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This is an author produced version of a paper published in

International Journal of Agricultural Management (ISSN 2047-3710)

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Citation Details

Citation for the version of the work held in 'OpenAIR@RGU':

SMITH, R., LAING, A. and MCELWEE, G., 2013. The rise of illicit rural enterprise within the farming industry: a viewpoint. Available from <i>OpenAIR@RGU</i>. [online]. Available from: http://openair.rgu.ac.uk
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Citation for the publisher's version:

SMITH, R., LAING, A. and MCELWEE, G., 2013. The rise of illicit rural enterprise within the farming industry: a viewpoint. <i>International Journal of Agricultural Management</i>, 2 (4), pp. 185-188.
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The rise of illicit rural enterprise within the farming industry: A viewpoint

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Abstract

In this viewpoint article we seek to make the farming community aware of the increasing presence of organised criminals and crime within the farming community. In the past decade there has been a discernable rise in the level of organized criminality in rural areas especially in relation to farm crime across Britain and Europe. This has been reported in the media in many European States and is exacerbated by the financial crisis and by a lack of cooperation between member states and agencies.

Introduction

Since the Rural Policing Act of 1839 (or Rural Constabularies Act), rural policing and in particular the rural police station has been an integral part of the framework of policing in Britain. In this viewpoint article, we discuss several inter-connected emerging trends which should be of concern to the rural and farming communities. Rural policing is a specialised and under appreciated policing role which is increasingly under threat. There are three linked constituent parts relating to the demise of the rural police officer. This imminent danger can be ascribed to:

- the closure of rural police stations;
- a decrease in the number of police officers based in and operating from rural police stations;

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- the reduction in training in rural matters for police officers.

All three of the above issues are obviously interconnected and should be of interest to farmers. This situation is part of a longer term withdrawal of policing services in rural areas (Smith, 2010).

The imminent demise of the rural 'Bobby' and the closure of rural police stations both have potential consequences for farmers in terms of increasing crime levels. According to our research, 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. This can be viewed as a strategic and operational withdrawal from the current concept of rural policing. Indeed, the closures are significantly altering the rural landscape of policing. The closure of police stations impacts on the number of police officers actually policing the rural area and also impacts upon the loss of core rural policing skills. Our research reveals that rural community policing skills are not taught at the Scottish Police College, nor by the National Police Improvement Agency in England. The current financial recession in the UK has created political, financial and organisational pressures which have driven this spate of closures across the United Kingdom and Ireland. This slow and inexorable closure of rural police stations is worrying enough without taking into cognisance the potential for organized criminality in rural areas.

For example, 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. Crime is becoming more organised and entrepreneurial as organised rural crime groups target or operate from rural areas are aware of and exploiting this gap. 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.

A recent article by Sergi and Lavorgna (2012) on the expansion of the Italian Mafia into rural crimes such as the theft of farm machinery and tools; the theft of livestock; and into unregulated butchery practices, clearly evidences the danger that serious and organised crime groups can pose to rural areas when they seek to expand their criminal activities in the current economic recession.

Whilst there is no evidence that we are aware of that the Italian Mafia are routinely operating such practices in the UK, it does appear that indigenous UK and 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. In addition, there is evidence that British based organised crime groups are also becoming more organised and prolific at exploiting criminal opportunities that present themselves in rural areas. We therefore, examine and highlight the changing landscape of rural crime in a UK wide context to map and detail how it is changing as well as drawing out practical issues which the farming, police intelligence community and policy makers can utilise in initiating future planning initiatives. The evidence for the practice of such rural criminal entrepreneurship is not immediately self evident unless one knows what one is looking for.

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 reached new levels, 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 to exploit. To date, there have been few serious studies which have examined the changing nature of rural crime, criminality and policing.

It is necessary to articulate a few of the basic ideologies around which the policing of rurality is governed. It is generally regarded that:

- urban areas are the natural habitat for the serious and organised criminal;
- there is less crime in rural areas – known as the rural idyll thesis;
- the majority of rural crime is committed by urban criminals – known as urban marauder thesis;
- 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: -

<p>Rurality as a base for operations</p>	<p>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 settled criminals”.</p>
<p>Rurality as a criminal playscape</p>	<p>In this scenario, organised urban crime groups target the countryside for the purposes of poaching, hare-coursing, badger- baiting and dogfighting and</p>

	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.

Table 1 Opportunities

The countryside can prove an attractive operating environment for organised criminal groups because there is less police surveillance and therefore less opportunity of being stopped and searched. Rural policing (where it exists) is organised around the policing of villages and as a general rule, local policing 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.

Our perception of the rural criminal is a socially constructed one of the loveable rural rogue and small time thief (Smith and McElwee, 2013). Consequentially, little consideration is given to the existence of organised crime groups consisting of rogue farmers and other members of the rural community such as farm workers or anyone who has previous experience of farming who knowingly conspire to commit such crimes. Of interest is the concept of the "Rogue Farmer" (Wiber, 1995; Smith, 2004; Heffernan, Nielsen, Thomson and Gunn, 2008; Smith, 2010; Smith, 2011 and Smith and McElwee, 2013) which we believe is a subject worthy of serious academic debate as well as being a subject of interest to the farming community. Moreover, Wilkinson, Craig and Gaus (2010) refer to the "*Exploitative Farmer*" employing

and exploiting migrant labour. We acknowledge that this is a minority group within farming.

It is evident from our research 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 is a key skill as is ownership of a sheepdog and appropriate equipment. One also requires knowledge of the market for the resale of livestock. It is also evident that few urban crime groups would possess this type of knowledge. Although the existence of predatory urban crime gangs targeting rural areas is an established fact the existence of indigenous organised crime groups operating in rural areas, committing rural crime is less well known.

In the UK, there is no official definition of rural crime, nor any framework of how it should be recorded. Furthermore, in England and Wales, the Association of Chief Police Officers, have a portfolio for rural crime headed by a Chief Constable but its sister body in Scotland, do not. Furthermore, none of the other government agencies involved in the interdiction of rural crime have a working definition either. In investigating rural crime, there is inevitably scope of inertia and myopia in organisational matters which have the potential of being exploited by organised crime groups.

In an attempt to counteract this trend, there has been an increase in the implementation of innovative policing practices such as the introduction of Parish Constables; Rural Special constables; Village Bobby schemes; mobile police offices; the opening of temporary police stations in village halls 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 has been a welcome innovation. However, such innovations are introduced piecemeal and the advantages are in danger of being lost due to the financial pressures brought about by the recession and the age of austerity.

The rise of the rural criminal enterprise

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. In one high profile case 'Operation Goldflake' five men including a businessman were arrested for the theft of tractors and JCB's to the value of £500,000. These were exported to Turkey and Iraq. This is but one of many examples featured in the press.

Furthermore, our research has indicated that since the year 2000, there has been a rise in the incidences of rural criminal entrepreneurship. In particular, there has been an increase in the level of organised criminal activity centring upon food related crime. One such example is the Food Standard Agencies Operations Aberdeen and Fox into the fraudulent sale of thousands of tonnes of condemned meat into the food chain. So are the organized crime gangs involved in the theft of sheep and the illegal production of "Smokies" for the Halal Trade (Smith, 2004). Another example, are organized crime groups involved in the illegal harvesting of shellfish and poaching. The 'Eurovet scandal' in which a businessman / farmer set up a company to import and sell unlicensed veterinary medicines earned the perpetrators between £6 and 13.5 million pounds (Smith & Whiting,

2013). Likewise, the so called 'Black Fish Scandal' in which a group of Scottish fishermen fraudulently entered undeclared fish into the food chain netted the culprits approximately £63 million pounds (Smith, 2012).

These cases are all connected conceptually as they relate to crimes which were not traditionally of concern to the police service per se. They are dealt with by various government agencies responsible for different parts of the legislative process. All of these crimes entail a multi agency approach to deal with them and invariably all of them entailed the involvement of police officers in the joint investigations. Many of the accused in these high profile crimes are businessmen or farmers who do not fit the typical profile of the urban organised criminal.

The need for a more organised response

Although the crimes discussed above may appear to be separate occurrences and individual activities, they point to an ongoing trend towards criminals targeting food related crimes which is likely to continue in the future. Whilst we acknowledge that there is little available evidence to suggest that they are all committed and controlled by traditional organised crime figures, there is nevertheless, increasing evidence that rural crime is becoming more organised and lucrative to such organised crime groups. There is, therefore, always the danger that such groups may seek to expand into the UK market.

Conclusion

We argue that there is a need for:-

- The development of a universally accepted definition of what constitutes rural crime and that this should be implemented UK wide;
- 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.

There is also a need for designing new and different methods and ways of policing and for teams or squads of rural police officers to be created, drawn from different agencies, along the lines of the Australian Rural Crime Team model or the Danish Food Standards Agency Flying Squad model.

Although many of the indigenous (dis)organised criminal groups are not operated with the same ruthlessness that Italian and Eastern European Mafia undoubtedly are their criminal activities, nevertheless, are still lucrative. Many of the rural crimes discussed in this article are not crimes which one would traditionally associate with organised crime or be associated with serious and organised criminals yet the scenarios discussed above nevertheless demonstrate an increasing degree of organisation and sophistication by the criminals concerned. Thus, rural based organised crime groups may well be a new type of organised criminal group for the intelligence community to concern

itself with. It has often been noted that organised crime is extremely adaptive. However, it is difficult to counter if there are fewer police on the ground in rural areas and there is no unified rural policing plan. Likewise, if the authorities are unaware of the markets these organised criminal groups operate in, then there is a reduced chance that they will be effectively dealt with. What is disturbing is that the closure of so many rural police stations has been done without an act of Parliament, let alone without public consultation thereby negating some of the net gains made by the Rural Policing Act of 1839. After all delivering effective rural policing without a policing presence is difficult.

The issues discussed herein are obviously exacerbated by the current financial crises in Britain and across Europe. This has created new markets and marketplaces for criminals to exploit. There is little sign that the current recession is about to end and even if and when it does, that it will result in a reduction of the criminal activities committed by organised crime groups in rural areas. As the crimes currently committed by these opportunist entrepreneurial criminals become more embedded in the criminal community, there is a danger that they will become more attractive to even more ruthless organised criminal groups and mafias.

This article also evidences the increasing gap between government policies and our law enforcement capacity to effectively police rural areas. Moreover, there is an increased danger that this could lead to an expansion of traditional organised crime groups in rural areas. The closure of rural police stations and the withdrawal of police officers and resources from the countryside must be addressed urgently before there is irreparable damage done. Whilst there is clearly a need to reduce to fiscal costs of policing, this has to be balanced against the

needs of the individual communities because withdrawing services without putting in place a workable strategic plan, is not a sensible course of action.

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