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How does
organised crime
impact on local
communities?

Report of the eleventh Oxford Policing Policy Forum
14 May 2012

All Souls College,
Oxford

POLICING POLICY FORUM

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GUEST LIST

Monday 14th May 2012

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Mr Jon Collins	Deputy Director	The Police Foundation
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Mr Martin Hewitt	Deputy Assistant Commissioner Specialist Crime and Operations	Metropolitan Police Service
Mr Steve Howes	Detective Superintendent	Northumbria Police
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Mr Alun Milford	Organised Crime Division	Crown Prosecution Service
Mr Martin Molloy	Deputy Director with responsibility for Prevention	Serious Organised Crime Agency
Mr Edward Nkune	Director of Knowledge	National Fraud Authority
Mr Nick Oliver	Strategic Market Development	Capita Secure Information Systems Ltd
Mr Harvey Redgrave	Special Adviser to Ed Miliband MP	House of Commons
Mr Andrew Rowsell	Detective Chief Superintendent	West Mercia Police
Dr Sara Skodbo	Organised Crime Research Team	Home Office
Det. Chief Supt Adrian Tudway	Chief of Staff to Keith Bristow	National Crime Agency
Professor Federico Varese	Professor of Criminology	University of Oxford
Mr Brian Webb	Board of Trustees	Internet Watch Foundation
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Mr Andrew Wright	Assistant Research Officer	The Police Foundation

The Oxford Policing Policy Forum

The Oxford Policing Policy Forum is a joint initiative of the Police Foundation and the Centre for Criminology at the University of Oxford. The Forum provides an opportunity for a wide range of stakeholders interested in policing to discuss fundamental issues under Chatham House rules. The main purpose is to encourage informal debate rather than inviting an audience to listen to formal presentations. Participation is by invitation only (see guest list).

Background

The Serious Organised Crime Agency (SOCA) estimates there are 2,800 organised crime groups operating across England and Wales, costing the economy up to £40 billion per year. Measuring the impact of these crime groups on local communities is difficult, as the chain of crime often begins outside the local area and can encompass a wide range of activity from drug dealing to computer hacking to simple burglary.

The 11th Oxford Policing Policy Forum met on the 14th May to ask 'How does organised crime impact on local communities?' This meeting of the Forum was chaired by Roger Graef and an introductory presentation setting out some key issues was given by DAC Martin Hewitt, Head of Organised Crime Command at the Metropolitan Police.

Presentation

Martin opened the Forum, providing a senior law enforcement perspective on organised crime. In his view, spending excessive time debating the definition of organised crime was largely futile. More time should be put into understanding its impact and how the police should tackle it, rather than focusing on categorisation or definition.

Martin described organised crime as the 'squeezed middle' of law enforcement, coming somewhere between better understood and better advertised areas of policing such as counter-terrorism (CT) and local policing. Both CT and local policing have compelling narratives that ensure they have become priorities for the public and politicians, but organised crime is less well understood and operations are more secretive, making it difficult to demonstrate its impact at the local level. This has become an area of policing for which there is little public clamour to act, consequently organised crime teams are often under-resourced and under-funded. The policing of organised crime is expensive, and, as law enforcement contracts, specialist crime teams may suffer disproportionately. Put simply, Martin said, nobody will complain (or probably know) if organised crime units are disbanded in favour of neighbourhood policing units.

The problem of lack of public awareness needs to be addressed, both in terms of securing resources, and in terms of the public's innocent complicity in aiding organised crime by, for example, buying fake DVDs or other counterfeit goods. However, the problem needs to be tackled delicately to ensure the police do not spread fear and anxiety.

It remains to be seen to what extent Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs) will sufficiently understand that organised crime is of concern, both locally and nationally, and that they need to budget accordingly. The Strategic Policing Requirement is designed to provide guidance to PCCs in setting priorities, but it is not yet clear whether it will have the weight to protect the resources needed for tackling organised crime effectively.

Organised crime is well understood in policing where it crosses over with traditional policing fields such as drugs; however there are substantial gaps in policing knowledge when it comes to dealing with other types of organised crime. Structural challenges are also posed as the policing of organised crime cannot be managed without sophisticated mechanisms for sharing information and operations across force (and sometimes national) borders. Effective regional cooperation requires the right personalities and is difficult to manage well. If the National Crime Agency (NCA) is to be a central coordination hub it will need to be able to rely on effective regional networks, so current systems will need to be improved.

It is important to understand and portray the damage organised crime can do at the local level. To this end, both SOCA in the UK, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) in the US have attempted to measure its impact in terms of harm. At one end of organised crime, such as fraud, it is reasonably straightforward to put a figure on harm; however this becomes more difficult for other types of organised crime, such as people trafficking, where the data is so poor. Organised crime group mapping (OCGM) attempts to collate data on the threat of OCGs, but its use is limited in that it can only identify those aspects of organised crime that the police know about and are dealing with, not the 'dark figure' of organised crime, which is much larger than the dark figure for volume crime.

Part of the difficulty in mapping organised crime lies in the sheer range of illegal activities and motivating factors that it covers. Organised crime can be primarily about business and profit, very much motivated by money-making and aspirations to live a wealthy lifestyle. But it can also encompass 'disorganised crime', such as young gang members who shoot rival gang members simply because they have challenged their territory or reputation. Cybercrime, similarly, is fluid and elusive, ranging from the 'hactivist' who crashes a website as a form of protest and may not even see themselves as criminal, to those who use the internet to organise acts of terrorism. Organised criminals move swiftly in and out of various types of organised crime: Martin gave the example of a Lithuanian group in London who can go from high level organised crime in the morning to stealing laptops and selling 'hookey' petrol in the afternoon.

Martin emphasised the importance of a prevention based approach to tackling organised crime. SOCA and the Metropolitan Police (MET) are carrying out some interesting work in terms of disruption, but they are hampered by the fact that disruption and prevention are sometimes seen politically as soft options. Given the difficulties in finding and identifying members of organised crime groups, it is often more efficient to analyse the processes used by offenders to commit offences and disrupt them. Thus law enforcement should do more to identify and map how certain stages of a legitimate business process can open the door to the commission of a crime so that steps can then be taken to close such doors.

Martin described policing as being 'woefully under-capability in dealing with this threat,' given its fast moving nature and the constant progression of ways which criminals can operate. Specialist police, such as financial investigators, are few and far between in this field and once trained, they can be easily tempted away to work in corporate security for considerably larger salaries. Further, the international legislative framework is not sufficiently set up to deal with organised crime, and even when hard-won convictions are secured, penalties can be minimal. In England and Wales the communications data legislation is currently not adequate to deal with the threat of cyber or technology enabled crime, although a proposed Bill will attempt to address this.

Discussion

Defining Organised Crime

The Forum began by discussing whether it would be useful or valuable to come up with an agreed definition of organised crime. It is difficult to assess or measure the impact of something if there is no agreement on what it is that is being measured. However, the absence of a strict definition gives the police more flexibility to run operations and adapt to technological changes. Indeed, it was suggested that SOCA had deliberately chosen not to define organised crime for this very reason. Nevertheless, if attempts are made to define organised crime, it was considered important that they include references to its cross-border (often international) nature and the motive of profit, particularly financial profit, but also other types of gain such as respect in the case of the 'hactivist'.

Public Communication

Although the Forum did not decide on a definition, participants agreed with Martin that crucial to tackling organised crime was the need to write a clear narrative the public could understand; a narrative that was not just based on abstract facts, using figures that aroused their emotions. One participant felt that this was a trick missed by SOCA, who, contrary to CT teams, made a deliberate decision not to publicise their work. Although informing the public could cause unnecessary fear and anxiety, a shared community outrage could assist in the fight against organised crime.

One suggestion was to describe organised crime as a 'social justice issue', detailing the link between organised crime and other crimes such as prostitution or drugs. There are however difficulties with this approach. A 'social justice' strategy would only succeed if the public were to become truly engaged with the issue. Also, organised crime is most prevalent in the hardest pressed communities where there is little sense of moral outrage. People living in such communities tend to have many bigger worries to contend with. Furthermore, those profiting from organised crime often tend not to live in the communities most affected by their activities. And in some cases communities are to a certain extent dependent on the system organised crime has created - for example young people being able to start-up businesses and 'dirty' money entering into the formal economy which is then reinvested in economically valuable legal enterprises.

The Forum accepted it is very difficult to explain the chain of causation between up-stream crime and local crime: crimes such as fraud are complex and do not appear to impact directly on an individual, although their effects are felt across communities in the form of higher prices or cuts to public services. Despite this complexity, one participant warned against trying to over-simplify the problem; the public can appreciate that although the crimes are sophisticated and we may not fully understand the link to the local community, the threat of organised crime is nonetheless credible. Indeed, there is evidence the public does understand the threat. The Scottish Crime Survey shows the top two public concerns are credit card fraud and ID theft¹ and the 2009/10 British Crime Survey (now the Crime Survey for England and Wales) shows credit card and bank fraud are areas of local crime the public believes are increasing the most.²

The narrative, the Forum agreed, depended on its aim – what did the police want to accomplish? Was it to make law enforcement part of a more holistic drive to raise social and moral values (the Forum agreed this would be extremely difficult to achieve) or to generate shared outrage³ and secure additional resources? Or was it to secure votes? This led the Forum to a discussion of funding issues.

Resources

There was a real sense of concern that economic constraints might make organised crime teams vulnerable to budget cuts. As organised crime is often hidden and teams work under cover, the public are often unaware of such activity and would be unlikely to know if a team were axed. It might be tempting for a vote-dependant PCC to put resources into more high profile public concerns such as neighbourhood policing.

The Forum acknowledged the considerable amount of time and resources it took to train, set up and run an organised crime team and were concerned that these teams may be particularly vulnerable in the current economic and political climate. The key issue was how to avoid valuable resources being cut that might not be easily be recaptured. Although organised crime group mapping was seen as a critical tool, threats and risks cannot be mapped without the resources to uncover them in the first instance, so an approach that allocates resources on the basis of identified threats and risks would be woefully insufficient. Participants were therefore concerned that resources would diminish just at a time when the industry is expanding. As one attendee warned, this may result in a perfect storm, with the problem of organised crime becoming endemic.

¹The Scottish government 2010/11 Scottish Crime and Justice Survey: Main Findings Edinburgh 2011

²Home Office July 2010 Crime in England and Wales 2009/10 Findings from the British Crime Survey and police recorded crime (Third Edition)

³As counterfeit DVDs, cigarettes and alcohol are the lifeblood of some communities, in straitened economic times it might be particularly difficult to generate outrage about these issues.

PCCs

The Forum agreed that forces will need to ensure they set out a clear case to their PCC for the funding of organised crime teams. Participants remembered that the first PCC (effectively), Kit Malthouse, announced in January his intention to remove resources from specialist units into neighbourhood and local policing.⁴

The Forum was concerned that, although PCCs will be accountable to the public, this may not assist them in making the right financial decisions. The local power of the PCC is intended to be offset by the power of the new NCA to be able to task but it is as yet unclear how this will work in practice. Will the NCA underwrite the risk of moving resources to organised crime? How will the NCA be able to use resources in those forces where chief officers or PCCs have cut organised crime teams? Will the Strategic Policing Requirement carry enough weight? What would it need to look like to make the police and PCCs take it seriously? This led the Forum to consider the National Intelligence Model.

Global/local

Participants expressed concern that the National Intelligence Model had resulted in policing becoming silo-like, missing opportunities to join up problems effectively. There was little formal structure for regional sharing of data and intelligence with no mandate from Government on how to approach this. Some felt the Government's localism agenda would exacerbate this.

In order to tackle organised crime effectively forces need to take both a local and a partnership approach. The police have understood well how this works in relation to drugs, but not so well in relation to say fraud, where although the effects can be felt locally, the drivers are often located further afield. The Forum went on to discuss the need to incentivise the police to improve cross-border working.

Incentivising the Police

The Home Office Counting Rules were raised as a disincentive to the police to focus on certain aspects of organised crime, particularly fraud. The Rules encourage the police to focus mainly on what is measured and can skew the process of prioritisation. Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC), for example, has encouraged prioritising the tackling of local burglary and many forces are still driven by the red, amber, green approach to targeting resources – red being those crimes the public care most about such as burglary or car theft, and green being those they care least about. Police culture and structure has been slow to catch up with the threat of organised crime, so although some chief officers are on board, many continue to be led by what has been measured in the past. Indeed, some forces, the Forum learned, are already substantially reducing the funding for their organised crime units.⁵

How might the effectiveness of the police in tackling organised crime be measured, particularly given that success does not always result in an arrest? In an ideal world there would be perfect metrics and strategies, which would allow the greatest value for money to be achieved, but these do not yet exist. However, as one attendee stated, even without these, it should be possible to develop a strong narrative such that the numbers can be better interpreted. The Forum recognised the difficulty of this task - it is far easier to count the number of local burglaries than to identify the number of organised crimes – and yet those burglaries are often perpetrated by organised crime groups.

The Home Secretary chairs monthly meetings with the police and other key stakeholders on organised crime so it is clear this is an area of concern to the Government, but the problem remains of translating dialogue and rhetoric into reality. In this regard the police and the Home Office need to work together to collect the right information on crime rates and other measures of threat, harm and risk. The Home Office has a valuable role to play in ensuring resources are allocated to deal with organised crime, but this does not sit well with the PCC accountability agenda. Perhaps serious consideration should be given to mandatory resource allocation.

⁴Evening Standard 12 January 2012 <http://www.thisislondon.co.uk/news/ill-put-police-back-on-beat-says-sheriff-7307109.html>

⁵ <http://www.birminghammail.net/news/birmingham-news/2012/03/24/west-midlands-police-gangbusters-set-to-lose-cash-in-force-cuts-97319-30612283/>

Measuring Harm

Participants recognised that without proper evidence on the impact of organised crime at a local level it is difficult to bring about change, either in terms of public/political awareness or in terms of resource allocation. Although SOCA has begun to make real progress with the harm framework and is building a knowledge-base of types and groups of offenders, better metrics are needed in order to quantify harms effectively. To this end qualitative, in depth pieces of research may help as might evaluations of successful interventions. It was pointed out that OCGM is only as good as the data that is put into it, and that too often the quality of information is poor. In order to make the best use of mapping, the quality and accuracy of the intelligence used must be raised. In this respect the police at the local level need to be fully involved in in-putting intelligence-based data into the mapping process.

Valuable lessons can be learned from looking at the policing of drugs. The police strategy to deal with upstream drug crime has vastly improved over the last 20 years and many of the techniques learned could be developed and applied to organised crime, prevention in particular. If the opportunity to prevent organised crime is missed, it is significantly harder to identify the perpetrators after the event.

Conclusion

Participants at the 11th Forum identified two key issues in relation to our knowledge of organised crime. The first is in relation to public understanding, which needs to be addressed by engaging with communities and providing a clear narrative. The second is in the quality of information in-putted into mapping organised crime, which is currently poor and can lead to decisions being made on misinformation and resources being allocated incorrectly. But overall, participants were most concerned about the resourcing of organised crime teams. It was not sufficient, Forum attendees felt, to leave this important area to Chief Constables and PCCs to decide. There is a need for Home Office direction, whereby resources for organised crime are enshrined in statute and are therefore protected from the cuts. As one participant stated; if we lose police skills in organised crime, it will take a long time to get them back.

Abie Longstaff