

Rural Crime:

Serious, Organised and
International

Who Victimises Rural Communities?

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The extent to which this research was reliant upon the good will of the police force and partnership institutions cannot be overstated. Therefore, gratitude must be extended to all forces and institutions who have supplied data to the project; without their participation, the research would simply not have been possible. Special thanks must also be extended to Northumbria Police for their facilitation of this research. More particularly, to Superintendent Andy Huddleston, and to PCSO Peter Johnson whose analytical capabilities are second to none and without whom, this research would have been unable to gain sufficient depth of analysis.

Listening to the Concerns of Rural Residents: Why is this research needed?

The Threat to Rural Communities is Real:

The NFU Mutual's most recent figures indicate that the costs associated with rural crime increased by 22% in the year to 2022, with 80% of NFU Mutual agents stating that crime is disrupting business activity (i). Within these overall trends, the costs associated with the theft of agricultural machinery and vehicles increased by 29% to £11.7m, and those related to the theft of agricultural GPS systems by 15% to £1.8m. Rural crime and the associated costs therefore have a considerable impact on rural residents and business owners, and significantly, this threat appears to be increasing over time. The continuity of the risk posed by criminals in rural communities is further underscored by the NFU Mutual's figures relating to 2020 during the global Covid-19 pandemic. In this report, NFU Mutual reported an overall 20% reduction in the costs associated with rural crime in 2020 (ii). Whilst these figures evidence a substantial decline, they must be viewed within the context of wider reductions in crime during the global pandemic and attendant lockdown periods. From this perspective, according to the Crime Survey of England and Wales, the year to March 2021 witnessed a reduction of 19% in crime overall and 20% in theft (iii), with police recorded crimes declining by 10% during the same period (iii). Reductions in the costs associated with rural crime generally, therefore, were in line with wider trends taking place during the same period. However, within the NFU Mutual's overall figures, particular forms of rural crime appear to conflict with this significant downward trajectory. For example, during the same period, the costs associated with the theft of agricultural vehicles fell by only 2% and those of GPS thefts almost doubled (ii), indicating that offenders continued to be drawn to the countryside by criminal opportunities throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. Therefore,

the continuity of
criminal opportunities

present in rural areas is evident and this is something which has profound consequences for those who reside, and own businesses, in the countryside.

Increasing recognition is made of the unique vulnerabilities which characterise life in rural locations. Arising from their position of geographical isolation, under-investment in, or disconnection from, services and the rural myopia of policy making, the vulnerabilities of rural communities - which are both material and psychological - are known to have significant deleterious effects on quality of life for those who live and work there (iii; iv; v). As part of this wider picture of vulnerability, concerns relating to crime, victimisation and policing are of upmost importance to those living rural areas. Of those recently surveyed by the Countryside Alliance, 97% of rural respondents felt that crime was a significant problem in their community (iv). Not only is fear of crime a salient aspect of rural life, so too is first-hand experience of victimisation, with 43% of those surveyed reporting that they had been the victim of crime in the last 12 months (iv). The impact that victimisation and fear of crime has upon rural life is extensive and contributes to a pervasive sense of insecurity (vii) and the proliferation of mental health problems among those affected (viii).

Theft of agricultural
machinery and vehicles



increased by

29% to £11.7m

- NFU Mutual Crime Report 2023



Communities Feel Unsupported in Meeting the Challenges of Rural Organised Crime:

Significantly, much of this victimisation goes unreported (v), with 49% of rural residents recently surveyed suggesting that they do not feel the police take rural crime seriously (iv). Underpinning the problem of under-reporting, rural communities also report a sense of dissatisfaction with, and lack of faith in, rural policing (iv; v). When combined with rural victims' belief that they are being specifically targeted (v), increasingly by those drawn from organised crime groups (ii; v;), the collapse in police-community relationships has significant consequences for feelings of safety in rural areas. Rural residents are left feeling that current policing approaches are unable to respond to the complexity of rural crime which is thought to be deeply rooted in organised crime structures. The link between rural offending and organised crime has been much more firmly established in other countries such as Ireland and Italy (ix) with much less research focusing on the links which exist in the UK. Despite this, there is a widely held belief in the existence of this link among rural residents (x) and increasing evidence from law enforcement (xi) and industry partners (ii) to support the idea that rural crime is both organised and international in nature. Whilst limited academic research exists in this area, a small number of studies have been able to evidence these elements of the UK rural crime problem. Using police and industry data, academics have been able to evidence the involvement of Italian, Polish and Turkish mafia in the theft and exportation of tractors (xii) and interviews with offenders have been used to explore the use of international networks for the transportation and sale of stolen plant and agricultural machinery (vii).



To date, no significant attempt to understand the nature of the population involved in the perpetration of rural crime has been made, and the current report attempts to address this gap in knowledge. Drawing on police and partner organisation data, the research has sought to improve understanding of the extent to which organised and travelling criminality underpins the current rural crime problem.

95% of rural respondents
felt that crime was a **significant problem**

How was the Research Conducted?

Better Data is Needed:

In the early stages of the research, significant and sustained data quality issues were encountered when attempting to use police data to elucidate the quantitative and qualitative features of rural offending. One of the original aims of the research was to sketch the contours of the UK's rural crime problem and to that end, requests were submitted to all police forces for information relating to rural crimes occurring in their force area within a designated timeframe. However, the challenges associated with obtaining this information were so significant that the research was unable to establish any meaningful picture of the frequency with which rural offences occur in the UK. Whilst some forces elected not to participate in the research, others were unable to do so on account of their inability to identify and retrieve information relating to rural offences from their local force system. During the research, problems associated with data quality were found to be both significant and widespread throughout the country, meaning that forces were often unable to offer an accurate assessment of the rural threat they faced. The inability of forces to provide accurate information on rural crime relates to several underlying issues which impede their ability to identify and retrieve rural crime data. In the first instance, rural offences are not defined and differentiated from other offence types in crime recording systems meaning that they cannot be easily extracted from wider incident and offence lists. In the second instance, data is often inputted either incorrectly, or with insufficient detail by those responsible for recording crime, making it more difficult to locate rural offences using keyword searches. This means that any attempt to compile information relating to rural incidents can be incredibly time-consuming, fraught with difficulty and, ultimately, yield incomplete and inaccurate data. The prevalence and persistence of these issues throughout forces significantly undermines any attempt to define, quantify and comprehend rural crime. The inability of forces to name and define the nature of the issue they face is a fundamental problem and one which ought to be overcome as a matter of urgency so that strategies for addressing rural crime may be formulated according to an appropriate evidence base.

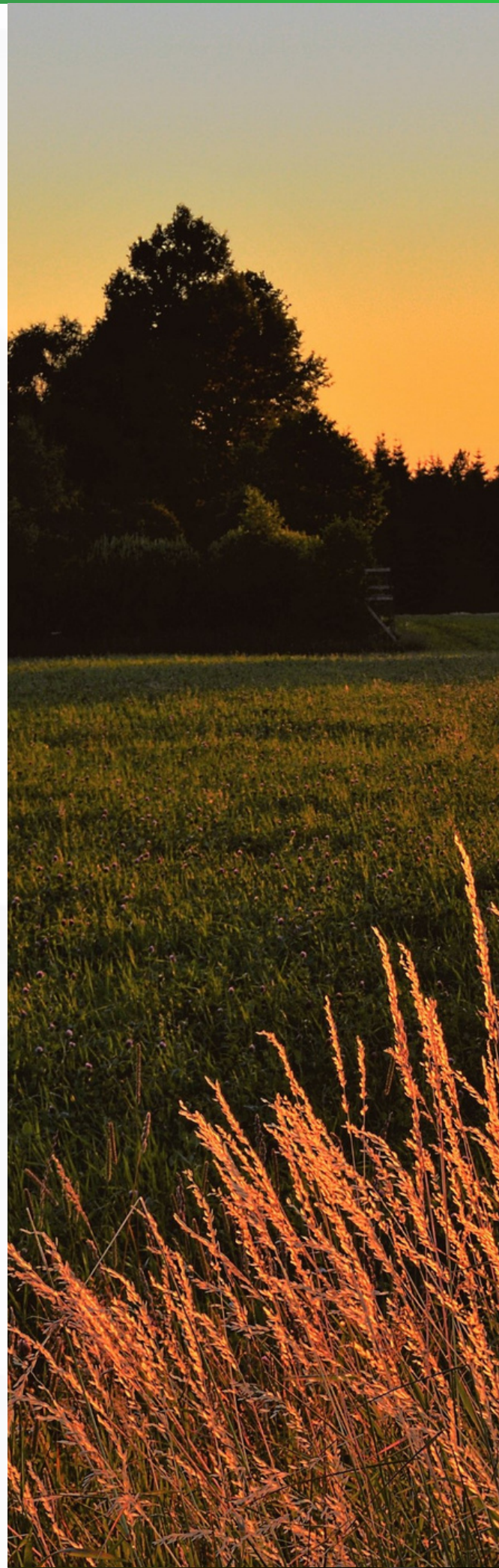
Despite these widespread data quality issues, a small number of forces were incredibly proactive in the compilation of force level rural crime data. These forces routinely collated intelligence and incident data on a daily, weekly or monthly basis which was used by rural crime teams (RCTs) to inform the focus of their activities. Data collection in these examples relied on a variety of methods including the completion of keyword searches relating to offence or commodity types, and the analysis of data relating to key postcodes or beat codes.



Inevitably, some of the data returned by these methods included offences with semantic, but not substantive, relationships to rural crime and this often made it difficult for forces to accurately quantify their rural crime problem. Nevertheless, when forces routinely gathered this type of information, they were much better placed to offer insight into the nature of their rural crime problem and describe with greater accuracy the offence types which were most likely to affect them. Among the models shared with the research, RCTs who used an Op name to tag incidents at the point of recording where characteristics were used to identify an incident as rural crime were particularly effective. The success of such schemes was dependent on significant investment in training call handlers and officers, but their replication is worthy of consideration at a national level as a means of increasing the ease with which rural crimes can be identified and retrieved from police force systems. Furthermore, implementation of national op names would be of enormous benefit in the homogenisation of data sets across forces. The introduction of the National Rural Crime Unit, and the creation of the National Rural Crime Co-Ordinator role within this, represents an important step forward in this regard as work undertaken under this portfolio is already taking steps towards the improvement and standardisation of data collection.

The Methods of Research:

The principle aim of the research was to establish an empirical basis to assess the extent to which travelling, organised and serious criminals play a role in the victimisation of rural communities. In order to achieve this objective, a mixed method approach was taken whereby police and partner data was analysed and interviews with various stakeholders in the problem of rural crime were conducted. The data collection for the project took place over the course of around a year and involved, in the first instance, the analysis of data from Regional Organised Crime Units (ROCU), the Police National Database (PND), local police force systems, the National Crime Agency (NCA), Environment Agency (EA) etc. This data was then supplemented with intelligence data from local forces and interviews with those involved in policing rural crime. The data collected in the study aimed to understand more about the criminals who commit rural offences and their links to organised crime. In the first instance, searches for formally mapped Organised Crime Groups (OCGs) whose primary threat related to rural offences were conducted before the search was extended to include secondary and tertiary threats. Following this, interviews with officers from local RCTs were used to identify the most prolific rural offenders at force level, before this information was cross-referenced between force areas to identify where nominals were offending across police force borders and to identify links between perpetrators. Searches were then conducted on PND to explore the offending histories of those involved in rural offending. This information was amalgamated in order to assess what is known about those involved in the perpetration of rural offences, the nature of their offending and their associations and links to other forms of criminality, including serious and organised crime.



What Does the Data Say?

The data returned to the study lends significant weight to the concerns of rural residents. Findings unequivocally demonstrate that those involved in rural offending are far from opportunistic, low-level criminals, and that they often have significant links to wider forms of serious and organised crime. However, because of the policies and procedures currently in place to deal with organised crime in England and Wales, much of the data used to establish this picture came from outside those institutions tasked with policing organised criminality. Under current policing models, a network of nine ROCUs, in partnership with the NCA, are responsible for the delivery of the Government's Serious and Organised Crime Strategy (2018). Key to this process, is the identification and mapping of OCGs using a procedure known as Organised Crime Group Mapping (OCGM) and the subsequent formulation of national priorities based on assessments of the threat, harm and risk posed by various groups.

The importance of these procedures relates to their ability to direct often limited resources towards those offences and offenders deemed most likely to inflict the greatest levels of harm within society. Inevitably, this means that offences such as Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE), human trafficking, illegal firearms and other 'high harm' offences dominate the attention and activities of those institutions tasked with addressing organised crime. Crucially for the present research, this means that many rural offences lie outside of datasets ordinarily associated with organised crime whether or not these activities might otherwise be considered organised crime. The under-representation of rural offences in organised crime datasets relates, therefore, to their deprioritisation in policing, rather than to an absence of organised criminality in rural communities. Remaining wedded to definitions of organised crime which are dependent on the implementation of formal mapping procedures is, therefore, extremely problematic, and for this reason neither ROCU data nor PND searches were able to offer a comprehensive representation of organised criminality in rural areas. Consequently, data from more diverse sources was utilised to build a more nuanced understanding of the ways in which the presence of organised crime in rural communities can be evidenced.

The nature of this evidence is detailed below and unequivocally demonstrates the strong links between organised criminality and the harms perpetrated against rural communities. The following sections of the report offer evidence of the ways in which rural areas are victimised by individuals with serious and sustained criminal histories and who have links to other forms of serious and organised crime which often has a transnational element. This information reveals an urgent need for police and policy makers to take the problem of rural crime more seriously, and to allocate resources which are commensurate with the seriousness and complexity of the problems outlined.

Who Commits Rural Crime?

In order to build a clearer picture of those involved in rural offending, local RCTs were asked to provide details of their top rural nominals who were known to be involved in offences such as the theft of plant and agricultural machinery and vehicles; theft of livestock; hare coursing and poaching; doorstep crime; fly-tipping; heritage crime; and the theft of targeted materials including items such as metals, fuel and feed. Forces were asked to provide the names, locations and PNC IDs of offenders, in addition to any available information relating to offending histories and known associations to OCGs. This information was then used to explore PND records for the nominals. The information gathered in this stage of the research very clearly demonstrated that those involved in rural crime are far from low-level, opportunistic offenders.

Rather, the offending histories of the nominals in the study evidence criminal careers that are both serious and sustained, and which encompass a range of offence types including, rural and non-rural crimes and wider forms of serious organised criminality (SOC) and serious organised acquisitive crime (SOAC).

The sections below detail some of the defining characteristics of the offending histories of rural criminals:

Rural Criminals have Long-Term Careers

In the first instance, it is evident that involvement in rural crime tends not to be short-term. Rather, the nominals in the research were found to have a long-term commitment to rural offending, having been involved throughout their lives and sometimes working in conjunction with family members. Thus, relatives spanning multiple generations are known to collectively engage in hare coursing and poaching offences and similar arrangements were identified in relation to those engaged in plant theft, with criminal enterprises in some cases being approached as family businesses. Moreover, it was evident from the data that those involved in thefts from rural areas demonstrate a fidelity to particular rural crime types, often over entire criminal careers. Thus, for these offenders, rural crime is a way of life, but more than this, it represents a successful model of business enterprise to which they remain committed over sustained periods. The cases outlined below offer typical examples of the longevity of the careers of rural criminals.

Hare coursing: The Galloway Family

The Galloway family have been known to police for at least a period of forty years for their ongoing engagement in multiple types of crime and ASB. The various members of the Galloway family have convictions for numerous offences including Theft of Motor Vehicles (TOMV), burglary, assault, poaching and hare coursing. The vast majority of the criminality perpetrated by the Galloway family takes place in the countryside and they are known to be routinely involved in threatening and intimidating rural residents whilst trespassing on land. The family are known to be heavily involved in national hare coursing events and have been so for decades. During these events, they are routinely aggressive and violent and have been convicted on a number of occasions for assault and criminal damage, assaulting both members of the rural community and members of the police force.

Police data demonstrated the way in which four generations of the Galloway family travel the country extensively to participate in hare coursing, regularly travelling several hundred miles in a single trip. Their long-standing involvement in these events demonstrated the way in which the activity was of intergenerational importance to the family. However, more significantly, despite the violence and attendant criminality associated with their involvement in hare coursing events, even the youngest members of the Galloway family were included in these activities.

The exposure of pre-school age children to these environments very clearly demonstrates the way in which rural crime comes to be firmly established as a way of life for some and how this serves to sustain long-term involvement in activities such as hare coursing.

Plant Theft: The Carr Family

The 'Carr' family are heavily involved in the commission of rural crime. Their main source of illicit revenue is generated through the theft of plant and agricultural machinery, though they are also involved in other forms of rural theft. Four generations of the Carr family - whose ages range from mid-seventies to teenagers - are known to be involved in criminality and their participation in rural offences is long-standing with known convictions spanning a period of at least thirty-six years. The Carrs run a business - breaking end of life vehicles and buying and selling machinery - which employs all generations of the family. Whilst the family business has a legitimate element, it is also simultaneously used to process stolen machinery and to launder the proceeds of crime. Among the family members, there is a clearly discernible division of criminal labour with the eldest Mr Carr holding responsibility for establishing contacts for the transfer and sale of stolen machinery.

The second eldest generation of Carrs were also well-established in national criminal networks which were used to facilitate the logistics of the movement of stolen goods. Members of the two youngest generation of the Carr family were involved in the procurement of vehicles, sometimes stealing and secreting vehicles themselves, but they were also known to commission local offenders and drug users to commit thefts on their behalf. Mirroring the experiences of the Galloway family detailed above, the Carr family displayed a deep inter-generational immersion in a particular form of rural crime, evidenced by the longevity of their collective commitment to plant theft which spanned multiple decades. The repeated victimisation of rural communities across the UK came to form the basis of their family business and the skills and resources associated with this were passed down through four generations of the family.

The examples given above were selected on the basis that they were representative of findings from across the UK. Rural crime does not appear to mirror other forms of crime in which engagement tends to be more transient. Rather, offenders often remain committed over sustained periods and build entire criminal careers upon the exploitation of criminal opportunities which exist in the countryside.

Rural Criminals Victimise Rural Communities in Multiple Ways

Beyond the long-term commitment to the commission of rural offences, nominals' records also evidence their involvement in multiple forms of rural crime across their criminal careers. Offenders, in short, tend to commit numerous types of rural offences. Whilst there are exceptions to this rule - such as the highly organised groups who appear to specialise exclusively in the theft of specific categories of rural commodities - the careers of rural offenders tend to be characterised by what is often termed 'poly-criminality'. The diversity of criminal involvement evident in the records of rural criminals demonstrated the way in which they tend to be simultaneously involved in acts such as hare coursing, poaching, violence and intimidation within rural settings alongside various forms of acquisitive criminality. Their involvement in the theft of multiple forms of rural commodities indicated that, whilst rural crime tends not be opportunistic in nature, offenders are willing to exploit any criminal opportunities present during the course of their offending. The example given below indicates how this tends to manifest in the biographies of individual offenders.

Gav

Gav is a prolific rural offender, but the composition of his profile is fairly typical of rural criminals more broadly. His main area of criminality appears to relate to the theft of plant equipment which he takes from both rural settings and construction sites in more heavily populated areas. Gav is in his forties and has convictions for stealing agricultural machinery stretching back into his teens. Alongside vehicle thefts, he is known to have stolen a range of commodities from farms and rural businesses including generators, fuel and metal etc. He also has convictions for assault and other disorder offences which relate to hare coursing events. Intelligence data supplied by five separate forces flagged Gav as an ongoing threat to rural communities with intelligence indicating his ongoing involvement in hare coursing, badger baiting and vehicle thefts. A growing body of intelligence also indicated Gav's involvement in the organisation of a national betting syndicate for hare coursing whose members were also simultaneously involved in a network which distributed firearms and stolen agricultural and construction equipment.



The example of Gav's criminal history is far from atypical when looking at the profiles of rural criminals. His conviction record, and the picture established by intelligence data relating to him, demonstrated the way he spent protracted periods of time in rural areas and was comfortable in exploiting the broad range of opportunities they offered for financial gain. These opportunities were both direct in the theft of tangible commodities, but also involved more abstract measures such as profiting from gambling activities associated with wildlife offences. Crucially, however, data suggested that the division between these activities was far from clear cut, with intelligence indicating that networks associated with wildlife offences and attendant betting syndicates were also used simultaneously to build networks to handle and distribute stolen machinery and vehicles.

Rural Criminals are also Involved in Wider Forms of Criminality Including Serious and Organised Crime

Analysis of the criminal records of prolific rural offenders demonstrates their involvement in much wider forms of criminality which take place outside of rural areas, and much of this criminality includes very serious and harmful offence categories. Rather predictably, given the skills sets, networks and experience of rural offenders, significant numbers were involved in the theft of plant from construction sites and other more urban locations. Beyond this, the range of offences highlighted to the research was fairly extensive and included acquisitive offences, criminal damage, ownership of illegal weapons, violence, fraud, domestic violence, doorstep crime, heritage and cultural property crime, modern slavery, sexual offences, ASB, and drug offences. In short, the criminal careers of rural offenders are wide and varied and often not confined to the rural context.

Of particular note, was the presence of links between those convicted of rural offences and wider forms of serious and organised crime. It is important to note at this stage that the identification of these links do not represent an attempt to classify the rural offences perpetrated by these nominals as organised crime. Rather, what the data very clearly established was that those who are involved in non-rural forms of serious and organised crime, and who are sometimes members of OCGs, also come to the countryside to cause harm, sometimes in the form of perpetrating machinery thefts, and at other times to engage in wildlife offences. The links between rural nominals and the drugs trade were of particular significance in the data. Evidence indicates that a substantial number of those involved in the commission of rural crime are also simultaneously involved in the drugs trade in various guises. Beyond the numerous convictions for possession and personal use, there were a

substantial number of rural criminals

flagged for their involvement in the supply of illicit substances, often on a large scale and sometimes involving transnational activity with a smaller number flagged for their participation in drug cultivation.

The following example offers insight into the deep connections between rural crime and drug supply within one force area. This data was compiled by an extremely proactive and successful team and is fairly exceptional in the overview that it offers. Nevertheless, the presence of links between rural crime and drugs offences was something which was deeply continuous not only across UK force areas, but also among foreign national offenders (FNOs) known to be involved in rural crime in the UK.

28% victims of rural crime

failing to report their experiences to the police
– Countryside Alliance

Force A: Wildlife Offences and the Drugs Trade

One force was able to provide extensive and detailed data on 65 offenders who were known to be involved in wildlife offences. These offences included poaching, badger baiting, hare coursing and illegal hunting. Of these sixty-five offenders (discounting offences of personal use), twenty-seven were known to have drugs convictions, only three of which were low-level offences related to small-scale supply. The remaining twenty-four offenders had very serious and sustained involvement in drugs offences which is summarised below:



- Offender 1:** Supply of Class A; poaching, badger baiting, lamping, illegal dog breeding.
- Offender 2:** Supply of Class A and B; poaching.
- Offender 3:** Large scale county lines drug supply and online drug sales; badger baiting.
- Offender 4:** Membership of an OCG running a major Class A drug supply line; hare coursing, poaching, lamping, ferreting.
- Offender 5:** Large-scale supply of Class A and associated money laundering; poaching, lamping.
- Offender 6:** County Lines drug supply, drug supply into prison, drug-debt-related attempted-murder; badger baiting.
- Offender 7:** Supply of Class A; poaching and other wildlife offences.
- Offender 8:** Supply of Class A; poaching, badger baiting and multiple wildlife offences.
- Offender 9:** Supply of Class A and steroids; Badger baiting and lamping.
- Offender 10:** County lines drug supply, drug supply into prison, drug-debt-related attempted-murder; badger baiting.
- Offender 11:** Class A drug supply; poaching, lamping.
- Offender 12:** Class A drug supply; poaching and lamping.
- Offender 13:** Supply of Class A & B drugs and cannabis cultivation; poaching and illegal hunting including use of a Harris Hawk.
- Offender 14:** Supply of Class A & B drugs and cannabis cultivation; poaching and illegal hunting including use of a Harris Hawk.

Offender 15: Running a major drug supply line of Class A & B drugs; poaching and multiple wildlife offences.

Offender 16: County lines drug supply, drug supply into prison, drug-debt-related attempted-murder; badger baiting.

Offender 17: Local level supply of Class A & B drugs; poaching.

Offender 18: Local level supply of Class A & B drugs; poaching.

Offender 19: County lines supply of Class A drugs, production of cannabis; a range of wildlife offences including poaching involving the use of a Harris Hawk and the organisation of poaching meets.

Offender 20: Large-scale Class A drug supply and attendant money laundering; lamping and poaching including the use of a Harris Hawk.

Offender 21: Supply of drugs into prison, laundering drug profits for an OCG, supply of Class A; poaching and illegal hunting.

Offender 22: Supply of Class A; lamping, badger baiting, animal cruelty.

Offender 23: Cultivation and supply of Class B; hare coursing, poaching, badger baiting and illegal hunting.

Offender 24: County lines drug supply of Class A; hare coursing and badger baiting.

Whilst the data supplied by this force was exceptional in the level of detail it offered, data from other forces was also supportive of the extensive links that exist between rural offenders and wider forms of serious and organised crime, including strong links to high level drug supply. The data appears to indicate that rural areas operate not only as the sites for the lucrative acquisitive activities of offenders, but also as locations for their leisure activities.



Rural Criminals are Responsible for the Infliction of Serious Harm

Crucially, not only do

those involved in the commission of rural crime tend to have long and sustained criminal careers

which span multiple rural offence types, the analysis of police data also demonstrates that they are often responsible for extremely harmful outcomes for a range of actors. The harms associated with rural crime, therefore, are far from being restricted to the financial impacts associated with the theft of commodities, or to the destruction of property and crops by trespassers. In the first instance, rural offenders are responsible for acts of violence committed during the course of offences such as theft. Research demonstrates that these acts usually relate to offenders' attempts to leave offence locations, but they nevertheless have long-term and devastating impacts for those subjected to them (vii). Data from across the UK demonstrates the way in which acts of physical violence, intimidation and threat accompany incidents of rural crime including acquisitive and wildlife offences. All participating forces were keen to highlight cases where police officers or members of the public had been subject to acts of physical violence at the hands of rural criminals. Sometimes these acts related to one-off events taking place in the context of other offences and elsewhere substantial evidence existed of rural criminals engaging in sustained campaigns of violence and intimidation against rural residents and landowners in order to discourage them from reporting crime to the police.

Beyond these examples of violence and victimisation, there was also evidence that those committing rural offences were themselves sometimes subject to exploitation, coercion or violence. The nature of this evidence took several forms, but most commonly involved cases where those tasked with stealing commodities, scoping potential targets, or driving getaway vehicles were drawn from vulnerable backgrounds – such as those with drug addictions or special educational needs – and were coerced into carrying out offences. Much less common were cases which involved evidence of modern slavery. In two examples, rural criminals involved in plant and machinery thefts, drug cultivation and doorstep crime were known to have held individuals in conditions of modern slavery to be used for the purposes of offending. The commission of rural crime, therefore, has significantly harmful impacts for a broad range of individuals including rural residents, business owners, police officers and even sometimes for those committing the offences themselves. The harms associated with these offences significantly undermine the quality of life of those affected and are known to result in psychological distress, injury and have even resulted in the death of victims, perpetrators and police officers (xvii; xviii; xix). Within debates around rural crime, the gravity of these impacts is something which is often overlooked and is something which requires much greater attention at a strategic level within both politics and policing alike.

How Organised is Rural Crime?

There is no singular definition of organised crime, with different institutions and organisations offering slightly different interpretations of the phenomenon. The Government's Serious and Organised Crime Strategy (2018), for example, defines serious and organised crime as 'individuals, planning, co-ordinating and committing serious offences, whether individually, in groups and/or as part of transnational networks' (HM Government, 2018: 11). Whereas, the UN place greater emphasis on the presence of multiple offenders and the material outcomes of crime with their definition, which designates organised crime as 'a group of three or more persons existing over a period of time acting in concert with the aim of committing crimes for financial or material benefit' (United Nations, 2000). Within policing, rural crime is located under the National Serious Organised Acquisitive Crime (SOAC) Portfolio which outlines requisite criteria for inclusion under this definition. The NPCC definition of SOAC requires that the criminality of offenders is not restricted to specific crime types, that their crimes form part of a series of offending, which involves cross-border criminality, and that the offending is impactful and aims at financial or material gain (NPCC, 2022). When viewed through the lens of these definitions, **the data collated in the research very clearly demonstrates that a significant proportion of rural crime constitutes organised criminality.** However, only a small number of rural OCGs are currently mapped in England and Wales, meaning that this dataset fails to capture the extent of organised crime activity in rural areas by some margin.

As discussed above, the mapping procedures used to score and prioritise organised crime groups for police intervention play an extremely important role in directing limited resources towards those behaviours deemed to have the greatest potential for harm. Inevitably, this means that

most rural offences remain outside of formal mapping procedures.

Thus, only a small number of groups whose primary threat related to rural offending had been subject to formal mapping processes. Without exception, these groups were involved in theft of plant and agricultural machinery and vehicles, though their criminality tended to span multiple offence types. Moreover, those groups whose criminality had met the requisite threshold of threat, harm and risk tended to have heightened scores which related either to the frequency of their offending, their involvement in violence or use of weapons, or perhaps to their involvement in related high-harm offences such as ATM rip-outs. The number of active OCGs constantly fluctuates, with groups being both newly mapped and archived on a regular basis. Therefore, the number is characterised by a significant degree of fluidity meaning that it becomes more difficult to speak of numbers in absolute terms. However, to offer an indication, at the time the research was conducted, twenty-two currently active OCGs involved in rural crime, were highlighted to the project. To put this number into perspective, the NCA Annual Plan 2020-21 states that a total of 4,772 mapped OCGs were active in the UK at that time. Thus, those rural crime groups who have been formally mapped, represent both a tiny proportion of the overall number of OCGs mapped, but also crucially, of the number of rural crime groups currently active in the UK. The examples below demonstrate some of the characteristics of mapped groups which supported their inclusion in OCGM procedures:

OCG One: Portland

Portland is a group whose members are drawn from across three forces areas in England. Their criminal activities centre around the theft of Land Rover Defenders in high volumes which were subsequently broken down for parts and shipped abroad, and to the theft of plant and agricultural machinery and vehicles, which were often subsequently used in ATM thefts. Portland's involvement in Land Rover theft was evidenced over a period of several years and resulted in losses exceeding £1m in value. Their perpetration of plant theft was established over a period of around a decade, and the ATM thefts in which some of the group members were involved significantly increased the levels of harm associated with their offences. The nominals involved in the group were also known to be violent, had PNC weapons markers for both firearms and knives and had previously been involved in attacks on police officers. Among the membership, there was also significant involvement in the supply of Class A and B drugs. In this example, the high-volume of offences, combined with the increased level of threat, harm and risk resulting from the use of machinery in ATM thefts allowed Portland's activities to meet the thresholds of OCGM procedures more easily.

OCG Two: Bee

Bee was a fairly large group whose membership was characterised by a certain degree of fluidity over time as peripheral members were mapped and archived with relative regularity by a particularly dynamic and responsive force. However, the core membership remained unchanged over time and principally comprised of men drawn from the Gypsy Roma Traveller (GRT) community in a single force area in England.

The group's members had extremely long histories of criminality encompassing rural and non-rural offences, but their core area of business was in the theft of plant and agricultural machinery and vehicles, and ATM thefts. The disposal methods used by the group for plant involved both national and international routes and evidenced their participation in extensive criminal networks. They were also involved in the commission of other offence types such as poaching and hare coursing, drug supply, violence and vehicle crime. Numerous members had weapons markers, and all might be considered career criminals with long records of very serious offences. Despite police having been aware of their activities for over a decade, the group remained outside of OCGM procedures during this sustained period of serious criminality. The eventual decision to map the group related to shifting priorities in their home force, where the theft of rural vehicles came to be prioritised following a spate of offences and a related high-harm incident. Crucially, in this instance, the mapping of this particular group had little to do with the qualitative nor quantitative features of their offences, but rather that their activities came to be more closely aligned with their force's priorities.

Twenty-two

currently active OCGs

involved in rural crime



A Significant Proportion of Rural Crime is Organised Crime but Remains Unmapped

Given their competition with other high-harm offence types, therefore, rural crime groups have a very low probability of receiving official recognition as an OCG. The two examples above offer insight into the types of rural crime which feature in organised crime data and into the inconsistent and unpredictable circumstances which can determine whether a group becomes formally recognised as an OCG. Rather than representing an absence of organised crime in rural areas, the under-representation of rural crime in formal OCG data can be more accurately understood as relating to the rural myopia of national priorities. Consequently, the police forces who participated in the research were able to evidence the presence of large numbers of rural crime groups whose offending bore all of the hallmarks of organised crime, but which remained outside of formal mapping procedures. In line with the NPCC definition outlined earlier, these groups were known to engage in series of cross-border offending over protracted periods which encompassed multiple offence types, and which resulted in significantly harmful impacts. Examples of the way in which these defining characteristics of organised crime manifested in rural offending are outlined below.

Rural Crime is Cross-Border Criminality and Often Involves Networks of Individuals

One of the defining features of **rural crime groups** is their **systematic engagement in cross-border offending**.

Research data unambiguously demonstrates the centrality of movement and travel to the M.O's of rural criminals. When used in relation to rural crime, the term 'cross-border' criminality usually refers to the manner in which the activities of rural criminals transcend the borders of police forces. When considered from this perspective, it is important to note the inevitability that human behaviours will naturally transcend police force boundaries which merely represent lines arbitrarily drawn on a map. However, when analysing the offending patterns and business models of rural criminals, it becomes clear that geographical movement of offenders is far more purposeful than the mere natural extension of activities across boundaries. Previous research has highlighted the crucial role played by geographical movement in the M.O's of plant thieves (vli), and the current analysis further underscores the importance of understanding the way in which rural criminals travel in the course of their offending.

Across all rural offence types, data demonstrated that nominals regularly travel substantial distances while offending, transcending not only police force borders but also regional boundaries. Among those involved in rural SOAC, widespread evidence exists of the way in which nominals routinely travel distances of several hundred miles in order to carry out thefts. These data sets evidence the way in which offenders choose to victimise rural areas which are geographically distant from their home force because they are less likely to be known by police. They are also willing to travel to carry out thefts across multiple force areas to reduce the likelihood that the extent of their activities will come to the attention of the police. One OCG, Holly, whose main business model centres around the theft of plant and agricultural machinery, is known to have covered 550 miles in order to steal numerous pieces of equipment in one night and regularly offends across eight different force areas. When looking at the national picture around rural SOAC, this modus operandi is fairly typical with nominals routinely engaging in cross-border thefts, and often travelling long distances in the course of a single theft series. This was evident in the data supplied to the research which indicated that particular individuals were labelled as priority nominals across multiple forces. This issue was mirrored in the data relating poaching and hare coursing where priority nominals were often flagged by multiple forces as result of the geographical spread of their offending. Here, data indicated that hare coursers habitually travel the length and breadth of the country to participate in events.

Crucially, however, evidence reveals the purposeful nature of rural criminals' decision to engage in cross-border offending. Rather than merely representing an attempt to access a wider range of potential targets or to colonise new markets, cross-border offending signifies an intention to exploit the weaknesses present in current policing methods. Previous research has demonstrated that offenders know that, should they distribute their activities across multiple force areas, the police are less likely to connect offences, allowing the full extent of their activities to remain obscured (vii). Unfortunately, the data collected in the research revealed the efficacy of this approach as police forces often remained unaware of the activities of their own priority nominals in other force areas. Moreover, the way in which rural nominals geographically extend their activities across multiple force regions is often more sophisticated than individuals, or groups travelling to commit crime. Rather, criminals often form wider networks of rural offenders which are often based on shared offending histories, family relationships or shared membership of communities. The formation of these broader networks facilitates cooperation between actors across force borders, often on a national level, in order to engage in the planning and execution of rural crime and the subsequent sale of stolen goods. In the research, numerous examples of these co-operative networks came to light, but one particular group exemplifies the way in which this occurred.



Reindeer

'Reindeer' are a group of nominals operating out of a travellers' site in the West of England. The group comprises of a number of committed career criminals whose business model is based in numerous forms of rural SOAC. They specialise in offences such as residential and commercial burglaries in rural areas, fuel theft, drug cultivation, rogue trading and they have been known to be involved in serious forms of violence. A significant proportion of their criminal portfolio relates to vehicle offences which are stolen both for onward sale and for use in subsequent offences. The group routinely engage in theft of, and from, vans, theft of UTVs, ATVs, Land Rovers, Range Rovers and a wide range of plant equipment which they have also later used in ATM rip-outs.

Whilst 'reindeer' exist as a discreet group whose membership is made up of extremely experienced and accomplished rural criminals, their decision to operate as a wider network helps ensure their ongoing success. Their natural location in wider GRT community networks is a resource upon which they capitalise in order to evade police attention. They do so by using nominals and vehicles from other force areas to engage in reconnaissance activities and sometimes to commit offences in exchange for a fee. Their arrangements for the disposal of stolen goods are also purposefully designed in order to minimise the likelihood of their detection. In the first instance, the group have an appointed person to arrange disposals whose criminal record was almost non-existent, save a solitary charge for a minor disorder offence. This meant that the seller was unlikely to attract police attention while he distributed goods across a network of handlers known to be spread across the UK. Existing relationships present within the GRT community thus provided the framework for a very effective theft and distribution network for UK rural criminals. In this model, members of the 'reindeer' group maintain control of operations whilst nominals from other force areas operate almost as sub-contractors to perform specific tasks such as reconnaissance, theft or transportation. Again, this is a model of criminal networking that is replicated across the UK among rural criminals.

Data demonstrated the way in which a second model of criminal collaboration allowed offenders to extend the geographical reach of their criminal enterprise, but in this second example, no one group appears to assert dominance with groups working in partnership, in a reciprocal manner to facilitate rural SOAC. Again, in this model of operation the networks and relationships present in the criminal element of the GRT community appeared to facilitate the development of cross-border rural crime networks and numerous examples of this way of working were found across the country.





Cabin

'Cabin', a northern mapped OCG, are made up of members of a GRT family who all have very long criminal histories in various forms of rural SOAC and violence, but they have a particular specialism in the theft of plant. For a significant period of time, the criminality of the 'Cabin' group remained fairly concentrated in a small geographical location and their enterprise remained focused on rural SOAC and plant theft. During this period, members of the group would steal and sell goods, often to other members of their GRT community or their family and wider acquaintances. However, over time, the 'Cabin' OCG have joined forces with two other mapped rural OCGs who are also drawn from GRT communities, but who are based around three hundred miles from where the 'Cabin' group lived and operated. The nature of their collaboration bears a much greater resemblance to that of a partnership working than to the model of sub-contracting outlined above. Here, the 'Cabin' group work with two other OCGs 'Labrador' and 'Corbett' in a number of ways. Sometimes members work together to perpetrate thefts and sell goods, whereas at other times, one group will identify targets in their own force areas for other groups to steal. In joining forces with the other two groups, the 'Cabin' OCG were able to significantly extend the geographical reach of their criminal activities, showing up in data across seven force areas. This collaboration also facilitated the diversification of their criminal portfolio, extending into broader forms of acquisitive offences, ATM rip-outs and drugs offences. Through collaboration, therefore, came an intensification in the seriousness of their offending and crucially, this was facilitated not only by the merging of the activities of three distinct OCGs, but also their respective extensive wider networks. Most significantly, when these wider criminal associations were traced, Cabin, Labrador and Corbett were found to be operating in much wider networks of transnational, high-level organised crime groups involved in plant theft, drug supply extreme violence and global illegal betting syndicates, though it is unlikely that they had sight of this fact.

Cross-border offending is an integral feature of the M.O's of rural criminals. Their ability to operate over significant distances, and as part of broader networks, is testament to the organised nature of their enterprise. However, movement across police force borders and regional boundaries is a deeply purposeful act which allows nominals to capitalise on weaknesses in cross-border information sharing among police forces nationally, and this too demonstrates the relative sophistication of their endeavours. Crucially, however, the cross-border activities of criminals are not restricted to the violation of boundaries within the UK, as thefts are often perpetrated to service demand in overseas markets and therefore offences also involve the transcendence of national borders.

Rural Crime often has an International Component

Across all rural crime types, the vast majority of nominals are domestic offenders. They tend to be UK citizens who are born, and live, within the UK. However, the criminality of FNOs plays a central role in sustaining part of the UK's rural crime problem, particularly in relation to the theft of plant and agricultural machinery and vehicles. In some cases, this involves the collaboration of domestic and overseas offenders, in order to create international transportation and disposal routes for goods stolen from the UK's rural communities.

In other examples, the UK has witnessed the arrival of groups of overseas offenders who come to the UK for the sole purpose of committing crime and who do not appear to have any links to domestic offenders or UK criminal networks. As the two types of criminal networks involving FNOs tend to operate in very different ways, they also consequently necessitate distinct responses in terms of policing methods. Nevertheless, they are unified in the way that they both necessitate effective international partnership working and intelligence sharing, in order to facilitate both the pursuit and prosecution of offenders, and the recovery of stolen goods. However, in recent years, the achievement of seamless international policing responses has been significantly undermined by the UK's decision to leave the EU and the demise of the Schengen Agreement. Interruptions to the flow of information that have resulted from the UK's exclusion from the Schengen Agreement have significantly undermined our ability to populate and search databases of stolen equipment, making it much more difficult to recover agricultural machinery and vehicles. Inevitably, this makes the UK an attractive prospect for those involved in the theft and international distribution of plant and agricultural machinery, because the risks of stolen goods being located, intercepted and seized are substantially reduced. The police are currently working with the NCA and Interpol to seek a solution to this problem and have established interim measures which allow for the circulation of information relating to those vehicles identified as stolen for export. However, the identification and adoption of longer-term measures are urgently needed in order to reduce the attractiveness of the UK as a destination for FNOs involved in the theft and distribution of plant and agricultural machinery.

In order to illuminate the nature of FNO involvement in the theft of plant and agricultural machinery, two case studies are presented below. The first demonstrates the way in which FNOs and domestic offenders collaborate to service overseas markets with agricultural vehicles stolen in the UK. The second case study demonstrates the way in which groups of FNOs operate as deracinated theft and distribution cells who tend to perpetrate crime in the UK independently of domestic offenders. The case studies have been selected on the basis that they are indicative of wider trends in criminal activity taking place nationally.

Case Study One: Domestic OCG collaborate with FNOs to export stolen plant and agricultural vehicles.

A significant crime series involving the theft of hundreds of pieces of plant and agricultural machinery across at least four force areas was perpetrated by a domestic OCG. At its core, the group consists of a number of serious and organised criminals who have been formally mapped OCG members. These nominals have extensive offending histories on PND which consist of a broad range of acquisitive crimes, including the theft of numerous types of vehicles and construction equipment from rural settings. They are also known to be involved in more serious offences including the theft of ATMs, for which the theft of plant serves as a precursor offence. Their criminal histories also incorporate a broader spectrum of offences including drugs and modern slavery offences. Beyond this core of offenders, the group's criminal activity is also dependent on the participation of a significant number of other offenders whose relationship with the group varies greatly in intensity. Whilst the principal OCG members were often directly involved in theft events, on many occasions they would also enlist the criminal labour of this wider group of associates to drive vehicles, perpetrate thefts, or carry out reconnaissance on their behalf in exchange for cash. Among this wider group of satellite offenders are a number of FNOs who are involved in the transportation of vehicles out of the country and who arrange sales abroad. The machinery stolen by this group was destined for export to areas such as Central and Eastern Europe and Africa. However, in this case, the domestic OCG members were not directly involved in the transportation and exportation of these goods, and this therefore necessitated the formation of wider criminal collaborations.

When exporting stolen vehicles, the group used two principal methods which were underpinned by different levels of involvement with FNOs. In the first instance, the group had extremely solid links with two local handlers, both of whom were domestic offenders, though one initially originated from another country. These handlers acted as intermediaries between the domestic OCG, the FNOs involved in transportation and the overseas recipients. Consequently, in this instance, home OCG members were not thought to have any direct contact with FNOs as their relationship was mediated by a third party. However, intelligence was indicative of the fact that a two-way flow of communication existed in the sense that the domestic OCG were directly servicing demands of overseas buyers by stealing to order. In the second instance, FNOs employed in the haulage industry were responsible for the collection and transportation of vehicles through ports and onwards to Eastern Europe. In this case, principal group members were directly involved in the handover of vehicles to FNOs, and phone data evidenced their regular and sustained contact. In this example, intelligence was also able to evidence the relationship between domestic offenders and overseas recipients. Thus, the two business models established by this particular OCG, were dependent on the collaboration between domestic and overseas offenders who worked together to form extensive international criminal networks comprising of a small core of closely connected nominals and a much larger number of more loosely associated people whose involvement was often opportunistic and ad-hoc.

Case Study Two: Travelling groups of FNOs visit the UK with the sole intention to commit crime

In a second example, FNOs acting with little, or no, formal links to domestic offenders were also found to play a significant role in the systematic victimisation of rural communities across the UK. Unlike the previous example, the criminality of these foreign offenders was not dependent on being embedded in domestic criminal networks. Rather, they tended to work in small teams, coming to the UK for short periods of time with the sole purpose of committing rural crime. An example of this model of offending can be found in an Eastern European group named 'Sycamore', who were heavily involved in the theft of agricultural GPS systems from farms across the UK. The group were fairly prolific in their offending and were known to be responsible for a very high number of thefts which were distributed across a significant geographical area. Whilst Sycamore's main area of business in the UK appears to relate to the theft of agricultural GPS systems, evidence also exists of their links to chop shops for domestic vehicles. The way in which Sycamore executed thefts unequivocally evidenced the significant levels of professionalism, organisation and skill which characterises this particular model of criminality. The nominals involved in this theft series were highly organised both in the sense of their modus operandi but also in their links to wider forms of transnational organised crime networks.

In the first instance, the group appears to be fairly rigidly hierarchical, and evidence exists of their use of violence to maintain order among their members. The nominals in the group reside in Eastern Europe and their involvement in rural crime in the UK therefore clearly evidences the transnational nature of their criminality. However, Sycamore are also known to be involved in the theft of GPS systems across a number of European jurisdictions. The theft series for which Sycamore were responsible were perpetrated by itinerant nominals who travelled across numerous countries with the sole purpose of victimising rural communities. The thieves usually spent very short periods of time in the countries they targeted, tending to leave as soon after thefts as possible. Some evidence exists that the victims of itinerant FNOs are determined in advance as, upon apprehension, some nominals were found to be in possession of lists of targeted commodities. Their modus operandi therefore evidences the significant levels of planning and sophistication involved in their business model. Significantly, the nominals who travelled to the UK did not operate in isolation but were embedded in a larger network of transnational organised criminals. Sycamore, whilst heavily involved in rural acquisitive thefts across Europe, were also simultaneously involved in high-level drug supply in their country of origin, and this area of their criminality also had a transnational element. The criminal portfolio of the group encompassed multiple forms of serious transnational organised crime and rural criminality merely represented one revenue stream within this. The people who came to the UK to execute thefts inevitably occupied lower positions in the criminal hierarchy of Sycamore's structure and may not have been involved in this wider criminal portfolio. However, the ongoing decision of Sycamore's senior members to incorporate rural SOAC into their broader criminal undertakings, alongside other forms of SOC, is testament to their ability to generate significant profits from this area of business and of their ability to operate with relative ease in this arena.

Research data very clearly demonstrates that transnational criminality plays an important role in sustaining the UK's rural crime problem. Nominals from outside the UK are key to creating demand for stolen commodities and to facilitating their transportation outside of the UK. The way in which FNOs participate in rural offences varies enormously. Some FNOs appear to co-operate with domestic offenders on an ad-hoc basis to provide transportation services and these individuals appear to have no further involvement in criminal activities. Beyond this, both FNOs embedded in networks of domestic offenders, and those operating in the UK independently, play a much more active role in the commission of thefts and transportation of goods. Evidence also unambiguously demonstrates that these groups tend to be members of OCGs simultaneously involved in serious and organised crime, most commonly within the drugs trade. Members of these groups are adept at negotiating postal, transportation and freight networks to facilitate the distribution of stolen goods and are able to operate across multiple jurisdictions. Their criminality is, therefore characterised by a degree of sophistication which poses significant challenges for UK rural communities and policing structures.

Conclusions

The aim of the research was to discover more about those involved in the commission of rural offences in the UK, and to explore their involvement with serious and organised crime. The research found that the population of those involved in the commission of rural offences comprises of a fairly diverse group of nominals, whose links to serious and organised crime vary enormously. In the first instance, the vast majority of rural crimes appear to be perpetrated by domestic nominals who have long and sustained criminal histories which encompass multiple forms of rural and non-rural crime, including serious offences related to violence and drug supply. Within these expansive careers, rural criminals tend to display long-term commitment to the victimisation of rural communities, engaging in various rural offence types over time. Moreover, the harms associated with rural crime can be significant with widespread evidence of distress, injury, intimidation and violence provided by multiple forces. In short, those involved in rural crime tend to be well-established criminals with extensive and wide-ranging criminal histories. However, beyond the elucidation of the characteristics of those involved in rural crime, the project was also able to evidence more substantive links between rural crime and organised criminality and these links took four main forms:

- Some UK rural crime groups, predominantly those involved in the theft of plant and agricultural machinery, have received formal recognition as OCGs and regularly operate in the UK to steal machinery to service both domestic and overseas demand.
- Those involved in rural offences have membership of OCGs whose criminality relates to offences committed outside of the rural arena, most commonly in drugs markets. These OCG members come to the countryside to engage in acquisitive and wildlife offences.
- Foreign national offenders who are members of OCGs in other jurisdictions come to the UK to victimise rural communities, sometimes acting independently and sometimes in partnership with domestic offenders.
- Rural crime groups within the UK operate as OCGs and meet the criteria of national definitions of organised crime, but remain outside of formal mapping procedures because of their inability to compete with other high-harm offences.
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The evidence, therefore, is stark. The reality of the UK's rural crime problem is underpinned by a situation of complexity and gravity which is not reflected in the response with which it is met. Under current policing arrangements, recognition is made of the role played by OCGs in rural crime by its location under the NPCC SOAC portfolio. However, at an operational level, local RCTs - which can have no assigned resources, or can comprise of a single officer - are required to meet the demands of the problem outlined above.

There is, therefore, a significant disjuncture between the reality of rural crime and the resources assigned to its control. Rural crime finds itself slipping through the cracks of current policing models: often too complex for local RCTs to respond meaningfully, and simultaneously unable to meet the thresholds of threat, harm and risk to warrant ROCU or NCA attention. This essentially creates an 'open goal' for criminals to operate with relative impunity in rural areas (xiii) and the continued attraction of organised criminals to rural areas is testament to the lucrative opportunities present within these settings.

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