

RESEARCH, EVALUATION AND SHAPING ORGANISED CRIME POLICY

“Due to the difficulties in obtaining hard data on the nature and extent of organised crime activity in the UK, the available evidence upon which to base strategies and to test their effectiveness is inadequate.”

Home Office website, 2005

Intelligence, investigation, evidence and proof are commonly used terms in the field of organised crime. However, despite an appreciation for the importance of the role of evidence and intelligence, the research base on what works in tackling organised crime is limited. This short article sets out a broad approach to thinking about the ways in which research and evaluation can be used to develop more effective agency responses to tackling organised crime. This is to ensure that both policy makers and those involved in tackling organised crime in practice begin to understand some of the key questions that need to be asked to determine if specific actions make a difference.

Asking the right questions

The starting point of any evaluation is to develop a framework within which a series of investigative questions can be addressed. These questions seek to test a series of factors to determine why a chosen intervention might be expected to work, how it actually works, if its impact can be demonstrated and, lastly, whether it was worth the investment. Each one of these key questions is discussed in turn, below.

When developing a particular agency response to tackling organised crime (eg, targeting key individuals running a counterfeiting operation) that you wish to use to deliver a specific outcome (eg, a reduction in the availability of counterfeit goods), the first question to consider is: should it work? In other words, what is the underlying logic or mechanism through which you would expect a specific intervention to have an impact on crime? Using the above counterfeiting example, this might be that “by targeting the distribution network, we expect to create significant obstacles between the manufacturing operation and the street sellers and so to reduce the availability of counterfeit goods for sale on the streets.” It is important to

Research and evaluation can play an important role in helping to develop more effective agency responses to tackling organised crime

**Andrew Richman with Dr Nicky Miller
report**

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establish, and test the logic that led to the belief that by removing key individuals, the distribution network will be so significantly impaired that it would lead to a reduction in counterfeit goods.

Having established the logic, the second question to answer is: can it work? To what extent has the intervention been implemented in practice? The logic of the chosen intervention may have been well thought through, but if there was a failure in its implementation, then desired outcomes may not be seen. For example, if the right resources were not available at the right time, then a project or intervention may not have been fully implemented.

Having established the details of the implementation, the third question to answer is: does it work? What evidence is there that the intervention led to the planned outcome? The aim of all public policy evaluation is to attribute outcomes to particular interventions. This is difficult in practice, but it should usually be possible to construct a research design that allows the impact to be measured and attributed to the intervention. Using our counterfeiting example, it might be possible to develop a simple mechanism to demonstrate a simple temporal sequence between the intervention, the investigation and arrests and the availability of counterfeit goods.

Once you have determined if an intervention has worked you can go on to ask: is it worth it? How do the costs of the intervention compare with the benefits of the outcome? While much focus is placed upon measuring outcomes, there is still the need to measure the wider economic and social benefits of implementing the intervention compared with the costs of doing so. Using our example once again, it may be that the impact of any disruption may deliver so few benefits, in relation to reduction in societal harms or net economic benefits that the spend on this particular activity is not worth the investment, particularly when the resources could have been spent on more efficient alternatives.

Within other broad areas of social policy as well as in the criminal justice system more specifically, there is an increasingly robust body of evidence about the impact of specific interventions which is helping improve delivery and achievement of agreed outcomes.

“Impact evaluation is already being made a standard feature of investigations in organisations dealing with

organised crime but we need to go beyond internal evaluation to ensure all agencies dealing with serious and organised crime learn from best practice.”

One Step Ahead: A 21st Century Strategy to Defeat Organised Crime. Home Office (2004)

Building an evidence base

There is a need to draw on quality research to inform the development of policy and enforcement interventions. There are, however, large gaps in the knowledge base with isolated pockets of research studies that are largely unco-ordinated and that vary substantially in terms of their methodological quality. Consequently, research into organised crime can, at present, only provide policy makers and law enforcement with limited guidance about how to target resources.

There are, however, good reasons for this. For instance, the conceptual and definitional issues surrounding organised crime are complex and difficult to disentangle. The total research output is comparatively small when compared with other policy areas such as health or education. In addition, a number of barriers exist that make it difficult to measure the extent of organised crime activities, as well as the harm caused by them and the impact of law enforcement initiatives designed to tackle them. These barriers are predominately centred on the issue of scarce availability of data and the development of appropriate measures to describe organised crime.

Devising impact measures is difficult when much of the crime activity under investigation is not visible in the public arena. Enforcement agencies do not record organised crimes in a manner that is easy to access and because of its hidden nature, it does not tend to appear in crime surveys. Additionally, the sensitive and confidential nature of the available data makes it difficult to access for research purposes (Michael D Maltz, *Measuring the Effectiveness of Organized Crime Control Efforts*, The University of Illinois, Chicago Press, Chicago, 1990). Furthermore, there still appears to be an unwillingness to share data and knowledge among relevant agencies and government institutions and this also makes cross checking of information difficult.

The nature of the available data is heavily based on case studies, intelligence reports and anecdotal sources, thus

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making it hard to assess its reliability for research purposes. As a result, the evidence base around organised crime is currently based on less than reliable data and interventions practiced have little solid basis in research.

Nonetheless, the Home Office has recognised this and instigated a research programme to supplement the intelligence-based knowledge provided by enforcement agencies. The aim is to increase knowledge and understanding of organised crime activities and the associated impact of interventions aimed at tackling it.

The emphasis of this research programme is currently on measuring the scale of organised crime and the various types of harm that it causes. The focus of the programme is threefold:

- Establishing the economic and social costs of organised crime.
- Measuring the level of public concern regarding organised crime and the problems that it causes.
- Estimating the size of the criminal markets involved and how they work.

Currently the research projects are weighted more towards understanding the underlying problem of organised crime than to impact evaluations. This does not underestimate the importance of the latter, but does acknowledge that such evaluations are only feasible when the nature and scale of the problems are better understood and a better base line from which to measure impact is available. This will then facilitate the development of appropriate strategies and provide a clearer picture of what success would look like.

There are real challenges in measuring organised crime, but it is still important to develop a body of evidence about which enforcement responses work, why and in what context. All those engaged in tackling organised crime have not just an active interest in ensuring their actions make a difference, but also in ensuring that resources are used to maximum effect. To do this there is a need for closer communication between researchers, policymakers, enforcement agencies and the wider stakeholder community.

Ultimately, all parties need to be able to focus on the key challenges and to share the lessons gained from research and evaluation, so that the results can help build an evidence base that is relevant, understandable and most importantly useful in improving future effectiveness. ■

Approaches to undertaking evaluation

There are many different types of evaluation, the appropriateness of which depend upon the purpose of the evaluation. However, there are two main approaches – these are known as summative and formative evaluations:

- **summative evaluation:** in this approach to evaluation, evidence is gathered and analysed over the course of the evaluation and an end report is produced which sums up all the evidence. Thus, aims are set at the beginning of the piece of work and an assessment of how well these aims have been met takes place at the end.
- **formative evaluation:** in this approach to evaluation, evidence is gathered and analysed throughout the project and fed back regularly to the individuals and groups involved in the design or implementation of the work. Thus, the findings from the evaluation process have an impact on the direction of work and can influence the development of tools.

Within both approaches, it is possible to undertake a number of different types of evaluation. The three principal types of evaluation are as follows:

- **outcome evaluation:** an outcome evaluation seeks to assess what has been achieved and whether aims and objectives have been fulfilled. It seeks to ask and answer questions around what was achieved;
- **process evaluation:** a process evaluation collects data on the mechanisms of the work (ie, the way in which the programme works). It seeks to ask and answer questions around how aims were achieved;
- **economic evaluation:** an economic evaluation, as its name would suggest, focuses on the financial aspect of a programme. It seeks to ask and answer questions around how much the work has cost and whether it has achieved value for money.

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