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Rural Crime incidence – Northern Ireland and other jurisdictions

1 Background and challenges

This updated briefing note quantifies the scale of rural crime within Northern Ireland and other neighbouring jurisdictions.

The issue of rural crime has grown in the public consciousness in recent years within Northern Ireland with incidents such as thefts of animals, machinery and burglaries/robberies from rural residents featuring regularly in the local news. The recent report published by the insurer NFU Mutual and titled *Crime in the Countryside 2011* highlighted what appeared to be a growth in crimes affecting the farming community across the UK.

One of the major challenges faced by the researcher in preparing this briefing note was the fact that there is no commonly used definition of what constitutes 'rural' in relation to crime statistics. By way of example, the PSNI can provide statistics by police region (Urban = greater Belfast and Rural = rest of Northern Ireland) but there is no real 'rural' disaggregation beyond this level. As a result many of the police forces contacted

across the UK were unable to provide rural crime figures and in those instances where the figures are available it made different police force statistics impossible to compare.

As a further complication, there is some debate around what the term rural crime actually covers. Is it for example any crime committed within a rural community or does it only relate to particular crimes such as livestock or machinery theft which tend to occur on farms/farm dwellings?

Whilst some police forces collect data on the type of crime (e.g. livestock theft or agricultural machinery theft), others identify the location where the crime occurred (e.g. farmland, outhouse/shed or yard). The lack of a consistent approach here has provided a challenge in terms of data collection and raises some concerns as to how accurate any data can be.

In addition to the previously mentioned challenges, a particular obstacle to data collection from police forces within England, Scotland and Wales has been the fact that the data being sought has not existed centrally (i.e. Home Office) but has required separate Freedom of Information requests to be made to each police force.

2 Agreed approach

In response to the above challenges, and in an effort to standardise the data collected, the following assumptions were made in relation to data requested from police forces throughout the UK and Ireland. Rural crimes were defined either as:

- theft of farm equipment/machinery or livestock where available;
- or
- theft/burglary where the location of the crime was recorded as farm premises, farmland or premises often associated with farms such as outhouses/sheds or yards where available.

On this basis data requests were made to the PSNI and An Garda Síochána. In relation to GB police forces, requests for data were sent as follows:

- Wales – North Wales, Dyfed, South Wales and Gwent;
- Scotland – Fife, Dumfries and Galloway, Grampian, Strathclyde, Tayside, Lothian and Borders, and Northern; and
- England – Cumbria, North Yorkshire, Devon and Cornwall, Avon and Somerset, Norfolk and West Mercia – all areas with significant rural populations.

3 Northern Ireland

In terms of specific crimes the PSNI does not specifically identify thefts of livestock or machinery. Thefts like this are recorded as broader thefts but the PSNI do try to identify those that might be farm related on an ad hoc basis through various other details

associated with the incident (e.g. where stolen property is listed as farm machinery or farm livestock).

Taking these caveats into account the following table highlights the number of recorded burglaries, robberies and thefts within Northern Ireland where the stolen property was farm equipment or livestock.

Year	Number of recorded offences
2007/08	66
2008/09	69
2009/10	117
2010/11	137
1 st Apr – 30 th Jun 2011* (figures for 2011/12 are provisional)	31

Table 1: Recorded burglary, robbery and theft offences where the stolen property is farm equipment or livestock² Source: Central Statistics Unit, PSNI

It should be remembered that these figures are unlikely to include all thefts, robberies or burglaries involving farm equipment or livestock due to the vagaries of the crime recording system. Nonetheless the figures do reveal that from 2007/8 up to the end of 2010/11 there has been an apparent 108% increase in the number of recorded offences.

4 Ireland

An Garda Síochána crime data is available at group level (based on the Irish Crime Classification System publications) for Garda Regions / Divisions, and certain other data is available at Garda District / Station level. However these categories do not necessarily fall into a definite rural / urban divide.

The location of certain crimes (thefts/burglaries in particular) can be determined – e.g. where location is 'Farmland', 'Yard' or 'Outhouse/Shed'. However it is important to note that 'Yard' may not necessarily mean 'Farmyard' and equally 'Outhouse/Shed' may not be on a farm or even in a rural area. The available statistics are also unable to determine the actual objects taken in thefts / burglaries, but are rather disaggregated as vehicles or other property.

Location Type	Incident Type	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011 (up to the end of June)
Farmland	0811 Theft	14	25	32	36	20

¹ Farm equipment includes agricultural machine, tractor, harvester or other.

² Livestock includes cattle, poultry, sheep and pigs.

	unauthorised taking of vehicle 0826 Theft of other property	157	191	196	236	101
Outhouse/Shed	0811 Theft unauthorised taking of vehicle	17	57	71	86	39
	0826 Theft of other property	229	428	701	743	409
Yard	0811 Theft unauthorised taking of vehicle	264	341	552	508	250
	0826 Theft of other property	1097	1478	1700	2201	1306

Table 2: Selected thefts by location from 2007 to 30th June 2011.

Source: Central Statistics Office Ireland

In relation to theft of other property from farmland there has been a 50% in recorded crime between 2007 and 2010, whilst in the same period theft/unauthorised taking of a vehicle has increased by 157%. In overall terms, thefts from farmland increased by 59% between 2007 and 2010.

Whilst the data for thefts from outhouses and yards cannot be directly determined as either rural or farm based the trend has also been upwards in terms of reported crime between 2007 and 2010. Theft/unauthorised taking of a vehicle from an outhouse/shed increased by 405% in this period, whilst theft of other property increased by 224%. With regard to yards the theft/unauthorised taking of a vehicle increased by 92% between 2007 and 2010, whilst thefts of other property increased by 100%.

5 GB

Having contacted the previously outlined police forces for data it was clear that all of the forces contacted did not currently hold this data in an accessible format, and that accessing this data, if it existed, would require the submission of a formal Freedom of Information (FOI) request, which if successful would take up to 20 days under the auspices of the Freedom of Information Act³. Given these circumstances a formal FOI request was submitted to each of the 17 aforementioned police forces for data and a total of 8 responded.

³ [Freedom of Information Act 2000](#)

Area	Definition of 'rural crime'	2009	2010	2011	Difference since 2009 (+/-) ⁴
Devon & Cornwall⁵	Statistics have been recorded as crimes at 'farms'.	900	816		-9%
Dumfries & Galloway	All areas excluding the towns of Stranraer & Dumfries are classed as 'rural'. Data is collated for theft (and attempts), theft of a motor vehicle & house-breaking & kindred. Data has been manipulated to include crimes that have been categorised as 'rural'. It excludes construction & industrial sites.	126	197		+37%
Fife⁶	There is no definition for 'rural' crime. Crimes are tagged with marker such as farm, field or agriculture to describe the location.	38	5		-87%
Grampian	No specific definition of rural crime. When a crime is investigated, the appropriate marker(s) or class description will be attributed to the complaint, such as industrial/agricultural, followed by a sub category of for example farm equipment. However, this is not always necessarily recorded as it is up to the Officer to enter these details.	59	91		+35%
Lothian & Borders⁷	Rural crime is not specifically defined. Loci types can be defined as 'agricultural and horticultural' with additional material available such a farm or stables. However this recording is not mandatory. Figures provided are for theft of an animal or agricultural vehicle and are for quantity of items stolen.	443			N/A

⁴ Percentages have been rounded to the nearest whole number

⁵ Figures obtained cover 2008/09 & 2009/10

⁶ Figures obtained cover 2009/10 & 2010/11

⁷ Figures obtained cover May 2009 – April 2010

Area	Definition of 'rural crime'	2009	2010	2011	Difference since 2009 (+/-) ⁴
Norfolk ⁸	No specific definition for rural crime. Figures have been collated manually by a researcher working on the new rural crime initiative, Operation Randall.			388	N/A
North Wales	Crime is not categorised under a 'rural' heading. Statistics have been recorded as offences that have occurred at a 'farm' and are 'theft-related offences only'.	36	29		-19%
South Wales ⁹	Crime is not recorded as being rural or urban. Data covers the theft of agricultural machines and animals.	40			N/A

Table 3: GB Police forces – definition of rural crime employed and incidence

- For police forces that listed each individual item that was stolen rather than an 'incident date', it is presumed that they took place during separate incidences;
- Agricultural animals that are included may vary; and
- Some police forces may have also included attempted as well as actual thefts. This is evident in the data from Dumfries & Galloway.

Table 3 contains data on how rural crime is defined, the number of crimes committed and the change in crime incidence since 2009.

Looking at the data it would appear that rural crime is more of an issue within the jurisdictions of particular police forces, with the areas being covered by the Norfolk and Devon and Cornwall Constabularies being notable examples. Such an interpretation would however be flawed as the data contained in table 3 is not directly comparable due to the fact that all of the police forces who provided data use differing definitions for rural crime and also have different crime recording systems.

6 Key Observations and Lessons

It is clear that one of the major problems in dealing with rural crime is the lack of a common definition for what constitutes rural crime, and this makes the quantification of the issue across the UK and Ireland difficult if not impossible.

⁸ Figures obtained over February - October 2011

⁹ Figures obtained over January 2009 – October 2011

In light of this issue it is clear that the adoption of a common definition and common rural crime reporting system would be helpful in establishing both the scale of the overall scale of the issue, key rural crime trends and potential solutions. This observation is also supported by academic work published by Dr Jane Jones from the Department of Law and Criminology at Aberystwyth University in 2011¹⁰. Whilst Dr Jones work focussed on farm crime she emphasised that,

'...tightening up on the recording of farm crime would contribute to a more systematic approach to the policing of farm crime. It would allow for the mapping of farm crime incidents and thus have the potential to pinpoint 'hotspots' where concentrations of certain crime types may be situated. It would allow for any patterns and comparative shifts to be identified and perhaps act to shape the allocation of resources where and when they are needed, which in the current financial climate is of ever increasing importance.'

Building upon this analysis, Norfolk Police's Operation Randall initiative provides an interesting case study in addressing rural crime and the benefits of adopting a better means of recording and analysing rural crime.

Operation Randall¹¹ was launched by Norfolk police in January 2011 with the intention of reducing rural-specific crimes such as machinery, metal, and oil thefts and wildlife crime. The operation was launched in consultation with the farming community and also aimed to improve the two-way flow of information to deter and disrupt travelling criminals.

Although the Norfolk Police do not have a specific definition for rural crime (other than the usual split of areas into urban and rural), a key component of the Operation Randall initiative was the creation of a common system for logging and profiling rural crime incidents.

This system enables details of the crime, its location, the value of goods stolen, the day date and time of the incidents as well as collating any data on the possible perpetrators such as the type of vehicle they were driving. The collection and analysis of this data has enabled the Police in Norfolk to better target particular crimes and potential perpetrators and has led to significant arrests and convictions.

¹⁰ [Jones, Dr J, Recording and Responding to Farm Crime: A National Study of Police Forces in England and Wales, Department of Law and Criminology, Aberystwyth University, 2011](#)

¹¹ [Operation Randall webpage, Norfolk Constabulary website, 19th April 2012](#)