

Community Experiences of Serious Organised Crime in Scotland

This report summarises the key findings from a research project that explored the community experiences of serious organised crime (SOC) in Scotland.

Introduction

This research was commissioned by the Scottish Government to explore the community experiences of serious organised crime (SOC) in Scotland. The study sought to provide, for the first time, focused qualitative research on the lived experiences of residents who have an awareness of SOC in their communities and may have been affected by it, directly or indirectly. The research was led by the University of Glasgow and the University of Stirling, with further input from the University of Abertay and the University of the West of Scotland. The Scottish Community Development Centre was also an active partner in the research, helping with accessing communities and with organising community feedback events called 'co-inquiries'.

The study sought to answer the following questions: 1) What are the relationships that exist between SOC and communities in Scotland? 2) What are the experiences and perceptions of residents, stakeholders and organisations of the scope and nature of SOC within their local area? and 3) How does SOC impact on community wellbeing, and to what extent can the harms associated with SOC be mitigated?

Methods

The research involved in-depth qualitative research, to understand both direct and indirect forms of harm. This is an innovative approach to the study of the harms caused by organised crime, with prior studies adopting more quantitative methodologies.

The work commenced by interviewing national stakeholders and with the collection of information on national patterns of SOC. Subsequently, three case study areas were selected for in-depth community research. Case study areas were selected on the basis of pre-existing academic and policy literature, an initial set of interviews with key experts, and on the basis of aggregated and anonymised intelligence summaries provided by Police Scotland. These case studies were 'geographically-bounded' in nature and covered urban, semi-urban and rural areas.

The impact of SOC at a more 'diffuse' national level was explored via research in a range of smaller case study sites and via interviews with national stakeholders. This allowed examination of SOC impacts in rural and remote areas and on populations not concentrated in a defined community.

Fieldwork consisted of interviews, focus groups and observations involving residents, schools, local businesses, community organisations, and third sector and statutory organisations providing local services. In addition a small number of focus groups were conducted in the Scottish prison estate with individuals with lived experience of organised crime in community contexts, as either victims or offenders.

In total, data was collected from 188 respondents. Subsequent to the fieldwork, events were held in the three case study sites to present back – and explore the significance of – the preliminary findings. These co-inquiry events were designed both to help validate findings, and also to explore the implications of the findings in terms of community development, policy and practice. A sub-sample of 33 community participants took part in this process.

Serious Organised Crime¹ in Scotland

SOC is considered to have a significant impact on the wellbeing of Scottish communities. As well as economic costs it is evident that there are broader social costs in community settings.

The effects of SOC on Scottish communities are not evenly distributed, with impact varying in nature and severity across urban, semi-urban and rural areas. While certain forms of SOC have deep roots in territorially-defined communities, others have less visible and more diffuse and invisible forms of impact. In recent years SOC in Scotland has demonstrated both continuity and change, involving both neighbourhood-based criminality and more geographically diverse forms of activity.

The case study areas had all experienced the consequences of the decline in Scotland's coal-mining, fishing, and manufacturing industries. All could be characterised as experiencing significant social and economic disadvantage, with unemployment and underemployment a common concern. Participants identified poverty and inequality as key drivers of crime in their local areas, including SOC activity.

While the case study areas had traits that were similar to other communities in Scotland, however, it should be noted that these findings should not be read as a generalised picture of SOC-community relations in Scotland. Although these themes were evident across the various case study locations, it is notable that there were differences in intensity between urban, semi-urban, and rural contexts. The intensity was highest in the urban embedded context and least intense in the diffuse location.

Community experiences

Criminal activity and impacts

Across all field sites, participants recognised organised crime as a significant and enduring feature of the local landscape. In each area, there were local firms, families and 'faces' who were seen to have involvement in organised criminality. Organised crime frequently featured as a relatively routine aspect of everyday life that was known of, to a greater or lesser extent, by a majority of participants.

¹ In this report the term 'organised crime' is used generally to refer to planned, group-based criminality with significant financial reward. While the terms 'organised crime' and 'serious organised crime' (SOC) are used interchangeably in the report, it is notable that the term 'organised crime' had more traction with community respondents, while the term SOC was more familiar to statutory interviewees, being the term used in Scottish policy and policing documentation. There is no implied, precise, or agreed, difference in how these two terms are defined.

Participants in all fieldsites identified street crime – notably drug-dealing and theft – as the most visible manifestation of organised criminality. It was often recognised, however, that these visible forms of crime were the ‘tip of the iceberg’, with the majority of SOC activity hidden from public view.

There was consensus that the principal community impact of SOC in Scotland is that of the illicit drugs market. The illicit drugs market embeds a range of harmful consequences for users, their families, and the general fabric of community life, including the entrenchment of vulnerabilities including addiction and debt.

For communities where SOC is deeply embedded, the cumulative effect of the presence of SOC can result in a degree of resignation to its impact. Fear and violence form part of the background to everyday life.

Outside of these very direct community impacts, SOC has clear economic, cultural and social consequences within Scottish society more broadly; in particular through the harmful and pernicious effects of criminal markets in illicit drugs, stolen property, and human exploitation.

Organised crime – exploitation, recruitment and supporting ‘narratives’

Organised crime groups often have detailed knowledge of vulnerability in local areas. Groups seek opportunities to create financial gain from exploiting or recruiting individuals who are frequently vulnerable.

Weaknesses in welfare provision and in the provision of essential services, such as shortfalls in housing benefit, or forms of welfare sanction, were found to be readily identified and exploited by SOC groups. Such exploitation can, at times, be presented as forms of ‘assistance’.

Exploitation of community groups also extends to more diffuse forms of SOC. Participants reported forms of exploitation across a range of legal and illegal enterprises (e.g. hospitality, fishing, agriculture, nail bars, prostitution, and cannabis cultivation).

Youths hanging around in public areas were a community concern across all fieldsites, specifically when they were involved in anti-social behaviour and street crime. In some cases young people from this cohort are understood to be ‘mentored’ into involvement in more organised forms of criminality.

Although territorial identity remains significant, community respondents reported that street-based gang violence had declined in visibility and severity in recent years. A number of explanations were offered for this, including the growth of social media-facilitated drug dealing.

In the context of unemployment, precarious work, and zero-hours contracts, organised crime was seen as offering a route to financial reward that was very appealing to some young people, particularly young men in search of respect. Organised crime was portrayed as a meritocratic, 'equal opportunity' employer where able young people could find both success, and a sense of belonging, that they were denied in the legitimate economy.

To a significant extent 'positive' narratives and perceptions of SOC represented a mismatch with reality. In fact, the prospects for young people who become involved in organised crime are bleak, with few achieving sustained material success without detriment. Involvement comes with a persistent threat of imprisonment or, when at liberty, a constant threat of violence, which can in turn have significant impacts on mental health and wellbeing.

Service providers

The study engaged in interview-based data collection with local police and other statutory agencies, including social work, housing, and schools. Data from these 52 interviews was used to triangulate the findings from community interviews and explore the barriers to service provision in case-study areas.

Statutory agencies and their partners face considerable challenges in the provision of services and supporting the needs of communities. Against this backdrop, the presence of SOC constitutes a barrier to effective and equitable service delivery, both 'blocking' and 'distracting' scant resources.

Across all case study sites a decade of austerity and budget cuts has clearly eroded the capacity of service providers. In particular this has led to office closures in the majority of these communities, resulting in a 'distancing' between organisations and residents, and an associated loss of community knowledge. The presence of embedded SOC activity in a local area can create further distance between communities and service providers through fear of reporting crime.

The increased mobility and inter-connectedness of SOC, promoted by improved travel infrastructure and the global reach of online and social media technologies, creates particular challenges for local statutory partners, who may not have ready access to the central resources and capabilities required to deal with highly mobile and/or technology-enabled criminality.

Issues for the main service providers / agencies are summarised as follows:

Community policing had relatively weak purchase on SOC issues in the case study areas. Police community relationships were generally seen as poor, being characterised by high levels of mistrust. In some communities these poor relationships were considered long-standing and often inter-generational. The effectiveness and credibility of local policing generally was further challenged by strategies used by SOC groups to foil police operations, and efforts to deliberately

divert police resources away from SOC activity through reporting of bogus 'incidents'.

Schools are seen as a key asset in communities but also a potential problem area when pupils are disengaged from school, at risk of school 'drop out' and subsequent involvement in crime. Drug dealing around schools, often facilitated by social media, was seen as a problem in a number of areas. Some schools were considered more effective than others at challenging disengagement and affording some protection to pupils, in terms of pupils from the area enjoying better integration into the school and into pro-social friendship networks in the school community.

Housing is also considered to be a significant asset in communities, with local providers commanding more trust in communities than many other agencies. Exploitation of vulnerable tenants was identified as a significant concern across the fieldsites, with some providers offering innovative new approaches for identifying and supporting vulnerable populations.

Private businesses and retail premises did not feature significantly in case study areas, and where they did, there was limited evidence of direct victimisation by SOC. However, these areas were generally characterised by weak commercial environments. In one area this had enabled SOC groups to gain some purchase on the community through providing services and facilities, including motor vehicle services and leisure facilities. In this area SOC had also been associated with intimidation and the prevention of other, legitimate businesses, from setting up in the area. Therefore SOC may inhibit investment in communities. This combined, with the stigma associated with negative area reputation, could partially contribute to the sustained levels of socio-economic exclusion experienced within these communities.

Social work and related organisations face substantial challenges in supporting desistance and reintegration for individuals convicted of SOC offences. Whilst some individuals with backgrounds of offending are anxious to escape from their criminal associations, this can be difficult in circumstances where SOC groups are not prepared to let them 'walk away'. Supporting these individuals through the provision of appropriate housing, medical care, and employment is a particular challenge in a resource-stretched environment.

Conclusions

SOC has deep roots in Scotland and extends its corrosive reach into a wide range of communities, businesses, and institutions. To date, SOC activity has been approached principally as a policing problem. While recognising the pivotal role of policing, the study suggests that tackling the deep roots of SOC effectively requires a broader set of partnerships, involving both statutory agencies and local community groups. A number of recommendations to this effect are contained within the main report.

The step-change in working practices suggested by this shift is not straightforward and will require, from statutory and community organisations alike, both strong leadership and a willingness to listen. The starting point, however, is the very real and enduring forms of direct and indirect harm, victimisation and indebtedness revealed in this report. Only by shining a light on an issue that is often in the shadows, or is distorted through the glare of media glamourisation and dubious forms of celebrity, can real and effective responses be formulated. This research aims to make a contribution to this important endeavour.



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ISBN: 978-1-78851-901-4 (web only)

Published by the Scottish Government, May 2018