

Bridging the Research and Policy Divide on Organised Crime

Debate

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Abstract: Organised crime is beginning to take a more prominent role among policymakers. Despite continued focus on counter-terrorism because of renewed tension created by Islamic State, organised crime is receiving increasing attention and additional resources. The dominance of counter-terrorism, however, has created gaps in experience and understanding of organised crime and how it should be addressed. Academic research plays an important role in filling these gaps, but it is often disconnected from the needs of policymakers. This article examines the renewed engagement with organised crime at the UK, European and international level, and identifies some gaps in knowledge and experience. Exploring the divide between current academic research and policy needs, the article outlines the creation of a Strategic Hub on Organised Crime at the Royal United Services Institute that aims to bridge the gap between theory, policy, and practice.

Keywords: Organised Crime; Strategic Hub; Research; Policy; Collaboration

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Introduction

Across Europe and further afield, governments are beginning to engage more meaningfully with organised crime. In a space once dominated by counter-terrorism, organised crime is receiving renewed attention and governments are allocating additional resources to address it. The period of

inaction on organised crime has created a gap in experience and understanding of how criminal groups operate, their motives, and the scale, costs and impact of criminal activity. While academics play a crucial role in filling these gaps, academic analysis does not necessarily meet the needs of policymakers. More effort is needed to bridge the gap between theory, policy, and practice.

Renewed Engagement with Organised Crime

Since the terrorist attacks in September 2011, countering terrorism was the priority of governments worldwide. This ensured that resources for other security threats such as organised crime were significantly reduced. Many commentators reported on the “tunnel vision” of particularly US intelligence and national security analysts. Foust (2010) noted that in response to the War on Terror, “the U.S. intelligence community (IC) has undergone a remarkable transformation. A relatively modest part of the national security community before the 9/11 attacks, by 2010 the IC had swelled to encompass nearly a million people largely focused on prosecuting the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the global counterterrorism mission”. A report by RAND details what this meant for law enforcement agencies throughout the country, outlining the extent that their resources were directed to countering terrorism (Davis et al., 2010). Similar trends have been witnessed in Europe. Hillebrand outlines how “at the domestic level, European counter-terrorism actors have experienced a considerable increase in budgets, a widening of their mandates and a broadening of their functions” (2012: 1-2).

Law enforcement agencies have maintained a focus on organised crime, particularly when it affected their areas of operation. For example, a superintendent in the London Metropolitan Police uncovered a Romanian human trafficking network following the arrest of children forced to beg and steal in London. This resulted in a joint operation with Romanian police to target the leaders of the network. Many countries have also had special agencies focused on crime, such as the UK’s Serious and Organised Crime Agency (SOCA). However, within high level policy circles, organised crime has not been a priority. There are signs that this is beginning to change.

Recently, President Obama has shifted away from the “war on terror”, seeking targeted operations, while also recognising the other threats that face the US. This shift in American policy has opened space for other challenges, including organised crime, to receive renewed attention, both within the US and globally. The cost and impact of organised crime, and the potential links to terrorist groups has also ensured that governments are now paying more attention.

In the UK, organised crime is now recognised as one of the greatest threats to national security. The Serious and Organised Crime strategy released in 2013 stated that “serious and organised crime is a threat to our national security and costs the UK more than £24 billion a year. But for too long, too many serious and organised criminals have been able to remain one step ahead and out of law enforcement’s reach” (HMG, 2013: 5). This recognition followed on from a major overhaul

of how organised crime is addressed in the UK. SOCA was replaced by the National Crime Agency (NCA) in 2013, which brings together various agencies in an attempt at a coordinated response to organised crime that targets both the national and international level. This goes beyond a domestic focus, as “overseas, organised crime undermines good governance and the stability of countries of strategic importance to our national security” (HMG, 2013: 8).

The NCA takes a multi-layered approach to organised crime. It seeks to pursue organised crime; prevent people from engaging in organised crime; protect against organised crime; and prepare to reduce the impact in order to reduce the level of serious and organised crime in the UK. The NCA’s approach draws on the successes of counterterrorism, reinforcing the idea that initiatives to address organised crime have emerged out of a broadening security agenda. The NCA also seeks to take an open and transparent approach, in part to increase public awareness of organised crime. The first step in doing this was the release of its inaugural threat assessment in May 2014, which sets out the current threats in the UK and how these are predicted to change over the next 3 years. These developments represent a significant change in how organised crime is addressed in the UK. Although the budget of the NCA remains small, there is renewed enthusiasm for addressing the threat of organised crime.

The fight against organised crime in the EU has also evolved significantly. Organised crime became a key objective in the 1992 Maastricht Treaty, leading to the harmonisation of national legislation, the creation of specialised agencies (such as Europol and Eurojust) and police and judicial cooperation. The 2003 European Security Strategy identified organised crime as one of the 5 key threats facing the EU. “Europe is a prime target for organised crime. This internal threat to our security has an important external dimension: cross-border trafficking in drugs, women, illegal migrants and weapons accounts for a large part of the activities of criminal gangs. It can have links with terrorism” (EU 2003). The 2010 EU Internal Security Strategy also noted the importance of linking the fight against organised crime with external policy and longterm development objectives. Since 2004, Europol has been reporting on the state of organised crime within the EU, which has evolved into an annual threat assessment of serious and organised crime.

Operationally, organised crime has also become a key element of EU external engagement. EU state-building interventions in the Western Balkans had a significant focus on organised crime. The EU Police Mission in Bosnia-Herzegovina focused solely on organised crime and corruption in its final two phases between 2009 and 2012. More broadly, the Instrument for Stability (IfS)^[1], created in 2007, provides a mechanism to address organised crime through external engagement by building the capacity of law enforcement. The flagship project of the IfS has been the Cocaine Route Programme, which seeks to build capacity of law enforcement agencies along the cocaine route into Europe, particularly in Latin America, the Caribbean and West Africa.

Within peacekeeping and peacebuilding missions, the UN is also becoming involved in addressing organised crime. An International Peace Institute (IPI) report noted that “organised crime has become a serious threat in almost every theatre where the UN has peace operations” (Kemp,

Shaw and Boutellis, 2013: 1). Although the report highlights a continued “mismatch between the seriousness of the threat posed by organised crime and the UN’s ability to tackle it” (ibid), the UN is becoming more involved. At the 12th

Annual Congress on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice, the UN Secretary General’s message called for “a ‘one UN’ approach by bringing crime prevention into the mainstream of our work, particularly in conflict prevention, peace-keeping and peace-building” (UN, 2010). In 2011, the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations signed a joint action plan with the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) to work together on drug trafficking and organised crime in conflict and post-conflict areas (UNODC, 2011). A number of peacekeeping and peacebuilding missions now have mandates that address organised crime. For example, the UN Peacebuilding Mission in Sierra Leone (UNIPSIL) was tasked with implementing the West Africa Coast Initiative (WACI), a multi-agency initiative to address drug trafficking and organised crime in Sierra Leone.

Although these approaches engage with organised crime at different levels—from that affecting the UK or the European Union, to transnational organised crime—they all highlight renewed attempts to engage with criminal activity.

Gaps in Knowledge and Experience

Despite this renewed enthusiasm to address organised crime, both within and outside national borders, previous inactivity in this area has created gaps in knowledge and expertise. While governments, the EU and UN have renewed their commitment to address organised crime, they are not equipped with the knowledge to adequately understand the changing dynamics of organised crime or even the scale, impact and costs of criminal activity. In many instances strategies to address organised crime rely on traditional law enforcement strategies that do not address the factors that support the proliferation of organised crime, or effectively deter criminal activity.

In relation to UN peacekeeping and peacebuilding missions, Kemp, Shaw, and Boutellis argue that they “are not well equipped or well prepared to face this threat” (2013:1). There is a recognition within the UN and among other actors addressing organised crime that a comprehensive approach to organised crime is required. However, there is lack of understanding on how to do this. Cockayne (2011:7) noted that “a review of key development actors’ guidance and assessment tools for peacebuilders [...] reveals that not one of them includes indicators or assessment methodologies for mapping or analysing organised crime [...] The new Rule of Law indicators developed by the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations seek to take a comprehensive approach, but also exclude organised crime. The OECD DAC has recognised that organised crime is a factor in peacebuilding, but has offered no comprehensive guidance on what to do about it”. In response, there is a tendency to rely on traditional law enforcement strategies that primarily

respond to incidents of organised crime. This points to a lack of experience in engaging with organised crime in an innovative way, which derives from a lack of understanding it fully, its drivers and how it manifests itself in different environments.

The EU has acknowledged gaps in their understanding of organised crime. The 2011 European Police Chiefs conference highlighted limited capacity for anticipating new trends, particularly in relation to crimes that are not already a priority. Similarly, there are difficulties keeping pace with the changing nature of crime, specifically cybercrime and economic crime. In response to these gaps, the “working group on organised crime advocates a more creative approach to combating criminality that looks beyond traditional law enforcement investigations, prosecutions and surveillance methods” (Europol, 2011:3). However, as with the desire for a comprehensive approach outlined above, this would entail detailed analysis of how to ensure this new approach. The conference also recognised the need for a “new model of policing [...] that draws on a network of law enforcement specialists, and emphasises collaboration with partners in the private sector, NGOs and academia” (EUROPOL, 2011:3).

The UK Government specifically articulated gaps in knowledge in a 2011 report, “Future Directions in Organised Crime Research”. The report identified a series of research priorities. It was recognised that the understanding of the scale, impacts, costs and victims of organised crime was inadequate. An understanding of the individuals engaged in organised crime, including their relationships and the markets they operate within, was lacking. The report pointed to the need to evaluate existing interventions to address organised crime—whether this was addressing the factors that allow organised crime to take root, the strengthening of law enforcement, or initiatives to safeguard communities affected by organised crime. The report also recognised the need to develop a better evidence base around drivers, and understand the changing nature of organised crime and future areas of concern.

Three years on, with the release of the National Crime Agency’s first National Strategic Assessment, many of these areas have still not been investigated. The assessment raises a number of issues with quantifying the level of organised crime. A comprehensive assessment of the scale of child sex exploitation and abuse is not possible as it is well hidden; there is no definitive measure of cybercrime; the assessment is unable to judge some areas of economic and organised acquisitive crime; and a more cohesive and consistent intelligence picture on corruption is required. While effectively quantifying organised crime is difficult, these knowledge gaps call for a consideration of new methodologies to identify and measure criminal activity.

The assessment also highlights a number of other knowledge gaps. There is currently an inadequate understanding of why people engage in organised crime. Profit is a clear motive, but there are many other factors at play also. Without understanding the motivations, it is difficult to identify opportunities to undermine illicit activity. There is also a lack of understanding of the broader impact of organised crime in the UK. Estimations have been made about the social and economic costs, yet deeper analysis is required to assess what this actually means.

Difficulties in understanding and quantifying organised crime within the UK suggest that understanding the flows into the UK is also going to be limited. Although the assessment points to a range of transportation methods for entering the UK, there is still an inadequate understanding of the routes of illicit goods and people and the markets that exist along them. There is also limited analysis of the drivers in source countries. Without understanding these issues, the NCA can only respond to incidents of organised crime within the UK, rather than preventing crime at its source. These gaps in knowledge among government and intergovernmental actors addressing organised crime, highlight a need for expert analysis on different forms of organised crime, its scale, cost and impact, its changing nature and other elements that affect strategies to address criminal activity.

Filling the Gaps

Just as organised crime has become a growing concern for policymakers, academic research has also expanded. Von Lampe (2012) has recorded a growing number of journal articles and monographs that focus specifically on organised crime. Many engage with a particular type of organised crime, such as drug trafficking, human trafficking, human smuggling or the illicit cigarette trade; others address a particular country or region; and others investigate specific criminal groups (Von Lampe, 2012).

Academic research on organised crime has a number of benefits. Academic researchers have the freedom and flexibility to research a wide variety of areas connected to organised crime. Without being driven by a particular policy agenda, academic researchers can determine which areas are important and warrant further investigation. Within academic research on organised crime, there is also an emphasis on empirical data. This provides rich and detailed analysis of how organised crime manifests in different environments, who is involved, and the tensions and nuances that arise within organised criminal activity. These factors are often not visible from afar, but have a significant influence on how organised crime is understood and addressed.

The flexibility of academic research can pinpoint what the real problems are in relation to organised crime. The emphasis on empirical evidence contributes to the establishment of an evidence base on organised crime. The specific trends in academic research outlined above also deepen the understanding of organised crime, in particular how it is evolving and where future threats may arise. By assessing the specifics of individual transnational offenders and the groups involved, research can expose who is participating in organised criminal activity, why and the markets they operate in, contributing to more effective strategies to respond to it. Researchers can elucidate the drivers of organised crime and evaluate existing interventions on organised crime, resulting in more targeted strategies that draw on lessons from earlier approaches. Academic research can also consider alternative strategies for addressing organised crime that go beyond law enforcement bringing in a wide spectrum of views from security, law, development, and peacebuilding fields.

While organised crime is a growing area of research for academics, much of the research that has emerged is disconnected from the needs of policymakers. Some academic research does engage directly with policy demands. A team of academics evaluated the development of the EU's Internal Security Strategy and identified remaining challenges (European Parliament, 2011). Similarly, the London School of Economics has formed an Expert Group on the Economics of Drug Policy that engages in analysis to inform government policymaking. Academic research has also contributed to several Home Office reports, such as *Understanding Criminal Careers in Organised Crime*, released in October 2013. Yet, for the most part academic research is far removed from policy debates.

Different Tracks

Policy development and scholarly analysis proceed on different tracks. The freedom that underpins academic research can mean that it is disconnected from what is actually happening and the policy discussions underway. The identification of gaps in knowledge does not necessarily align with the knowledge needs of policymakers. Instead research may advance theoretical debates which do not enhance responses to organised crime. The disjuncture between academic and policy communities means that academic research does not always focus on issues of concern.

Research that emerges from this context can still have value for policymakers as it raises issues that have not otherwise been considered and deepens the understanding of organised crime. This can encourage policymakers to think about organised crime in different ways, consider new approaches and different problems. However, it often speaks a different language. The focus on theory does not always align with problem solving. A detailed analysis of concepts and issues, while useful to explain how particular findings were reached, is disconnected from the practical implications of addressing organised crime. Given the time constraints of policymakers, this makes it inaccessible.

Although policy development and academic research proceed on different tracks there is much to be gained from a dialogue between the two. Academic analysis can improve approaches to organised crime, and provide a deeper understanding of the phenomena, while policymakers and practitioners elucidate problem areas and where further analysis is required, ensuring that academic investigation has a significant impact. Some advances have been made in bridging the gap between policy and research. The US National Institute of Justice brought together scholars and practitioners to discuss their research agendas and potential areas of collaboration. The UK government sought to create a research hub by releasing the Future Directions in Research on Organised Crime report. However, as yet, this has not come to fruition.

Strategic Hub on Organised Crime

The Royal United Services Institute is aiming to fill this gap in the UK. With a growing profile of research on organised crime, RUSI will bring together policymakers, practitioners and academics together to discuss the challenges they face and discuss where further research and analysis is needed. The institute has a strong understanding of the needs of policymakers and the gaps in knowledge that impact the strategy to address organised crime as well as a growing network of academics engaged in research focused on organised crime. The plan is to bring these elements together, creating a platform for policymakers to articulate their needs for research and analysis and for academics to share their areas of work. To do this, RUSI has launched a Strategic Hub for Organised Crime research in association with the Home Office, National Crime Agency, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, and the Partnership for Crime, Conflict and Security within Research Councils UK. The aim of the new hub is to develop a world class research agenda that meets the needs of policymakers and practitioners in the field. The Hub's steering committee, drawn from government, police, research councils and academia, have identified three priorities that need to be understood in more detail: how we assess what strategies are effective at disrupting organised crime, what do criminal markets look like, and where are the vulnerabilities in the system.

Research on the disruption of organised crime is essential to determine whether strategies are effective, whether they are ethical and to consider alternative strategies. Existing metrics on organised crime, such as recorded crime figures are not an accurate source as they are subject to arbitrary rules and categories. Equally, existing police performance tools are not an accurate means of measuring impact against organised crime, as they are more focused on volume crime, which is easier to define. These tools are also primarily a measure of police activity. As organised criminal activity spreads into other areas, the threat is poorly understood. The Organised Crime Group Mapping undertaken by the NCA and Home Office has improved the intelligence picture, but more research is needed to understand how best to target them.

Understanding criminal markets and the flow of illicit goods is also essential in order to develop appropriate strategies to disrupt criminal activity. An investigation into specific forms of criminal activity—whether this is trafficking in drugs, people or other commodities, distribution networks within the UK, or the structure of criminal groups—can generate broader lessons to enhance strategies to respond to organised crime.

Currently, the response to organised crime is primarily reactive—strategies are put in place to respond to known criminal activities. While Prevent and Prepare and now key elements of the UK's Serious and Organised Crime Strategy, there is a need for a better understanding of where the vulnerabilities to criminal activity are, engaging in a risk analysis to engage with future threats. Given the economic drivers of much criminal activity, organised crime has become much more business-like. As such, it is essential to consider how criminal activity may evolve in response to new opportunities.

Across all three of these areas, much academic research is already underway. However, as discussed above it is not always communicated in a way accessible to policymakers, or it may be unknown to them. Through the Strategic Hub, RUSI aims to bring the two strands together. The first step was a conference to launch the Hub on 8 December 2014. Each of the three areas discussed above had a panel with a government speaker outlining what they need to know and why. This was followed by two academic speakers outlining research currently underway in the area, and how this can meet the needs of policymakers. In the afternoon, discussion forums further engaged with these three areas, generating new strands of research that can deepen our understanding and build on the strengths of both policymakers and academic researchers.

The Strategic Hub on Organised Crime will foster relationships to bridge the gap between theory, policy and practice in order to create a better understanding of organised crime and its contributing factors in order to enhance strategies to address it and develop new approaches. The December conference was just the beginning of the conversation. Throughout 2015, a series of workshops will also be organised to continue to engage with other areas identified as knowledge gaps in relation to organised crime.

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[1] The IfS has transformed into the Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace (IcSP).