

Looking beyond the 'rural idyll': some recent trends in rural crime

Jane Jones describes recent trends in the theft of livestock and agricultural machinery in the countryside

Longstanding images of the 'rural idyll' are bound up with ideas about a simple way of life existing in the countryside and an agricultural lifestyle. Indeed, such pastoral images remain a potent representation in contemporary times as city dwellers search for their 'rural retreat' where they can seek out leisure activities and peaceful pleasures away from the daily grind. Within this selected representation there appears to be no place for crime.

There are however, alternative and less well publicised versions of the countryside in existence. Indeed, in more recent times, academics and policymakers have recognised that the countryside is changing. Migration patterns have skewed towards an older generation in many rural areas and a decline in economically active young people - trends brought about by varying economic needs, employment opportunities and demographics. There has also been a more general diminution in resources and services in the countryside, in part exacerbated by the increasing demand for what were already scarce supplies such as affordable housing

What all this means, is that in reality rural inhabitants face similar challenges to their urban counterparts across a range of social,

economic and political processes. Rural crime does happen and it does have an impact. The last two decades of the twentieth century certainly witnessed a number of emergent concerned voices about crime in the countryside. Perhaps the Tony Martin case best marks the crescendo of this concern during the millennium year when Martin, a Norfolk farmer, shot dead a burglar on his isolated farm property in August 1999. This case engendered much debate on the issue of rural crime where the pendulum swung between calls to increase resources to tackle rural crime and references to disbelief about it being a 'real' issue - in the words of one reporter from *The Guardian* (2000), 'A load of palpable nonsense has been talked about rural crime since the verdict in the Martin case'. Interestingly, this report drew on a comparison between crime in the countryside and on a low-income council estate in the inner

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city which harks back to the age-old rural-urban dichotomy that arguably has underpinned the 'rural idyll' myth. Whilst in relative terms one is more likely to experience victimisation in a highly populated and impoverished urban area, crime in rural areas also requires consideration. Rural areas present different issues for policing in terms of their lack of natural surveillance and the relative isolation of properties, widespread areas making call out times longer and

rural residents' concerns about anti-social behaviour and crime, which can be perceptibly exacerbated in the face of social change.

Recent trends in agricultural crime

Ten years or so on, the focus of concern about rural crime has re-emerged. Numerous accounts of animal rustling and the theft of large agricultural machinery have appeared across the national press. The BBC's Countryfile programme watched by between six and nine million viewers every Sunday (Case, 2012) has reported intermittently on farm crimes costing the industry millions of pounds. In 2010 it cited 600 tractors worth £25 million stolen during that year along with 1,700 quad bikes. Increasingly these thefts are involving large and expensive agricultural machinery by organised gangs, where tractors turn up in other European countries including Lithuania and Poland as well as further afield in less developed countries. In 2011 the same programme reported on the theft of 4 x 4 vehicles citing four Land Rovers stolen in the UK every day, parts of which are broken down and sold for hundreds and sometimes thousands of pounds.

The NFU Mutual (2011) reported that 'criminals are systematically targeting Britain's farms' and cited the cost to UK agriculture as £49.7 million in 2010 which represented a 62 per cent increase in reported rural crime according to their Mutual branches. This data is based on their annual survey of rural crime. An accompanying statement in the report from their Chief Executive offered a number of explanations for this upsurge, 'Whether it's the recession, tighter security in towns, or the rise in oil, meat and scrap metal prices countryside people are feeling the blight of rural crime on their land'. Whilst, one needs to exert caution over such statistical analysis, not least in the discrepancies inherent in the system around false and inflated claims or non-reporting, it does seem to be in line with a recent trend in the reporting and publicising of rural and agricultural crime.

Policing challenges

In November 2011, the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) in conjunction with Crimestoppers held a national seminar on rural crime – the inaugural ACPO rural crime seminar entitled ‘Rural Crime – closing the gate on criminality’. This seminar was an attempt to bring together law enforcement agencies and partners with the aim of tackling the issues. Richard Crompton the Chief Constable of Lincolnshire Police and the ACPO lead on wildlife and rural crime referred to the particular challenges for policing in the rural context. He pointed out that geographically widespread areas and isolated dwellings can be contributory factors to a sense of vulnerability for some rural residents and hence a heightened fear of crime. Crompton also referred to criminals who ‘will travel great distances across county boundaries to commit offences’ and the upsurge in the commission of organised crimes where the police have ‘witnessed the increasing sophistication of organised gangs making huge profits from stealing farm tractors and equipment.’ (Crompton, 2011)

It seems then that recent trends in rural crime have witnessed an increasingly serious and organised element to criminality in the countryside. For some, this may be a surprising development taking place beyond the urban environment. It is less obvious to envisage organised criminal gangs operating in rural areas, after all isn't it all about agriculture and rustic rural lifestyles where everyone knows each other? Indeed, what is there to target?

The reality is that there are rich pickings on offer. Targeted thefts of large machinery can be easier to access in the countryside where there is poor security on site and on the equipment. There is a supply and demand network for developing

countries and for Eastern Europe there are no issues with left hand and right hand drives for tractors. Effectively, there are massive returns for relatively little risk with machinery being stolen to order and arriving at Dover for export out of the country within a 15 hour timeframe (Elliott, 2011). The geographical landscape facilitates the commission of such criminality. It is far easier to conceal large stolen agricultural machinery and vehicles in the countryside whilst arranging transportation to designated handlers for dismantling and/or exportation to European countries and beyond.

Tackling rural crimes

In response to these recent trends there have been a number of initiatives set up to tackle rural crime both nationally and at the local level. The Plant and Agricultural National Unit is a specialist police unit working with the insurance industry to reduce theft and recover stolen machinery. At the local level

police forces have set up a range of initiatives in collaboration with local residents. Hertfordshire Constabulary have introduced Rural Special Constables including Mounted Rural Specials. This has recently been followed

by Norfolk Constabulary with a ‘specials on horseback scheme’ introduced in April of this year. In the South East, five police forces came together to produce an anti-farm theft DVD and at an individual level one farmer painted his 250 flock of

sheep orange to prevent rustling in 2011.

One of the clear messages that came out of the ACPO rural crime seminar was the need for increasing the collaborative working already in existence with local crime reduction partnerships and rural inhabitants. In the current financial climate with reductions in Home Office budgets it will be interesting to see how this will affect the balance of policing in rural

communities. In other words, who will take the ‘lion's share’ of responsibility to reassure rural inhabitants that their concerns are being addressed? In a landscape where there are already potential difficulties in call out times and patrolling widespread areas, the question needs to be asked: who will be policing the green frontline in the face of the current and proposed changes to policing in England and Wales? ■

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