

‘Policing Rural Communities’: An *International Society for the Study of Rural Crime* Roundtable

Abstract

Rural crime and criminal justice practices and responses face different challenges from those experienced in urban contexts.

A practitioner-focused roundtable, convened by The International Society for the Study of Rural Crime (www.issrc.net), investigated challenges and innovations in international contexts on issues surrounding rural policing. The roundtable was held online on 20 October 2020 and was moderated by Dr Jessica Peterson, formerly of the University of Nebraska at Kearney (now an Assistant Professor at Southern Oregon University).

Panellists were asked to respond to two key questions:

1. What are the key challenges for rural policing?
2. What innovations are being deployed internationally to address these challenges?

The following are transcripts of the four presentations from the panelists on this Roundtable.

Keywords: rural policing; International Society for the Study of Rural Crime; France; Australia; Scotland; challenges; innovations



Christian Mouhanna

Director, Centre de Recherches Sociologiques sur Le Droit et Les Institutions Pénales (Centre for Sociological Research on Law and Criminal Justice Institutions)

Christian Mouhanna has a PhD in Sociology as well as more than 20 years of experience in the French police forces. He is a permanent researcher at the French National Centre for scientific research, and the former director of the Centre for sociological research on law and criminal justice institutions.

I belong to a centre which is the Centre for Sociological Research on Law and Penal Institutions. The Centre is composed of researchers from sociology, history, political sciences, statistics, and we are working and researching on police, courts and prisons in France and public policies about crime and security matters. We are dependent on support from several institutions: the French Ministry of Justice, the National Centre for Scientific Research, and two universities – the University of Paris-Saclay, a very big one; and CY Cergy University.

I will speak about the French rural policing. In charge of it is a very strong organization, which is Gendarmerie Nationale, a military police force of 100,000 servants. They don't have unions and they live in barracks – that covers the rural part of the French territory.

What is very important is that the Gendarmerie Nationale is a very centralised organisation with a top down system under the command of the National Director of the Gendarmerie Nationale who sets the priorities for all the squads all along the territory. That may seem strange to understand for those who live in other countries, which is that the rural police are very centralised. This Gendarmerie Nationale is in charge of policing 95 percent of the French territory. That is also very important, because even in France we have some desert territories without significant populations and without police coverage.

Altogether, this organization includes 50 percent of the French population. That's to say the villages and cities over 20,000 inhabitants. The Gendarmerie Nationale is facing a main problem: to maintain the links with rural communities and their inhabitants. For many reasons, the Gendarmerie has lost much of their links with the population because of New Public Management requirements, as they are turned to produce statistical results for the central administration, leaving very few to be involved in negotiations with local communities.

The national organisation decided 10 years ago to merge many squads. So a single squad is covering a bigger territory, hence, it's hard to maintain links with all small villages. We have a lot of Mayors – we have more than 30,000 mayors and villages with mayors in France. So it's important to maintain the links with these leaders and through them, to the population in these places.

And we have also this new phenomenon of Gendarmes who want to live in urban areas and no more in rural areas because they have no access to theatres, cinemas, universities, etc... and they want to quit these rural areas to go in cities or near cities. The chiefs are afraid of this situation and they want to maintain links with the population and to avoid the Police Nationale situation. The Police Nationale works in the cities and as perhaps you know, there are a lot of problem with the population. The police officers are more and more rejected by the some part of the population, especially in poor areas. And the problem is that with these gaps, they have no or little information for solving cases or modifying police practices. They can do little intelligence in the poor areas. And so Gendarmerie chiefs are afraid of facing the same problem in their rural areas.

And what these chiefs of the Gendarmerie have decided to do is to create the 'Gendarme without office'. The idea is to give all gendarmes what they call a 'modern tool' – smartphones with a lot of apps. The idea is to give them these smartphones as a type of 'office', and to send them on permanent patrols and not to allow them to go back physically to their offices because they're afraid of having gendarmes will spend most of their time in their offices dealing with paperwork instead of meeting with the public, which is dispersed over a large territory.

The goal is to increase mobility and to stop troops from spending all of their time inside offices. And to maintain this direct contact with the population because they know that if you don't have contact with the population, you won't be able to control crime. And it's a big challenge to control what is going into these rural areas. And that's why they wanted gendarmes to still maintain this contacts. The problem is whether or not gendarmes will adhere to this policy. We can see much reluctance, with apps only used mostly for control and not to improve links with the population.

We are conducting a big research project on this issue. And we are looking at the field to see how local gendarmes are working, are accepting this mission and this new way of working. And you can see that of course they don't have an actual problem with smartphones because everybody's using smartphones, but they often prefer to go back to their office anyway. They don't want to stay all day long in their patrol car or out of their cars speaking with the population. And that's the big challenge for us at the moment as far as rewriting policing is concerned.

Tori Heaney

Farm Crime Advisor, Farm Crime Coordination Unit, Victoria Police (Australia)

Tori Heaney has degrees in criminology and business as well as a graduate certificate and intelligence analysis. When she is not working on her family farm, she is providing analysis, advice and research direction for the farm crime coordination unit of Victoria Police in Australia that focuses on livestock theft and other farm related crimes.

I'll start with a brief background of the policing model that we use here. In 2011, Victoria Police established a Livestock and Farm Crime Specialists Group across the state to deal specifically with livestock and farm related crime investigation. In developing this specialist group, it was identified that there were police members across Victoria who had high levels of knowledge, skills and expertise to deal with livestock and farm related deaths. These members had a passion to address rural crime and the requisite skills to investigate this crime thing.

By creating this group of subject matter consultants, Victoria police started to address the fundamental concerns of the farming communities and related sectors across Victoria. In 2019, to complement and invigorate the existing model, Victoria Police established the Farm Crime Coordination Unit, which consists of a detective inspector and a farm crime advisor which is me. The existing Agricultural Liaison Officer role was rebranded to the Farm Crime Liaison Officer to more accurately encapsulate the role of these members.

The FCCU, as we're known, was created to strengthen and facilitate the work undertaken by the liaison officers across the state by providing a coordinated response to target farm crime, monitoring crime trends and patterns, developing intelligence and working with local police to proactively and reactively address issues. We currently have 68 farm crime liaison officers across the state who work in varied areas of Victoria Police and have high levels of knowledge, skills and expertise to deal with farm related crime.

Recent figures show that Victoria has almost 29,000 farms with over 22 million beef and dairy cattle, sheep and lambs, pigs, poultry and other animals. More than 40 percent of Australian lamb and 60 percent of Australian milk production is from Victoria. From a policing perspective, the main farm crime themes apparent within Victoria are livestock theft, farming equipment theft, animal activism, illegal hunting and firearm theft. But of these, the most unique challenge we face is from livestock theft.

Livestock theft is one of, if not the main, cause of concern within farming communities. And while we know that rural and farm crime is by no means just livestock theft, it is a significant issue affecting Victorian farmers and something that needs to be addressed. And it's in this area that we face some of our primary challenges. So figures from the Crime Statistics Agency in Victoria show that the minimum value of sheep and cattle stolen across the state between 2015 and 2019 is \$7.6 million. From that figure, we can

conservatively estimate that during this time, between 30,000 and 35,000, sheep and cattle have been stolen from Victorian farms. It affects farmers livelihoods and has a negative impact on the communities and individuals affected.

So there are a number of challenges involved in solving livestock theft. But today I'm going to highlight the different concern, and that concern is the issue of under-reporting. Consultation with police members, industry representatives and rural community members indicate that a large amount of farm crime goes unreported, a fact that is well known in both policing and rural criminological areas. If you talk to any farmer, they can list any number of neighbours or associates that have experienced some form of livestock theft, but if you ask them whether they've reported those instances to police, the answer is quite often "no".

Well, there are a number of reasons that victims might not report livestock theft or other farm crime. The two reasons I'll highlight a delaying and reporting from when the offence may have occurred, and due to concerns that police might not take the report seriously. Yes, it is known that the more time that passes between when a crime is committed and when police are notified reduces the chance of the offence being solved. Crimes such as stock theft are often not discovered immediately, and sometimes well after the event has occurred, meaning there may be little physical evidence to recover and few avenues of inquiry to follow up.

This, coupled with concerns that are the report won't be taken seriously or the full impact of the situation not being taken into account, creates doubt in police ability to solve these crimes leading to further hesitation in reporting. But it isn't the complete lack of reporting as a whole. When we speak to members in rural stations, we hear the same story again and again. Farmers mentioning last livestock theft as an aside to police, not wanting to make an actual report but just let the members know so they're in the loop. The challenge is getting them to see the value of their information.

While under reporting of farm crime remains prevalent, we cannot get an accurate picture of the scale of the problem. When the data reflects low numbers of reports, it's difficult to justify allocating resources. The main focus we're driving is encouraging members of rural communities to report, not just all stock theft and all farm crime, but any suspicious activity or behaviour.

Members of rural communities know their own areas better than anyone else. They recognise their neighbours and the vehicles that traverse the local roads on a daily basis while they are parked on the side of the road while they fix a fence. They talk to each other and know what's going on. Even elements relating to known offenders and methods used for disposal avenues for stolen livestock are quite often known to locals within rural communities. It's hard for us to do anything if we don't know about it in the first place.

We believe, and the message we are driving to Victorian farmers and rural communities, is that every piece of the puzzle is important, and members of the public might

have the last piece of the puzzle that is needed. All knowledge is useful. They might only have three numbers of a number plate, but it might be the three numbers that someone else didn't see. We need people to speak up to assist us in solving crimes. Every report helps us to gather intel to form patterns and trends. This information is then used to inform police tasking.

Here at Victoria Police we use a tasking coordination process. We assign resources where they're needed, and responses are intelligence led. If we don't receive reports to know things are happening, we don't know to allocate resources. Our aim is to embolden and empower farmers and members of rural communities to take control of their circumstances.

We need to get back to the basics to encourage reporting, to increase confidence both in police members in their interactions with people from those communities, but also in victims of farm crime to have confidence that police take these crimes seriously.

We need to encourage farmers to be vigilant. There may not be any sign of damage to fences or gates, meaning that farmers might not be aware that a theft has occurred.

We need to provide community members with the tools to take steps to prevent crimes. When it comes to helping to reduce the incidences of livestock theft, these tips include regular stock counts, keeping fences well maintained, ensuring all stocks are correctly tagged and identifiable, securing stock yards from to prevent unauthorised use, using CCTV.

As with all crime prevention, the aim is to make it harder for the offenders to commit crimes without getting caught. We're doing this by increasing public awareness of the role of the farm crime liaison officers and the Farm Crime Coordination Unit within Victoria Police. We're encouraging communities and victims of farm crime to utilise the services available to them.

There have been a number of campaigns calling for information about livestock theft and farm crime. We're talking about livestock theft in the media, we're highlighting instances of livestock theft on social media. We have and will continue to do so once we're back in a COVID safe environment, attended agricultural field days and shows. We're engaging with external stakeholders to work with them in relation to farm related crime. We're monitoring investigations ensuring investigators are provided with the subject matter expertise and assistance are required.

Yes, these are the basics, because we need to ensure we're taking these small step initiatives and focusing on getting them right to achieve the bigger picture. We need to ensure we build bridges between local communities and people and the police that look after these communities. We need to provide a consistent, coordinated approach. And we want people to know the Victoria Police take farm crime seriously.

Inspector Alan Dron

National Rural Crime Co-ordinator, Police Scotland

Inspector Alan Dron has worked in the police service for over 28 years, including a period with the Scottish Crime and Drug Enforcement Agency. He is based at the Scottish Crime Campus where he serves as the rural crime coordinator for Police Scotland. Beyond his role in rural crime prevention, he also chairs the Scottish Heritage Crime Group that ensures responsible access to Scotland's rich environment and outdoor life.

Scotland is a relatively small country 5.4 million of our population but 90 percent plus is designated as being rural. And the geography of it causes us some issues. But for us, it's trying to actually get folks to appreciate that the police should take everything seriously, it doesn't matter whether it's the smallest possible offence or the largest crime. It all should get treated in exactly the same manner, regardless of who you are in terms of geography or demographics.

For us, initially, it was one rural crime coordinator, and one police officer to cover the whole country. So starting internally, we had a bit of an issue to try and generate our response to take this seriously, to actually understand that what we do – there are reasons for it. And the way that we tried to do that was to link it with organised crime, which we're able to prove very easily. But to do that, we also tried to focus on firstly getting a rural crime strategy. And that was, I think, one of the keys to trying to overcome any challenge, and negated that people didn't think policing took it seriously.

So we actually have a proper strategy in Scotland about rural crime. And we kept it very simple. We listened to people, and we actually tried to become very visible. But by making it personal, we then thought that we could engage more with the rural communities throughout Scotland. So just like Victoria, we're seeing we're trying to actually engage, to ensure there's linkage between the policing and the rural communities.

So we had something that's tangible to give out. We spelled out a very straightforward vision with four key objectives and certain priorities for Scotland, about what we are going to do to tackle rural crime. Coupled with that, then we obviously have the challenge of being visible, with only having one officer initially. It was difficult to then try and gain the trust, actually to ensure that people understood that we're here to listen to them when you're trying to cover the country.

I am delighted to say that Police Scotland have actually taken on board some of the evidence that we've produced, and my department now consists of an inspector, a sergeant, three constables, and interestingly enough an architectural liaison officer for the whole of the country so we can try to provide on the ground prevention advice to anyone regardless of the location, but also in tandem with developing the strategy in trying to get that linkage and trust visibility.

We had to prove evidence. And that proved tricky, because I think one of the biggest challenges was actually trying to understand the extent of crime in Scotland. If it's in a rural environment, how many things are actually reported? How many instances go unreported but everybody knows who did something, or knows who actually may have done it.

So we've tried to then break it down by the 13 policing divisions in Scotland, to try and engender some local connectivity, to try to get folks more and more to report locally, and to then feed the information into a national picture so that we will get a bit more of a clearer understanding of who's doing what in Scotland. Not surprisingly, a lot of it is linked. And it's quite often the same criminality that's travelling. So we have an issue, obviously, with transient criminality that's moving around the rural communities, which then makes it, another challenge, quite hard to then track them. If they cross a border or they cross into a different division, then who's tracing them. And as they go, who's then after them.

But slowly we're starting to get there. And I think, encouragingly, it's always about looking forward for us. So we'll always, you know, go with a bigger department. And with better luck, if we can engender a partnership approach, which is key, trying to make sure that others within the rural communities actually assist because policing cannot do all. We cannot simply try to arrest our way out of any issues. We must start with prevention and education. And we must rely on those who are in the rural communities.

And I think sometimes that's where policing can miss it. Because at the end of the day, there's many people across any country who have the knowledge, they live in a community, they have pride in that community. How would you then give them ownership to then take that pride and make sure that no criminology and crime can happen within their area. And if you can reduce the offences and the crime within an area, then they obviously feel safer, and thus reducing the impact of the fear of crime.

In terms of a quick sort of success, what we've tried to engender, certainly in Scotland – one of the things we've developed is Rural Watch. It's a national scheme, very much like a Neighbourhood Watch scheme that various other places will have. But again, it's trying to make it personal. So it's called Rural Watch. People straightaway know us, with an identity, the logo, and the feel of it makes it feel very rural. So whether you're a crofter, whether you're a big landowner, or on the estates, if you are in that sphere, you actually feel somebody is there for you can report any incident, regardless of how big or how small. You can actually then know that somebody will come and visit you or your pass on an alert, which will allow us hopefully to catch whoever is perpetrating an incident or offence quicker. And the whole point is to try and ensure that people talk to each other. And we can get the right people to the right places, hopefully at the right time to catch the right people.

But again, it's communication; communication is key. Perception builds from communication as well as effective communication thereafter. And we can change the perception – that policing in Scotland takes everything that happens within a rural

environment seriously, and will actually respond to it, it will get the same level of investigation. And we will go out of our way to try, in particular if it's unfortunately a repeat victim, to go back and speak to them, try and reassure them, then we'll try and bring in the preventative methods. Can we use the architectural liaison officer to try and strengthen what is around about them in terms of a prevention approach, just to ensure there's a bit of reassurance and then for any repeat offender that is offending specifically within the rural environment, we will undoubtedly target them, just to let them know that we know that that is what we specialise in.

And if they go into a rural environment, we all be there with them. Because again, that is one of the challenges. Somebody was in to commit a crime or offence in a rural environment where there's less CCTV, less eyes and ears, they think they actually can operate with far, far greater ease. We need to make sure that they know that the rural environment from a policing perspective is a really hostile environment if you want to commit crime. So hopefully that just gives you a little bit of an insight into what we're trying to do here in Scotland.

Detective Inspector Cameron Whiteside

State Rural Crime Coordinator, New South Wales Police Force (Australia)

Cameron Whiteside is a Detective Chief Inspector with the New South Wales Police Force in Australia. His 31 year career started in 1989 and has included positions such as operational Detective Sergeant and then finally Detective Inspector. He is also the inaugural and current state rural crime coordinator for the rural crime prevention team that covers the regional New South Wales. This is basically an area that is four times the size of the UK and is comprised of 20 different police districts and police area commands.

It's very insightful, some of the things that we are seeing from across the Australia and also overseas and I think one thing in common is that we're all suffering the same as issues with respect to rural crime.

First part of the question: what are the key challenges for rural policing in New South Wales? Before speaking on this, I need to provide the definition of what rural crime is, which has been adopted by the New South Wales Police Force since 2014. The reason for this is that far too often, in my opinion, both the complexity of and in the same time simplicity of rural crime, is confused and lost by police, academics and the wider public.

It is often swallowed up when speaking about crime in rural areas as opposed to rural crime. This has a negative impact on the recording, prevention, disruption, responding to rural crime. So what is rural crime? Rural crime in New South Wales is defined as incidents of crime that impact on the function of the pastoral, agricultural and aquacultural industries. The key phrase is "impact on the function". Simplified even more, I think quite often a term used is farm crime which is used across other parts of the world. The definition does not include all crimes or incidents committed in rural locations. For instance, not included is domestic violence offences occurring on a rural property, motor vehicle accidents on rural roads or cannabis plantations.

The key challenges in New South Wales and from my readings of policing in rural communities, the key challenges are not new. There is a distinct lack of community confidence in police and the judiciary, under reporting, delayed reporting, police capability to adequately respond to, resource and investigate rural crimes and in particular stock theft.

The majority of research focuses on the police capability, and rightly so, but only a few highlights the victim, the farmer in the industry addressing their vulnerabilities, target hardening their properties, including stock identification. The Bradshaw report in 2016 made it quite clear that much more could be done. Steve Bradshaw [retired assistant commissioner of NSW Police] said the current police response to crime in rural and remote communities was brought into question in every public consultation held over the course of the review. He said that stock theft, rural trespass and illegal hunting were crimes of major concerns in rural

isolated communities. These crimes can lead to significant economic losses for primary producers and rural communities.

On the back of the Bradshaw report, I'm pleased to say that this is changing significantly in New South Wales. We've got a long way to go but we're off to a good start with a dedicated rural crime prevention team addressing the police capability to respond to and to disrupt in respect to rural crimes.

How are we changing? What innovations are being deployed to address these challenges? In 2017 and into the beginning of 2018, our [former] Commissioner [Mr Mick Fuller] made a commitment to regional New South Wales to address the incidence of rural crime around the state. And what I'll show you here shortly is a small snippet of that Mr. Fuller outlined to realise our vision for a safer New South Wales we must now focus on prevention, disruption, response and capability.

The Rural Crime Prevention Team known as the RCPT has adopted this as our core values and would aim to be one of the best policing agencies in the world by addressing these core but simple aspects of crime fighting. We have grown from 32 rural crime investigators in 2017 which are specialist investigators. Our rural crime investigators are all detectives, criminal investigators who are subject matter experts. However, I suggest it's the same across the world that the skills are not reversible in terms of general crime.

My detectives can investigate everything up to a homicide, but there's other investigators that traditionally do the common general investigations who would not know where to start in terms of stock theft, so it's quite unique. In 2018, we grew from 32 to 46 and included four unsworn staff. So we've got 46. We've got three intelligence analysts around the state and our policy and projects officer who helps us with the policy and projects within the team and many other things.

We've just had an announcement that our team is going to increase with another 18 over the next two years, so by 2022 we'll have 64 in our team, which in essence is 60 investigators, including myself and the detective sergeants. Our analysts, I've just touched on them, traditionally we have analysts in New South Wales Police, who in my submission have not felt part of a team. Our analysts are very much on equal footing with investigators and are tasked to show initiative not just become number crunchers to make me and other bosses look good in front of others. Today, they take it a step further, and they've organised a video conference on a monthly basis with other intelligence analysts across all the states and territories in Australia sharing common problems with rural crime, which I'm quite excited about.

We've got a set uniform and it's hard to get detectives in the uniform believe me, but what it does, it gives us an identity within the community and at saleyards so the local community know who we are, they know who to come and speak to and have confidence in what we do.

The key priorities of the of the Rural Crime Prevention Team is educating frontline employees initially. We've conducted an internal workshop training our first responders in all things-rural crime from stock theft, dealing with external agencies, taking reports, sale yard visits, etc., and which is already showing reward in terms of the service we provide to the community.

Increase social media presence – when we started we had 13,000 followers, and as of just now we've got over 46,000, an increase of 230 to 240 percent over that period. For example, I posted something a short while ago, about two hours ago on our site and it's had 50,000 followers already and has elicited over 200 comments. It's of a horse that had been shot and killed, and we had to exhume the carcass, and it's getting significant attention.

The approach we've got with media is to report, not on the things that traditionally police always report on – the homicides, the drug busts, vehicle fatalities. We report on things from small amounts of diesel that was stolen right through to the significant rural crimes, because they're the crimes that impact upon the farmer and the other more serious crimes is not something that impacts on everyone.

Enhanced community engagement – we conduct around-the-state workshops with farmers teaching everything from crime scene preservation, to the use of drones and the legalities. We've now changed to an online presence (due to Covid), we're about to start next month six webinars with the New South Wales Farmers Association to connect with those farmers on similar topics.

We've had a significant focus on operational investigations especially illegal hunting and trespassing aimed squarely at reporting and increasing community confidence.

Developing stronger stakeholder engagement is another key priority and in essence is taking the blinkers off. Examples of that are the work we're doing with the University of New England, such as with the farm survey they're conducting, a unit of study addressing rural crime and the lack of underreporting and delayed reporting, and presenting at the University.

Recently, we launched Operation Stock Check, which is an operation aimed at disrupting the theft corridors of livestock. Traditionally, people think that stock is stolen in big semi-trailers, and we're finding that small numbers of stock are being stolen with utes and placed in trailers, horse floats and even potentially gutted out caravans.

So what we're doing, we're training up all the uniformed police with the confidence and knowledge of how to do that themselves. Because, in essence, these stock thefts are happening in the middle of the night, we're not always out. So we're giving confidence to the cops that have come to the country from the city that don't know what cattle varieties are or

what stock are and we give them the skills on how to interact with those who are victims of crimes involving livestock.

And I'm pleased to say there is some significant interest. And I notice a colleague from South Australia is online here tonight so we're sharing that operation hopefully to go national. It's an ongoing operation and has no end date. All in all, and all the while, everything we're doing or aiming at doing is enhancing the police districts, the uniform policing and commanders in their 21 districts, and their capability of the ownership of rural crime, so to try and remove the perception that it's just not the rural crime investigators that are the ones that addressing the rural crime, it's everyone's responsibility, and we're more or less in this together.

So the future is quite promising. We're working with external agencies in relation to GPS tagging of stock, retinal scanning, because one of the biggest issues we're finding with stock theft – and it is no secret – is the lack of identification, the delays in reporting, which will be covered by satellite devices telling us when the stock has being stolen, just to make our response more timely and to increase the opportunity of having a successful prosecution.