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How organised crime affects the most vulnerable communities

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Despite the lurid coverage of organised crime in the UK, the public often appears relatively sanguine about it in studies, preferring police to focus on more everyday crime such as antisocial behaviour, burglary and property damage. Other surveys such as the Police Foundation's recent study of the impact of organised crime on communities in England have attempted through creative (but speculative) analysis of local crime figures, to determine what proportion is down to organised crime.

Our own study of communities in Scotland focuses more on the stories and experiences of local people in trying to understand how organised crime not only affects community life, but how it has come to "sell" and sustain itself in particular areas.

The mafia effect

For most law-abiding people, organised crime is a hidden presence that actually poses little direct threat in their daily life. High-profile media coverage of gangland violence obscures the fact that current shootings in Scotland are clinically targeted at other gangland figures.

This contrasts with the more chaotic violence sometimes associated with drug gang-related incidents elsewhere in the UK, such as the recent murder of teenager Mathew Cassidy in rural North Wales, and the occasional shooting of innocent bystanders in gang-related violence in London.

Author



Niall Hamilton-Smith

Senior Lecturer, University of Stirling

London and the rise of violent crime - BBC Newsnight



In our Scottish case studies many people were certainly fearful of crossing – or even talking about – prominent criminals, giving organised crime a sense of protection and license. The widespread glamourisation of organised crime, whether in the news or in fiction, arguably strengthens these criminals, bolstering their cachet and their ability to command silence and consent.

But like the Wizard of Oz booming from behind the curtain, much of this is just smoke and mirrors – amplified bluster. Popular portrayals of mafia-style crime depict prominent villains as powerful figures within communities, who in the absence of effective policing, exert alternative forms of control, commanding authority and loyalty.



Popular portrayals of the mafia, such as *The Sopranos*, lend organised crime groups glamour and cachet. HBO

The reality

This is in stark contrast to our own findings. While Scottish villains may periodically pay for funerals of their henchmen and families, or look after their foot soldiers in prison, these displays of patronage are largely just propaganda, playing up to the mafia image, rather than representing a more substantial role in protecting, controlling or providing for communities.

In fact, our study found that organised crime flourishes in communities that remain vulnerable, disadvantaged and fractured. These areas of Scotland are not power bases for organised crime, they

are feeding grounds. Mental health, drug addiction, debt, family dysfunction and troubled childhoods are all vulnerabilities to be milked for profit.

Mr or Mrs Big may lend Joe Soap some cash to tide him over after cuts to his housing benefit, but these favours come with strings attached (grow these plants, hold on to this package, deliver this to here). Granny Soap may get a loan at a diabolical rate of interest, but the loan is to pay off grandson Soap's drug debts – debts in turn owed to the same crime clan.

Arguably the only order that crime gangs bring to some communities is of the chemically induced variety – cheap handfuls of street Valium anaesthetising the lost, depressed and hopeless from Friday night to Monday morning.

Scotland's Valium Crisis - Dundee



Problems to fix

In Scotland there is certainly the political will and drive to try and break these forms of exploitation. But three big challenges loom:

1. Economic austerity: this continues to restrict public finances and the services needed to turn communities around. Our study revealed how remote many of these services have become in the most affected communities, with office closures and the combining of services (often far from some of the neediest communities).
2. Cybercrime: established organised crime groups have successfully co-opted technology, commanding access to regional distribution networks and local markets, while using it to frustrate law enforcement through counter-surveillance and the ability to hide their criminal transactions.
3. Brexit: the notion that Brexit will facilitate more effective sovereignty and governance, at least through building up borders seems doubtful when cyber-technology has made such borders

redundant, connecting local criminals directly (and more cheaply) to international producers, wholesalers and distributors. In Scotland there are substantial economic sectors that rely on hard-working, low-paid, and currently legal migrant populations. Some, such as fishing, agriculture and hospitality, have already been troubled with instances of exploitation and human trafficking. Disruption to regulation, security co-operation, legislation, and taxation can't be precisely anticipated in terms of Brexit, but it is likely to be significant.

Any situation where the hand of good governance is weak, or where the state appears to falter, criminal entrepreneurs will be quick to extract profit. The added reach and flexibility afforded through increasingly connected (and handily insulated) global networks makes their job even easier.

Our research makes clear that we should be under no illusions that organised crime offers any sort of patronage or protection to the desperate or dispossessed in difficult times. The poor and vulnerable will not be fed, they will be eaten.

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