Public concern about serious organised crime

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Abstract

The 2011 cross-government Organised Crime Strategy (Home Office, 2011) emphasises the need for community safety practitioners to provide information to help citizens recognise when they may be vulnerable to serious organised crime so that they might take steps to prevent victimisation and the need for the state response to serious organised crime to be supported by local communities. Drawing on focus group data, this article examines the nature of public concern about serious organised crime; citizen views regarding the police (and other agency) response to serious organised crime; and how information about serious organised crimes is communicated to members of the public. This article finishes by considering implications for community safety practice in light of the 2011 Organised Crime Strategy.

Key words

Serious organised crime, public consultation, communication

Introduction

There is a sizable literature which examines how ‘serious’ we believe crimes to be, the extent to which we ‘worry’ about or are ‘fearful’ of crime as well as the degree to which we are ‘confident’ in the criminal justice system. Indeed, the British Crime Survey has provided wide ranging data on public perception about crimes and the criminal justice system in England and Wales since its inception (Parfremment-Hopkins and Green, 2010: 11). As well as generating knowledge about public opinion, these data are also used to shape criminal justice practice and have formed the basis of performance indicators for the police and other criminal justice agencies over recent years (Farrall and Gadd, 2004). Despite the efforts which have been made to unpick the factors which shape citizen perceptions about crime, research explicitly examining views about serious organised crime is more limited. This article examines the nature of concern about serious organised crimes and the worries and anxieties they create. It also considers citizen views of the nature of the police (and other agency) response to serious organized crime with a focus on mechanisms of communication and public engagement in the event of serious organised crimes occurring.

This article has been written in light of the 2011 cross-government Organised Crime Strategy (Home Office, 2011) which places an emphasis on the provision of information to help citizens recognise when they may be vulnerable to serious organized crime and in turn to take steps to prevent victimisation. The strategy also stresses the need for the state response to serious organised crime to be supported by local communities. It has also been written in the shadow of broader moves within policing and community safety practice to consult with communities about their preferences and priorities for police practice; the emphasis on the providing information about crime (and other) problems; and the elections of Police and Crime Commissioners in England and Wales¹. Moves which potentially have, we believe, implications for the state response to serious organised crimes.

Approach

In considering the issue of public concern about serious organised crime we take a qualitative approach. This affords an opportunity to consider in more detail some of the complexity – and contradictions – inherent in citizens stated views on serious

organised (and other) crime problems. The article is based on data generated from a public consultation exercise which was conducted in two county police services in England (Surrey and Sussex) in 2010. This article is based on a series of six focus groups which were conducted across the two police services and were primarily aimed at generating information to inform the development of a police communication strategy for serious organised crime within the wider context of improving confidence in the protective services. In total 75 participants voluntarily attended the focus groups. We should note that the participants for the focus groups were not generated randomly but from 'key informants' who were paid £25 each to cover expenses. However, attempts were made to reflect demographic diversity. The groups were evenly split in gender and there was a rural/urban mix in the locations of the focus groups. Although the groups reflected a range of ages the majority of the participants were 35-55 years old.

Defining what is, and what is not, a serious organised crime is far from straightforward (see for example Hagan, 2006). Government discourse has drawn attention to '*those involved, normally working with others, in continuing serious criminal activities for substantial profit, whether based in the UK or elsewhere*' (Home Office, 2004: 7) and '*the definition of organised crime is individuals, normally working with others, with the capacity and capability to commit serious crime on a continuing basis, which includes elements of planning, control and coordination, and benefits those involved*' (Home Office, 2011:8). Whilst, in principle, many crimes could fit into these definitions, certain crimes tend to be viewed as inherently more organised than others for the purpose of contemporary law enforcement. In the UK 'threat assessments' have drawn particular attention to trafficking of controlled drugs; organised immigration crime (people smuggling and human trafficking); financial crime (fraud); and organised acquisitive crime (e.g. armed robbery, road freight crime and organised vehicle theft) (Home Office, 2011: 9).

The focus group participants discussed definitions of serious organised. Facilitators asked participants how they understood the term 'serious organised crime' and asked for examples of the sorts of incidents that it might incorporate, the elements that define 'serious and organised' and how such incidents differ from crime in general. Reflecting Bullock et al (2009) the broad consensus amongst participants was that

many crimes, from low level antisocial behaviour to burglary to kidnap and murder, all could be organised. For participants, whether a crime was viewed as organised was dependent on the context and circumstances in which it occurred. However, the group discussion, data analysis and ultimately this article have primarily focused on views regarding those crime types – noted above – which are generally viewed as organised for the purposes of law enforcement in England and Wales: in particular Class A drug dealing, organised immigration crime and forms of fraud.

The focus group participants were asked to consider the impact of serious organised crimes both locally and nationally along with the level of harm that it is perceived to cause and to whom. In doing so, discussion was aided by the use of scenarios, the nature of which will be discussed in the main body of this article. Participants were asked to reflect on state responses to serious organised crime incidents and the effect that these have on confidence in the police service and other criminal justice agencies. Lastly, the participants were asked to consider the nature of the information that they believed the police service (or other organisations) should provide about serious organised crime both for the purposes of crime prevention and in the event of serious organised crimes occurring. The first part of this article outlines the findings of the focus groups. These findings are discussed in light of previous studies in the area and the 2011 organised crime strategy in the final sections.

Results

Concern about (serious organised) crime

Forms of crime generally considered organised for the purpose of law enforcement did not generate high levels of concern amongst participants in our focus groups. Instead, participants in this study expressed heightened concerns about volume crimes such as burglary and vehicle crimes along with behaviours which fall below the threshold of criminal offence such as forms of anti-social behaviour. Reflecting previous studies conducted in this area, it was clear that respondents did not differentiate between crime types when considering how serious they were perceived to be and the extent of concern that they generated. Instead, participants drew attention to how it was the nature of the act, coupled with the harm that it caused and to whom that shaped the level of concern that crimes – and other events – generated.

The accounts of participants in this study drew attention to how notions of seriousness appeared to interact with participants understanding of relative day-to-day crime risks in determining which crime types created most concern, with implications for how serious organised crimes were understood. We consider these in the following sections, starting with fraud.

As noted above, fraud is a form of crime viewed to be organised and prioritised by the British government at the time of writing. The nature of fraud is actually very variable incorporating amongst others tax and benefit fraud, counterfeiting, investment and pension fraud (see Levi and Burrows, 2008). The considerable financial impact on the private and public sectors has been demonstrated. Levi *et al* (2007) conservatively estimated that fraud cost the UK £13.9 billion in 2005. The Home Office (2011) estimate the cost as between £20 and £40 billion a year. Participants discussed their concerns about frauds such as identification theft and credit card frauds. Many participants had been victims of these crimes, or knew people who had, and noted the inconvenience and worry it can cause. In addition, these kinds of crimes have received a great deal of publicity and government attention over recent yearsⁱⁱ and reflecting this, some participants noted that they had changed their behaviour to avoid victimisation (e.g. shredding documents). For participants, though, these forms of fraud did not illicit the highest levels of day-to-day concern. This would seem to be because the outcomes of fraud are primarily financial, rather than physical. In certain cases – such as credit card fraud – the costs are ultimately absorbed by a financial institution rather than an individual. In addition, participants believed that many forms of fraud are avoidable and in turn that some victims are partly culpable for their victimisation. These points can be fleshed out further drawing on participants' responses to a discussion of an example of a 'boiler room' fraud: where fraudsters' cold-call investors offering them worthless, overpriced or non-existent shares.

Participants were invited to discuss a series of boiler room frauds which had been committed in the county of Sussex, where half of the focus groups had been conducted, which had received local press attention. It involved two perpetrators who cold-called individuals and persuaded them to buy shares in a company which turned out to be overpriced or worthless. Some 'investors' had lost significant amounts of money, including one elderly gentleman who had lost nearly £200,000. Ultimately,

the two perpetrators were charged with conspiracy to commit fraud, both were found guilty and received sentences of 3 ½ years and 18 months respectively. In group discussions this fraud aroused only minimal concern. A primary explanation was that the frauds did not generate a threat to personal safety either to the victim or more widely. One focus group participant noted: *'It's all happening very quietly and unseen, no one is harmed.'* This participant was drawing attention to how there was no apparent threat of violence, or wider criminal activity, which might have diffused harm amongst communities over and above the immediate victims themselves. In addition, whilst participants expressed sympathy for the victims of these frauds, especially those victims who might be considered vulnerable, there was a view that the victims were partly culpable for the crime: *'I don't know because on one hand I feel sorry for the victim, but on the other feel he has contributed to it, he was bitten and caught'*. So whilst participants did raise concerns about vulnerability, and in turn expressed concerns about the vulnerability of their elderly friends and relatives, these frauds were viewed as avoidable for the majority.

The second theme evident in participants' accounts – awareness of relative day-to-day risks – also has implications for understanding of certain organised crimes. Participants felt that they were unlikely to be *directly* affected by many forms of serious organised crime. At the time of writing organised immigration crime is viewed by the British government to be 'a current key threat' (Home Office, 2011: 9) and represents a clear case in point. Human trafficking and smuggling are high profile crimes which have attracted much attention from government, law enforcement agencies and the media. Participants were certainly aware of the high levels of harm experienced by victims of trafficking. Widely publicised cases of immigration crime – such as the deaths of some twenty Chinese workers who had been smuggled into the UK and lost their lives as they harvested cockles in Morecambe Bay, Lancashire in 2004 and of 58 Chinese men and women who died in a lorry that was smuggling them across the English Channel and into Dover in 2000 – have raised the profile of these problems in the UK. However, whilst well aware that victims of organised immigration crime could suffer from wide ranging harm, participants drew attention to how this is a crime type that the majority will not be directly affected by on a day-to-day level. If they were affected participants believed it would be through the wider consequences of serious organised crimes, such as wider acquisitive crime or

nuisance, a point most evident in discussions of Class A drug dealing, which forms the basis of the forthcoming discussion.

Drug dealing has been shown to demonstrate high levels of public concern and is associated with wide ranging harms from the health and social implications for individual users, to the implications for communities, to the wider costs to public services and society (Bullock et al, 2009). Participants in this study were asked to discuss their views about Class A drug dealing focusing on a scenario involving the large scale importation of cocaine from Brazil and Ghana and the subsequent distribution of the drugs in the county of Sussex. In this case, 19 defendants were charged and 17 of those subsequently convicted. The ring leader was sentenced to serve 21 years in prison and to pay a £800,000 confiscation order. This drug dealing scenario generated concerns of various types for participants. First and foremost participants reported that their concerns were framed in terms of the potential threat to their personal safety. This threat was primarily constructed in terms of the wide consequences of Class A drug dealing for communities such as acquisitive crime by drug users and the associated potential for violence along with the consequences for children who may become involved in using drugs or otherwise negatively influenced by the presence of drugs. In short, participant concern about availability of Class A drugs was primarily driven by a perceived threat to personal safety in turn shaped by the proximity to the location of drug markets. Indeed, some participants drew attention to how they believed the effects of drug dealing could be circumvented by avoiding certain areas where drug dealing was known to be a problem.

Whilst participants did not express concern about many forms of serious organised crime on a day-to-day basis, there was much clearer concern about the potential impact on the UK as a whole. One focus group participant noting '*It costs [the country] too much in terms of life, distress and financial cost*'. As participants did not generally have direct experience of serious organised crimes, their concerns about the impact for the UK tended to be prompted by media reports of specific events. Perceptions of serious organised crimes were event-led and mediated through the experiences of other people and through media reporting of the events. Whilst these reports did not lead to day-to-day worry about victimisation for participants, media reports of serious organised crime certainly raised broader concerns about British

society, its structures and institutions. Concerns were generally expressed in terms of the costs to the UK, as noted in the above quote, along with the competence of the police and other institutions to tackle serious organised crime, to which we turn shortly, and wider concerns about moral decline throughout society.

The notion that serious organised crime is representative of wider moral decline was strongly evident in participant's discussions. To illustrate, participants expressed their disgust at the boiler-room fraud and drug dealing examples discussed above. This disgust reflected the impact on the victims, condemnation of the perpetrators and the wider implications for society as a whole. Participants believed these sorts of crimes were indicative of broader decline in wider social structures which were thought to create the conditions in which serious organised crime could flourish. For example, in discussing the boiler room fraud participants wondered what role family and community played in preventing these crimes. Participants expressed concerns that community and family structures have broken down, that people do not necessarily know their neighbours or look out for their safety and that this can lead to the development of serious organised crime problems.

State response to serious organised crime

Questions about the competence of the state to tackle serious organised crimes were raised by participants. In respect to the drug trafficking scenario participants raised questions about the performance of customs, immigration and the police service. While a successful outcome – in terms of arrests and convictions – was ultimately achieved, and indeed the perpetrators received long sentences, the reports of serious organised crime led participants to consider the weaknesses in these institutions. After all, the perpetrators had been able to smuggle cocaine into the country and offend for some time prior to being caught. It also raised questions about 'justice' for some participants and it was clear that reports of the outcome to the serious organised crime cases were interpreted in terms of wider debates around confidence in the criminal justice system, elaborated in the following sections.

There was, in fact, sympathy for the police service which was generally perceived to be doing a good job. That said, participants' views were not informed by any understanding of police activity in the area of serious organised crime. One

participant noting: *'I don't feel particularly well informed about how they are tackling it, but I don't feel particularly concerned that they aren't'*. Indeed, several participants said that they could not comment on the issue of the police response to serious organised crime because they did not feel informed enough. Public confidence in the ability of the police service to tackle serious organised crime was somewhat vague and based on perceptions and media reports. As the previous quote indicates, participants tended to assume that the police were doing a good job, in the absence of any information to suggest that they were not. Participants were clearly less confident in the wider criminal justice system. Accordingly, participants believed that the sentences received were too short (at least in the case of the boiler room fraud). Where they did receive lengthy sentences participants believed the perpetrators were likely to be released early anyway. They also believed that the proceeds of crime were unlikely to be recovered and, even if they were, that they would not be returned to the victim.

Communicating information about serious organised crime

Participants expressed an appetite for information about crime (organised or otherwise). However, beyond this general point participant views on the nature and extent of police-community consultation about crime problems were not straightforward. This raises questions about how much information about serious organised crimes is communicated to members of the public and the appropriate mechanisms through which to do so.

As we have seen, information about serious organised crime generally comes from the media. Participants' accounts indicated that this potentially leads to at least two problems. First, participants noted that media coverage can be extensive and on-going, especially in relation to significant events (such as a murder) which led some to believe that heightened information leads to heightened concerns about crime. One participant noting *'I do worry about media coverage; it gets so out of proportion'*. Second, participants drew attention to how the media acts as a filter through which citizens absorb information about crime. The relationship between media reporting of crime and fear of crime is of course a complex one. However, participants certainly felt that the media distorts through condensing or editing police reports of crime or by overlooking certain information, stressing other information and changing the tone.

Participants felt that media reports of serious organised crime tend to focus on the more ‘graphic’ details of the crime and the *modus operandi* of the offenders rather than on the police operation and its outcomes. The consequence, for some participants at least, was heightened anxiety.

Participants stated that they would look to the police for both reassurance and crime prevention advice in respect to serious organised crime. Given that participants concerns about crimes seem to be shaped by proximity it is perhaps unsurprising that proximity to an event would seem to be a critical factor in the need for reassurance from the police service. Participants stated that they would look to the police first and foremost for reassurance in the event of an incident involving serious organised crime in their *immediate* locality (e.g. in the road that they live in). However, it was clear that participants didn’t necessarily expect to receive information from the police about events in this way. One participant who had witnessed armed police raid a house in his street said: *‘I don’t know if I’d expect the police to update us. I did have a similar incident like this in my neighbourhood once and was annoyed that the police were silent to us after that’*.

Participants were asked to reflect on where they would get information from if a serious incident occurred in their neighbourhood, should they want it. There was a general lack of awareness amongst participants about how to access information from the police. Most participants spoke of looking to the media for information, while a minority mentioned telephoning the police directly. No one considered contacting their local neighbourhood policing team. Indeed, despite the development of neighbourhood policing in England and Wales over the last ten years there appeared to be a distinct lack of awareness of these teams and the associated arrangements which have been put in place to communicate with the public. Many participants discussed how good it would be to have local meetings where communities could share information with the police and were surprised to hear that these already existed.

Whilst it was clear that participants did not expect to get information from the police about serious organised crime, nor know where to look for it if they did want it, they did indicate preferences for the nature and format of police communication in the

event of serious crimes occurring in their communities. Most clearly participants expressed a desire for communication directly from the police where incidents were local: *'I would like someone to come to my door, or if I was out at least to leave a letter explaining a bit more about it. Because it is that much closer to you, I think it's important to know about it'*. This perceived need for information predominately related to concerns about personal safety and reassurance that, in the aftermath of a serious incident, it was safe to go about day-to-day business. The majority of participants favoured direct face-to-face communication with police officers as a mechanism to communicate information about the event in these circumstances and suggested that this should occur as soon as possible. Over the longer term, participants expressed a desire to know the outcome of any serious organised crime incident in their locality. Participants suggested that failure to communicate outcomes leaves people wondering whether the offenders have been released and that communities *'make up their own stories'*. However, as stressed, most people do not believe they have experienced serious organised crime, or its aftermath, first hand. The first that most will hear about serious organised crimes is what is reported in the media. In general, participants were happy to rely on traditional media outlets for police communication about serious organised crime where incidents occurred outside of their immediate locality.

As we have seen, participants were more worried about 'everyday crime' and, accordingly, wanted information about how to stay safe and prevent victimisation. However, participants certainly stated that this might include information about the mechanisms through which organised criminals operate in order that people might recognise it and avoid it, as well as other crime prevention advice and information about crime hotspots.

Discussion

This article has described the findings of a qualitative study that examined the nature of public concern about serious organised crime. Certain forms of crime generally considered organised (for the purpose of law enforcement – especially organised immigration crime and forms of fraud) did not generate amongst the highest levels of concern amongst participants in our focus groups. In seeking to explain this, we have

examined how concerns about crimes (serious and organised or otherwise) seemed to result from the interaction between perceptions about consequences of crimes (in terms of physical, emotional or financial impact) and relative risk of victimisation. The final sections of this article consider these findings firstly in respect to other research in the area and secondly in light of recent organised crime policy developments in England and Wales.

The consequence of a crime was a clear factor in shaping how serious participants viewed it to be. On the face of it crimes which had a physical impact on victims were certainly viewed as the most serious, reflecting the findings of many studies which have examined public perceptions of the relative seriousness of crime types. Drawing on a comprehensive review of the literature in this area Stylianou (2003: 42) noted that 'violent behaviours (causing bodily harm) are generally perceived as the most serious followed by property crime (causing property loss or property damage).' Yet participants did not necessarily report heightened concern about crimes with physical consequences. Rather than prioritising those crimes with a physical outcome for victims, participants prioritised day-to-day issues such as environmental problems, nuisance behaviours and lower level property crimes. A finding which corresponds with a wider body of evidence.

Concerns about crime in local areas seem to be shaped by citizen perceptions of 'moral consensus, social order, and collective efficacy' (Jackson, 2011). Issues such as antisocial behaviour come to act as indicators of public concern about neighbourhood and moral breakdown, along with the pace and direction of social change (Jackson, 2011). Certainly these kinds of concerns were evident in the accounts of the focus group participants. In fact even when discussing serious organised crime, which overall may not have raised a great deal of worry, general concerns about its effect on societal and moral health were raised.

However, whilst this might provide a context in which concerns about crime were raised and discussed by participants, strongly evident were proximate or situational factors in participants' accounts of why some crimes generated more concern than did others. This echoes studies which have found that that 'citizens generate their own subjective risk estimates, which comprise the interplay between perceived

consequence, likelihood, and control' (Jackson, 2011: 531). Warr and Stafford (1983: 1033) note that there has been relatively little research on the proximate causes of fear of crime – perhaps because 'the proximate cause of fear of crime seems too obvious to merit discussion: one becomes afraid when confronted with the apparent likelihood that victimization will occur'. Warr and Stafford (1983: 1040) conclude that fear of crime is not simply a function of the perceived outcomes of victimisation and that citizens are well aware of the relative risk of different types of victimisation: 'perceived risk carries as much weight in producing fear as perceived seriousness'. Certainly, the notion of proximity was very evident in this study, with participants reporting heightened awareness of the crime (and other problem) types they thought they might be at risk from.

In a similar vein to the broad points made by Jackson (2011) and Warr and Stafford (1983) Bullock et al (2009) argued that concerns about organised crime types seemed to be shaped by an interaction of the severity and probability of impact. They further drew attention to how participants distinguished between *where* any harms associated with crimes primarily fell. Physical, emotional and financial harms that fell at the level of the individual were viewed to be more harmful than those that fell at the community, business or societal level (Bullock et al, 2009), in part because the harms were diffused amongst greater numbers of people and institutions. This resonates with the findings reported here. The harms associated with certain forms of serious organised crime, notably fraud, might ultimately be seen to be absorbed by the institutions of business and governments. In this sense there is no clear victim.

Parallels may usefully be drawn with public views regarding the seriousness of 'white collar' crime, which a handful of studies have examined (e.g. Schrager and Short, 1980; Cullen et al, 1982; Rosenmerkel, 2001; Piquero *et al*, 2008). Historically there may have been public indifference to white collar crime – at least compared to other forms of crime – although there is evidence that this might be changing. 'Indifference' to white-collar crime might be the result of diffusion of harm which is in any case financial rather than physical in nature. Certainly, as stressed, while people tend to agree about which offences are the most serious (Pease, 1985) it would seem that 'there is more discord in views about the seriousness of so-called 'victimless' crimes than in other areas of crime' (Levi and Jones, 1985: 245). All of the above have

implications for how serious organised crimes are viewed: there may be no discernible victim; the harms absorbed by institutions rather than individuals and the economy in some cases; and more generally certain forms of serious organised crimes may be of little *immediate* relevance for many. That said certain types of serious organised crime certainly raised more concerns than others. The distribution of Class A drugs raises wide-ranging concerns – although focus group responses suggested that primary concerns tend to be shaped by the proximity to drug markets and in turn to the implications for personal safety, acquisitive crime and the impact of drug dealing on the wider environment.

This has implications for how serious organised crime problems are understood by communities and potentially how the police and other agencies respond to them. At times government discourse on the harm caused by serious organised crime appears almost apocalyptic. The foreword to the 2004 organised crime white paper stressing *‘organised crime is big business. It causes untold harm on our streets, damage to our communities and nets billions of pounds each year for those responsible’* (Home Office, 2004: iii). Similarly, the 2011 organised crime strategy stresses how *‘organised crime poses a threat to the UK’s national security. However, unlike other national security threats, the effects of organised crime are felt by individuals, communities, businesses and our economy on a daily basis’* (Home Office, 2011: 5). However, despite government discourse, serious organised crime may well be viewed by the public as something that is happening to *someone* else, *somewhere* else.

There is a risk is that ‘invisible’ serious organised crimes may not feature on community safety agendas which are oriented around the results of public consultation. At the time of writing, more than ever, the public have a say about which crime types are prioritised by criminal justice agencies in England and Wales. Much is made of agreeing priorities between communities and the police service. For example, the aforementioned neighbourhood policing agenda is based on the premise that policing needs to better address the needs of the community and that the public should have a greater say in policing priorities. Citizen views on serious organised crime no doubt means that they are unlikely to feature in the priorities for neighbourhood policing teams, with the possible exception of drug related offences. Indeed, previous research has shown that neighbourhood policing teams are generally

called on to tackle relatively low level problems, even where more serious crime problems are evident (Bullock, 2010). This potentially has new resonance in the context of the election of Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs) who have a mandate to allocate resources to problems which the electorate identify as priorities. Again we believe the chances are that serious organised crime problems will not feature in PCCs plans where they are based on policies aimed at maintaining a popular mandate. The Home Office seems to have identified the risk that PCCs will commit little resource to invisible serious organised crime problems and notes tentative arrangements to mitigate (Home Office, 2011). We finish this article with a consideration of these plans in the light of the findings from this study.

First, the serious organised crime strategy seeks to balance local and national priorities for policing through supporting PCCs with *‘effective, clear and coordinated national arrangements’* (Home Office, 2011: 29). Although the Strategy says little about what these are. Second, the strategy seeks to raise awareness of serious organised crime problems at the local level: *‘providing a more complete local picture on criminality will help ensure organised crime receives the local attention it needs’* (Home Office 2011: 28). The Home Office, together with police services, have made available ‘crime maps’ which draw together recorded crime statistics for local areas. The information has been made available at least in part to help citizens work with the police to prioritize local problems for attentionⁱⁱⁱ. These maps are certainly evolving and more detail is being provided over time. However, it is unlikely that they will ever provide the level of detail needed to unpick the scale and nature of serious local organised crime problems in communities. Even so, given the findings of the study reported in this article local forces may face an uphill battle in ensuring ‘organised crime receives the local attention it needs’. There is some complexity here. Serious organised crimes – in and of themselves – may generate relatively little concern but the wider consequences, more evident to residents perhaps, may well generate concern on a day-to-day level. Parochial as it may sound to this end information should be generated about the wider consequences of serious organised crime problems as well as the implications for immediate victims. Again, there are questions regarding whether police services will realistically be able to bring this information together in a meaningful way.

Third, the Home Office seem to be putting their faith in ability of neighbourhood policing teams to both generate information about crime problems, including serious organised crime problems, and to communicate the nature of risks with local people:

Neighbourhood policing teams are often very good at obtaining local intelligence through their relationships with local communities. We will identify best practice in the dissemination of neighbourhood and local intelligence that can be used to brief local authorities, police authorities (now) and PCCs (from 2012), on organised crime. This will help ensure local leaders are better informed and engaged in relation to organised crime threats in their localities (Home Office 2011: 28).

There is limited empirical evidence regarding the relationship between neighbourhood policing and the generation of information about crime – though certainly successive governments have put faith in the principle. However, we do know more about the nature of community engagement in neighbourhood policing and, reflecting the findings of other research, this article has demonstrated that citizen understanding of and engagement in neighbourhood policing is not widespread. This does raise questions then about the principle that neighbourhood policing can act, as is purported, to stimulate a debate about serious organised (or any other crime) problems at the local level.

Lastly, one of the reasons that the organised crime strategy advocates making more information about serious organised crime available to communities is to prevent victimisation by raising awareness of the threat and methods used by organised criminals and providing information to enable businesses and individuals to protect themselves (Home Office, 2011: 6). This article has drawn attention to a set of issues related to the consumption of information about serious organised (and other) crimes. This study, like others, has suggested that citizens have an appetite for information about crime, be it about serious organised crime or otherwise. The challenge will be to develop meaningful mechanisms to disseminate such information. One issue is that citizens seem to consume information about crime passively. They are unlikely to seek it out themselves. There would seem to be reliance on the media rather than, for example, asking the police directly, searching the internet or attending police-

community meetings. The police (and other agencies) need to recognise the inherent weaknesses in communication strategies that rely on active engagement by citizens. Instead, law enforcement agencies themselves will need to be proactive in developing ways of communicating with communities – perhaps with a focus on the media. Another issue relates to the type of information being disseminated. This article draws attention to how citizens look to the police for information for both reassurance *and* crime prevention advice. The findings suggest that there may be gains to stratifying communication strategies by place. Reflecting a need for reassurance, there would seem to be a preference for swift and direct personal communication from the police in the event of incident occurring in an immediate locality – although we accept that this may be difficult to achieve in practice. However, where events were not local however participants were happy to rely on passive communication – say through the media – for information on serious organised crime.

There has been government recognition that law enforcement agencies cannot tackle the problem of serious organized crime without the support of communities. However, this article has drawn attention to how these problems are invisible to many citizens and unlikely to be priorities for them. In light of this authorities may face an uphill battle to develop a narrative that brings serious organised crime problems alive. However, this issue remains important. Unless the invisible can be rendered visible, law enforcement agencies will continue to tackle these problems alone.

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ⁱ Police and Crime Commissioners were elected in November 2012. For the Home Office their aim is to 'cut crime and deliver an effective and efficient police service within their force area.' The hope is that they will 'provide stronger and more transparent accountability of the police, PCCs will be elected by the public to hold chief constables and the force to account; effectively making the police

answerable to the communities they serve'. See <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/police/police-crime-commissioners/> [Jan 1st 2012]

ⁱⁱ See www.identitytheft.org.uk/ for details of the UK government response [accessed Jan 1st 2012]

ⁱⁱⁱ See <http://www.police.uk/> for details [26th May 2012]