

Farm Crime and Farmer-Police Relationships in Rural Australia

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Abstract

This article presents select findings from ‘farm crime’ victimisation surveys undertaken in the two most populous Australian states of New South Wales and Victoria. We examine the findings in relation to farmer crime victimisation, their willingness to report crime, and their worry about crime, as well as farmer perspectives on policing generally and the policing of farm crime specifically. In both states, there are high levels of victimisation, high levels of worry, low- to mid-levels of confidence in the police, and there remains a gap between experiences of farm crime and reporting. Both states have police tasked specifically with addressing farm crime. The Victoria Police have Farm Crime Liaison Officers that specialise in assisting with farm related crimes, however this is a voluntary role which forms part of an officer’s larger workload. By contrast, the New South Wales Police Force Rural Crime Prevention Team is a dedicated team consisting of specialised rural crime investigators and intelligence practitioners focused on proactive and preventative interventions in farm crime. Farmers in both states were surveyed regarding their awareness and engagement with these rural policing teams, and we examined how this may shape victimisation, reporting, worry and the relationships between police and farmers. In New South Wales, awareness and direct contact with rural crime police led to both increased satisfaction with police and crime reporting. Respondents with awareness of this team also express significantly less worry of crime, whilst those with direct contact did not. We conclude the article by discussing and contextualising these findings within rural criminology and considering ways forward for the policing of farm crime.

Keywords: rural; rural policing; rural crime; farm crime; acquisitive crime

Victoria and New South Wales (NSW) are Australia's two most populous states: both are located on the country's eastern seaboard on the Pacific Ocean. Victoria has a population of 5.93 million, of which 414,000 people are located in the rural balance of the state (non-metropolitan and non-regional); NSW has a population of 7.48 million, with 552,000 living in the rural balance (ABS, 2022). Agriculture uses 55 percent of the Australian landmass, constitutes 11 percent of goods and services exports, 1.9 percent of gross domestic product, and 2.6 percent of employment (ABARES, 2021).

Four key challenges are present for the policing of rural spaces: (i) physical geography and the tyranny of distance between properties and from formal elements of the criminal justice system, notably police; (ii) rural stoicism and significant under-reporting of crime, which limits police ability to apprehend offenders and results in an incomplete picture of actual offending rates for policy- and decision-makers; (iii) familiarity between police and rural residents, and the strain that this places on rural-based police who must maintain a dual identity as law enforcer and local resident; and (iv) resource provision to rural-based police and rural-specific training for officers sent to work in rural locations and dealing with agricultural crimes (Harkness & Larkins, 2019; see also Harkness, 2017; Harris & Harkness, 2016).

In 2011, Victoria Police launched a group of approximately 48 Agricultural Liaison Officers (AGLOs) "to support and improve investigations into stolen livestock and other farm-related crime" (Victoria Police, 2012, p. 45). In 2019, this group had increased in size to over 70 officers and was renamed Farm Crime Liaison Officers (FCLOs) (Victoria Police, 2020). The role of an FCLO is voluntary, and officers juggle farm crime investigation work with general duties.

This model contrasts with that of NSW, where a team of dedicated full-time rural crime investigators are located strategically across the State. In May 2012, 32 Rural Crime Investigator positions were created, based at 26 non-Greater Sydney locations, and the Rural Crime Prevention Team (RCPT) was launched in 2017. The RCPT is comprised of detectives dedicated specifically to policing "incidents of crime that impact on the function of the pastoral, agricultural and aquacultural industries" (McKechnie, 2019). Since its inception, the RCPT has increased to 52 specialised officers in 2020.

Drawing upon survey responses in both Victoria and NSW, this article examines farmers' experiences of crime victimisation and worry about crime, their attitudes towards police, crime reporting behaviour and interactions between these variables. It specifically examines farmers' awareness and engagement with rural-specific policing teams and considers how this may shape the variables outlined above. This article also conceptualises how geographic location and cultural context are significant when considering citizen-police relations, and argues that there is significant value in the delivery of coordinated rural- and farm-crime specific policing approaches.

Theoretical Background

Research has consistently shown that victimisation rates amongst Australian farmers are high (Barclay et al, 2001; Anderson & McCall, 2005; Barclay, 2015; 2016; Harkness, 2021; Mulrooney, 2021). There are a number of explanations for these high rates, focused primarily on the ways in which the locational and cultural context of the rural shapes crime and responses to crime.

There exist unique geographic and cultural attributes in rural farming communities: factors which are reflected in the incidence and responses to crime in rural spaces, as well as access to criminal justice services. Many offences (such as stock-theft or illegal hunting) are quintessentially ‘rural’ (Barclay, 2016), as are the targets of acquisitive crime (such as theft of farm machinery; water; agricultural chemicals) (Mulrooney & Harkness, 2020). Historically, there are more relaxed cultural attitudes to security, and there are implications brought about by lower population densities. The sheer distances between settlements and properties are much greater than in urbanised environments, and local policing presences are much sparser. In terms of social density, while strong social bonds have been shown to mitigate crime, for example through increased informal social controls, others have highlighted that these same tight-knit acquaintanceship networks may facilitate crime (such as worry about reprisal for reporting crime) (Barclay et al., 2004).

These elements combine to create a criminogenic environment that may still be dependent upon local characteristics (such as presence of agricultural farms), yet vastly different from an urban environment in terms of types of offending, opportunities for offending and in preventing and responding to crime. For example, let us consider geography alone. Much crime prevention is predicated on rational choice theory which suggests that offenders make decisions based on a calculation of risks and rewards. Thus, for instance, one mechanism to increase the risk of offending is through natural surveillance based on the notion that a busy city-street is apt to be a safe street as people are around to witness and intervene in crime, thus deterring such behaviour (Jacobs, 1961). In the rural environment, however, the risk/reward calculation made by a potential offender is often skewed to them favourably as there are a myriad of valuable assets on farms yet ‘eyes in the paddock’ are sparse, resulting in an absence of both formal and informal ‘guardianship’ (Felson & Cohen, 1980).

In addition to high levels of victimisation, following past research, the data presented in this article indicates that farmers worry about crime victimisation, under-report their victimisation to police, and have low levels of confidence in the police to deal with farm crime – along with low levels of satisfaction with the police and criminal justice system more generally (Mulrooney & Harkness, 2021). These issues are strongly interrelated and may greatly hinder the capacity of communities and the police to prevent and respond to crime. For example, in the extant literature, high levels of victimisation have been shown to contribute not only to high levels of worry (Collins, 2016) but also to low levels of

trust/confidence in the police and the criminal justice system more widely (Singer et al., 2018; Pazonna, 2020).

Elevated levels of worry are bi-directionally related to confidence in the police (Doob & Roberts, 1998; Dowler, 2003; Alda et al., 2017). Importantly, low confidence in the police and fear about crime contribute to low public engagement with police and crime prevention efforts (Cherney & Chui, 2009; Kidd & Chayet, 2010). Yet, the geography of the rural emphasises that addressing rural crime is a shared responsibility, and that farmers must participate and engage for crime prevention to be successful. Police cannot simply 'go it alone', particularly given the pressures on police resourcing in rural spaces where an instantaneous first response is highly unlikely. Critical to encouraging citizen participation, ensuring accountability and responsiveness and enabling public cooperation with police and compliance with the law (Jackson & Bradford 2010) is the development of trust and confidence in police by the public (Harkness, 2015).

Building strong police/community relationships in rural settings is as critical as in urbanised communities yet there are barriers to trust being established, including farmer perceptions around a lack of police practical and cultural knowledge and expertise in the farming space (Mulrooney, 2021). Such perceptions may discourage engagement and reporting as farmers may feel their victimisation will not be taken seriously or that they will fail to be heard and, more importantly, understood. For example, in the case of stock theft, a responding officer may underestimate the significant value of the lost stock and the on-costs to the farm (such as loss of breeding potential); they may lack the knowledge as to what exactly it is they are looking for in terms of the stock or breed; and they may lack the necessary knowledge to investigate such a theft in terms of where the stock may be taken and transported or how they will be off-loaded or otherwise used. This is where the role of specialised rural policing teams can play a vital role in not only enforcing the law but also in preventing offending from occurring by bridging police and rural communities (Harkness, 2015, p. 24).

Data and Methods

Surveys of farmers in Victoria and NSW consisted of 47 and 88 questions respectively, almost entirely quantitative and seeking responses regarding experiences of crime, perceptions of crime and criminal justice, crime reporting behaviour, rural policing and crime prevention and awareness. The majority of questions were multiple choice and used Likert scales (i.e., on a continuum from strongly agree to strongly disagree). The Victorian survey focused on acquisitive crime on farms specifically; the NSW survey likewise focused primarily on acquisitive crime, however also inquired more broadly about additional rural-orientated offences such as trespass and illegal shooting. Although both surveys had many questions in common, the surveys themselves were not identical. As such, while the results provide insight into the respective themes and topics explored in each jurisdiction any comparisons should be made with caution. Neither survey forced respondents to answer all questions – for this reason, the number of respondents per question differs.

Victorian responses (n=906) were collected in 2017 and 2018, initially online using Survey Monkey and later disseminated in hardcopy form to members of the Victorian Farmers Federation. In New South Wales, the survey (n=550) was open in 2020 and deployed online via Qualtrics. The NSW survey benefitted greatly from a wide network of industry and community partners aiding in spreading the survey to their respective communities. Partners included non-government organisations, government departments and agencies, police, members of parliament, local government, and farming community leaders (see Harkness et al., 2022).

Fixed limitations of both surveys are acknowledged. Those who chose to respond may have been motivated because of personal experiences and therefore might have responded differently from other farmers in a truly representative sample: that is, there exists a non-response bias. The Victorian cohort is skewed to older farmers, which may reflect the use of a hard-copy postal survey, and over 80 percent of respondents were owners of full-time farming businesses. Respondents to the NSW survey were more evenly distributed by age and gender, likely reflecting the online delivery method with more hobby and part-time farmers compared with Victoria (Table 1).

Table 1

Respondent Demographics (Victoria and NSW)

Characteristics	Victoria (%)	NSW (%)
Gender	n=906	n=508
Male	71.1	52.6
Female	28.9	47.4
Age	n=906	n=522
18-24 years	0.66	6.51
25-34 years	3.20	10.73
35-44 years	8.72	16.28
45-54 years	17.88	25.29
55-64 years	29.91	24.33
65-74 years	26.93	13.03
Over 75 years	12.69	3.83
Property type	n=883	n=458
Hobby farm	4.4	16.4
Part-time farming business	11.9	23.1
Full-time farming business	81.9	57.2
Retired and no longer producing	1.8	3.3

Data analysis was performed using SPSS statistical software. Chi-squared tests for independence were used and all post-hoc analyses were corrected for multiple comparisons with the Bonferroni method. Confidence indices (CI) were generated by taking the average of Likert-scale (strongly disagree=1 to strongly agree=5) responses to six questions on participant perceptions of police (Table 6). CIs of each state were compared using a Welch's T-test. The effect confidence indices had on different variables were analysed using a Mann-Whitney *U* test (MW). Kendall's tau-b correlations were run to determine the relationships between worry, satisfaction, confidence and reporting.

Results

Victimisation

Victimisation rates are high in both states. In Victoria, 68.1 percent of farmers reported having been a victim of *theft* from their farms in their lifetime. In NSW, 80.8 percent of farmers reported having been a victim of some type of farm crime in their lifetime. The NSW data also indicated high levels of repeat victimisation: 76.8 percent of farmers report being a victim of crime on two or more occasions while 23.3 percent of farmers have experienced crime more than seven times. The lower total levels of total victimisation in Victoria may be explained by the survey's focus on acquisitive crime only.

The Victorian survey found that the primary offences of acquisitive crime experienced by farmers were the theft of farm equipment and tools (e.g., hand-tools, chainsaw etc.) (39.9%), farm inputs and supplies (e.g., chemicals, fencing supplies, livestock feed, vet supplies, seeds, crops etc.) (32.1%), and livestock (31.8%) and machinery (tractor, wheat header etc.) (14.3). In NSW, farmers' primary experiences of victimisation were trespass (49.9%), illegal shooting/hunting (40.7%), and theft of livestock (39.3%), followed by acquisitive crimes (Table 2).

Table 2

Relative Frequency of Participants Reporting Victimisation by Offending Type (Victoria and NSW)

Victoria	%	NSW	%
Equipment and tools (theft)	39.9	Trespass	49.9
Farm supplies and inputs (theft)	32.1	Illegal shooting/hunting	40.7
Livestock (theft)	31.8	Theft of livestock	39.3
Machinery (theft)	14.3	Break and enter	32.5
Thefts of money or personal items	8.7	Theft of equipment and tools	28.6

Reporting Crime

Of the Victorian respondents, 82.2 percent indicated they would report to the police any theft from their farm *all the time* or *quite often/most of the time*. In NSW, 70.6 percent of respondents indicated they would report crime that occurred on their farms to the police *all the time* or *quite often* (Table 3). It is important to consider that these rates of reporting may be shaped by the focus on theft in the Victorian sample compared to NSW which included any type of crime and, subsequently, crimes which farmers may consider minor in comparison to theft and thus less likely to report.

Notably, actual reporting of experienced crime varied significantly by offence type. For example, in NSW farmers indicated they had reported arson in the past on one or more occasions 87.5 percent of the time, while only 20.8 percent reported dumping of rubbish. Additionally, despite being the crimes most frequently committed, 66.7 percent of participants reported stock theft while trespassing and illegal shooting/hunting were reported 44.6 percent and 43.1 percent respectively.

Table 3

Tendency to Report Theft from Farms (Vic) or Crime on Farms (NSW). Frequency of Likert-Scale Responses

	All of the time	Quite often (Vic) / Most of the time (NSW)	Occasionally (Vic) / Sometimes (NSW)	Rarely	Never
Vic: “I would report any theft from my farm to the police”	67.5%	14.7%	15.1%	*not asked	2.7%
NSW: “I would report crime which has occurred on the farm to the police”	42.3%	28.2%	18.7%	9.2%	1.5%

The reasons for reluctance in reporting were similar across both samples (Table 4), revolving primarily around a lack of confidence in police interest and capacity to solve the crime if reported, as well as perceptions of barriers to investigating crime in rural spaces.

Table 4*Top Five Most Common Reasons for Reluctance in Reporting (Victoria and NSW)*

Victoria	%	NSW	%
A belief there is not enough evidence for police to proceed	52.4%	The police would do nothing about it	52.1%
It may be difficult to tell if a crime has occurred	49.1%	Lack of proof/evidence	50.9%
A belief police would do nothing about it	39.9%	Worry about revenge/retaliation	39.7%
A belief that it is not serious enough to report	32.8%	Discovered crime too late	36.7%
Cost of loss is less than the insurance excess	21.1%	Police lack knowledge/expertise	26.6%

Worry About Crime

Given high levels of victimisation, it is unsurprising that farmers also express high levels of worry of crime. Fifty-nine percent of Victorian farmers classify crime in their local area as serious or very serious. In NSW, 70.3 percent of farmers classify crime in their local area as serious or very serious, 59.8 percent believe that crime is increasing, and 64.3 percent are very worried/worried about crime in general. When exploring by offence type, concerns are heavily focused around areas of victimisation. For instance, farmers in NSW indicated that the crimes they were worried or very worried about were trespass (81.8%), break and enter (74.3%), theft of livestock (72.4%), and illegal shooting/hunting (65.8%).

Perspectives on Police in Local Area

Just over half (53.6%) of Victorian respondents were satisfied or very satisfied with the standard of policing in their local area, while 16 percent indicated high dissatisfaction or dissatisfaction. By comparison, satisfaction with police in NSW was relatively low with just over a third (37.9%) satisfied or very satisfied with the police while 31.8 percent indicated they were dissatisfied or highly dissatisfied (Table 5).

Table 5

Relative Frequency of Responses to the Question “Overall, How Satisfied are you with the Standard of Policing in Your Local Area?” (Victoria and NSW)

Overall, how satisfied are you with the standard of policing in your local area?	Victoria (%) n=878	NSW (%) n=551
Highly satisfied	6.49	6.3
Satisfied	47.15	31.6
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	30.52	30.3
Dissatisfied	13.1	20.7
Highly dissatisfied	2.73	11.1

Both surveys asked six questions in common relating to various elements of confidence in the police (Table 6). In Victoria, the greatest level of agreement was provided to the statement *The police in this area are dealing with the things that matter to people in this community*; this prompt also generated the highest agreement in NSW, although for less than half (47.0%) of respondents. In both states, the highest level of disagreement was offered to the statement *Local police are well resourced* (Victoria, 42.5%; NSW, 53.8%). When looking at farm crime specifically, 43.1 percent (Victoria) and 30.6 percent (NSW) of respondents indicated that they had a high level of trust in the police to deal with this issue, while 21.0 percent (Victoria) and 41.9 percent (NSW) disagreed.

Table 6

Perceptions of Police in Local Farming Communities (Victoria and NSW)

Thoughts on Police in Local Area	Agree / Strongly agree (%)		Neither agree nor disagree (%)		Disagree / Strongly disagree (%)	
	Vic	NSW	Vic	NSW	Vic	NSW
The police in this area are dealing with the things that matter to people in this community. Vic: n=880; NSW: n=396	64.5	47.0	27.6	30.6	7.95	47.0
The police in my area can be relied on to be there when you need them. Vic: n=883; NSW: n=396	54.0	39.9	28.6	25.8	17.3	34.3

The police in this area treat everyone fairly regardless of who they are. Vic: n=881; NSW: n=396	61.5	43.7	33.3	36.4	5.3	19.9
I am satisfied that enough is being done by Victoria Police to prevent crime in my area (Vic) / Enough is being done by the police to prevent crime in my area (NSW) Vic: n=876; NSW: n=396	28.2	16.9	42.6	38.4	29.2	44.7
Local police are well resourced. Vic: n=883; NSW: n=396	19.2	13.4	38.3	32.8	42.5	53.8
I have a high level of trust in police to deal with farm crime. Vic: n=879; NSW: n=396	43.1	30.6	35.9	27.5	21.0	41.9
Overall, how satisfied are you with the standard of policing in your local area? Vic: n=878; NSW: n=396	53.7	37.9	30.3	30.3	15.9	31.8

Responses to the six Likert questions were scored 1 to 5 (Strongly disagree =1 to Strongly agree =5), with an average taken to develop an index of police confidence. The higher the CI, the more confidence the participants had in police (a score of 3 indicates a neutral level of confidence). NSW demonstrated a lower-than-average level of confidence in police, 2.8 CI \pm 0.81SD. In Victoria, participants demonstrated an above average level of confidence, 3.27 CI \pm 1.27SD. There was a significant difference in the CIs between the states ($F=2.24$, df 24, $p=0.01$). Nevertheless, neither state had particularly high levels of confidence.

What Can the Police do Differently?

Both surveys asked what the police could do differently to address farm crime (Table 7). In Victoria, *taking stronger action against farm crime* was the most favoured response. In NSW, respondents wished to be engaged with officers in person more often. Victorian respondents indicated a desire for the police to maintain a physical presence in rural spaces, as well as to work harder to bring offenders to court. Similarly, in NSW, farmers indicated a desire for more patrols/physical presence and support for investing in a police unit that specialises in rural crime. Taken together, farmers show strong support for several measures to tackle farm crime, including both reactive and proactive measures.

Table 7

What Police Should do Differently to Tackle Farm Crime (Victoria and NSW)

What should police do differently to tackle farm crime? (Victoria)	Relative frequency of response (%) n=2403 responses	What should police do differently to tackle farm crime? (NSW)	Relative frequency of response (%) n=1528 responses
Take stronger action on property theft	20.8	Engage with farmers in person more often	15.0
More random patrols/physical presence	19.7	More random patrols / physical presence	14.3
Work harder on bringing offenders to court	15.1	Invest in a police unit that specialises in rural crime	14.0
Engage with farmers in person more often	15.0	Educate and train all police to deal with rural crime	12.8
Provide better education to rural communities about crime prevention ideas	12.9	Take stronger action against farm crime	9.6
Develop state-wide strategies	11.6	Be more proactive about preventing crime	9.5
Engage with farmers by social media	4.9	Work harder on bringing offenders to court	9.2
		Provide better education to rural communities about crime prevention	8.6
		Develop state-wide strategies	7.0

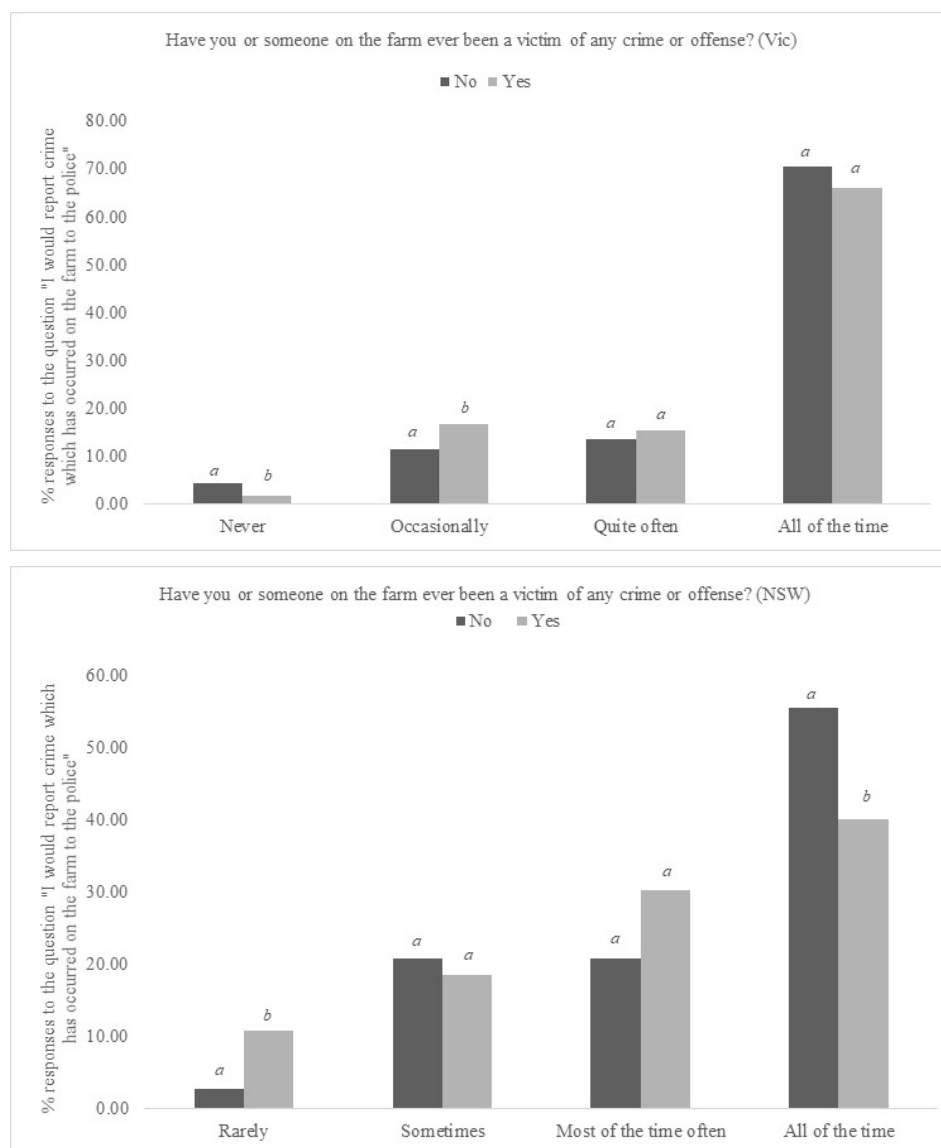
The Interplay Between Victimisation, Worry, Satisfaction and Confidence

Whether or not someone has been a victim of crime significantly impacted their likelihood of reporting crime. In Victoria, victims were more likely to respond *Occasionally* and less likely to respond *Never*; whereas in NSW, victims were more likely to respond

Rarely and less likely to respond *All of the time* (Figure 1). Satisfaction with police was significantly dependent on whether the respondent had previously been a victim of crime. In NSW, people were more likely to be *Highly dissatisfied* and significantly less likely to be *Satisfied*. In Victoria, participants were significantly more likely to be *Dissatisfied* and significantly less likely to be *Highly satisfied* (Table 9). In both states, confidence was significantly affected by whether the respondent had been a victim of crime or not – if respondents were victims of crime, their confidence in police was less than for those who had not been victims of a crime (MW 67,553, $p < 0.001$ (Vic); MW 7,260, $p < 0.001$ (NSW)).

Figure 1

Comparison of Responses to “I Would Report Crime Which Occurred on the Farm to the Police” Depending on if Participant Had Been a Victim of Crime or Not.



Note: Responses “Rarely” (Vic) and “Never” (NSW) were removed from analysis because response count was below 5. Column proportions analysed using Chi-squared and post-hoc analysis corrected for multiple comparisons with the Bonferroni method. Letters indicate columns that do not differ significantly from each other.

A Kendall's tau-b correlation was run to determine the relationships between worry and satisfaction and worry and confidence. Similarly, the relationships between reporting and confidence and reporting and satisfaction were determined; as was the relationship between confidence and satisfaction (Table 8). As worry is reduced, satisfaction and/or confidence in the police is increased. Similarly, the likelihood of reporting a crime increased significantly as confidence and/or satisfaction in the police increased. There was a significant, positive relationship between confidence and satisfaction. While these correlations are important, they are not the only factors contributing to reporting, satisfaction, confidence and worry. For instance, gender also shapes worry of crime (see Collins, 2016). However, it is beyond the scope of this article to identify all potential confounding factors.

Table 8

*Kendall's tau-b correlation coefficients for Reporting, Satisfaction, Confidence and Worry. *p=0.002, **p<0.001*

		Satisfaction	Confidence
Reporting	NSW	0.15**	0.17**
	Vic	0.10*	0.13**
Worry	NSW	-0.24**	-0.19**
	Vic	-0.17**	-0.11**
Confidence	NSW	0.75**	-
	Vic	0.67**	-

Specialist Rural Police

High levels of victimisation, worry of crime and low confidence in the police have been shown to be related to punitive attitudes towards crime (i.e., a preference for harsher punishment; see Snacken, 2015; Mulrooney & Wise, 2019). As such, it is unsurprising that farmers would like to see stronger action taken against farm crime. However, there was also strong support for more proactive and preventative elements of combatting farm crime across both states (Table 7). In NSW, there exists a strong desire for the police to engage with farmers in person and to adopt a crime prevention role and for police personnel to have advanced skills and expertise to police rural crime specifically. Indeed, 89.8 percent of NSW respondents agreed that *there should be a team of police officers trained to deal with rural crime specifically*.

A primary finding in the literature is that a lack of police confidence in farming communities contributes to lower levels of engagement and reporting (see Barclay, 2015; 2016). Additionally, across both samples low confidence/satisfaction in the police were related to higher levels of worry and both resulted in lower levels of reporting crime (Table 2). This lack of confidence and worry about crime has been attributed, in part, to the

perceived capacity of police to intervene in farm crime as well as a perceived lack of cultural and practical knowledge on the part of police (Table 4). As such, it was hypothesised that those respondents that were either aware of rural specific police teams or had direct contact with rural specific police teams would have higher levels of crime reporting, satisfaction and confidence in the police and lower levels of worry of crime than those who were not aware of such teams or had not had contact.

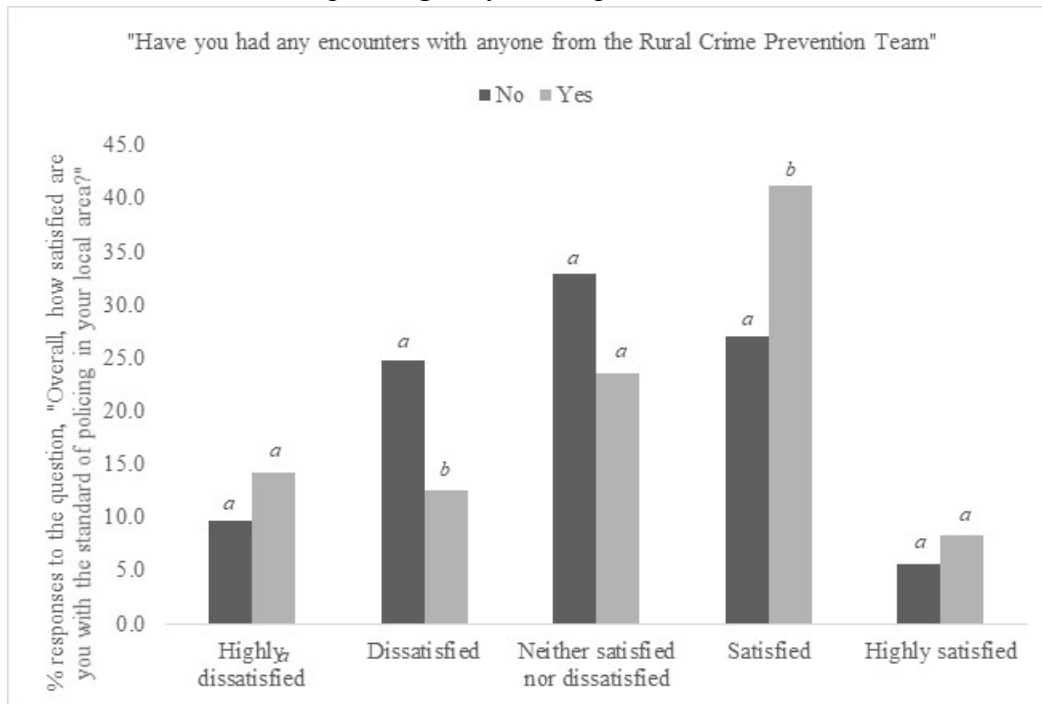
Nearly 66 percent (65.7) of NSW respondents were aware that the RCPT provides assistance and advice to rural crime victims and investigates rural crime. By contrast, in Victoria 67.0 percent of farmers were not aware of the existence of AGLOs (FCLOs). The significant gap in awareness is expected given the relative investment in and publicisation of these respective 'rural police'. In NSW, respondents who had direct encounters with the RCPT were highly satisfied/satisfied with the RCPT (73.7%), and in Victoria 74.6 percent were highly satisfied/satisfied with their encounter with an AGLO (Table 9). 50.1 percent of all respondents in NSW agreed that *the RCPT has been a positive development in the fight against rural crime*, with only 6.9 percent in disagreement.

In general, 43 percent of NSW respondents indicated they were more inclined to report crime since the development of the RCPT, with only 10 percent in disagreement. Those aware of the RCPT (n=257) were significantly more likely to agree with the statement "*I would report crime which has occurred on the farm to the police*" and significantly less likely to respond with a neutral, neither agree nor disagree ($X^2=17.6$, $df 2$, $p<0.001$). Respondents who had direct encounters with the RCPT were significantly more likely to respond that they would report a farm crime to the police *all of the time* and significantly less likely to respond *rarely* ($X^2=18.0$, $df 4$, $p=0.001$). There was no significant difference in reporting in the Victorian sample ($X^2=0.54$, $df 4$, $p=0.91$; $X^2=2.19$, $df 3$, $p=0.53$ respectively).

There was no significant impact on the confidence index based on awareness of or encounters with the RCPT in NSW (MW 15,560, $P=0.12$: MW 14,190, $p=0.07$ respectively). However, respondents who had encountered the RCPT were significantly more likely to report they were satisfied with policing overall ($X^2=16.2$, $df 4$, $p=0.003$) (Figure 2). In Victoria, while respondents who were aware of AGLOs (33.1%) had slightly better perceptions of police, there was no significant increase in confidence or satisfaction due to awareness or encounters with AGLO's (MW 72,588, $p=0.06$: MW 21,761, $p=0.72$; $X^2=6.16$, $df 4$, $p=0.188$; $X^2=3.03$ $df 4$ $p=0.55$ respectively).

Figure 2

Comparison of Responses to “Overall, How Satisfied Are You with the Standard of Policing in Your Local Area?” Depending on if Participant Had Encounters with the RCPT



Note: Column proportions analysed using Chi-squared and post-hoc analysis corrected for multiple comparisons with the Bonferroni method. Letters indicate columns that do not differ significantly from each other.

While those who were aware of the RCPT were significantly less likely to worry about crime ($X^2=8.09, df 3 p=0.04$), those with direct contact were not ($X^2=2.28, df 3 p=0.51$). There was no significant reduction in worry of crime in the Victorian sample regardless of awareness or encounters ($X^2=6.13, df 3 p=0.19$; $X^2=1.94, df 3, p=0.59$ respectively).

Table 9

Comparison of Two States Specialist Policing Groups and the Impacts of Awareness and Encounters on Reporting, Satisfaction, Confidence and Worry

	RCPT			AGLO		
	Awareness	Encounter	Victim of crime	Awareness	Encounter	Victim of crime
Reporting	$X^2=14.82, df 3, p=0.002 (n 385)$	$X^2=17.16, df 3, p=0.001. (n 325)$	$X^2=9.32, df 3, p=0.025 (n 325)$	$X^2=0.54, df 4, p=0.91 (n 864)$	$X^2=2.19, df 3, p= 0.53 (n 317)$	$X^2=10.18, df 3, p=0.02 (n 858)$
Satisfaction	$X^2=5.548, df 4, p=0.24 (n 389)$	$X^2=16.2, df 4, p=0.003 (n 389)$	$X^2=11.03, df 3, p=0.01 (n 371)$	$X^2=6.16, df 4, p=0.188 (n 869)$	$X^2=3.03 df 4 p=0.55 (n 322)$	$X^2=25.56, df 3, p<0.001 (n 859)$

Confidence	MW 15,560, p=0.12 (n 396)	MW 14,190, p=0.06 (n 396)	MW 7,260, p=<0.001 (n 396)	MW 72,587.5 p=0.06 (n 843)	MW 6860.5, p=0.51 (n 312)	MW 67,553, p=<0.001 (n 840)
Worry	X ² =8.09, df 3 p=0.044 (n 374)	X ² =2.28, df 3 p=0.51 (n 373)	X ² =21.04, df 3 p=<0.001 (n 395)	X ² =6.13, df 3 p=0.19 (n 862)	X ² =1.94, df 3, p=0.59 (n 299)	X ² =16.05, df 3 p=0.003 (n 857)

Note: Reporting, Satisfaction and Worry analysed with Chi-squared test for independence, Confidence analysed with Mann Whitney U test (MW). NSW, Rural Crime Police Team (RCPT) and Victoria Agricultural Liaison Officer (AGLO).

Discussion

There exist unique geographic and cultural attributes in rural farming communities: factors which are reflected in the incidence and responses to crime in rural spaces, as well as access to criminal justice services. The evidence from the two surveys lends further support to previous research on farm crime in Australia (Barclay, 2015; 2016), indicating high levels of victimisation amongst farmers in Victoria and NSW as well as worry about crime. The data on reasons for non-reporting incidents of crime suggest that farmers often elect not to report crime owing to perceptions of limited capacity for formal intervention. Reticence to report crime because of the array of factors outlined above leads to a disparity between crime committed and reported, and subsequently an impact on policing resourcing and operational practices based on an incomplete picture of the true extent of offending and victimisation.

It is unsurprising, then, that farmers indicate low-mid levels of confidence and satisfaction in police overall. This confidence gap has been widened through poor interactions (such as contact with officers with limited or no agricultural knowledge) and differing expectations of both farmers and police shaped by the rural context (Harkness & Larkins, 2019). Additionally, a lack of confidence culminates in consequential affects, such as worry of crime which itself shapes confidence in the police and the criminal justice system more broadly and impacts on community capacity to prevent and respond to crime. Whilst future responses to rural crime prevention look promising in terms of intervention with technological and environmental innovations (Harkness & Mulrooney, 2020), the data suggests that outcomes – such as successful prosecutions and clearance rates – do not constitute the totality of farmers' needs.

Indeed, farmers clearly desire an informed and engaged rural police force which is well-resourced, and which can be relied upon to be proactive as well as reactive. Respondents indicated high levels of satisfaction with the RCPT and those who has direct contact with the RCPT had significantly greater satisfaction with the police in general. Additionally, those respondents who were aware of and had direct contact with RCPT were significantly more likely to report crime. This satisfaction may result from farmers feeling seen, heard and understood by the police (i.e., cultural awareness), while greater levels of reporting may indicate greater confidence in these police to be able to address farm crime more specifically.

Confidence in the police overall and more broadly, however, was not significantly impacted by the presence of rural specific police units in either state. Lingering low levels of confidence may be hypothesised to be the result not only of history and time, but an acute awareness of the ‘reality’ of policing the rural. Indeed, farmers express a keen awareness of the limitations of policing the rural (such as response times; gathering evidence) and this may shape both confidence in the police (such as capacity to solve crimes) and worry of crime (such as the police still being far away). Furthermore, while those who were aware of the RCPT were significantly less likely to worry about crime, those with direct contact were not. This result may be shaped by the fact that those with direct contact are more likely to be victims of crime, which is related to higher levels of worry.

The evidence from this research supports the extant literature indicating that worry of crime and confidence in the police are bi-directionally related and shape crime reporting. As such, it is imperative that resources are allocated to the reduction of high levels of worry amongst farmers about rural offending. While preventing crime and enforcing the law are primary goals of police, worry of crime itself is important to combat for three key reasons: (i) worry of crime can have a significant impact on an individual’s quality of life through stress, physiological effects (Stafford et al., 2007) and negative psychological well-being (Doran & Burgess, 2011; Gray et al., 2011); (ii) worry of crime may undermine social trust and efficacy, which can contribute to social disorder, exacerbate worry and undermine informal social control (Skogan, 2015); and (iii) addressing worry itself may contribute to preventing and responding to rural crime by improving social trust, enhancing collective efficacy and informal social control, and building confidence to increase engagement with police, reporting and crime prevention efforts (Cherney & Chui, 2009; Kidd & Chayet, 2010).

In rural spaces the tyranny of distance means that crime prevention is a shared responsibility, with both farmers and police alike needing to adopt preventative practices. Police cannot simply ‘go it alone’, particularly given the pressures on police resourcing in rural spaces where an instantaneous first response is highly unlikely. However, low levels of confidence and high worry of crime may negatively impact the willingness of farmers to cooperate (Cherney & Chui, 2009; Murphy & Cherney, 2012; Tyler, 2011). Available evidence indicates that integrated, proactive, and community-oriented strategies may reduce worry and worry of crime (Zhao et al., 2002). For example, *Operation Stock Check* in NSW is a ‘high-visibility’ proactive enforcement strategy in which officers inspect vehicles carrying livestock. Enforcement aside, the high visibility nature of this operation sends the message to farmers and rural communities that the police are present in rural spaces and doing something about an offence which farmers often experience and express significant worry of.

Police-public contact, police visits to homes and commercial premises, or more formal meetings and other organising efforts, can reduce the worry of crime directly, and indirectly by enhancing public opinions of police (Dalglish & Myhill, 2004). For instance, Peyton, Sierra-Arévalo and Rand (2019) found that positive police contact significantly improved attitudes towards police and, more importantly, willingness to cooperate. The

presence of AGLO's and the RCPT at rural events such as agricultural shows, and the running of 'rural crime prevention workshops' for farmers by the RCPT in collaboration with the New South Wales Farmers Federation, speaks to these efforts. By targeting worry of crime, rural police may positively intervene in the personal and social consequences posed by high levels of worry, while at the same time building confidence in the police and, subsequently, an engaged and cooperative partnership with farmers in combatting rural crime.

Conclusion

The data presented in this article indicates that in Victoria and NSW there are high levels of victimisation of farmers, high levels of worry of crime, low- to mid-levels of confidence in the police, and there remains a gap between experiences of farm crime and reporting. Although in its relative contemporaneous infancy, the team of full-time rural crime prevention officers in NSW appear to be making headway on tackling these issues. Lessons learned from NSW with a resourced dedicated specialised team can be absorbed in other jurisdictions. For example, it is perhaps not surprising that the Victorian AGLO's did not have the same 'impact' as the RCPT when we consider relative resourcing, attention/focus and professionalisation, as well as the fact that 67% of farmers surveyed were not even aware of their existence.

Nevertheless, in light of this progress, significant resources should be allocated to addressing worry of crime for its own sake but also as a means to build confidence in the police and meaningful relationships with farmers that are so integral to combatting crime in rural spaces. Geographic location and cultural context are significant when considering citizen-police relations and rural police, armed with knowledge of locational context and cultural geography and trained to deal with rural crime and its nuances, are best placed to address these issues through integrated and proactive and community-oriented strategies. Future research should attend to examining the efforts put forward by rural specific police units as they seek to reduce worry and increase confidence, as well as the implications this may have on preventing and combatting rural crime.

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