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Organized Rural Crime Groups

> KEY POINTS

- Between 2000 and 2012 over 1,000 police stations have been closed in the UK and many more have been placed on reduced opening hours. A similar situation is unfolding in Northern Ireland and Eire. This may be viewed as a strategic and operational withdrawal from the current concept of rural policing. This closure trend has significantly altered the landscape of rural policing in the UK.
- In the same period, the landscapes of rural crime and criminality have also changed in that there has been a noticeable increase in the levels of the organisation of crime groups involved in committing rural crimes. In short crime is becoming more organised and entrepreneurial.
- Organised rural crime groups which either target or operate from rural areas are aware of and exploiting this gap. The current financial recession in the UK has created political, financial and organisational pressures which have resulted in the closure of a significant number of police stations across the United Kingdom. Statistically many of these are rural police stations. This situation is part of a longer term withdrawal of policing services in rural areas. Both of these trends have unintended consequences in that they have created a set of circumstances which provide an increased opportunity for indigenous and international serious and organised crime groups with the capability of targeting rural areas.

The increase of rural crimes such as the theft of farm machinery and tools; livestock; and unregulated butchery practices, evidences the danger that serious and organised crime groups pose to rural areas as they expand their criminal activities in the current economic recession. It does appear that Eastern European organised crime groups are targeting the UK by stealing tractors and other items of heavy plant for resale in Europe and on the African subcontinent. There is evidence that British based organised crime groups are also becoming more organised at exploiting criminal opportunities in rural areas.

THE CHANGING NATURE OF POLICING RURAL CRIME

According to recent figures released by the National Farmers Union (NFU Mutual) theft from farms in the UK has increased, as the estimated cost of theft to UK agriculture tipped £52.7 million in 2011. However, agri-crime and farm theft are but one feature of rural crime.

Although serious and organised crime and the policing thereof are normally associated with being an urban phenomenon, rural areas present unique opportunities for the serious and organised criminal entrepreneur to exploit.

It is generally perceived that:

- urban areas are the natural habitat for the serious and organised criminal;
- there is less crime in rural areas;
- the majority of rural crime is committed by urban criminals;
- rural crime is somehow less serious than urban crime and therefore requires less of a policing presence;

Rural areas provide alternative criminal opportunities for the urban based organised crime group. The relationship between the urban based organised criminal and rurality forms part of their ongoing modus operandi as shown in the table below.

Rurality as a base for operations	In this scenario the urban criminal will use rural houses and buildings for the illicit production of various criminal commodities. Alternatively, they will use rural dwellings as safe houses and rural areas for illegal stashes. Also, in this group would be categorised the so called "greenbelt bandit and
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Rurality as a criminal playscape	settled criminals". In this scenario, organised urban crime groups target the countryside for the purposes of poaching, hare-coursing, badger- baiting and dogfighting and similar activities
Rurality as a target market	In this scenario, both urban and rural based organised crime groups target the countryside to steal tractors, plant, farm machinery and tools, scrap metal, fuel and to engage in sheep and cattle rustling.

The countryside is an attractive operating environment for organised criminal groups: there is less police surveillance and less opportunity of being stopped and searched. Rural policing is organised around the policing of villages and is not designed to interact with and patrol remote rural areas. As a result, urban criminals frequently own and use off road motorcycles and four wheel drive vehicles which can easily navigate off road terrain.

The rural criminal is viewed as a loveable rural rogue and small time thief. Consequentially, little consideration is given to the existence of organised crime groups consisting of rogue farmers and rural entrepreneurs who conspire to commit crime. However, it is evident that certain types of rural crime require the possession of rural social capital and a working knowledge of rural practices. For example, cattle and sheep rustling is one such crime which requires the complicity of criminals with a rural background. Knowledge of how to herd animals and understanding the functioning of the Mart are key skills.

THE WITHDRAWAL OF POLICING SERVICES IN THE COUNTRYSIDE

Since the Rural Policing Act of 1839 rural policing has been an integral part of the framework of policing in Britain. Rural policing; a specialised and underappreciated policing role is increasingly under threat. There are three aspects to the demise of the rural police officer:

- the closure of rural police stations;
- a decrease in the number of police officers based in and operating from rural police stations;
- the reduction in training in rural matters for police officers.

Of these, the closure of rural police stations is worrying. Since 2000, approximately 1,017 police stations have been closed in the UK. The majority being rural police stations. Between 2007 and 2012 in Scotland 56 police stations were closed and 23 had reduced opening hours imposed on them and in England and Wales there were approximately 361 reported closures. For example, Northern Constabulary in Scotland closed 26 police stations and in Gloucestershire is selling off 18 of its 29 police stations.

Irrespective of these points, if one were to envisage a model of the UK in the year 2000 with every police station then open, illuminated with a single (energy efficient) light bulb, and compare it with similar model of the UK for the year 2012, one would see that great swathes of the countryside are now in metaphorical darkness.

The closure of a rural police station has a symbolic effect as well as an operational effect. As history has proven that once closed, there is no return of the service to the community. Many of the officers who formally policed rural areas are moved to urban policing environments where their knowledge and skills are lost to their rural communities. The closure of police stations impacts on the number of police officers actually policing the rural area. Our research reveals that rural community policing skills are not taught by the National Police Improvement Agency. In the UK, there is no official definition of rural crime, nor any framework of how it should be recorded.

In an attempt to counteract this trend, there has been an increase in the implementation of innovative policing practices such as Parish Constables; Rural Special constables; Village Bobby schemes; mobile police offices; the opening of temporary police stations in village halls and churches and other community driven models such as farm, horse, shop and pub watches. Some forces have pioneered the use of rural intelligence officers and rural community beat officers and the introduction of the wildlife crime officer is a welcome innovation.

The National Farmers Union (Mutual Insurance) recently introduced an innovative scheme whereby they have sponsored two full time police officers in their intelligence unit to tackle the

rise in Tractor thefts. As a result of their work in 2011 the unit tracked down tractors stolen in the UK to Poland and Africa.

CONCLUSION

We argue that there is a need for:-

- The development of a universally accepted definition of what constitutes rural crime;
- The formulation of a unified rural crime policy and plan to be implemented UK wide which lays out the strategic response to the threat;
- That rural policing be placed back on the training agenda;
- That a specific rural crime tag be placed in crime recording databases;
- That there is a greater degree of cooperation between agencies and a sharing of intelligence between these agencies and the police;
- More sponsoring of rural crime specialists following the NFU mutual model.

We are particularly interested in examples of rural crime and would welcome comments on this piece please to Gerard McElwee.

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