

# **WHAT WORKS: CRIME REDUCTION SYSTEMATIC REVIEW SERIES**

## **THE EFFECTIVENESS OF ASSET-FOCUSSED INTERVENTIONS AGAINST ORGANISED CRIME: PROTOCOL FOR A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW**

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## INTRODUCTION

This document provides the background to, and prospects for, undertaking a systematic review of the evidence relating to the effectiveness of asset-focussed interventions against organised crime. It details a principal research question to guide the review and aims to provide an overview of the methods through which relevant studies will be identified and reviewed. This research will be disseminated to the What Works Centre for Crime Reduction (WWCCR), hosted by the UK College of Policing. Specifically, this research contributes to the WWCCR Work Package 2 (WP2), as one of the five work packages commissioned to map the existing evidence base for crime reduction, label this evidence for quality, cost and impact, and make it easily accessible for practitioners and decision makers.

### **Background and research question**

Organised crime is a pernicious problem in many contemporary societies. The spread of organised criminal groups and networks across space and time – from the traditional *Mafiosi* in Italy to current cyber-criminals operating with seeming scant regard for modern borders – has prompted a range of responses from an array of agencies and actors. Such responses reflect the view that countering organised crime is one of the major challenges of the twenty-first century (Laycock, 2010: xv). Among these responses, asset-focussed interventions have emerged to become one of the central tools used by policing and law enforcement agencies in their attempts to tackle and reduce organised crime. The systematic review that proposed herein seeks to identify and evaluate the evidence relating to asset-focussed interventions against organised crime, and in doing so answer a specific research question. The research question, as developed for this project, is:

*Are asset-focussed interventions effective in reducing the level of threat and/or harm posed by organised crime groups and networks?*

Before progressing it is necessary to define some of the key terms in this research question and subsequently provide more detail on the research process itself.

## **Definitions**

Organised crime groups/networks: Defining organised crime has proven problematic. Parsimony in criteria can lead to over-inclusion, thereby incorporating too many types of low-level criminal behaviours (see Bersten, 1990). Alternatively, defining organised crime in accordance with a detailed and specific set of criteria risks being too prescriptive (see Maltz, 1976). Furthermore, despite some pragmatic shifts away from considering the phenomena as ‘organised crime’ and towards other forms of nomenclature (Levi, 1998), the term continues to retain contemporary relevance and resonance for the public, policymakers and professionals. It remains, for example, a key term employed by HM Government, the National Crime Agency, the Scottish Government and Police Scotland.

In defining organised crime this study draws upon the definitions currently used by both HM Government (2013) and the Scottish Government (2009). Organised crime is understood as criminal activities that:

- involve more than one person, working on a continuing basis
- are organised, meaning that such activities involve control, planning and use of specialist resources
- benefit the individual concerned, particularly through financial gain.

Groups and networks involved in organised crime vary in size and complexity over time and space. They may engage in one or more criminal activities, including, but not limited to:

- the importation, production and/or distribution of goods such as controlled drugs or firearms
- human trafficking
- environmental crime
- organised acquisitive crimes
- fraud and money laundering through legitimate businesses
- the use of violence, corruption or collusion to further illegal business interests.

These criminal activities may be transnational in nature, involving the movement of people, goods and/or money across borders. Organised crime groups or networks may engage in cyber-crime; such crimes may be either cyber-dependent (where the use of information communication technologies, computer networks or the internet are required for criminal activity to take place ‘online’) or cyber-enabled (where information communication technologies, computer networks or the internet are used to multiply the scale and speed of crimes that can also take place ‘offline’).

Organised crime groups and networks may use a variety of methods and techniques to further their criminal activities and illegal business interests, including, but not limited to, any of the following: the use of violence, threats or intimidation; bribery, corruption or collusion, often through gatekeepers, specialists or facilitators; and/or the use of sophisticated technologies to conduct operations, maintain security and evade justice. Whilst some of these methods and techniques may also be indicative of other areas of criminality (such as the use of violence, threats or intimidation by street-based territorial gangs) they are distinguished from such by their scale, ambition, and their organised, planned, and directed nature.

Asset-focussed interventions: we will use the term ‘asset-focussed interventions’ in preference to other – currently popular – terms such as ‘asset-recovery’. The rationale for doing so has a basis in the existing literature, within which the term ‘asset recovery’ has been subject to some critique (see Bullock and Lister, 2014: 47). Discussing ‘asset-focussed interventions’ provides a holistic framework in which to locate an array of particular interventions and tactics with distinct rationales, functions and anticipated outcomes: from cash seizure, detention and forfeiture (undertaken where there are reasonable grounds to suspect assets derive from crime or are intended for use in a crime, and which do not require a criminal conviction) to confiscation (which occurs after a conviction has taken place and imposes an order requiring an individual to pay to the State an amount specified by a court).

In practice, we will consider the ‘asset-focussed interventions’ to encompass a range of activities, including:

- a) *Cash seizure, detention and forfeiture*: where cash, cheques or bonds that total £1000 or more can be seized if they are suspected of being the result of crime, or of being used to commit crime. An application can then be made for the cash to be detained and forfeited under the Proceeds of Crime Act (POCA) in a civil court.
- b) *Confiscation*: where an individual convicted of committing a crime is also suspected to have benefited financially from that crime and legal action is taken to confiscate the assets acquired from criminal activity. The role of the confiscation process is to recover the value of the assets that have benefited that individual, such as cash, properties or vehicles. This value can be recovered following a successful conviction by applying to the court for a confiscation order. If the order is granted the court will assess which assets can be confiscated, and the value of those assets.
- c) *Civil recovery*: where assets can be recovered from an individual through the civil, rather than criminal courts. The process is similar to the confiscation process, except that in this case the individual does not have to be convicted of an offence for the assets to be recovered. To be confiscated the assets only have to be proved to result from criminal activity on a balance of probability rather than an offence having to be proved beyond reasonable doubt.
- d) *Taxation*: recovering taxes on criminal earnings that have been identified and can be assessed for tax (for example income tax or corporation tax). This is another way of targeting profits from crime without having to pursue a separate criminal conviction.
- e) *Seizure and removal of property, including vehicles*: undertaken on the basis of a range of legislative powers, including those provided in the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971, the Powers of Criminal Courts (Sentencing) Act 2000, the Sexual Offences Act 2003 (College of Policing, 2014a and 2014b).

Threat/harm: we will consider threat to mean the capability and intent of an organised crime group or network to undertake its criminal activities. In tackling organised crime, government policing and law enforcement agencies frequently consider ‘harm’ as synonymous with cost. We will consider harm to be social; understood as the costs to communities as a result of organised crime, including both ‘hard’ calculable measures (such as the financial/economic impacts including loss of revenue to Government or the cost of public services to tackle organised crime or its consequences) and ‘softer’ measures (such as physical harm to individuals, groups or classes and the social and emotional damage caused to communities, well-being and safety).

Effectiveness: we consider effectiveness to mean the extent to which disruption interventions result in a reduction in the threat of an organised crime group or network and/or the harm that results from its activities. This systematic review will seek not only to identify ‘what works’, but also to explore the conditions that facilitate effectiveness: of where interventions work, when they work and why they work. In doing so it seeks to combine the principles and processes of two distinct approaches to evidence synthesis: meta-analysis, most associated with Cochrane and Campbell Collaboration systematic reviews (see Sackett et al., 1996; Petrosino et al., 2001) and realist synthesis (Pawson and Tilley, 1997; Pawson, 2006). The former of these approaches, meta-analysis, will provide evidence relating to ‘what works’. The latter of these approaches, realist synthesis, will assist in interrogating the available evidence to identify what types of organised crime have been disrupted through asset-focussed interventions, and the conditions that are necessary for their successful implementation.

Specifically, therefore, this review aims to generate evidence regarding:

- a. The causal mechanisms through which asset-focussed interventions have been found (positively or negatively) to affect the level of threat or harm associated with organised crime groups and networks (for example does tackling an organised crime group through an asset-focussed intervention(s) disrupt the group or degrade its capability to re-invest in further criminality?).



- b. The conditions found to be (more or less) conducive to the effectiveness of the causal mechanisms identified in (a) (for example the size/composition of an organised crime group, the nature of the criminality linked to such groups/networks, the geographic location or context of such a group/network, the embeddedness of such a group/network within a specific community).
- c. The conditions found to be required for (or to rule out) implementation of asset-focussed interventions by law enforcement against organised crime groups and networks (for example, available resources and funding, tactical and operational expertise, a robust intelligence base to identify groups/networks of organised criminals against whom interventions can be targeted).
- d. Where possible, the degree to which asset-focussed interventions undertaken against organised crime groups and networks are cost-effective/otherwise beneficial as well as effective at reducing the level of threat or harm associated with this phenomenon.
- e. The patterns of (positive and negative) outcomes produced by (a)-(d) (for example reduced/increased levels of threat or harm posed by organised crime groups/networks; levels of crime associated with organised crime, including: seizures or drugs and other assets, serious violence, money laundering, environmental crimes and so forth).

## **APPROACH OF THIS SYSTEMATIC REVIEW AND REVIEW METHODS**

This section describes the overall approach of this systematic review, including an overview of the methods to be used in furtherance of this. It begins with a description of the review process, before progressing to discuss the search strategy for identifying relevant studies, the criteria for inclusion and exclusion of studies in the review, and the methods for retrieval of relevant reviews.

## **Overview of review process**

Relevant electronic databases (including the grey literature) will be searched using pre-determined search terms. This approach to systematic review is designed to be transparent and accountable, thereby offering a high degree of replicability.

## **Search strategy for identification of relevant studies**

This section describes the search strategy used to identify relevant studies. A key feature of the search strategy will be the balance between sensitivity (the broad scope of a retrieval strategy) and precision (fine-tuning a search so that it produces only results that are relevant). Given the hypothesis that the literature on asset-focussed interventions against organised crime was likely to be smaller in volume than that found in other areas of crime control (such as CCTV, for example) we have sought to devise a protocol that is intentionally broad. As a result of this we have selected a suitable range of sources to explore and generated a suite of keywords to apply in our search strategy that was as inclusive as we could reasonable make it.

## **Methods for identification and retrieval of relevant studies**

The retrieval of relevant studies will be achieved through the following:

1. Keyword searches of electronic databases. These databases will include:
  - i. “organised crime” OR “organized crime”  
AND
  - ii. “asset\*” OR “recover\*” OR “money\*” OR “launder\*” OR “forfeit\*” OR  
“confiscat\*” OR “proceeds” OR “financ\*” OR “econom\*” OR “seiz\*”
2. The following databases will be searched using the above-mentioned keyword searches:
  - a. Proquest (all databases, peer reviewed)
  - b. Proquest dissertations and theses
  - c. SCOPUS
  - d. Web of Science
  - e. Informit
  - f. Westlaw
  - g. Social Care Online

- h. EBSCOhost (Business Source Premier, EconLit, ERIC, PSycINFO, SocINDEX with Full Text, eBook collection).
3. In collaboration with Phyllis Schultz, an information specialist and librarian at Rutgers University in the United States, the publications of the following government, research and professional agencies will be searched:
- a. Center for Problem-Oriented Policing (Tilley Award and Goldstein Award entries)
  - b. Institute for Law and Justice
  - c. Vera Institute for Justice (policing publications)
  - d. Rand Corporation (public safety publications)
  - e. Police Foundation
  - f. Police Executive Research Forum
  - g. The Campbell Collaboration reviews and protocols
  - h. Urban Institute
  - i. European Crime Prevention Network
  - j. Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention
  - k. UK Home Office
  - l. UK College of Policing (Polka)
  - m. Australian Institute of Criminology
  - n. Swedish Police Service
  - o. Norwegian Ministry of Justice
  - p. Canadian Police College
  - q. Finnish Police (Poliisi)
  - r. Danish National Police (Politik)
  - s. The Netherlands Police (Politie)
  - t. New Zealand Police
  - u. US National Institute of Justice

4. Backward searches will be conducted of all publications identified as relevant to the research question by searching the available bibliographies and lists of references. A further manual search of the authoritative publication monitor 'Recent publications on organized crime', collated by Klaus von Lampe and published in the journal *Trends in Organized Crime* will be located and interrogated in order to identify any studies of potential relevance.

### **Criteria for inclusion and exclusion of studies in review**

To be included in the list of studies suitable for analysis each study will fulfil the following criteria:

- a) *The study must report on the reduction of organised crime through the use of asset-focussed interventions.* We will include studies on asset-focussed approaches undertaken by any stakeholder. We will also interpret reduction widely, in line with our discussion of threat/harm above, to include for example, the disruption and deterrence effects of (temporary) asset seizure, as well as (permanent) asset recovery. Studies that report on the effects of asset-focussed approaches in isolation or as part of a wider package of interventions to reduce organised crime will also be included.

For inclusion in meta-analysis, a study must satisfy point a) above and:

- b) *Report at least one quantitative crime outcome measure.* Outcome data could comprise official measures (police recorded crime, intelligence or performance data; government data; data from international organisations) or unofficial measures (self-reported levels of victimisation, offending, or public perceptions).
- c) *Report original research findings.* Systematic reviews will not be included. The quantitative findings for any single study will be incorporated only once, even if reported in multiple publications.
- d) *Employ a research design that allowed for the computation of a reliable effect size (i.e. an experimental or quasi-experimental evaluation design including a control group or a suitable single study interrupted time series design with multiple observations conducted both pre- and post-intervention).*

For inclusion in realist synthesis of asset-focussed interventions, studies must satisfy point a) above – report on the reduction of organised crime through the use of asset-focussed approaches – *and at least one* of the items below:

- e) Report substantive information relating to crime-related causal mechanisms activated by asset-focussed interventions.
- f) Report substantive information relating to the conditions needed for asset-focussed interventions to activate crime-related causal mechanisms.
- g) Report substantive information about the implementation of asset-focussed interventions.
- h) Report substantive theoretical content concerning asset-focussed interventions and crime-related outcomes.

### **Data extraction**

For those studies identified as eligible for meta-analysis and realist synthesis, the following information will be extracted where available:

- 1) Study identifiers (title, author(s), year, publication status)
- 2) Location (country, region, state, city)
- 3) Type of asset-focussed intervention(s)
- 4) Whether asset-focussed interventions were implemented in isolation or as a package of crime reduction measures
- 5) Context in which asset-focussed interventions were implemented (such as history/extent of organised crime activities, nature/maturity of legal regime supporting such interventions, cf. the *moderators* in EMMIE)
- 6) Causal mechanism through which the intervention is expected to work (cf. the *mechanism* in EMMIE)
- 7) Research design (randomized experiment, quasi-experiment, and so forth)
- 8) Pre and post outcome measure statistics (implementation and control areas, cf. the *effects* in EMMIE)
- 9) Statistical test(s) employed
- 10) Information on implementing asset-focussed intervention, including costs (cf. the

*implementation and economics in EMMIE).*

### **Data analysis**

For the quantitative data analysis of asset-focussed interventions in this review, we will employ standard approaches used to assess change in crime outcomes (particularly the reduction, but also the disruption, or organised crime) across the studies that meet the specified inclusion criteria. The approach to quantitative or statistical analysis will include calculation of proportional change (for studies that deploy a pre- and post-intervention stage research design) and meta-analysis to produce a weighted mean effect size from individual effect sizes expressed as odds ratios. Meta-analytical procedures feature frequently in systematic reviews, and involve the pooling of findings from primary studies and the synthesis of the results of several studies into a single quantitative estimate, such as an overall effect size. This systematic review will combine both meta-analysis (where possible) and a ‘realist synthesis’ approach in an effort to further contextualise the conditions under which specific interventions are, or are not, effective. Realist synthesis problematises the simple assertion that some programmes ‘work’, and instead emphasises that it is the underlying resources that they offer that generate change (Pawson, 2002: 342). Additionally, this review of the effectiveness of asset-focussed interventions in the reduction of organised crime will be guided by the prospective use of a recently developed framework that operates in accordance with the acronym ‘EMMIE’ (Johnson et al, 2015). This combined perspective, including the deployment of the EMMIE framework, will not be unique to this systematic review, as it has also been central to the overall research programme in the *What Works Centre for Crime Reduction* in its attempt to provide better evidence for better policing.

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