

## Article

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## **PRAXIS AND THE DISRUPTION OF ORGANIZED CRIME GROUPS**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Although reports state the frequency of general crime has fallen across the developed world, no such trend is evident within organised crime. This has caused law enforcement agencies to search for more innovative approaches to tackle this global problem. Emerging prominently within this period has been a 'disruption' approach, albeit little systematic research currently supports its use. This study explores the way one English Police Force has tackled 15 Organised Crime Groups (99 individuals), using this type of approach. The study specifically examines the characteristics of the offender, the tactics used, and the re-offending levels following the police activity. It concludes by highlighting: the methodological challenges associated with the measurement of organised crime disruption; the ethical questions surrounding this type of intervention; and the overall effectiveness of the approach.

Key words: Disruption; Organised Crime, Organised Crime Groups; Organised Crime reoffending

## INTRODUCTION

Although commentators observe general crime levels have fallen across the developed world since the 1990s (Farrell et al. 2008), no such trend is evident in organised crime (Lambsdorff, 2005). Organised crime is becoming an increasingly important priority to governments, who highlight its ability to impact upon all levels of society, creating instability at a national level and violent territorial disputes at street level (Home Office, 2011).

As Organised Crime is a hidden, ambiguous and diverse phenomenon, this creates an immediate methodological challenge as to how it is identified and measured (Levi & Maguire, 2004). An extensive body of literature illustrates the difficulties academics have faced when addressing this issue. The UK government describe it as, '...serious crime, planned, coordinated and conducted by people working together on a continuing basis, their motivation is often, but not always, financial gain' (Home Office, 2013:14), however this is but one of approximately 180 other definitions on the subject (von Lampe, 2015). Notwithstanding the lack of agreement surrounding the definition, it is clear organised crime exists as a diverse phenomenon. Francis et al. (2013) have shown this category can involve many different types of offences, with perpetrators ranging from late onset offenders (who receive their first criminal sanction in middle age), to early and persistent offenders, who evolve to more serious co-offending.

Whilst this definitional debate continues, for governments (as well as international, national and local policing agencies), the visible ramifications of organised crime require a tangible and urgent response. Strategy and tactics have generally revolved around three themes: enforcement (prosecution), prevention and disruption. These are implemented at various geographic and operational levels and are all associated with strengths and weaknesses. For example *enforcement* focuses on the prosecution and incarceration of specific organized criminals, and although it brings clear benefits in terms of justice, the process of transnational investigation can be extremely costly (Kirby & Penna, 2010). Further, a simple mathematical calculation questions its efficacy in terms of eradication. In the UK, an estimated 6000 Organised Crime Groups (OCGs) exist, comprising 38,000 active offenders (Home Office, 2011). If 85% are recidivists (Sproat, 2012) and less than 6% are targeted at any one time (HMIC, 2006:5), then prosecution appears a slow and cumbersome method to tackle the threat. Coupled with this there are many examples of individuals who continue to facilitate their crimes when in prison, whilst others merely view incarceration as presenting a business opportunity for others to exploit. Unsurprisingly more flexible approaches have emerged. *Situational Crime Prevention* approaches, defined by Kirby & Penna (2010:205) as 'those interventions that successfully stop or dismantle a single organized crime event, specifically those that change a process of

environment in a sustainable manner', look to block the opportunity for a particular crime event to occur. However, this type of approach remains elusive and evades common practice (Bullock et al., 2013). This is because *preventative* approaches require careful analysis and partnership activity, which are culturally unpopular with Police agencies, who historically prefer more action oriented approaches (McLean & Hillier, 2011). Finally there is *disruption*, which has become increasingly common in law enforcement parlance, although has generated little academic examination.

The overall aim of the study is to increase academic knowledge in relation to the disruption of organised crime, and it does so in three ways. First it examines the literature to understand the theoretical underpinnings of the approach, as well as exploring any existing evidence that relates to its efficacy. Second, the paper will introduce empirical data, generated by a Police Force in the North of England, who engaged in a disruption approach against 15 organised crime groups (OCGs). Specifically the paper will provide insight as to the type of offender tackled and the type of intervention used. Finally, the study will examine the effectiveness of the disruption approach by exploring reoffending patterns following the interventions.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW: THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF DISRUPTION**

### *The theoretical underpinning of a disruption approach*

Perhaps the most widely cited example of disruption was the incarceration of Al Capone, a violent American gangster, eventually imprisoned in 1931 for the tangential offence of tax evasion. Tilley (2009), points out the term 'disruption' was highlighted in the title of a 2001 annual report by the Organised Crime Agency of British Columbia, although it emerged more commonly in the latter part of the decade, as traditional responses were increasingly challenged (Ratcliffe, 2008:13). However as Ratcliffe continues, although disruption, 'is part of the lexicon of intelligence led policing in many police organizations (it is)...ambiguous and not clearly defined by most agencies'. This viewpoint is supported by Tilley (2009:5), who argues whilst many references to disruption appear in the organized crime / terrorism literature, there has been little attempt to 'articulate the logic of disruption or to codify its methods'.

Disruption in the context of organised crime has previously been defined by Kirby & Penna (2010:205) as a, 'flexible, transitory, and dynamic tactic, which can be used more generally to make the environment hostile for the organised crime group....this approach focuses on disrupting the offender's networks, lifestyles and routines'. Indeed from this initial exploration, a conceptual distinction can be observed between the three approaches mentioned earlier. *Crime Prevention* focuses on the

crime event, whereas *disruption* (and enforcement) concentrates on the offender. Further, as Tilley (2009:3) observes, *disruption* focuses on threat reduction, whilst *enforcement* aims to facilitate justice, and *prevention* aims to reduce the frequency of crime. Finally *disruption* concentrates on the present whilst *enforcement* concentrates on the past and *prevention* focuses on the future.

There is a clear theoretical base to support the potential efficacy of a disruption approach in relation to general crime. Positivist criminologists argue crime is not spread randomly, but concentrates around particular places and people. Many argue this predictability is generated by the opportunities that emanate from the rhythms of everyday life (Felson, 2002). Indeed, for a crime to occur, a motivated offender must come together, in the same time and place, as a suitable target, in the absence of a capable guardian (Clarke and Felson, 2008). As all three conditions are necessary for the crime to occur the control of any one can reduce the likelihood of criminal activity (Clarke and Felson, 2008). One of the most cited theories in this regard is Rational Choice Theory, which suggests offenders are rational actors who balance the cost of committing the crime with its potential rewards. Therefore by: increasing the effort needed to commit the crime; increasing the risk of detection; reducing the rewards obtained; removing the provocation; or the excuses associated with its commission - the offender can be disrupted (Cornish & Clarke, 1986; Kirby & Nailer, 2013).

Across the world law enforcement agencies have used these theories to devise a variety of strategies, such as 'Intelligence-led', 'Hot Spot' and 'Predictive' policing. These have met with various levels of success (Braga, 2007), and whilst concerns surface that blocking crime would merely displace it to another area, or in another form, this anxiety has never been fully warranted (Guerette & Bowers, 2009). However the question, for this study, is whether these approaches would have a similar impact if transferred to something as complex as organised crime. To date, this finding has not been replicated in this approach at a systematic level. This is of particular concern as there is an increasing strategic turn to this form of policing, both at government and law enforcement policy level. It is to this operational practice the paper now turns.

#### *Applying the theory: the praxis of disruption.*

The bridge between academic theory and successful practice is often a fragile pathway. The term 'praxis' highlights the process by which theory is enacted or realized (Seng, 1998), and this section will unpack this process and explore recent studies relating to the effectiveness of disruption in organised crime.

The limited studies that currently exist, serve to question the effectiveness of a disruption approach in relation to organised crime. Leong (2007) supports the importance of disruption strategies, however she questions their effectiveness, pointing out they often rely on a partnership approach, which is historically difficult to implement. Secondly, Duijin et al. (2013) question whether disruption can work in practice. They used value chain simulations on 19 Dutch cases of cannabis cultivation, to examine the dynamics of criminal networks. They conclude that as cannabis cultivation is built on flexible and adaptive networks, the disruption approach (that extracts specific perpetrators at specific times from the crime process) barely affects the resilience of the network. Indeed, they argue efficiency increases over time as new actors bring: improved processes, efficient new shortcuts, and opportunities for expansion. Finally Sproat (2012:332) argues that even if the disruption tools are present this doesn't guarantee their use. In recent years UK, government policy has increasingly developed legislative tools, in the form of orders were specifically designed to prevent or deter re-offending. These include: travel restriction orders (TROs); financial reporting orders (FROs) and Serious Crime Prevention Orders (SCPOs). Sproat calculated, between 2006-11, the Serious & Organised Crime Agency (SOCA) used these ancillary orders on no more than 15% of offenders associated with their investigations. A wider examination also found limited use of other relevant powers. For example during the five-year assessment period SOCA were associated with 28 exclusions, 13 citizen revocations and 331 alerts (an average of 66 each year).

However these findings should not be surprising as reduction approaches, even when addressing low-level crime, are often problematic and associated with the phenomenon of implementation failure (Rosenbaum, 1986). Laycock, (2012) argues their effectiveness relies on a carefully considered approach. First an effective mechanism (the rationale to support the proposed intervention) must be devised, which is appropriate to the specific context (Laycock, 2005). So, for example, arresting an individual for domestic violence, (which relies on the mechanism of deterrence, generated through social stigma), is seen to deter the future offending of employed professional workers, but has less impact in deterring chaotic unemployed offenders (Sherman, 1997). However, when considering the disruption of organised crime, there appear further layers of complexity. As previously intimated organised crime is an umbrella term for a multitude of separate offences, which involve a wide diversity of offenders, who have different levels of seniority and capability. For example, a 'principal' or core offender, coordinating logistics at a transnational level may be less visible and more protected than an enforcer who collects outstanding drug debts, or guards a 'safe house' to house trafficked women. Therefore, if the approach is to prove successful, the intervention must be tailored according to the offence type, profile of offender, and the crime process context.

In summary it appears the academic literature has generated little information on the use of disruption as an approach to tackle organised crime. Although there is some theoretical support for the approach, there is little evidence that it works in practice (other than at an anecdotal level). Specifically this literature review suggests the praxis of disruption is complex due to: the type of organized crime, the sophistication of the offender, the type of intervention (mechanism), and whether and how it is implemented. As such an increased level of systematic analysis is required to illuminate understanding. The aim of this study is to add to this small body of existing knowledge by examining the experiences of a Police Force in the North of England that used a disruption strategy against Organized Crime Groups (OCGs).

## **METHODOLOGY**

### *Data collection*

The Police Force from which the data was obtained is situated in the North of England. Home Office analysis has previously indicated the approximate distribution of OCGs using a scale of low (1) to high (5) (Home Office, 2013:23). The majority of UK police forces outside London, have a low or moderate distribution of OCGs, and this area was graded as 2, which was similar to the majority of Police Forces across the country. Prior to the data gathering process the researchers were subjected to a national vetting process and benefitted from numerous meetings with analysts and practitioners, at both strategic and tactical level, to develop a greater understanding of the disruption process.

It was highlighted from the outset that the lack of a common definition in organised crime creates difficulty in generating consistency and accuracy in the identification of offenders. To promote consistency within the UK, two approaches are used. First, as highlighted earlier, there is a national definition, albeit this allows for subjective interpretation. Second, across Britain a standardized process is in place to identify OCGs. The mapping project scores OCGs on six categories, evidencing the level of: (i) injury caused, (ii) community impact, (iii) reputational/ political impact (public attitudes of police impartiality and effectiveness), (iv) level of cross border offending; (v) economic impact; and (vi) criminal capacity/ capability (Tusikov, 2012: 107). This process generates a 'threat score' that describes the perceived menace from each OCG (Gilmour, 2008).

At the time of this study, once the Police had decided the OCG was no longer a threat, they were removed from the Force and national database, and archived. The

authors were provided with material relating to the 15 most recent archived OCGs, who the Police had categorized as 'successfully disrupted'. This was a subjective Police decision, supported by the 'threat matrix' score. Each of the OCGs had a police intelligence report, describing the analysis of the suspects as well as the police tactics used. This was supplemented by data on the individuals accessed through the Police National Computer (PNC) (Home Office, 2014). PNC data includes; personal descriptions, criminal convictions and sanction history, and is often used as a reliable instrument to establish offending patterns (Francis et al., 2013). This allowed criminal sanctions to be analysed before and after the police intervention. This material was provided to the authors, who within the confines of police premises were able to engage in content analysis across the available data sources. The identity of all of the offenders was anonymised and the data was analysed using SPSS, a statistical software programme, widely used for managing and analysing social scientific data.

As such the study primarily uses a quantitative approach, using secondary data. Quantitative approaches focus on using statistical methods to analyse numerical data for the purpose of measuring and interpreting the variables in question. This method is often associated with greater accuracy, validity and reliability of data, allowing for comparison and replicability (Sarantakos, 2004). Secondary data involves the re-analysis of data already collected, for the purpose of answering new questions (Glass, 1976). Using secondary data has obvious advantages, and in this example allowed accessibility to data not normally available due to a combination of confidentiality, high financial cost, and time constraints (Wincup, 2009).

## **RESULTS**

The results will be presented in three sections; a) the organised crime group sample; b) the process of disruption and c) the offending behavior before and after the police perceived the group to be successfully disrupted.

### *The OCG sample: Characteristics of the Organized Crime Groups.*

The first tier of analysis was at OCG level. There were 15 OCGs, each ranging in size between three and fifteen members. Table 1 (below) shows the primary areas of criminality the OCGs were involved with. 11 (73%) exhibited engagement in more than one area of criminality, and (67%) involved in the supply and/or distribution of drugs. The Police, following national protocol, had divided the 99 organised crime offenders into three categories: principal (n=20), significant (n=42) and peripheral (n=37) members. Principal members are those who direct the group, and the data



showed only four of the groups had more than one individual undertaking this role. Significant members (ranging between 0-7 members per group) are those who perform a critical role in the organised crime enterprise and are closely linked to the principal members. Finally the peripheral members, as the label intimates, are supplementary and impermanent members, not involved in planning. In this sample the majority of peripheral offenders (59.6%) were recorded as acquaintances, with (30%) being blood relatives (predominantly brothers).

Table 1 - Primary Areas of Criminality

<b>Primary Areas of Criminality</b>	<b>Number of OCG groups involved in area of criminality</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Drugs	10	66.7
Money Laundering	3	20
Illegal waste disposal	2	13.3
Vehicle Theft	2	13.3
Feud/damage to property of another OCG	2	13.3
Illegal Money Lending	2	13.3
Handling of Stolen Goods/Equipment	2	13.3
Vehicle related offences	2	13.3
Theft and selling vehicles/equipment	2	13.3
Fraud	1	6.7
Abstracting electricity	1	6.7
Metal Theft	1	6.7
Burglary	1	6.7

The next stage analyzed only the principal and significant members of each OCG. This decision was made for two reasons. First the data mining required additional police assistance, which would ultimately detract officers from core policing duties. Further, as the peripheral members are neither permanent nor significant elements of the OCG, it was felt the information would disproportionately distort the overall findings.

Of the 62 suspects that remained, 87% were male and 13% female, all of whom were categorized as white British ethnicity. Suspect ages ranged between 17 and 64 years, with an average age of 37 years. Only one suspect was below 18 years (1.6%); 19 subjects were in the 20-30 and 31-40 year category (30% respectively); 16 offenders (25.8%) were between 41-50 years, with seven (11%) being older. Although a high proportion were unemployed (26 or 41.9%), a variety of occupations were disclosed, including ten business owner/ directors (16.1%), two self employed (3.2%), and eight (13%) involved in driver related businesses.

57 (92%) of the sample had a previous criminal sanction. The start of their recorded criminal careers show a clear pattern, with the majority (44 or 71%) below 20 years of age on first conviction, and far fewer receiving this first conviction after 30 years of age (8%). Nearly 13% of the offenders were convicted for multiple offences during their first sentencing hearing and there is also a clear pattern in the type of crime committed, with over 30% of first sanctions relating to dishonesty (including burglary, shoplifting and theft from both motor vehicles and persons). Of the five offenders (8.1%), without prior sanctions, two had previously been prosecuted without success.

#### *The Disruption process: management and interventions.*

The Police Force involved within this study was observed to use a Gold-Silver-Bronze (GSB) management structure, which is a well-tested approach to deliver successful project implementation in operational environments (Salmon et al. 2011). The process uses a hierarchical chain of command, overseen in this case by a Chief Officer of Police, who acts as Gold Commander. The Chief Officer sets the strategy, maintains an overview, and negotiates multi-agency support at an executive level. At the next level the Silver Commander outlines the tactics that should be used against each individual OCG. It is then the role of the Bronze Commanders to implement these tactics. This means that the Police Force concerned tailored a specific approach to each individual OCG. Further the GSB system provides accountability, allowing problems to be quickly diagnosed and rectified.

Full details relating to disruption interventions were only available for 14 of the OCGs, and content analysis across this data found overall 161 interventions, ranging from 1 to 29 interventions for each OCG (mean 11.5). Table 2, shows the variety of interventions utilized, although not every group received the same type or level of interventions. The authors have arbitrarily divided the interventions into five categories to assist their analysis. The first can be viewed as *policing behaviours*, which relates to activity designed to make the subject aware they are being targeted. This may relate to warnings about their behavior or requests for information. The second category relates to *specific investigation activity*, the most frequently observed action in this section being the use of search warrants. The third section relates to the *use of the Criminal Justice System*, specifically prosecuting the suspects for a wide range of low-level tangential offences (most commonly motoring offences). The fourth section relates to the *control of assets*, be that through the Criminal Justice System (asset recovery) or the use of civil powers (repossession of business or residential property). The final section relates to activity that explicitly *controls or modifies the behavior of the suspect*. In one case a harassment notice was served to prevent further contact with a particular individual, although this particular category would also include the ancillary orders mentioned earlier.

In relation to the intervention itself, this was often a multi-agency affair. For example one of the OCGs received attention from the police and nine other partner agencies (including: Environment Agency, Local Authority Building Control (LABC), Vehicle and Operator Services Agency (VOSA), Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA)). Overall the most popular type of intervention was to arrest for lower level offences (36.6%) with some of the individuals facing multiple arrests for numerous offences.

Table 2 (below): showing type and frequency of disruption activity.

<b>Category</b>	<b>Intervention</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
Increase awareness to suspect	Cocoon letters asking to be vigilant to crime and provide information.	2
	Monitor adherence of good behavior in relation to current sentences	12 (7 Community order; 3 suspended sentence; 1 restraining order; 1 referral order)
	Criminality notice asking to desist from criminal activity	4
	Warning in relation to other behavior	1
	Document inspection	3
Investigation	Search warrant	12 (6 goods seized, 6 NFA)
	Firearm warrant	1
	Fraud check	1
	Telephone analysis	1
	Stop search	1
	Vehicle search	2
	Some level of surveillance / monitoring	7 (5 Police, 2 external agency)
Criminal Justice System prosecutions	Arrested	59 (7 led to imprisonment; 10 led to NFA).
	Charged criminal offences	10
	Caution	1
	Prosecution leading to driving disqualification	1
	Fixed penalty notice/ fine	2
	Summoned for minor offence	2
	Issue vehicle defect (VDRS) form	2
Assets	House repossession	1
	Asset Investigation Recovery	8 led to asset recovery; 3 NFA;
	Weapons revoked	2
Control movement or behaviour	Prevent travel another country	1
	Harassment order	1

### *Offending behavior before and after the OCG archive*

Each of the 15 OCGs in the sample had been archived by the Police, as they were no longer perceived as generating a current threat. The most common documented reason for this decision related to a lack of evidence, suggesting that no offending was occurring (53.3%). Three OCGs (20%) were said to exhibit diminished offending or were no longer acting as a co-ordinated group, and for two groups (13.3%) the principal members had been imprisoned. The period of police activity, between being highlighted as a significant threat to being archived, varied between three months and five years (mean 27.8 months).

The study allowed a limited time to observe offending patterns after the intervention period. There was an average of 15.5 months between the group being archived and the subsequent sanction check being made. Table 3 shows suspects from the 15 OCGs had accumulated 861 criminal sanctions prior to the Police operation and 70 in the short period afterwards.

The analysis found the majority of individuals (66%) did not commit any crime (or at least were not caught committing any crimes) since their OCG was archived. 73% of the 15 OCG groups had at least one offender who had since registered a conviction, and many of these had multiple convictions recorded against them, covering a wide range of offence types. Prior to archive theft was the offence most commonly seen, whilst following the archive process drug offences were the most frequent.

Table 3 – Criminal conviction data before and after archiving

OCG	Total sanctions prior archiving	Time between mapping / archiving	Time between archiving and sanction check	Total sanctions since archive
1	47	16 months	0 months	0
2	124	7 months	2 months	0
3	213	3 months	24 months	14
4	66	9 months	12 months	9
5	54	49 months (>4 years)	16 months	0
6	34	9 months	18 months	7
7	33	67 months (>5 years)	5 months	2
8	50	51 months (>4 years)	14 months	5
9	31	39 months (>3 years)	16 months	4
10	20	6 months	21 months	16
11	56	45 months (>3 years)	20 months	2
12	78	25 months (>2 years)	19 months	9
13	4	36 months (3 years)	19 months	1
14	14	Unknown	Unknown	1
15	37	Unknown	Unknown	0
	N=861	Mean 27.8 months	Mean 15.5 months	N=70

## DISCUSSION

The increased emergence of organised crime as a global threat, combined with the limitations of an enforcement-based response, has encouraged governments and law enforcement practitioners to identify innovative and (hopefully) more effective responses. The concept of disruption, whilst not new, has emerged with improved vigour and become common practice. However, whilst the approach has been reported widely in volume crime studies, its suitability is less known in organised crime and there appears little challenge to the increasing level of policy and operational interventions using this approach. This section wishes to comment upon three areas: the methodological ambiguity surrounding the measurement of

organised crime and disruption; the ethical and moral concerns of a disruption approach; and the effectiveness of implementation.

First, in any study of this nature, there is a legitimate question relating to the representativeness of the OCGs in the sample. Without reiterating the arguments articulated in more detail elsewhere, organised crime is a difficult phenomenon to pin down, resistant to definition and measurement. It is always of concern as to whether specific offenders fit within the label of organised crime. At one level the British OCG mapping process provides some quality assurance, and whilst some subjectivity always exists in the process, a standardized approach is in place for each police force across England and Wales, with the information forwarded and quality assured through a central database (HM Government, 2013). The 15 OCGs in this sample does appear representative, both in terms of criminal activity and offender characteristics when compared with a wider UK study by Francis, et al. (2013). They are predominantly male and exhibit a similar age profile, and age of first offending. The only major difference concerns the higher level of 'White British' offenders which emerges as a result of the local demographics (ONS, 2013). A further interesting finding surrounds the disclosure that 40.4% of OCGs in this sample are related or in a relationship with other OCG members (40.4%). Obviously these groups are partaking in secretive, high-risk activities, which require a high degree of trust between members (Kirby, 2013). Although it is accepted many OCGs are assembled around loose networks, traditional forms of organised crime have always been reliant on traditional family structures, a persistent feature across generations (Hobbs, 1998). As such there is some assurance that these offenders are consistent with other organised crime offenders described across Britain. However this does not help in assessing how this sample is representative of organised crime offenders, overall. A Police database highlights offenders captured by pro-active police methods, which is open to practitioner bias, as to the types of crimes and people investigated. There is no doubt some organised crime offenders do evade this database, although their number and profile, is unknown.

This study also shows disruption is a complex process and asking whether the approach is effective is too simplistic. It is evident that organised crime operates within different contexts, involving different crime types (i.e. drug trafficking, fraud); different geographic levels of operation (international / national/ local); different scales of operation (signified by the level of asset associated with the OCG); different roles within the OCG (principal/ significant/ peripheral); and different levels of OCG capability (motivation/ knowledge/ experience). The study also illustrated within the operational context a diverse array of disruption interventions (mechanisms) can be used, and this paper highlighted a number including legal (ancillary orders), partnership approaches, and tactical (police only) interventions. This level of

variation makes the probability of success difficult to predict, especially when one considers the further permutations generated by law enforcement agencies themselves. Each agency will have different levels of capacity and capability, operating at either at international/ national/ local level. Further, when this is coupled with the varying level of enthusiasm, knowledge and competence of both leaders and practitioners, potentially the outputs and outcomes can vary drastically. As such the question needs to be more specific than asking whether disruption works – it should ask what works, in what context, against what level of organised crime. As an example, reflecting again on this study, cursory analysis allows the question to be positioned with a greater degree of specificity. It examines a diverse sample of 15 OCGs who are operating at a national (rather than international) level, committing a range of offences. The disruption interventions are implemented by a local Police Force, supported by local partners.

The discussion now turns to the second issue, which relates to the process of *disruption*. This paper argues this approach concentrates operational activity on the present, looking to make the environment hostile to organized crime offenders. Based upon perspectives, such as Routine Activity and Rational Choice theory, if an offenders' motivation can be reduced, or the prominence of capable guardians increased, then offenders can be diverted from crime (Eck & Spelman, 1987; Clarke & Felson, 2008). Therefore, in theory, disruption is an operationally viable method to deal with organised crime groups. By analysing the organised crime groups in detail, the type of offences they are involved in and the opportunities they are exploiting (in order to commit their crimes), the police should be able to block these opportunities and consequently prevent future offending.

However it is when the theory is implemented that the challenges appear. During the field research we found this approach to generate interesting discussion in two ways. The first is whether society wants law enforcement agencies to subvert the Criminal Justice System through more informal approaches. Indeed there were some challenging questions asked of the Criminal Justice System, as to whether it was effective overall and the level of proportionality in relation to sanctions and deterrence. For example, officers explained they found an endangered house bird in the possession of a person suspected of serious violent offences. For this ancillary offence the person received a much harsher sanction than the offence for which they were investigating. Second, and perhaps the widest concern, relates to the ethics of specific interventions. Disruption interventions are generally intrusive and coercive, and focus on the individual. As an emerging process, often at the periphery of the official Criminal Justice System, there is no judicial precedent or rulebook; indeed it is often at the discretion of an individual officer as to how far he or she thinks lawful harassment may go. Unsurprisingly the Police were clear supporters of



the approach and some of the anecdotal responses showed they felt it 'leveled the playing field'. Further, they argued, an intelligence led approach meant they had the information to show the suspects involvement with organised crime (even if there was insufficient evidence to convict). They also highlighted that although suspects complained and made threats to litigate, this was never carried through. In this paper there is insufficient space to fully explore these issues however they are worthy of further examination.

This brings the paper to its final point. Putting these concerns aside is the process successful? The data shows that the 15 OCGs were all archived between three months and five years after they were initially targeted for intervention, the average time being 28 months. After this period the police felt the threat for each crime group (in this sample) was no longer present. However, the most cited reason for the archiving of the group was a lack of evidence or intelligence to show they were offending (53.3% of cases). So, even after prolonged monitoring or investigation, the police were either unable to provide intelligence regarding the perceived criminality of the groups, or the criminal activity was perceived to be minimal. There are three possible explanations to explain this. The first is that the interventions and attention were successful and disrupted the group from further offending. Secondly, that the perceived threat was over exaggerated and the individuals weren't as criminally active as first thought. Finally, it could be that the assessment is inaccurate and the OCG merely desist from crime temporarily whilst under the spotlight. Further research is needed to identify the most probable explanation. There were clearer reasons given for other archiving decisions. These included the principal or significant members of the OCG moving away from the region, or the OCG member being incarcerated. Again, ambiguity surrounds the level of disruption as offending may continue in another jurisdiction.

One obvious method of analyzing the level of disruption is to look specifically at whether the suspects have been further convicted for any criminal offence, following the archiving decision. It is important to note these suspects would no longer be involved in a proactive operation, therefore any prosecution would result from general police activity. Also important to remember is the sample generally comprise motivated and prolific offenders, who have an average of 15 convictions each. Notwithstanding these caveats it was found that following the archiving decision (on average 15.5 months later) 19 of the individuals (33.9%) have been prosecuted for further crimes. The data is insufficient to establish the level of offending, or whether these individuals are acting on their own due to the successful disruption of their group. Further, although prosecution provides some level of justice against those committing crimes, it is possible that arresting one member of an OCG simply leaves a void, which another person will come to fill, or the group is simply on a hiatus until

the member is released from prison. Again, without a much more detailed follow up, it is difficult to understand the sustainability emanating from the approach.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study initially examined the concept of disruption when tackling organised crime. It then examined a Police Force in the North of England who used a disruption approach to target fifteen Organised Crime Groups, incorporating 99 offenders. Specifically the interventions against 62 of the principal and significant members of the OCGs were examined.

The study highlighted a number of areas of interest. Whilst there is a theoretical underpinning to a disruption approach, it is surrounded by methodological concerns relating to the identification of organised crime and the measurement of impact. Further, although disruption is becoming more prevalent in policy and practice it raises some concerns as to the appropriateness of this approach. These concerns have received little discussion in academic literature and are worthy of greater exploration. Finally, putting these concerns aside despite the large number of interventions from the police and external agencies, and even after being archived as no longer a threat, a significant number continued to offend. However, it should also be highlighted that many of these OCGs would have gone unchecked if the Police had not used these more flexible disruption tactics. This study has revealed current research on the disruption of organised crime is limited and further research within the field is necessary before the most efficient and effective method of dealing with organised crime can be established.

### **Compliance with ethical standards**

Ethical approval: This article does not contain any studies with human participants or animals performed by any of the authors.

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