The Scottish Institute for Policing Research

Briefing Series

Supporting the development of evidence informed policing practice

FULLY INFORMED? A METHODOLOGY FOR ASSESSING INFORMANT COVERAGE IN POLICING

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Summary: Recent research published by Atkinson (2019) shows how the use of informants, or Covert Human Intelligence Sources (CHIS), has become a mainstay of contemporary policing in the United Kingdom (UK) as police, security and enforcement agencies seek to tackle a range of crimes. Atkinson (2019) also notes how the requirement to understand the extent to which informants can provide information on issues of interest has become essential to effective practice. This SIPR briefing provides police/law enforcement officers and intelligence analysts with a methodology to systematically map the breadth and depth of informant coverage in policing operations and the wider threat landscape. This methodology – the weighted spectrum approach to mapping informant coverage – can also support such agencies with an effort to develop an understanding of, and subsequently prioritise, gaps in informant coverage. A downloadable matrix is provided alongside this briefing to encourage the use of the proposed methodology in future practice.

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INTRODUCTION

Recent research by Atkinson (2019) has highlighted how the use of informants, or Covert Human Intelligence Sources (CHIS), has become a mainstay of contemporary policing in the United Kingdom (UK) as police, security and enforcement agencies seek to tackle a range of crimes. Atkinson (2019) reported that:

- Within policing, there is a requirement to fully understand the extent to which informants can provide information on targets and issues of interest.

- Assessments of informant coverage have traditionally been provided by those police officers directly involved in the 'handling' and 'controlling' of informants.

- There is some latent demand in policing, particularly from senior police officers, for increased analytical rigour and accountability in such assessment practices, in order to inform operational, tactical and strategic decision-making.

- Intelligence analysts have emerged as important new contributors to understanding informant coverage in policing, but their deployment in emerging practice remains patchy and under-developed.

- Crucially, where analysts have been utilised in the assessment of informant coverage, the importance of ensuring that their assessments are informed by a rigorous, robust, and accountable methodology, rooted in well-established processes and well-understood systems of practice, has been recognised.

Building on these findings, this SIPR briefing aims to provide police/law enforcement officers and intelligence analysts with a methodology that allows agencies to systematically map the breadth and depth of informant coverage in policing operations and the wider threat landscape. Informant coverage is understood here as the extent to which existing cadre of covert informants – the informant 'stable' – have access to, and can provide reporting on, the people, places, and other entities of current and emerging investigative interest. The use of this methodology – *the weighted spectrum approach to mapping informant coverage* – may also enable agencies to develop an understanding of, and subsequently prioritise gaps in informant coverage.

Importantly, it is necessary to highlight that this methodology has not been subject to testing in its current form. Whilst acknowledging this limitation, this paper seeks to offer intelligence analysts and police officers the practical support to integrate this promising methodology – or a version thereof – into their own practice. In doing so, it is recognised that the future testing and evaluation of such a methodology in practice will represent a critical area for any further development and debate.

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A METHODOLOGY FOR ASSESSING INFORMANT COVERAGE

The *weighted spectrum approach to mapping informant coverage* provides an advanced methodology that allows policing agencies to: first, comprehensively understand the breadth and depth of informant coverage in both operational activity and the wider threat landscape; and second, to understand and prioritise gaps in informant coverage. The weighted spectrum methodology is an advance on two 'precursor' approaches to informant coverage. These are a) the binary approach, and b) the spectrum approach, as explained below.

a) Binary approach

The binary approach to assessing informant coverage is both relatively simple. It indicates, based on the current capabilities within an existing cadre of informants (an 'informant stable'), of where coverage is and is not. In the example below (Table 1) the character 'x' represents coverage (i.e. the source can provide coverage of the target) and 'o' signals no coverage (i.e. the source cannot provide coverage of the target). Targets may be any individual, place, group, or other entity or issue of interest.

Table 1: Binary approach to mapping informant coverage

	Target 1	Target 2	Target 3
Informant 1	x	x	x
Informant 2	x	X	x
Informant 3	x	o	o

In addition to the advantage of its simplicity, this binary approach provides an indication of the relative resilience of the informant stable; indicating where coverage of a target is extensive or, on the contrary, where it is reliant on a smaller number of informants. Decision-making in relation to current operations (and in relation to the future direction and shape of the informant stable itself) can thus be informed by an overview of informant coverage against each target, and an awareness of the gaps in coverage therein.

An important deficiency of this approach is its lack of sophistication. The method indicates where coverage does and does not reside in the current informant stable; but says nothing further about the nature or quality of this coverage. All coverage, and all gaps in coverage, are afforded equal status, thus offering only a rudimentary basis for decision-making.

b) Spectrum approach

The spectrum approach addresses some of the above limitations. In this model, the coverage provided by informants is ranked numerically based on an assessment of quality. Table 2 provides an example of the spectrum approach to mapping informant coverage, where '0' represents no coverage, '1' represents peripheral coverage, '2' represents developing or deteriorating coverage

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(as appropriate), and '3' represents penetrative coverage. Working example definitions for these levels of coverage are shown in Table 3.

Table 2: Spectrum approach to mapping informant coverage

	Target 1	Target 2	Target 3
Informant 1	3	3	2
Informant 2	2	2	1
Informant 3	1	0	0

Table 3: Typology and definitions of informant coverage

Assessment	Attribute	Definition
0	No coverage	The informant cannot provide intelligence on the target.
1	Peripheral	The informant can provide some direct but limited intelligence on the target, and/or indirect low-level/contextual intelligence on the target.
2	Developing/ Deteriorating	*Developing*: the informant has well-established peripheral coverage and work is on-going to improve access and level of reporting (but not yet penetrative). *Deteriorating*: the informant has previously demonstrated ability to provide penetrative coverage of the target, but access and/or level of reporting has deteriorated (but is not yet peripheral).
3	Penetrative	The informant can provide direct and comprehensive intelligence on the activities, and any relevant associations, of the target.

In providing a more detailed assessment of the quality of informant coverage, the spectrum approach makes it easier to understand the relative health and resilience of the overall informant stable. Importantly, this typology also recognises informant coverage as *dynamic*, allowing stakeholders to think about the prospects for, and development of, each individual informant.

Despite the benefit of a more dynamic approach, the model is limited by the standard or equal weighting of targets, irrespective of its importance to the operation or investigation at hand. This is both unintuitive and unsatisfactory. It is also problematic in relation to *gaps* in coverage, which by the same logic, are also treated equally. The weighted spectrum approach to informant intelligence, as detailed next, is designed to address these limitations and strengthen stakeholder understanding of informant coverage against targets and/or issues of interest.

c) Weighted spectrum approach

The weighted spectrum approach (WSA) is based on the same information as its 'spectrum' counterpart outlined above, namely an assessment of coverage against targets, based on the scale ranging from 'no coverage' to 'penetrative'. However, in the WSA, scores for each individual assessment of coverage are multiplied, in the example below (table 4) by up to three times, based on the relative priority of each target. In table 4 the scores for target 1 are multiplied by three, the

scores for target 2 are multiplied by two, and the scores for scores for target 3 are multiplied by one.[i]

Table 4: WSA to mapping informant coverage

	Target 1 (x3)	Target 2 (x2)	Target 3 (x1)
Informant 1	9	6	2
Informant 2	6	4	1
Informant 3	3	0	0

The WSA is advantageous because it presents decision-makers with a guide to the breadth *and* depth of coverage against prioritised targets. Additionally, it provides a more granular assessment of coverage upon which to assess the relative health and resilience of the informant stable.

A key principle of the WSA approach is that the priority attributed to each target can change as operation, investigation, or enforcement activity develops. Crucially, this ongoing prioritisation of targets is independent of those making the assessment of informant coverage.

The weighted spectrum methodology can also be applied to gaps in coverage, whereby gaps are isolated and weighted according to the target priority. Table 5 shows the result of such an exercise:

Table 5: WSA to gaps in coverage

	Target 1 (x3)	Target 2 (x2)	Target 3 (x1)
Informant 1	-	-	-
Informant 2	-	-	-
Informant 3	-	2	1

In this way, the WSA prioritises gaps in coverage and indicates areas for future action. Common to all informant-mapping approaches detailed in this paper, the WSA may be presented in raw form or distilled into a smaller set of key recommendations more easily digested by decision-makers. Importantly, such recommendations are based on an assessment of coverage, and gaps in coverage, that are embedded in wider operational and tasking processes.

EMBEDDING A METHODLGY IN PRACTICE

The effectiveness of any methodology for mapping informant coverage is contingent upon its successful integration into routine police business. Each of the approaches discussed in this SIPR briefing can be accommodated comfortably into existing tactical tasking and co-ordinating processes in UK policing (including the National Intelligence Model framework). The approaches can also be supported within the existing capacity and capability of policing, without any significant re-configuration of roles or responsibilities (although recognising that a modicum of training may be required, as with any new practice).

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The key stages of this process and associated role requirements, which should be embedded within a routine tactical tasking and co-ordinating framework, are sketched below.
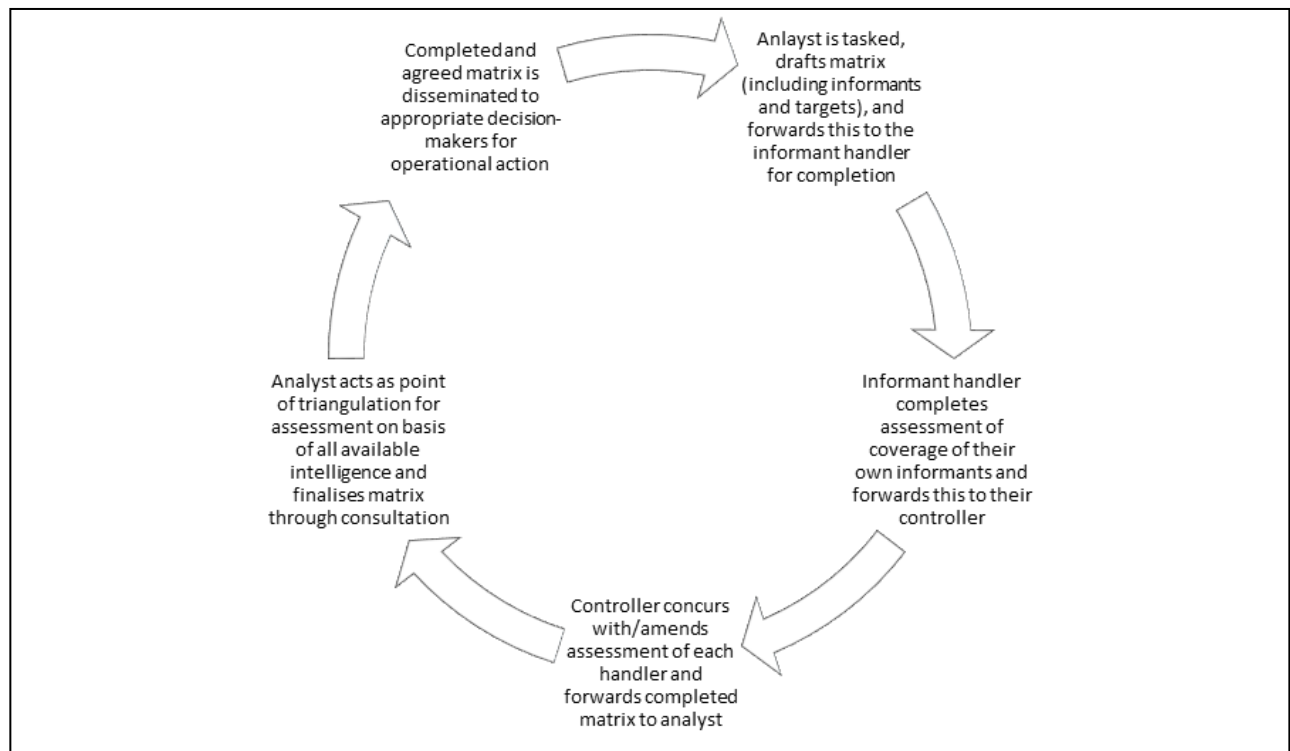

Figure 1: Informant mapping organisational flowchart

Crucially, this process moves practice beyond sole reliance on the assessment of handlers, and towards an assessment of informant coverage that is routinely embedded within a broader system of analysis and oversight. Additionally, the process tackles the perennial problem in police intelligence whereby tacit experiential knowledge residing 'in the heads of the individual police officer' is deployed only when beneficial to that officer (see Cope, 2004: 199-200; Ratcliffe, 2016: 98). More broadly, the process should create a more robust, accountable, and resilient system in which such professional knowledge is transformed into organisational intelligence.

Adopting and embedding the WSA in routine police business, while supporting new practices, also provides continuity with established approaches to informant coverage. In recognising the potential for conflict between police officers and analysts (see Brodeur and Dupont, 2008; Atkinson, 2017) the initial assessment of coverage remains with informant handlers; although the triangulation process allows the analyst to seek clarification where an assessment seems incongruent with the current or developing intelligence picture. The implementation of this approach requires a degree of diplomacy from the analyst to prevent the alienation of handlers and controllers, who may feel that their professional judgement is under new scrutiny.

Similar care is also required to ensure that the cultural environment is suitable for the integration of analysis and intelligence analysts in this area of policing. As Ratcliffe (2008: 215) observes, in the context of attempts to integrate the 'old knowledge' of cops and the 'new knowledge' of analysts in intelligence-led policing, the power of the culture of police officers has the potential to marginalise the intelligence analyst and their function. Any cultural resistance may be

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compounded by the fact that analysts are frequently considered to be working to the agenda of police leaders and management, rather than operational police officers (see Evans and Kebbell, 2012, John and Maguire, 2007: 208-209). Given such challenges, the requirement for the selection of a suitably experienced analyst in this role, with clear role requirements and strong organisational support, is critical.

CONCLUSION

The implementation of a systematic WSA to understanding and assessing informant coverage offers promise for more effective policing and law enforcement. The use of such a robust methodology could also complement other forms of analysis that require an understanding of how effectively the police are positioned in relation to mitigating criminal threats, such as serious organised crime group mapping (see Hamilton-Smith and Mackenzie, 2010; Cavanagh et al, 2015; National Crime Agency, 2017). For example, SOCG mapping can provide a prioritised list of targets to assess the informant stable against, and the WSA can be integrated into SOCG mapping to assess the relative penetration of surveillance networks (and thus the assessment of risk).

Despite the promise of analytical approaches to understand informant coverage, it must also be recognised that the emergence of such new practices has been, to date, patchy at best; varying between individual forces and agencies, and with some business areas developing and maturing an informant-focussed analytical capability at a faster rate than others. If analysis, and intelligence analysts, are to make a valuable and sustainable contribution to the understanding of informant coverage in policing and law enforcement then proactive leadership will be required to ensure consistent implementation and support.

It is again recognised herein that the model proposed remains, at this stage, largely untested. Any implementation of the methodology proposed herein would thus benefit from both an initial pilot project to assess its viability and, where a pilot project demonstrates that the system is both robust and potentially delivers operational, tactical and strategic benefits, from a subsequent evaluation at a suitable juncture to further assess the impact on practice.

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[i] This example weighting is provided as a relatively straightforward example of how the weighting process can work. It is, or course, flexible and open to adaptation.

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