tilley and Hopkins, 2008). Some organised criminal groups impose their own illegal forms of governance on to both criminal and law-abiding communities and markets, and even receive public support due to a perceived value in the community or through having a close personal connection with a member (or members) of the public (Ayling, 2009; Campana and Varese, 2018).
- **Cooperation:** the emergence and durability of organised crime is theorised as lying primarily in the conditions that facilitate criminal cooperation (Kleemans and De Poot, 2008). It is the ability to form and expand criminal networks that provide the knowledge, tools, resource or manpower to exploit criminal opportunities that would otherwise be out of reach. These opportunities to cooperate often arise from the everyday routines, settings and locations occupied by would-be offenders (Felson, 2006; Kleemans and Van De Bunt, 1999; Kleemans and Van De Bunt, 2011). The implication is that controlling these crimes is contingent on restricting the capacity to co-offend.
- **Criminal processes:** serious and organised crime seldom constitutes an isolated event but rather a process that involves a multitude of actors, activities, and interdependent stages in the commission of a crime (Edwards, 2016). To illustrate, drug supply offences were shown to be contingent on multiple components, that include transportation, the use of front companies, and legitimate businesses (for example, hauliers) (Hancock and Laycock, 2010). Police interdiction is therefore reliant on understanding the underlying conspiracy and being able to target the people or processes that are the 'pinch points' essential to the commission of the offence.

- **Hidden:** Many crimes are not reported to the police for reasons that include the prominence of ‘consensual’ crimes, for example supplying drugs or selling counterfeit goods (Tusikov, 2011), and vulnerable victims who do not recognise that they are a victim or are otherwise deterred from contacting the police (for example, see Clutton and Coles, 2007; Skidmore, 2020; Verhoeven et al, 2013). Furthermore, many offenders adopt sophisticated methods to evade detection by law enforcement. Consequently, there is a need to proactively collect and analyse information (or intelligence) to generate knowledge of offenders and offending. This introduces real challenges to producing a robust and comprehensive picture of offenders, affecting in turn, the ability to target and design impactful interventions (Innes and Sheptycki, 2004; Innes et al, 2005).

As a final consideration of the problem, serious and organised crime has not only grown in volume but seen qualitative changes. Singular notions (or ‘stereotypes’) of highly structured, hierarchical and expansive criminal groups such as the mafia, have given way to more diverse interpretations (Von Lampe, 2016). It has been recognised that the business model for much of serious crime in the UK involves ‘networks of criminal entrepreneurs’, often small groups of offenders, loosely connected, and for whom criminal cooperation is more transactional and transient (Bullock et al, 2010). Even lone offenders are not barred from inclusion within the organised crime policy framework (HM Government, 2018). This shift in how offenders are ‘organised’ is compounded by the growth of online communications and markets that facilitate serious crime (Soudijn and Zegers, 2012; Yip et al., 2013). In these loosely structured networks, the boundaries that determine who is and is not an ‘organised criminal’ are amorphous, drawing in actors that vary widely in their involvement and culpability, including some who are themselves victims such as in County Lines (Robinson et al, 2019; Sergi, 2015).<sup>1</sup> And finally, while criminal profit is the most common motivation for serious and organised crime, increasingly it encompasses offenders with other motivations such as child sexual abuse and online hacktivism (NCSC and NCA, 2017; Skidmore et al., 2022). These represent fundamental shifts, not only in the composition of serious and organised crime, but the ways in which ‘it’ can be ‘disrupted’.

### 3. So what is disruption in the context of serious and organised crime?

The government has put the ‘relentless disruption’ of serious and organised crime at the forefront of its national strategy (HM Government, 2018), while ‘disruption’ as a term and concept has permeated the language, assessments, and accountability systems across law enforcement (for example, NCA, 2021b; NPCC, 2022). However, there is no single authoritative definition of ‘disruption’. The lack of conceptual clarity obstructs external scrutiny, which is evident in its limited coverage in the research literature (Sheptycki, 2007).

The National Audit Office gave a broad and tentative explanation of ‘disruptions’ as being interventions that ‘lead to an organised criminal or group being unable or less able to operate’ (NAO, 2019). In explaining disruptions, the College of Policing focused more specifically on their role in ‘preventing organised criminals from having an impact’ and ‘making the choice to commit serious crime less attractive’ (College of Policing, 2016). The objective to restrict offending and harm could arguably encompass nearly any area of police activity to reduce crime, although ‘disruption’ is less explicitly a feature in ‘mainstream’ policing. The distinction appears to be less about the objectives and more about the targets – i.e. the ‘organised’ criminals or groups. Public policies have made clear the exceptional nature of the ‘threat’ that is posed by serious and organised crime, not only in relation to the offending and criminal methods, but the severity and scope of the risk they present to the UK.<sup>2</sup> It is significant that the concept of ‘disruption’ has roots in counter-terrorism policing (Innes and Thiel, 2008). Disruption represents an exceptional response to an exceptional threat.

#### The mechanics of disruption

Situational crime prevention and its close operational counterpart, problem-oriented policing, have a focus on identifying, understanding and addressing specific patterns in offending by adapting the environment in ways that remove the opportunities to offend or cause harm (Tilley, 2008). A ‘problem’ can take many forms and can relate to geographic hotspots for crime, seasonal patterns, groups that are vulnerable to victimisation, ‘hot products’ that are a target for theft, and prolific offenders (Tilley, 2008). And law enforcement is just one approach

1 <https://www.cps.gov.uk/legal-guidance/organised-crime-group-participating-activities>

2 Serious and organised crime has been positioned as a national security risk in the UK (HM Government, 2015).

among many that can be applied to achieving the instrumental outcome of crime reduction; for example, in an identified hotspot, rather than increased law enforcement, the introduction of more street lighting may be a more effective and efficient means to reduce crime. These prevention strategies have their focus on the 'near causes' of crime events: the current patterns in crime and opportunities available in the immediate environment, and so are less concerned with addressing wider structural antecedents, such as poverty or financial or technological infrastructure (Bullock et al, 2010; Edwards and Levi, 2008).

Kirby and Penna (2010) describe disruption as a police control strategy that embraces the principles of situational crime prevention, taking a flexible and pragmatic approach to reducing criminal opportunities, but one that is explicitly offender-oriented. It is the identified organised criminal groups or offenders, and their associated patterns of crime or impact, that represent the 'problem'. And in place of sustained solutions, disruption is a tactical framework to manage or contain the behaviour and risk of an offender or group in the here-and-now, concentrated on counteracting activities, associations, and features in their environment, that can be highly adaptable.

*'Disruption' is a more flexible, transitory and dynamic tactic which can be used more generally to make the environment hostile for the organised crime group. Without having sufficient intelligence to, for example, pinpoint a particular transport route or locale of offending, this approach focuses on disruption of the offender's networks, lifestyle and routines.'* (Kirby and Penna, 2010)

The College of Policing (2016) published an extensive compilation of tactics and powers for disrupting serious and organised criminals, broadly arranged by the various features of the behaviours or environments that commonly facilitate offending. These include aspects of an offender's lifestyle such as their associations, use of criminal proceeds or wider deviant behaviours; the use of vehicles or other travel to facilitate serious criminality; other behaviours or activities that facilitate offending such as access to certain locations or people; the use (or abuse) of legitimate business structures or resources; and the availability of criminal resources and opportunities. The breadth of tactics included in this 'menu' serve to highlight the near unbounded nature of disruption, the wide range of partner organisations with a prospective role to play (from financial regulators to utility providers), and the considerable scope for practitioner discretion in determining what form a disruption takes.

Table 1 outlines some examples of disruption interventions taken from the literature. Importantly, the interventions are arranged by the planned (or purported) impact on offenders from restricting their offending and related harm (i.e. the disruption). These broadly map on to the various complexities that characterise serious and organised crime (listed above) – the criminal behaviours and lifestyles of determined, versatile and adaptable offenders, the capacity to co-offend, and access to licit or illicit markets, commodities or enablers that are constituent parts of the criminal processes. The distinction is made between licit and illicit markets, commodities or enablers because they present distinctive opportunities for intervention, with licit elements particularly open to a wider range of regulatory responses from organisations outside of law enforcement. The selection of disruption activities implemented by law enforcement agencies will vary widely depending on the make-up of the offenders, groups and their offending, and on the focus of the intervention. The specific tactics are arranged in Table 1 as a best fit for each category of planned impact, but they are not mutually exclusive – for example, the takedown of an online carding forum may remove access to this illicit market and associated resources, but it may also restrict the capacity to co-offend.

A key point to acknowledge is that the instrumental ends of disruption (to restrict offending and related harms) can often intersect with other equally, if not more important, outcomes - notably, the protection of the public and criminal justice. For example, removing a sex worker from the illegal sex market may restrict offending by impeding a criminal network's ability to exploit that individual for profit, but it also holds intrinsic public value by protecting that individual from that exploitation. Similarly, imprisonment may restrict offending by incapacitating the offender and removing the opportunities to commit the crime in focus, but it also serves the vital function of justice by means of punishment. These outcomes are intertwined to various degrees, but they are not mutually dependent; the instrumental outcome of a disruption can be achieved in the absence of a justice outcome, and equally, justice may be achieved with little or no disruption (for example, an individual may continue to offend in the same way, even when in prison). That said, disruption represents a wide continuum of impact, and much of police work 'disrupts' crime to an uncertain extent – it seems plausible that the rehabilitation of a single drug user may have a very marginal disruptive impact on drug supply offenders.

Table 1: Categories of intervention for disrupting serious and organised crime.

Target for disruption	Common tactics	Examples of intervention
<b>Criminal behaviours and lifestyles</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Arrest / prosecute offenders</li> <li>• Criminal justice or civil control orders</li> <li>• Intensive policing and enforcement</li> <li>• Court imposed confiscation order</li> <li>• Civil recovery</li> <li>• Cash or asset seizure</li> <li>• Other regulatory controls and enforcement</li> </ul>	<p>The members of an identified organised crime group were <i>'routinely challenged regarding their behaviour and a zero tolerance approach applied to low level offences'</i>, including the police arrest of 'nominals', and enforcement through the Environment Agency for illegal tipping (Kirby et al, 2015).</p> <p>Civil recovery action was taken against a suspected drug dealer and the police, sheriff officers (similar to bailiffs) and a court-appointed administrator went to his home and seized various high value vehicles (Collins and King, 2013).</p> <p>A Housing Association threatened to terminate the tenancy of a local organised crime 'nominal' to deter further offending (Crocker et al, 2018).</p> <p>Police force investigations and arrests for viewing or sharing child sexual abuse material (CSAM) are aimed at restricting a suspect's capacity to engage in more serious offending (Skidmore et al, 2022).</p>
<b>Co-offending</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Targeting interventions to individuals identified as having a specific role in a criminal network (e.g. a 'kingpin' or 'lynchpin')</li> <li>• Interventions to interrupt the relationships or cooperative arrangements between offenders</li> </ul>	<p>Over a period of two years, international law enforcement cooperated to disrupt a drug importation network operating from Canada, with a focus on intercepting and seizing drug consignments and developing an understanding of the network. They identified a 'kingpin' who, as a result of the law enforcement intervention, saw a 'demise' in his status in the network and consequently, the overall network gradually became <i>'less orderly when intensely controlled'</i> by law enforcement in this way (Morselli and Petit, 2007).</p> <p>Disruption of online communities that involves compromising the trust and relationships between members of the network in order to break down cohesion and reduce their capacity to offend (Afilipoaie and Shortis, 2018; Soudijn and Zegers, 2012).</p>
<b>Access to licit markets, commodities or enablers</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Takedowns (websites, online accounts or communications)</li> <li>• Restrict access to legitimate services such as transport networks or business premises</li> <li>• Other regulatory controls and enforcement.</li> <li>• Restricting access to legitimate professionals and services (e.g. accountants or solicitors)</li> </ul>	<p>The police suspected an individual was receiving and handling stolen vehicles, but also identified that he had not paid his business rates, had not received planning permission for his workshop and was employing a staff member in receipt of unemployment benefits. They targeted enforcement at these infringements in partnership with the relevant authorities which culminated in the demolition of his workshop (Innes and Sheptycki, 2004).</p> <p>The Insolvency Service investigate and close down companies engaged in misconduct linked to pension scams, and furthermore, have the power to disqualify suspects from taking a company director position in the future (Skidmore, 2020).</p> <p>The police had concerns about a brothel in the local area, and by collaborating with the fire service they had the premises closed down for a breach of fire safety regulations (Crocker et al, 2018).</p>
<b>Access to illicit markets, commodities or enablers</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Seizure of illicit commodities (e.g. drugs or firearms)</li> <li>• Intercepting illegal border crossings</li> <li>• Takedown of criminal markets or communities online</li> <li>• Safeguarding victims</li> </ul>	<p>The NCA (2021c) targeted an international network involved in the import of illegal firearms into the UK which among other things led to the seizure of a consignment of 242 unlicensed converted blank firing pistols before they could reach the UK.</p> <p>The NCA (2021c) took down a dark web platform involved in the distribution of materials to undertake phishing campaigns.</p> <p>The police conducted 'welfare' visits to brothels in the local area, with a view to identifying and safeguarding potential victims of trafficking which removed sex workers from the illicit market in managed brothels (Crocker et al, 2017).</p>

## Creeping scope?

Crime prevention encompasses a broad range of interventions, and while this includes disruption, the boundaries that separate disruption from other forms of crime prevention are not clear. One particular typology for crime prevention draws parallels with public health and differentiates interventions based on their point of focus, from those that target the near causes of crime through to those that target more distant causes of crime (Brantingham and Faust, 1976). To illustrate, an intervention that targets and closes down a bank account after a customer's details are stolen by offenders would target the near causes of crime, whereas industry-wide efforts to create more robust identity authentication would prevent identity fraud from happening in the first place. The three tiers of prevention are shown below:

- **Primary prevention:** prevents the occurrence of crime in the first place by modifying the criminogenic conditions in the social, physical or technological environments;
- **Secondary prevention:** addresses emergent vulnerability or risk and prevents the criminality from occurring or becoming established, and;
- **Tertiary prevention:** manages crime that has occurred or is already occurring to reduce the harmful consequences.

(Brantingham and Faust, 1976; Muir, 2021)

Up until this point, disruption has primarily been discussed in the context of situational crime prevention interventions focused on restricting the patterns of crime related to known offenders, who are already offending. In this context, disruption gives primacy to 'tertiary' prevention strategies. However, more recently, the NCA has provided a more expansive definition of disruption that incorporates strategies aimed at addressing the threat of serious and organised crime at 'scale' and bolstering UK-wide 'resilience' (i.e., more distant causes), which seems to stretch towards secondary and primary strategies:

*'A disruption is recorded when the NCA has a positive impact in terms of reducing the threat, risk and/or harm posed by a SOC offender or organised crime group. This includes outcomes such as arrest or conviction, use of immigration or civil finance powers, and activity to tackle the threat at scale through crime prevention and through growing the UK's resilience to the SOC threat.'* (NCA, 2021b)

Historically, offenders and law enforcement interventions have predominated in the police strategies for tackling

serious and organised crime (Crocker et al, 2017; Hancock and Laycock, 2010; NAO, 2019). However, the UK government has acknowledged some of the structural causes of these crimes, particularly vulnerabilities among the public to victimisation or to being drawn into a criminal lifestyle. It is proposed that system-wide success relies not only on the pursuit of criminals, by means of 'prosecution and disruption', but also on the implementation of public protection measures to mitigate offending and its impact and other measures to prevent people getting involved in serious crimes (the so-called four Ps) (HM Government, 2018).

In light of changes to the government strategy, 'disruption' now represents to officials a broader base of interventions that span primary, secondary or tertiary prevention strategies. This might include not only offender-oriented strategies but those that are focused on addressing wider identified risks in society. Thus we might infer that the scope and ambition of 'disruption' as a mode of crime control has widened to line up with the changes in the national strategic approach. This change has implications for how disruption is implemented and by whom, and how to communicate its meaning and public value. However it is worth considering whether widening the conceptual scope of 'disruption' to include activities that are more generally seen as 'prevention', may represent an unhelpful blurring of the lines between distinctive categories of activity.

## 4. Public value?

Disruption has become an important performance indicator for national law enforcement: a currency for claiming value added against resources spent. Disruption accords a shared meaning to the various activities and achievements of law enforcement. It can also amplify the importance of an intervention, inferring something more than its face value; for example, drugs are seized but the significance lies in the 'disruption' to the criminal(s).

*'In 2019/20 NCA activity led to over 2,100 disruptions, 150 tonnes of drugs seized, 370 guns seized, 1,600 children safeguarded, 130 rescued potential victims of trafficking and over 1,000 arrests.'* (NCA, 2021b)

However, the National Audit Office (2019) concluded that 'counting disruptions' was an insufficient indicator of success when viewed against an objective to reduce 'the overall scale of the threat'. It is more a description of what has been done (i.e. an output) than what has been achieved (i.e. an outcome). To discern the meaning (or outcome, or 'value') of a disruption would call for a

robust picture of the ‘threat’ (or the risks) at the outset - a challenge due to its hidden and changing nature - and an ability to orientate the interventions and outputs to that picture. For example, the value of imprisoning an organised crime group member would need to be set in the context of how much crime has been reduced and for how long the effects last. This includes the individual’s continued capacity to offend or cause harm, the capacity and inclination of his criminal associates to continue to offend, and the significance to wider harm (e.g. accounting for displacement).

Not all disruption interventions are equal and their success is subject to a range of contextual factors that weight the relative value of each unit of ‘disruption’. Mackenzie and Hamilton-Smith (2011) criticised crude numeric performance indicators for disruption that fail to communicate any sense of social impact, strategic value or the quality of a given intervention. However, it potentially asks too much of the data and knowledge that is available to law enforcement, to account for all the moving parts in complex ecosystems and assess their impact on the future behaviour of offenders, offending, harm and risk (Gill, 2002). Outcomes-based frameworks for monitoring performance in any area of public service have been found to be intrinsically fraught due to the social complexities that confound expectations of a linear progression from problem to intervention to outcome (Lowe, 2013), and serious and organised crime is a complex area of public policy. The risk is that in being tasked to deliver outcomes that extend beyond the control of law enforcement agencies, they ‘default’ to delivering more accessible and measurable proxy outcomes (the ‘crude’ metrics) instead of more important outcomes that have a real impact on the lives of people affected (Lowe, 2013).

There are further challenges in empirically assessing the outcomes of disruption:

- Preventing crime is a prized outcome for the police but requires them to account for events that did not happen, and furthermore attribute ‘non-events’ to their intervention (Mackenzie and Hamilton-Smith, 2011).
- The value of disruption can be perceived in two ways; the reduction in the capacity and growth of known organised crime groups, or a reduction in particular forms of serious crime (Levi and Maguire, 2004). And it cannot be assumed that a reduction in the capacity of a particular crime group produces a commensurate reduction in crime. For example,

the disruption of an identified drug supply network cannot be assumed to reduce the availability of drugs in that area. It may not be possible to combine the two separate ends of tackling organised crime offenders and reducing serious crime into a single strategic framework.

- Disruption is instrumental but cuts across other competing outcomes, namely criminal justice, public safety and public confidence (Kirby and Nailer, 2013). There is overlap but none depends on the other, and it is unclear how this mix of outcomes is balanced and reconciled into a single accounting framework.

At the operational level of law enforcement, the value of disruption is primarily weighed towards changes to the risk that is presented by offenders or groups of offenders (Kirby et al, 2015). This involves systematic processes that use intelligence data to assign relative risk scores on the basis of each offender’s (or groups of offenders) current offending and impact, and their assessed potential to continue or escalate in their offending. This risk score is then tracked by operational teams in the aftermath of the disruption intervention(s), with success measured by the reduction in assessed risk. In this way the ‘threat’ is a product of processes in law enforcement for collecting and assessing intelligence, therefore assessments of police impact are only as objective and robust as our understanding of offenders, crime and risk. The police formulate both problem and answer which is problematic, particularly in the context of structural and cultural biases that can infuse police assessments (Tusikov, 2011; Hutton, 2017; Innes and Sheptycki, 2004).

A final point to consider on public value is the capacity for policing to cause damage. This is an outcome that has historically gone unrecognised in police assessments (Tusikov, 2011). The risks are especially apparent when tackling highly determined and adaptable perpetrators of serious organised crime. An unintended consequence of police intervention can be the heightened prospect of crime being displaced or developing into more serious and sophisticated offending (Levi and Maguire, 2004). Furthermore, the systemic and widespread use of disruption for controlling serious and organised crime has mainstreamed policing tactics that are often invisible to the public, and outside of the accountability frameworks of criminal justice ‘due process’ (Innes and Thiel, 2008). The public cannot know when an end has justified the means, because judgements about proportionality and effectiveness are the product of knowledge (e.g.



intelligence), systems and assessments that are internal to law enforcement. There are risks in imposing state controls that sit outside of conventional public accountability, because they distort public 'conceptions of justice' which introduces potential implications for police legitimacy (Innes and Thiel, 2008).

## 5. Conclusion

Disruption is an exceptional response to the exceptional set of problems that fall within the scope of the serious and organised crime policy framework. Its origins stem from a pragmatic adaptation in operational policing to the realities of tackling serious and organised crime, but it also has roots in multiple criminological theories which seek to explain the causes of crime and how to control it. However, the parameters for delineating where disruption begins and ends, and indeed, to what end it is undertaken, have not been made clear by government or law enforcement. It can be self-referential, representing both the means (to disrupt) and the end (a disruption). This uncertainty is striking considering its central position in the state's answer to serious and organised crime.

Disruption encompasses a variety of principles and practices that have evolved over time in conjunction with wider policymaking and practices for tackling serious and organised crime. The aim of this paper has been to unpack the concept of disruption to discern some of its fundamental characteristics as a distinct mode of crime control. This paper has highlighted the following points:

- Disruption is pragmatic: it is a framework for addressing a complex area of crime that is growing in volume and exceeds the capacities and capabilities of mainstream law enforcement to impose a conventional criminal justice response.

- Disruption is instrumental: its focus is to prevent crime by restricting the capacity of criminals to continue to offend and relatedly, reduce the risk of harm. Its effects can overlap with other outcomes including criminal justice or the protection of the public, but the nature and implications of this association are unclear.
- Disruption is a performance indicator: the value of police work is increasingly being weighed by its disruptive impact. Historically, 'disruption' has provided a means to account for the response to offenders and groups, but the horizons of disruption have been broadened to encompass the structural causes in society that give rise to these crimes.

From this brief review of the existing literature, some key questions arise. These will be addressed in our wider research project and its findings will be published later this year. These include:

- What implications do the changes in the scale and nature of serious and organised crime have for the methods, aims and effectiveness of disruption?
- What factors determine the nature, focus and potency of a disruption?
- What is the relationship between disruption and other key policing outcomes such as criminal justice and public protection?
- How meaningful are the established frameworks for measuring the outcomes of disruption? Is it feasible to develop more meaningful measures of this activity?
- What is the relationship between 'disruption' and wider 'crime prevention' and would it be helpful to be clearer about the distinctions between the two?

*The Police Foundation is currently engaged in a substantive project to examine the meaning, application and value of disruption as a mode of crime control for tackling serious and organised crime.*

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