

## LISTENING TO ALTERNATIVE PERSPECTIVES ON RURAL CRIME AND CRIMINALITY (A REPORT ON THE PILOT STUDY)

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**Summary:** This summary reports on the pilot phase of an ongoing study, funded by SIPR, into the changing nature of rural crime and what constitutes rural criminality. We set out to listen to alternative perspectives on rural crime and criminality and to speak to employees of agencies other than the police involved in policing rural criminality. We initially believed that such activities might be hampered by a lack of definitional clarity as to what constitutes rural policing and by the focus of the literature on policing *per se*. However, what the pilot study showed was that much of the criminality which was discussed transcends the artificial boundaries of rurality and urbanity in that it was primarily food crime or food fraud. This has implications for future research into rural crime.

### DEFINING THE PROBLEM AND REVIEWING THE LITERATURE

Since the inception of SIPR, rural crime and policing have been of perennial interest. Indeed, interest in rural policing, particularly in a Scottish context, is increasing. For example, there have been two SIPR-funded seminars in rural policing since 2006 and the seminal study of Fenwick, Docknell, Slade and Roberts (2011) was the first to listen to the voices of ordinary Scottish police officers concerned with interdicting rural crime. This is of importance because in Scotland, and the rest of the UK, rural crime is on the increase. Nevertheless, it is difficult for the interested observer to establish the scale of the problem in economic terms because there is no official consensus as to what constitutes a rural crime. We must rely on statistics relating to individual sectors. For example, figures released by NFUMutual in 2011 indicate that:-

- Theft to UK agriculture cost £52.7 million in 2011 and the estimated cost of thefts from Scottish farms rose to £1.8 million (an increase of 50%).
- There has been a 6% rise in the cost of agricroime as thieves focus on livestock, diesel and metals.
- The cost of livestock thefts rose by 165% in 2011. In the first six months of 2011, 142 rustling claims were reported whereas there were only 156 in the whole of 2010.
- 62% of NFUMutual Agents reported an increase in rural crime in their area.
- There are regional variations, as across the UK rural crime claims fell by 11% but the cost of tractor theft in Scotland rose by 45% in 2011 (UK wide Tractor theft claims costs rose by 11%).
- There is an increase in commodity theft and an emerging trend in the theft of red diesel, heating fuel and agrochemicals.

Moreover, our perceptions of what constitutes rural crime have been influenced by studies focusing upon the police as the primary agency responsible for interdicting rural crime (see Yarwood & Edwards, 1995; Yarwood, 2000; Yarwood & Gardner, 2000; Yarwood & Cozens, 2004; Mawby, 2004; Mawby, 2007; and Yarwood & Mawby, 2010). Traditionally the primary focus of such research has been on the police and upon investigating and interdicting rural crime (and the rural criminal) on a case-by-case basis. Whilst it is recognised that rural

policing is qualitatively different from urban policing (Buttle, 2006) it is difficult to quantitatively record it. There is not yet a consensus within the UK police service as to a commonly agreed definition of what constitutes rural crime. It is composed of a number of different and diverse behavioural categories from agricultural crime to wildlife crime and is variously referred to as rural crime; countryside crime; agricultural crime; and farm crime.

Nor does there appear to be a consensus either between the Police and other Agencies involved in its interdiction as to common terms and strategies for combating it. Nevertheless, agencies other than the police do interdict rural crime and criminality (Smith, 2010). It is our belief that this insular approach is problematic because there is a need to coordinate crime investigation and initiate joint crime reduction strategies better. From previous research into 'Illegal Rural Enterprise' (McElwee, Smith & Somerville, 2011; Smith & McElwee, 2013) we know that crime is becoming more organized, more business-like and widespread due to the current economic climate. It is a common assumption that in these austere times there has been an increase in illegal and illicit activity, which appears to be the case according to the NFU figures. There has been an upsurge in crimes committed by criminal entrepreneurs and entrepreneurial criminals and that these impact upon rural crime. This is important because entrepreneurship and crime are life themes which pervade the fabric of everyday life in contemporary societies as evidenced by studies of criminal entrepreneurship (Hobbs, 1988; Gottschalk, 2009; and Smith, 2009). Illegal entrepreneurs exhibit characteristics, such as strategic awareness, opportunity spotting and networking, shared by 'legal' entrepreneurs (McElwee, Somerville & Smith, 2008). Moreover, it is becoming increasingly difficult to separate entrepreneurial activity occurring between the formal and informal economies. It is estimated that the UK informal economy represents 12% of GDP or approximately £120 billion (Schneider, 2006). Williams and Nadin (2010) suggest that the informal economy has a greater prevalence in rural areas. To date there has been little research to suggest why this is so.

There are practical implications too because from a policing perspective, investigating illegal enterprise crime requires a different set of investigative skills than dealing with traditional organized crime. The former is committed by members of the business community and the investigative skills required are financial and often require a working knowledge of business *per se* (Smith, 2009). It entails working more with other government agencies which come into contact with such individuals as a result of other legislative crimes or offences. Examples include the food laundering scandals investigated by Operation Fox and Operation Aberdeen; the Eurovet Scandal; the Black Fish Scandal and most recently the Horsemeat Scandal. To date, from an academic perspective, there has been no unified research effort to synthesise the theoretical, conceptual and practical aspects of illegal enterprise crime hence the reason behind our wider research project. Also from prior research and a review of the literature on rural crime we were aware that many of the crimes we are interested in are committed from business premises situated in rural areas which are not easy to keep under surveillance. One of the problems with researching illegal enterprise crime is gaining access to illegal entrepreneurs to interview them. As a result, we had identified that much of the operational knowledge of such activities is held by Council and Trading Standards Officials. Consequentially, we sought to engage with such officials to examine reported occurrences of illegal enterprise crime in the UK and to listen to their voices. When the opportunity arose to benefit from a SIPR Small Research Grant we were delighted to accept. We designed a small scale study to engage with local statutory agencies and regional government officials to gauge the extent and scope of the activities. We were interested in uncovering evidence and examples of the existence of "*Rural Criminal Entrepreneurship*" (Davis & Potter, 1991; Smith, 2004; Smith and McElwee, 2013). We sought further evidence of the criminal activities of "*rogue farmers*" and of the prevalence of multi agency working (Smith, 2010).

## SOURCES OF INFORMATION

To empirically investigate the paradigm we used a mix of qualitative methodologies including a focus group (Basch, 1987; Blackburn & Stokes, 2000; Robson, 2011) supplemented by "*in-depth face-to-face-interviews*" with industry insiders. According to Robson (2011), focus groups are ideal for "*Real World Research*" such as our research project. The focus group consisted of 5 individuals from the Food Standards Agency, Animal Health, Trading Standards and a Police Wildlife Crime Officer. We followed this up with 10 face-to-face interviews with individuals identified through the 'snowballing' technique. These included Ministry vets, two farmers, a politician and representatives from NFUMutual.

## FINDINGS

From these interviews we gleaned a rich source of qualitative data, stories and explanations many of which were mini-case studies. From an analysis of the interview data we report the following preliminary observations:-

1. The respondents confirmed that they did not work to (or share) a universal definition of rural crime. They appreciated that rurality played a part in their everyday work. Contrary to our initial expectations they did not see their work as focusing specifically on the rural, nor did they see this as being problematic. We were surprised by this because if you do not record a crime by its location and type you will not be able to quantify it statistically nor search for it in a data base.

2. All Agencies involved reported good working relationships with the Police Service in Scotland. There was universal praise for the Scottish system of intelligence sharing between the authorities and all the Scottish Councils in relation to animal health and food safety concerns. They reported good levels of intelligence sharing on matters concerning rural crime. They appreciated that Scotland was a special case and that their positive experience may not be transferable to England and Wales. However, they acknowledged that they generally deferred to the police on matters concerning the investigation of crime.

3. These industry insiders confirmed that they dealt with crimes and offences on a weekly basis, not normally dealt with by the Police Service and that these crimes were perhaps under-represented in official statistics. They also acknowledged that in recent years staffing levels had reduced as had opportunities to update their knowledge of investigative practices. They reported that they were not always confident of their investigative abilities. Some intimated that such crimes were often detected as if by accident. There was thus, often an element of serendipity to the detection as in following one's instinct or hunches when involved in farm or factory inspections or by a chance sighting or piece of information from the public. They expressed a desire for more inter-agency collaboration on training and indicated that an Agency-wide investigative training manual with case studies would be helpful to them.

4. The respondents corroborated each other in their belief that crime was becoming more organised in nature and that there was an insider/industry element to such crimes. They justified this by stressing that, in general terms, knowledge of industry practices and procedures are an essential prerequisite in committing the crime. The most relevant story related to the ability to steal livestock and in particular sheep which required an intimate knowledge of how to round up and herd sheep into suitable transport and also necessitates knowledge of suitable marketplaces. To herd sheep requires a sheepdog or a quad bike.

5. From the interviews the strongest theme that emerged from the data was that they primarily dealt with food-crime and food-fraud. This was a revelation to us. On hindsight we can see the links between the different categories. The respondents articulated two basic types of food crime. Firstly, a parasitical type, generally committed as theft by organised crime groups who target livestock with the intention of passing the resultant meat, illegally, into the food chain. This can be the organised poaching of deer; the organised theft of sheep for the Halal Market; and the Seafood Industry. The second type was an industry insider type where owners of abattoirs become involved in the mislabeling or adulteration of the product for sale by adding cheaper and often potentially dangerous alternative meat products into the mix. Often the meat added is condemned and unfit for human consumption. Such crimes are committed by unscrupulous entrepreneurs and business men. These two types are not mutually inclusive/exclusive and that to sell their stolen or appropriated goods, organised crime groups must form alliances with rogue entrepreneurs or traders involved in the Food Industry. Moreover, on occasion, legitimate business persons within the Food Industry, may be threatened or blackmailed into participating in such frauds. Another aspect of food crime is the extended food supply chains involved in that many middlemen may be involved in a transaction and meat can cross many countries with different legislation. As a result it can be difficult to trace exactly where the various raw products in a processed food package originated.

6. Four of the main subthemes which emerged from the information were Organisation; Interaction; Collaboration; and Proactivity. Evidence supports a growing trend towards an increased level of organisation and sophistication noticeable in the criminal activities of both ordinary criminals and organised crime groups who operate in rural areas. Indeed, NFUMutual claim that this amounts to "*Criminals systematically, targeting*

*Britain's farms...*. Also much of the work of the agencies examined is characterised by reactivity, albeit there is some evidence of proactivity and proactive thinking in terms of the investigation of crime.

7. From our discussions with the politician and representatives of NFUMutual we noted concerns regarding the noticeable trend in the closure of rural police stations across Scotland. There were concerns expressed that this "austerity measure" would lead to a loss of service to rural communities and a deskilling of the police capability and knowledge base in relation to dealing with rural crime. This has implications for Police Wildlife Crime Officers who are increasingly finding themselves cast in the secondary role of rural policing experts.

8. It was not all 'doom and gloom' because we did learn about exciting developments in rural crime with the potential to compliment rural policing in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We were impressed by the NFU Mutual Farm Crime Reduction model and in particular their sponsoring/funding of a team of police investigators to develop intelligence on the theft of tractors and farm machinery. We also heard of the existence of a multi-agency, country wide Food Standards Task Force in Denmark. We see both of these examples as being innovative and entrepreneurial applications worthy of further research and official consideration.

As well as being of theoretical and conceptual interest to academics this pilot study has practical implications relating to how rural crime is policed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This summary places this research in the context of the wider literature and lead to more funded research into rural crime and policing in Scotland and the UK.

## FUTURE WORK

Since our pilot study in the autumn of 2012, the policing landscape in Scotland has changed considerably with the inception of Police Scotland in April, 2013. We have also experienced the Horsemeat scandal which again highlighted again the pernicious nature of food crime. Obviously, the results presented above are preliminary but we consider it was very worth-while listening to alternative perspectives (and voices) on rural crime and criminality because without doing so we would have been unaware of the current focus on food-crime and food-fraud and its links with rural crime. The conversations also highlighted that the agencies did not share our initial concerns about the apparent lack of a unified definition of what constitutes rural crime or criminality and take a pragmatic view of crime on a case by case basis. The pilot study has informed our future thinking about rural crime and policing and has given our research a new lease of life. We have engaged in dialogue with the farming community via a journal article in a farming journal (Smith, Laing & McElwee, 2013) and via the RUSource briefings (McElwee & Smith, 2013; Smith, Laing & McElwee, 2012). We are writing up an article on food crime for a criminology journal; a study of the closure of rural police stations is underway; and we are working on case studies relating to the investigation of food crime as well as investigating the possibility of sourcing further funded research.

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