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Police and Crime
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EMPAC Roundtable: Rural Crime

Research Insight report

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“We started by discussing hidden crime but the key point here is this is about hidden criminality”

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Background

As part of the East Midlands Police and Crime Research and Development Plan (EMPCRD), identified risk, threat and harm policing priorities are supported by research to inform policy and practice. An identified theme was rural crime and De Montfort University, Leicester, offered to host an initial Roundtable to scope the issues and identify the next steps on this important topic.

Thanks is given to De Montfort University for hosting and the National Police Chief's Council and the Association of Police and Crime Commissioners for supporting the event.

Method

The roundtable informal, action-orientated approach has been used successfully in other settings (such as national security consortiums with academia in Australia) and builds upon the existing collaborative partnership of EMPAC across the region. A number of academics from HEIs attended, from Knowledge Exchange / Transfer and across several disciplines and a mix of policing professionals from national strategic leads through to operational team members.

Specifically, an adapted facilitated focus group¹ method was utilised using a semi-structured conversation topic focus with strategic and tactical questions to provoke discussion (see appendices). Based on the new interactive dynamic of two differing working cultures (of academic and policing) coming together, Grounded Theory² principle was used to collect emergent views 'bottom up', to encourage an inductive approach.

The event was given executive support, being opened by DCC Craig Naylor, NPCC lead on rural crime. The NPCC *Wildlife and Rural Crime Affairs Rural Affairs strategy 2018 -2021* and the *National Rural Crime Network National Survey 2018* were presented to delegates.

¹ Bloor, M., Frankland, J., Thomas, M., & Robson, K. (2001) - for focus group methodology

² Glaser & Strauss (1967) – for grounded theory 'bottom up' insights from participants

Objective

The objective of the event was to:

Based on current policing challenges, in protecting the vulnerable and attacking criminal activities in rural settings, seek insights and innovation opportunities from a joint approach between policing professionals and academic researchers to improve policing capacity and capability.

The structure of the event's process was in four stages:

1. Executive overview – Rural Affairs Strategy

- a. The need to strengthen safe and prosperous rural communities
- b. Establishing Rural Affairs Priorities
- c. National Rural Crime Survey findings

2. Rural Context

- a. How organised is the rural crime market?
- b. How can the rural crime market be disrupted?
- c. How can vulnerable victims in rural settings be better supported?
- d. How can the reduction of confidence in policing in rural communities reported in the NCRN survey be reversed?
- e. How can the hidden crime in rural areas be better reported?
- f. How can rural communities be strengthened to fight the harm caused by crime?

3. Discussion

- a. Facilitated discussion

4. Actions

- a. What can we identify as actions to do next?

Rural context

The notion of the rural idyll, of a wealthier, happier place with fewer problems than urban settings, appears to be at stark odds with contemporary reality of vulnerability and criminality.



The contemporary rural reality involves a rise in crime. NCRN (2015) estimate the true cost of the UK's rural crime could exceed £800m. The NFU (2017) report that agricultural vehicle theft alone costs £5.4m. Social and economic changes mean the farming community has shrunk and with it some close-knit communities. At the same time modern transport infrastructures now enables the fast and often anonymous movement of expensive farm machinery into a global market. The NPCC *Rural Affairs Strategy* (2018) identifies that livestock theft also presents a public health threat with illegal food chain practices; modern slavery is a major concern, alongside fuel theft, fly tipping, machinery theft, poaching and equine crime. People in rural communities are too often vulnerable; living in fear and isolation and reporting diminishing faith in policing.

The opportunity for the roundtable, given the mix of delegates, was to seek diverse views, establish what is already known and encourage fresh thinking from across the involved partners, with a research 'known unknown' outlook at the centre. The interconnection of differing sorts of data, whether called intelligence, information or evidence are all forms of knowledge which a proactive research outlook can assist to expand.



Key discussion themes

Questions helped stimulate discussion firstly around the true extent of hidden crime. The conversation explored why underreporting might exist and if rural areas should be policed differently to urban spaces. What emerged was a challenge to the subliminal urban policing model, which relied on a geography of response. Over the large distances of the rural landscape, traditional notions of crime prevention and response were exposed as flawed. Large distances offered a form of anonymity and escape from the more intrusive urban digital and physical surveillance infrastructure. A key insight that, whilst the conversation began by exploring the vulnerabilities of communities' experiences of hidden crime, hidden criminality was masking a structured targeting of the rural environment. This equated to a war being raged by criminal networks, hiding in plain view, and largely unidentified by law enforcement statistical analysis.

Hidden criminality

There's a criminal war being raged on rural communities but we've not recognised it.	We need better analytical work to link connections for intelligence.	To understand the full crime picture we need to look across boundaries. Criminals do not respect boundaries.	This is a vicious downward spiral – you do less, you get less. With a constricting service there's more under reporting, people can't see the point. Then the crime isn't collated so it hides the real risk.
It's no coincidence that the organised crime networks are targeting places where there are high value goods, with little immediate response protection and through the use of violence and quick transport you can get away with it.	This is like a perfect storm for criminals. There's technology all over cities, so you simply go beyond the surveillance, into the shadowlands. You can count on the urban resources staying in the city but you've got a great transport network into global shipping.	Rural areas are like the dark web. You've got all sorts of rules and controls on the Internet, so the criminal just operates where they're hidden. It's off-grid crime.	The old Chicago School of offender motivation used to describe how crooks targeted the urban zone. Things have changed, the new reality is attacking the high rewards, in the rural space. Transport enables this and the obsession with the city keeps everyone off your back.
We need long-term understanding of the impact of rural crime across the wider criminal justice system.	Police resources have been squeezed so much this is changing the nature of living in this decade – this is getting like a cross between Robin Hood and Mad Max.	More knowledge exchange across forces about strategies for engaging service providers in a holistic support approach for potential vulnerable individuals and communities.	More analysis of harm spots of known rural crime to inform the likely or potential impacts of the unknown (hidden) crimes.
The road that allows the response car to come after 999 is the same road the criminals are going in the other direction off to the nearest port.	Community confidence in policing in rural areas is a big issue. Like counter terrorism, we have to firstly acknowledge this.	We need to be able to better understand what is happening in private settings in rural areas, such as domestic abuse	More analytical work, in collaboration with academic partners around spatial / geo spatial and temporal patterning of reported rural crime (i.e. GIS mapping on latitude and longitude)

There's a problem with violence being used against officers in remote areas. Officers are having to take tactical decisions about intervening and criminals know that.	There may be some technological things you can do. But it's maybe about adaptive leadership and accepting that some things will get stolen and managing expectations.	We need to be able to have hard conversations. We need to address the crime of travelling criminals.	Travelling criminals operate as a business, it's highly tactical and quite ruthless.
We need to develop the evidence of what's going on in rural communities. Recent surveys suggest we've been underestimating the problems.	Criminals get put off by the probability of getting caught. If there's low chance of that then you pretty much get lawlessness.	In the medium term we need a new approach to community safety, including physical and connected communities	Local policing professionals can be deeply frustrated about mixed messages from management. Targets damaged lots of policing. Chasing around closing the Incident list takes the priority.
We need to work across private agencies to identify issues. It will mean working with the different cultures of organisations	For public confidence there needs to be obvious procedural justice, with strong communication with communities.	People can feel overwhelmed and abandoned	For public confidence there needs to be a perception of a guaranteed level of support to the citizen
Longer term we need more problem solving with a focus out a practitioner level, mixing enforcement and prevention accordingly	Need to work more with private organisations, that requires a cultural shift, it's like the State is devolving this down ideologically	The national Rural Crime Survey shows things have gotten worse since 2015. It's continuing to get worse.	We've lost lots of officers through austerity. It's shrinking the police and the very State. It's creating a fend for yourself world.
Need to build more collaborative problem solving, bringing people together on mutual problems – social agency	There are different societal factors in rural areas, so when we think we understand domestic abuse we probably don't.	This is a parallel to Rotherham. We get perspective sometimes a decade later but in the here and now we're got vulnerable communities being targeted.	When is a pattern not a pattern? when it's not spotted. We've got many 'isolated incidents' that are actually the symptoms of organised, systemic crime networks
Tourists may be able to help but more so regular walkers etc as they can spot something unusual	We've got this notion that the urban landscape is threatening and dangerous. But there are people and resources nearby. Consider the bleakness of being cut off.	There's a perception that the rural seeing means everyone is rich and everything is beautiful. It's also a bit of an excuse, to be seen as a rural problem rather than a policing problem.	There is an issue with impunity and lawlessness on the country. This impacts on the police there who are stretched and on their own.
How organised is crime in rural settings? There's no threat assessment of problem profile to tell us. We think it might	We need to see how digital systems can interconnect communities in vulnerable and isolated settings	You've got a mismatch here of ill prepared defence of the rural landscape against ruthless criminals. Some are breaking into Fire	We have a problem with travelling criminality. They are living off the grid, on purpose, operating in isolated environments. They target under resourced areas, often

be terrible. It might be worse.		Stations to steal specialist equipment to go on to steal farm machinery. That's organised crime.	lacking CCTV coverage. It's no coincidence, this is targeted
Publicly, we need a high-profile speaker and advocate for rural crime issues	The 'isolated occurrences', <i>when</i> they are reported are disaggregated in other words nobody puts the fuller picture together that this is hidden criminality hiding in plain view. Our use of statistics is part of their camouflage.	There is hostile reconnaissance being used by organised crime groups.	What is the true extent of crime? What about the hidden within the hidden, like hate crime and domestic abuse on rural areas?
We need to understand more about that internal crime, that hidden Domestic Abuse for example, and also that visiting crime, where rural areas are getting raided.	There's an issue with cyber security in rural areas – farmers not knowing how to protect themselves on line	Longer term, we need to work from MCRN data to tackle feelings of isolation and vulnerability across public sector partnerships	We need to better understand the depth of vulnerability of being in an isolated environment – what it means to 'be alone'
There are some habits hard to break. Not locking that gate. Taking the keys out of a Landover in a field.	Officers haven't got the time to do things. In my area we used to have 100 we've now got 30. Local officers can sink under the pressure.	We've got here a known unknown. We need to understand it more through motive. We need to dig into why we've got hidden criminality stalking and preying on vulnerability in these settings.	We need to get more sophisticated and strategic in our joined-up risk and harm impact assessing. The impact on vulnerable communities I think is huge.
There are some technological uses but these need to be pragmatic. If you look at ports, they will sometimes switch trackers off to get cargo flow going quicker.	Communities say we don't respond. When we do it's often poor.	If the nearest back up is 35 minutes away what would you do?	How tragic is to hear police officers say there's nothing we can do, because we're outnumbered and threatened. How can the State allow this to happen?

Rural is different to urban

The key point here was that policing was presumed around the urban model, and that had not really been recognised and problematised in much depth. The rural crime discussion pointed to the need to consider rural environments as a minority and vulnerable grouping that needed tailored services, not 'left overs' from the city. There are political and economic macros factors at play. There is a huge industry in farming that is not being well protected from a financial argument, as well as a disadvantage in contributing to State provision yet receiving a lesser return than an average urban dweller. There was a Russian Doll in rural settings, where in that hidden landscape were further hidden crime types, such as domestic abuse and hate crime, and where capable guardians, reporting opportunities and outreach services were patchier than in the city.

Rural settings in a way have been slow to shout up about the problems and the city dweller has a stereotype of idyllic rural life – 'escape to the country' living. It's taking time to get the message through that there is a problem.	We don't stand back and recognise that everything in our society is dominated by the urban model. That's true of health, fire and police. The stance is you 'out there' will need to come to us in the city. Service provision is often linked to functional buildings and these are in the city limits.	Rural life is not really valued. It's a place to provide vegetables from and a place to visit as a tourist. Otherwise it's not taken seriously.	We hear a lot about the London centric mentality. This is like an urban centric mentality. For some these rural outlying areas are simply gaps in between the transport urban hubs, as if they do not have a value of their own.
We need better awareness among rural communities in cyber security, what to look out for, scams etc	The accountancy around this we've seen with hospitals too. Centres being closed because the numbers don't add up as worth having the provision. In the Industrial Revolution people moved to the cities for work. Now it's about rationing services in the rural areas to maintain the city as the core efficiency.	When we think about priorities we should remember that food and farming is the UK's largest business, worth over £100 billion a year.	How could rural Crimestoppers be expanded? This may not work the same as in urban neighbourhood watch models.
Partnership working can be developed and tailored. Traditionally it's been Crime and Disorder partners but for this it could include vets, GPs, delivery vans.	There's a new danger around the corner. This is an isolated community feeling they've been left on their own. They have a lot of guns. Remember Tony Martin?	A dummy camera is of more use than an alarm in a rural area as although it's Russian roulette you may just get caught.	If you take classic criminological theory we know that in the absence of a capable guarding, crime flourishes. Guess what is happening?
Are the networks in a rural community different to the urban? Who knows the story of the victim there? How do we connect the dots? Does distance in miles	There's a lack of research on this topic because there is denial that it's a problem. It's not serious because it's regarded as petty and in isolated incidents.	So how does safeguarding work in rural areas? Has any safeguarding board ever asked that question?	There are lot of firearms licence holders out in the rural community. They don't want to report mental health or domestic issues because it means the licence will be revoked.

also mean distance emotionally?	That's what the criminal gang wants you to think.		
The Crime and Disorder Act was never rescinded. Where's Section 17 for the rural community?	Politically if we're saying that those in rural areas aren't getting the State return why are they paying the tax that urban livers are? They're subsidising others.	We need more partnership working with service providers at a local level, e.g. churches, GPs, teachers, vets.	Build technology to increase productivity of staff in rural communities; more remote agile working so that officers aren't on an elastic band to the city
Crime prevention is not working. An alarm in a rural area - how will that work?	It's not reassuring for someone to ring the police to be asked 'where's that'?	Farmers are hanging on to a desire to see the rural landscape as desirable. But maybe this is becoming a green ghetto.	We've got a misleading media and film portrayal of the country. The reality is there's slavery on an industrial scale, high value thefts for international export and people feeling intimidated.
How much of the new College of Policing syllabus recognises and includes rural policing?	We need regular publicised pop up police shops, in a van a post office a village shop or church based.	With austerity I think rural areas have been hit twice. In the city, there's been a reduction too but a withdrawal from the rural, leaving often nothing there at all.	Even when there is a rural team, what happens out of hours? It's a response crew from the city. The police bases and stations are in or near the city.
Rural officers may have to be more omni-competent than most. There are some really complex issues and you're on your own a lot.	Neighbourhood policing can't now mean just what the police do. It must be multi-agency and must involve the public and business. Even more the case in rural areas.	Officers working in remote locations are more akin to special forces, where they have to hold their ground until the cavalry can get there.	We need more consistency about how to police rural settings, at NPCC and PCC level
There's a view that it's not serious because it's out in the sticks. Real life is not Heartbeat or Hamish Macbeth, this is serious.	What are the MPs representing rural communities doing about this?	What other resource can be used? Those already in the community like rural chaplains, teachers, vets. They need to be the radar for offences in vulnerable locations.	Rural communities are a minority group that need a bespoke policing approach.
Politics frames policing hence you've got an urban model, where the larger populations are.	There is a Russian doll in rural communities – isolation in domestic abuse in an isolated community.	People in rural settings can be on the edge betwixt the very rural and the urban. They might not be 'owned' by anyone, with no-one taking responsibility to safeguard them	We've got a quite urban model of policing which relies on response. That doesn't work over large distances. We've not thought about designing policing around communities – they just have to have what we've got
We've got a parallel to forgotten generations here. Where an entire ecosystem is being let	It's as if the State has got a plan to encourage criminality as a form of business growth.	It's sad to think society can somehow afford parking wardens patrolling and not police.	They used to say the public get the police they deserve. I think the contemporary truth is

down and allowed to suffer	Citizens are getting angry about being abandoned.	It's become all about the money.	they get the politicians they deserve.
We need community impact teams bespoke to rural settings	We need to understand the vulnerability of the rural context and treat as a minority needing a specific approach	We need to challenge that rural 'idyll' as the only concept – for some this is a prison	There's been a psychological impact on rural communities as if people in the city have pulled up the drawbridge.

Attack the best form of defence?

A theme that change is required for both the rural community and the police was partly borne from a sense of desperation. The vulnerability and isolation of networks impeded support for early intervention, prevention and post incident support. The vast areas which were impossible to effectively guard and response as a tactic was flawed. Those same vast areas were therefore vulnerable to targeted criminality. To change the conversation was it time for the community and the police to move from defence to more assertive attack? Could the community seize back control of the domain more and shift the environment to being more hostile to transient crime? Could the police rather than trying to cover everywhere just in case, target in force those suspected – to go on the attack?

Drones could be used a lot more, including using sensory equipment at night. Don't target drones on victims target them on offenders.	With farming being bigger financially than the car industry maybe there is a commercial mandate to expand private security provision. That may mean higher prices but it's about protecting the industry.	There is a lot of tight knit intelligence between farmers. How can the police tap into this more?	In terms of the criminal market it's too hard to be able to report suspicious goods for sale on things like eBay. It should be easier to be able to register a concern or suspicion.
Cradle to grave ownership of jobs has gone for a hand over approach. Is that the best way of doing things? In the interests of efficiency how much time is spent handing over?	Rural areas need their own Special Ops team, with investigative specialists.	There's perhaps a parallel to using prevent and protect in counter terrorism to get the community and industry working together in rural areas.	The state has a duty. People pay taxes. There is a duty to protect. States can't have it both ways, if they are offering nothing to the citizen the citizen has the right to reject the State. It's the social contract. Politicians need to make the case.
Need to expand the intelligence network, from bikers, horse riders, cyclists, walkers, climbers	We need to recognise it's different, so we need to do things differently. Take travel, police have to travel in from a long distance. What about getting police back living in the community so they're already there?	Do we need to arm all rural officers?	You need to follow the money. Take care coursing. Who is making the money out of it. Find them you find the root of the problem.
People are wary of committing crime when being watched. More surveillance in rural areas might help. Use of drones?	Take this to the Road Hauliers' Association, the professional enablers or criminal users of the road can be tightened through tachographs, transport managers, itineraries. The large machinery is being transported by someone.	Whilst we're focussing on the victim we're taking our eye of who are these organised criminal networks?	There's a recent Act that allows chiefs to swear in ports personnel as constables so they can police ports better. They are already running in Dover, Teesside and Bristol and Merseyside are looking at it.
In the short term we need more on-line	Digital offers some potential to reduce	Make it mandatory for a tractor to have a landline	Better training for call handlers is needed to

reporting for on urgent incidents, including third party reporting through NFU etc	isolation. We need to enable digital communities to improve safety and reduce vulnerability	number on it, like a skip. The landline can be checked quickly and verified against an address. No number no movement, like a pig licence.	understand the vulnerability and context of rural life. It can be an aggravating or weighting factor.
This is about classic criminal markets. Cut off the forward sale, the handling process, and there's no motivation to steal anymore. We need to get tractors like TVs are now, not worth the hassle.	Taser should be standard for rural police officers – for their safety.	To target harden an area of thousands of square miles is impossible. The criminals are operating very surgically. Policing needs to as well.	We could work more with the insurance industry for recognised toolkits to prevent crime
If you think there are times when the rural areas can weaponise themselves, for example outbreaks of foot and mouth. Everything goes into lock down. Maybe such lock downs could be for other things too?	We just don't have enough cops to police rural areas, over those distances. We need to look at other ways, like the Finland Police model.	Why not privatise some of the roads? Why not have toll technology that records who is going where? Local residents could get a rebate. It would be 24/7 surveillance.	In the short term we could do with a publicity campaign to encourage reporting. To create an assertive intolerance of crime.
There's been a tradition of the country as welcoming, friendly and laid back. Maybe there needs to be some aspects where we need some zero tolerance towards crime and create zones that are actively hostile towards crime.	Policing has got to operate in a surgical manner. It needs its general eyes and ears from others, like the local community and then strike in strength and in a targeted way when it has the information.	Policing cannot defend a huge territory. That's like Hadrian's Wall and the Romans. We have to go on the attack. If we know who the offenders are, let's hunt them down.	Need a commonly used messaging and social media platform to create a digital rural community
Pick key issues and be seen to take action, such as raptor crime	Thea's an issue with travelling criminality in rural settings. We need to be prepared for a charge or racism to say that and do something.	In the short term we need to grow public confidence we need prevention, engagement and confidence building through PCSOs etc in outreach programmes	The oxygen supply for international trade is the port. Seize more goods that <i>may</i> be stolen and build in a claim-back process upon further proof of ownership. It's disruptive to business but cheaper than the existing losses.
We need to evolve from target hardening the potential victim to hardening the resistance from the processes criminals use. Make the roads	Rural roads are key. Criminals can't get around without them. Many of these criminals are moving about and fast. We need to move away from target	If you listen to us we are portraying the police as victims. I don't think there are 120,000 organised criminals out there, so we probably outnumber them. But where we spread	Patrolling a vast area on a just in case basis is opportunistic policing. Criminals are being surgically forceful and targeted. Ridiculous as it

<p>and the ports hostile to them.</p>	<p>hardening to criminal surveillance.</p>	<p>ourselves thin and they come at us in numbers and with weapons we're at a disadvantage. We need to target them; take the fight to them on our terms.</p>	<p>may sound the police need to copy the criminal tactics.</p>
<p>Does the structure of 43 CCs and PCCs work to allow consistent delivery of service?</p>	<p>We're trying to make things fit as best possible based on established ways, but if the evidence says prevention and response doesn't work in rural areas we need a new approach.</p>	<p>That technology we need to develop needs to be more assertively targeting criminality, not trying to protect victims. The technology can get the intelligence to allow more proactive police strike operations.</p>	<p>There's another way to attack and that's to bait and wait. We could set more traps to lure in travelling criminals. Whatever the legal outcome it would send a message. It's how we catch foxes.</p>

Next steps

The roundtable on Rural Crime proved to be a start of something rather than a 'fix', but the process did start to change the conversation. The key emergent points build upon the existing Rural Affairs Strategy priorities. The tailoring of service towards need was a clear direction, for both the potentially internalised hidden crime patterns, such as hate crime, domestic abuse and cyber fraud protection, but also visiting targeted criminality.

There were some broader concepts to consider. There were strong political overtones to consider the parity of service to the citizen by the State and political representation. There were reflections on existing structures needing adapting around the citizen rather than around the organisation.

As with all research process where you think you are starting at is often not where inquiry takes you. In this instance, there was a considerable amount of frustration in not being able to help rural communities, where crime appeared to be on the rise. The attention ultimately started to focus more and more upon the hidden criminality, and found a conclusion that if you cannot provide universal protection then precision attack offers an alternative.

1. Explore research bids for greater exploratory research and analysis to inform understanding of the crime and harm in rural environments, including tracking the international markets for stolen goods.
2. A fresh look at the problem profiling of criminality targeting rural areas to inform more proactive policing offensives, rather than relying on target hardening and prevention.
3. Identify relevant stakeholders from public and private spheres who can collaborate in partnerships for the prevention, disruption, reassurance and enhancement of intelligence networks (e.g. private business, insurance and commerce who also inhabit or use the rural environment).
4. Seek to cut off supply chain opportunities such as in the transport system and the ports system. Encourage more reporting and default seizures of potentially stolen goods.
5. Explore ways of surveilling transport routes more intrusively, liaising with Highways Agency, ANPR, Transport Managers and lorry driver networks for Dash Cam, targeting agricultural machinery movement.
6. Develop cross border support and intelligence with forces covering ports, e.g. Humberside, and explore using the Marine Navigation Act (2013) to appoint more sworn in constables from ports personnel to police ports more broadly.
7. Reconsider how intelligence and data is collected to inform NIM products, given ineffectiveness of current methodologies such as crime data analysis. Consider more BCS type additionality.
8. Re-establish police responses away from ineffective urban led tactics which recognise rural policing as a specialist response to organised crime.
9. Explore holistic approaches to the rural community learning from safeguarding and counter terrorism lessons.
10. Redefine the narrative of rural crime in the political and policing landscape to highlight hidden criminality and vulnerability.

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The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of East Midlands Special Operation Unit.

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