# The impact of organised crime on local communities

## Key Messages

- *Analysis of police crime and intelligence data was combined with practitioner interviews to examine the impact of organised crime on three neighbourhoods in two West Midland cities, Coventry and Wolverhampton. These neighbourhoods had been identified by local practitioners as experiencing a significant and diverse range of impacts from organised crime.*

- *Empirical assessment of crime data revealed that between five and 17 per cent of recorded crime occurring within the neighbourhoods could be attributed to organised crime.*

- *The majority of organised crime identified by the police in the three neighbourhoods related to drugs, violence and fraud. In the three neighbourhoods, only four per cent of crimes assessed as 'organised' by the researchers were linked to individuals who had been formally classified by the police as an organised crime offender.*

- *A separate city-wide analysis of organised acquisitive crime in Coventry, estimated 27 per cent of police recorded shoplifting and theft offences were linked to organised crime groups (OCGs).*

- *Qualitative findings suggested that the most significant impact that OCGs had on the neighbourhoods related to the high degree of social control they exerted.*

- *The current police picture of organised crime is partial and fails to reflect the scale and diversity of organised crime occurring in these communities, or indeed the knowledge of local level practitioners in police and other agencies.*

## Introduction

There is a lack of empirical research on organised crime in the UK and no consensus on how to define it. Little good quality information exists and researchers have difficulty accessing it. Efforts to examine the scale and nature of organised crime are also hindered by under-reporting by victims and methodological difficulties in identifying links between recorded crimes and the OCGs that are directly or indirectly responsible.

The two-year research project reported here aimed to overcome some of these difficulties by developing a methodology to systematically interrogate police crime and intelligence data to assess the scale, nature and impact of organised crime on local communities. The aims were to capture and explore the full range of organised crimes occurring in three neighbourhoods in Coventry and Wolverhampton including those that were hidden from or overlooked by local enforcement, and identify some of the key vulnerabilities in the community to organised crime. The research also sought to assess the local response from both local police and partner agencies in light of recent policy developments.

The UK government has introduced a number of changes in recent years to help local police and other practitioners understand and tackle organised crime. This includes the introduction of Serious and Organised Crime Partnership boards to provide multi-agency strategic oversight locally, as well as a requirement for police and partner agencies to develop local profile assessments for serious and organised crime to inform decision-making and better target resources.[1]

## Approach

The main focus of the research was three neighbourhoods in Wolverhampton and Coventry that had been identified by local police and other practitioners as experiencing a significant and diverse range of impacts from organised crime. The research drew on both quantitative and qualitative data analysis. A separate analysis of organised acquisitive crime in Coventry had a city-wide focus.

Data sources included samples of recorded crime data, arrest data, police intelligence and Action Fraud reports. Quantitative analysis was supplemented by semi-structured interviews with more than 100 practitioners from the police, other statutory and third sector organisations, as well as members of the local communities. The data were combined to develop a detailed picture of the impact of organised crime on these communities.

A number of quantitative methods were applied to examine the scale and nature of organised crime activity:

- All crimes recorded during two one-month periods (June and November 2014) in the three neighbourhoods were assessed for links to organised crime using criteria derived from the UK government definition of organised crime[2]. Multiple factors were used in the assessment: the characteristics of the offender(s), the type and modus operandi of the offence, and the persistence of offending.

- All offence types with an assumed link to organised crime[3], recorded over a period of two years (December 2012 to December 2014) in the three neighbourhoods, were similarly assessed for a link to organised crime.

- Intelligence reports over a single year (December 2013 to December 2014) were also assessed and those identified as relevant were analysed.

In addition, the research specifically examined organised acquisitive crime in Coventry.

- Custody records for offenders of a range of shoplifting and theft-related offences were examined from a 32 month period[4]. The analysis looked at the inter-connectedness of those arrested, based on information such as the phone numbers and addresses provided, to estimate the proportion of offences attributable to OCGs.

The methodologies used will be described in detail in a forthcoming final report.

## Scale and nature of organised crime in the three neighbourhoods

Between five and 17 per cent of all crimes (950) that occurred in two one-month periods in the three

[1] HM Government (2013) *Serious and Organised Crime Local Profiles: A guide*. London: Home Office.

[2] HM Government (2013) *Serious and Organised Crime Strategy*. London: Home Office.

[3] The list of these offence types was taken and adapted from Francis, B., Humphreys, L., Kirby, S. and Soothill, K. (2013) *Understanding criminal careers in organised crime*. Research Report 74. London: Home Office.

[4] Custody records from December 2012 to July 2015 were included.

neighbourhoods could be attributed to organised crime. Of all the crimes assessed with a link to organised crime, 23 per cent were classified as acquisitive crimes, 18 per cent vehicle crimes and 15 per cent related to violence.

Looking specifically at crime types with an assumed link to organised crime, 592 recorded crimes were identified over the two-year period as having likely or possible links to organised crime in the three neighbourhoods. Of these, a high proportion were related to drugs (30 per cent), violence (22 per cent) or fraud offences (21 per cent). Some organised criminal activities that were described during interviews with local practitioners, and which are central to the national picture [5], were largely absent from recorded crime in this period; for example, exploitation, organised acquisitive and environmental crimes.

A year of intelligence reports relating to the three neighbourhoods were examined. [6] These are arguably more indicative of what the police had chosen to focus on than recorded crime, and over a single year they were found to be overwhelmingly focused on drug offending (59 per cent). There were by contrast very few intelligence reports which related to fraud (four per cent).

Although the local police had some knowledge of OCG-related money laundering, labour or sexual exploitation, and intimidation occurring in the local neighbourhoods, these crime types had virtually no footprint in recorded crime statistics. It is likely that any analysis based on recorded crime underestimates the impact of organised crime, in part because of the difficulty in isolating organised crime from all other crimes, but also because of the low levels of reporting by victims and the difficulties the police face in uncovering crimes where evidence and witnesses can often be hard to come by. For example, there was just one money laundering offence recorded in the three neighbourhoods over a two-year period.

## Organised acquisitive crime

Finally, interviews with local practitioners had revealed a perception that there was a problem with

shoplifting and theft-related crimes perpetrated by foreign national OCGs. To examine this empirically a method for interrogating police custody records was developed to identify acquisitive crimes with a potential link to organised crime. To capture a large enough sample, the focus expanded and the analysis was city-wide. The analysis found 27 per cent of shoplifting offences in the city were committed by perpetrators linked to an OCG [7]. Two-thirds (67 per cent) of perpetrators linked in this way were UK nationals, while almost one third (28 per cent) were Romanian nationals.

Practitioners expressed concern that many of the foreign national offenders involved in shoplifting and other theft were at risk of exploitation by OCGs. OCGs operating locally were described as recruiting from abroad, deliberately targeting individuals with poor levels of English because they were easier to control. Once in the country, victims of exploitation may be forced to live in substandard and crowded accommodation, be kept in debt bondage, be made to work or commit shoplifting or theft offences to pay their rent, and are often subject to threats, violence and exploitation.

## The local impact of organised crime

The full range and degree of harm organised crime causes local communities is generally not visible in recorded crime statistics. Interviews carried out with local police, practitioners and community members frequently highlighted how organised crime scarred neighbourhoods and the people who lived within them, causing harm that was less overt, more insidious and harder to tackle.

### Violence

While violent incidents linked to organised crime (for example, stabbings, group assaults and drive-by shootings) occurred mostly between rival OCG members, they often took place in residential streets, undermining communities' feelings of safety, and economic and social well-being. Interviewees regularly referred to a pervasive atmosphere of *'fear and menace'* and talked about verbal and physical threats, the use of intimidation, blackmail and

---

[5] For example, see National Crime Agency (2016) *National Strategic Assessment of Serious and Organised Crime 2016*. London: NCA.

[6] Relevant intelligence reports were extracted using a list of key search terms that would indicate relevance to organised crime.

[7] All perpetrators with links to two or more individuals who also had previous arrests for a shoplifting or theft-related offence, or those arrested with co-offenders for the same offence were classified as being linked to an OCG.

extortion by OCGs to enforce their will, including forcing victims and witnesses to retract statements given to the police.

## Social control

Interviewees described a high degree of social control exerted by OCGs in the three neighbourhoods, where they had settled local disputes 'informally', influenced the demographic make-up of the area by driving unwanted residents out, undermined the local economy by providing cut-price illicit goods and labour, run protection rackets, and purchased and appropriated properties to facilitate the storage of illicit/stolen goods. They had also exerted control over the rental market and avoided the regulatory controls of the local authority housing departments.

## Exploitation of vulnerable people

Interviews with practitioners suggested that communities with high levels of deprivation were particularly vulnerable to exploitation by OCGs. Interviewees in all three neighbourhoods stressed that young people were particularly at risk of being coerced into holding, carrying, cultivating or dealing drugs and undertaking other high-risk criminal activities on behalf of OCGs.

Searching for a sense of identity and status, and afraid of the consequences of non-cooperation, interviewees described how young people's choices were often severely restricted and directed towards offending by OCG members who had status and influence in the area. For young friends or relatives of family-run OCGs, choices were even more restricted.

## Environmental impact

In one neighbourhood, the organised exploitation of migrants seeking employment and a place to live had resulted in some cases in overcrowding, leading to problems with high levels of rubbish, discarded furniture, rat infestations and other forms of environmental deterioration. Interviewees acknowledged that these problems were widespread in some areas, and posed significant fire and health risks in the local community.

# Response

## Joint working

At the time fieldwork was being undertaken, the response to OCGs lacked clarity about which agency (or agencies) should take the lead. The development of multi-agency, problem-oriented approaches to tackling organised crime was hampered by poor information exchange within and between agencies and the absence of clear guidance on what to collect, who should collect it, who it should be shared with, and how. Many potentially useful partners (for example, Citizens Advice bureaux and local authorities) had little awareness or understanding of organised crime or their role in tackling it. However, in other cases, specific practitioners – for example, neighbourhood wardens, local authority housing officers and private housing regulators – possessed a wealth of information and insight into organised crime in the local community. Nevertheless, practitioners frequently mentioned the lack of clear reporting mechanisms, with most information sharing happening on an ad-hoc, face-to-face basis, relying mostly on personal relationships and individual areas of interest.

Problems around information sharing also existed within police forces, with neighbourhood officers reporting that their local knowledge was under-used by forces, and were rarely tasked to collect evidence on specific issues. This divide between local and force level resources was frequently highlighted, with neighbourhood teams sometimes only becoming aware of significant offenders on their patch following a major incident or via the media.

Information sharing was a particular issue when dealing with OCGs that moved across multiple jurisdictions or in cases where the organised criminality was displaced from one force area to another. Interviewees reported a lack of timely information sharing across boundaries, which effectively afforded offenders acting across such boundaries a layer of additional protection.

## Measuring the problem

All police forces follow the same process for identifying OCGs. The Organised Crime Group Mapping (OCGM) database is collated at a national level and provides a systematic framework for agreeing who the organised criminals are, how much of a threat they pose, their level of priority and the amount and type of resources needed to tackle them. There was a high degree of inconsistency evident in the decision-making around who to

include on the OCGM database, often with no clear rationale as to why some individuals were included and others were not.

Individuals formally recognised as organised crime offenders and mapped were, understandably, a prime focus and information on them was being proactively developed by local police teams. This was evident in the local intelligence reports assessed during this research, as most had concerned offenders mapped on the OCGM. However, only four per cent of the *recorded crimes* classified as organised crime by this study were known to be perpetrated by offenders recorded on the OCGM. This suggests there were offenders perpetrating organised crime locally that had not been acknowledged or targeted, and that the scale of the problem in the three local neighbourhoods far exceeded that which had been formally recognised by the police. This reflects a limitation in the capacity of the OCGM to provide a comprehensive picture of organised crime at the level of the neighbourhood, and perhaps also the inability of local practitioners to draw these links and recognise organised crime when present. The ability of organised criminals to evade detection by recruiting others to offend on their behalf may also be a contributing factor.

## Measuring success

Although serious and organised crime groups are involved in a wide range of offending in the UK, the police and other agencies have largely focused their enforcement efforts on local drug markets. Interview data suggested that even when an OCG involved in the drug market is dismantled following a successful operation (with the imprisonment of key offenders) a vacuum can be left which is often quickly filled by others. This brings into question whether traditional success measures such as the number of asset seizures, arrests, disruptions and prosecutions reflect actual harm reduction in communities. For example, while an operation may take drugs or cash from an OCG, a community may not experience any benefit when there is likely to be another OCG ready to take their place. Therefore, a key challenge facing local police and partners is firstly to protect communities from the corrosive impact of OCGs, but also to account for success in a sufficiently meaningful way.

## Engaging communities

In communities where OCGs are feared, reporting rates are typically low and gathering intelligence from community members can be very challenging, giving the police little information to work with. Local practitioners interviewed for this research stated that members of local diaspora communities were often reluctant or less able (due to language barriers) to engage with local agencies, and that residents who had come from difficult environments abroad displayed high levels of tolerance of criminal and antisocial behaviour.

## Conclusions and recommendations

The scale of the organised crime problem in the UK has largely been measured in terms of the number of perpetrators and groups known to the police. While the OCGM is a useful tool for managing OCGs across multiple layers of enforcement, from national to local, it is less well configured to account for the impact of organised crime at a community level or to direct resources in a way that protects communities from harm.

Additionally, a significant majority of mapped OCGs are involved in drug dealing, which is familiar territory and more visible to the police, but organised crime in local communities is much more varied than the OCGM picture would suggest.

This study revealed that a relatively high proportion of reported crimes – between five and 17 per cent – were attributable to OCGs living or operating in the three neighbourhoods. However, much of the organised criminality remained hidden or, in the words of one practitioner, sat in the *"too difficult"* box. The analysis above suggests that the OCGM provides a very partial picture of active OCGs.

A primary obstacle for the police and their partners is the apparent reluctance of many victims to provide information, which can limit how well understood organised crime is and hamper investigations. Consequently, a significant amount of OCG activity (and related harm) went unaccounted for or unaddressed in the neighbourhoods that were the focus of this research. It is vital to allocate resources to 'lifting the stone' for these more hidden aspects of

organised crime, to ensure that they are brought to light and receive an appropriate level of response.

### Recommendation 1

The police and other local agencies need to do more to identify the hidden victims of organised crime and facilitate investigations for which no victim comes forward.

Organised crime was often seen by local officers as 'too specialist'. Tackling organised crime needs to become intrinsic to the work of local neighbourhood teams and not just the preserve of specialist units. Not all interventions require specialist investigation techniques or culminate in a prosecution, and it is critical that neighbourhood officers know and understand all of the tools, techniques and partners at their disposal to disrupt organised crime.

### Recommendation 2

Officers' attitudes towards organised crime and their role in tackling it need to be reframed.

### Recommendation 3

Police forces should ensure local officers working in the community are engaged in tackling organised crime. Local officers need to be well briefed on the nature and scale of organised crime in their neighbourhoods and how they can play an active part in developing intelligence and tackling the harms caused by OCGs.

The police need the support and engagement of community members to successfully identify and tackle organised crime. In communities where there are cultural or language barriers, current engagement is particularly poor. A proactive approach to community engagement and intelligence gathering should be adopted, including the provision of support for community members to encourage them to come forward with information. There were examples found of police forces providing positive feedback to victims and communities, and demonstrating the benefits and positive results from police intervention. These were considered important for developing trust and encouraging people to report crimes they experience or are witness to.

### Recommendation 4

More needs to be done to understand how victims and witnesses can be better supported to provide information about the nature of organised crime, and to ensure it is appropriately recorded and shared.

### Recommendation 5

New approaches to engaging with diaspora communities and improving their confidence in the police and other local service providers need to be developed.

Despite efforts by the UK government to encourage a more diversified approach, with an emphasis on safeguarding victims and the vulnerable, and crime prevention, the police response to organised crime continues to place the emphasis on pursuing the perpetrators[8]. The approach promoted by the government demands a more problem-oriented and multi-agency approach to harm reduction and, if it is to become a reality, a substantial shift in focus is needed towards protecting community members from harm and preventing people from becoming involved in organised crime. New measures of success are required that reflect harm reduction, victim support, community engagement and public confidence.

### Recommendation 6

Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs), together with chief constables, need to shift the balance of the response to organised crime towards a greater emphasis on Protect and Prevent.

### Recommendation 7

In consultation with other agencies, PCCs should develop new measures of success for gauging the effectiveness of work undertaken to tackle organised crime.

The new local organised crime profiles mandated by the Home Office have the potential to build on the current understanding of local organised crime patterns and could complement OCGM by helping

---

[8] HM Government (2013) *Serious and Organised Crime Strategy*. London: Home Office.

to target preventative as well as enforcement interventions to tackle harm. To be comprehensive, they need to draw on information held by both police and other local agencies. They should identify specific problems and harms caused to communities and set out the roles and responsibilities of different partners in tackling them. The profiles and associated action plans should be owned at district rather than force level, and be grounded enough to be a helpful tool to assist in operational decision making and resource allocation. The intelligence they provide should feed back into OCGM to facilitate the development of intelligence on OCGs and associated offenders at regional and national levels.

### Recommendation 8

Police forces should develop local, multi-agency strategies, based on local profiles as well as mapped OCGs.

Finally, there is real confusion among local practitioners in the police and partner agencies about what organised crime actually is, whether they should be doing anything about it, and if so what that might be. This has to be addressed in order for an effective, multi-agency response to be developed. Agencies need to find better ways of sharing information, particularly with the police. Only then will the new Serious and Organised Crime Partnerships recently promoted by the government have a chance of being more than 'just another partnership'.

### Recommendation 9

The National Crime Agency needs to clarify the contribution of local agencies to tackling organised crime and undertake a review of local data sources.

### Recommendation 10

Local partnerships need to develop a more effective approach to analysing and sharing data between local agencies on organised crime.