

Public concerns about organised crime

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Background

This report sets out the findings of a study that sought to understand the harms that the public associate with organised crimes, and the extent of their concerns about them. In doing so, it draws upon data from ten two-hour qualitative focus groups and a telephone survey of a randomly selected sample of 1,000 members of the public. The impetus for this research was the 2004 *Organised Crime White Paper* which pointed to the need to examine the level of public concern about organised crime and the harm associated with it. Some problems, like the availability of drugs, are known to cause widespread public concern but little is known about the nature of concern about other forms of organised criminality.

Results

Access to information about organised crime

Respondents reported having limited access to information about organised crime from official (government and law enforcement) sources. Their knowledge of organised criminality came from national and local newspapers, television programmes and films, through word of mouth and via other local information (newsletters, for example). Reflecting this, respondents' understanding of organised crime was based largely on its image in popular culture, notably its representation in films and on television.

Forms and characteristics of organised crime

Survey and focus group respondents did not believe that organised criminality is confined to specific crime types. Any crime – from low-level localised anti-social behaviour, vehicle theft and burglary through to international drug and people smuggling/trafficking – could potentially be organised. Nevertheless, some forms of crime were considered to be more organised than others, for example drug dealing, people smuggling/trafficking, credit card fraud, extortion, protection rackets, counterfeiting, prostitution

and paedophile rings. Focus group respondents did, however, report that crimes which were organised had certain characteristics: they were considered to be structured and businesslike, planned, and associated with some kind of personal gain.

Harms associated with organised crime

Respondents believed that organised crime causes high levels of harm to the country, with almost 70 per cent of the telephone survey respondents agreeing that the harm caused by organised crime is extremely serious or very serious. Organised crime was also perceived to be increasing; 67 per cent of respondents thought there was more organised crime (when the interviews were conducted in 2006) than there had been two years previously.

However, focus group respondents did not differentiate between the harms associated with organised crime and those with crime in general. Harm was primarily associated with the potential consequence of a crime. The most harmful were those crimes which had an impact on the physical, emotional or financial well-being of the victim. 'Medium serious' harms were identified as those that impacted on the wider community but which had a less immediate physical or emotional impact on them as individuals. These included, for example, the breakdown of community relationships as anxieties about crime increased, negative impressions being made on young people (for instance 'glamorising' certain types of crime), or an area acquiring a bad reputation. The least harmful crimes were those where the consequences were dispersed by being carried by institutions or society as a whole, rather than by individuals. These harms resulted in costs to business, to the economy (including revenue and tax losses), to the criminal justice system and to wider public services.

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Respondents were most concerned about crimes they had personally experienced or worried about on a day-to-day basis. These included drug-related crimes, anti-social behaviour, mugging, assault, burglary and theft. Very serious violent or sexual crimes such as murder, rape and terrorism were, of course, associated with high levels of personal harm although for most respondents these crimes did not evoke day-to-day concerns. Forms of fraud, shoplifting, vandalism, motoring offences (such as speeding), tax evasion and benefit fraud were widely considered to be low-level crimes and elicited little concern. Crimes often considered organised – especially selling counterfeit goods, types of fraud and people smuggling/trafficking – did not elicit the same levels of concern as crimes such as burglary or vehicle crime. Harms associated with fraud and counterfeiting were seen to be absorbed more widely by business or the economy, and people smuggling/trafficking was seen as unlikely to result in personal harm to the public.

Impact of organised crime on society

Respondents differed in their views regarding the crimes considered most harmful at national level, at the community level, and at individual level. All the crime types that respondents were asked about – which included a range of organised and non-organised crimes – were considered to be harmful at the national level. Among the most harmful were some crimes usually considered to be organised, such as drug trafficking, gun crime and forms of fraud. Other organised crimes, such as people smuggling/trafficking and selling counterfeit goods, were seen to cause comparatively less harm at the national level. At the community level (with the exception of drug dealing), organised crimes were not considered to be among the most harmful. Instead, crimes not ordinarily thought of as organised such as burglary, vandalism, car theft and street robbery were reported as being the most harmful. At the individual level, burglary raised the most concern (although drug dealing and credit card fraud also continued to cause high levels of individual worry). Again, comparatively, organised crimes such as people smuggling/trafficking and counterfeiting produced some of the lowest levels of *personal worry*.

Conclusion

Many respondents thought that organised crime causes serious harm to the country and that it had increased over the two years preceding the study.

Crime (organised or otherwise) was considered to generate high levels of harm at both national and local levels, and also generated a great deal of individual worry. Respondents assessed harm on the basis of the extent to which a crime impacted, or had the potential to impact on the physical and emotional well-being of a victim. The degree of concern about crimes had different immediacy depending on whether that harm was seen to impact most on the individual, the community, or on society more generally. Crimes that impact at the individual level were considered the most harmful and those impacting on the wider societal or business level the least harmful. Some forms of organised crime – such as counterfeiting and certain frauds – elicit lower levels of concern because the harms associated with them are ordinarily absorbed by the wider economy and society rather than directly by individuals. Other forms of organised crime such as people smuggling and trafficking were considered to be harmful for the individuals affected but overall were associated with lower levels of concern because the likelihood of becoming a victim of such activities is low. A clear exception is drug dealing, which was widely considered to generate high levels of harm nationally, within communities, and for individuals.