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SERIOUS ORGANISED CRIME IN SCOTLAND:

THE ROLE OF COMMUNICATIONS IN REDUCING DEMAND, VICTIMISATION AND FEAR

AN EVIDENCE REVIEW AND TOOLKIT FOR COMMUNICATORS - EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND TOOLKIT

Serious organised crime in Scotland: The role of communications in reducing demand, victimisation and fear

An evidence review and toolkit for communicators – Executive summary and toolkit

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September 2017

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Organised crime is evolving rapidly. Public opinion, deep-seated and informed by images of gangs, glamour and violence in the news and entertainment media, lags some way behind the reality.

- There are many real threats which the public either do not perceive as being related to organised crime, or do not consider a threat at all. This lack of awareness matters for several reasons.

- Firstly, the majority of people do not consider themselves affected by or at risk from organised crime; it is something that happens elsewhere and to others. They are therefore less likely to take steps to protect themselves from organised crime. In general, those without personal experience of crime – or who do not believe they have personal experience of crime – are more likely to rely on portrayals in the news or entertainment media, which in turn are more likely to focus on violent or other interpersonal crime.

- Secondly, organised crime is largely funded by the general public, either through the purchase of controlled drugs or other illicit goods, or through unwilling victimisation. Without this source of funds, the capacity of organised crime to inflict physical or economic harm would wither.

- Thirdly, 'organised crime' as a concept already attracts widespread condemnation, and most people state that they would report it if they saw it. However, as many organised crimes would go unrecognised as such, public goodwill is not being fully translated into reports to law enforcement.

- In response to this awareness gap, strategies dealing with the threat of organised crime are increasingly focused on the need for preventative as well as punitive remedies, in the hope of more effectively reducing victimisation, fear, and the flow of money to organised crime groups. Communications is seen as a key element of this prevention strategy, with its role often summarised as 'raising awareness of the threats', or 'educating the public'.

- However, high-level strategies rarely discuss practical ways in which meaningful prevention messaging can be delivered.

- This newer goal of prevention sits alongside the traditional communications objective of increasing public confidence in the justice system and its constituent agencies. These two projects can be summarised as the 'prevention' agenda and the 'reputation' agenda.

- While there is overlap between crime prevention and reputation management messaging, in some circumstances they exist in competition with each other.

- The reputation agenda frames its messages by specifying the threat, condemning the crime, and promoting the capability of the agencies involved in tackling it. The tone of these messages tends to be one of a warning to perpetrators, or reassurance of operational effectiveness. Where guidance is offered, it is often in the form of a referral to other sources, and places responsibility on the reader to follow through and educate themselves.

- The prevention agenda seeks to more actively influence attitudes, support the development of positive behaviours, and encourage workable responses to threats. In practice it seeks to go beyond 'awareness raising' by undermining the attitudes which drive active engagement with organised crime, by empowering the public to protect themselves from victimisation, or by encouraging them to recognise and report organised crime.

- While prevention is the clear priority of Scotland's Serious Organised Crime Strategy and other high-level strategies both in Scotland and elsewhere, in practice reputation remains the most frequent focus of current media statements. While public statements have moved away from the language of war and conflict, they still tend to emphasise the threat of crime and the capability of law enforcement in tackling it.

- Evidence suggests that this blend of messaging may generate a positive view of and trust in the criminal justice system itself, but may also to contribute to a general fear of crime, a lack of practical understanding, and inaction in terms of personal protection. This appears to be close to the current reality.

- Where a crime is misunderstood or unknown, the threat must be explained. However, threat is often given prominence in media statements regardless of existing public awareness or knowledge. This may be due to a perception that such framing is required to make a story newsworthy, or that it drives audience interest in what is to follow. While in some circumstances this assessment is accurate, such statements are also often delivered alongside already newsworthy events, for instance at the conclusion of criminal cases. Their perceived efficacy as drivers of media interest may be overestimated in these cases, and their effectiveness in driving appropriate action may be misjudged if the threat is not also accompanied by specific, achievable behaviours which could mitigate risks.

- Emphasis on threat alone may make an audience decide simply to abandon efforts to protect themselves, or mitigate their fear by denying the existence of the problem.

- Behaviour change is driven not solely by exposure to information, but by the context and framing of that information and a complex range of environmental and psychological factors. There is little evidence of the efficacy of messages relating to serious organised crime having been tested on target groups prior to their use.

- The success or otherwise of media campaigns is generally judged by the 'reach' or readership of the messages, rather than their practical impact. There therefore appears to be an underlying assumption that reach automatically equates to attitude change, and attitude change to behaviour change. This is not the case.

- In order to achieve the goals of the prevention agenda, the language of public statements and campaigns should be rebalanced. While maintaining public confidence in operational work, our public statements and campaigns should also seek to become more useful to the public: better informed by specific threats and risks rather than generic crime types; founded on evidence of what works and what has worked; framed and delivered in ways which focus more on supporting individual capacity than they do on highlighting risk, particularly when the risk is already well established; targeted so as to be more likely to be adopted (see Annex A); and seen as ongoing, multi-year projects rather than individual events.

- Success should be measured, and campaigns informed, by indicators of behaviour change, rather than the degree of exposure to the messages. For instance, this could include assessing trends in crime reports; tracing trends in victimisation and crime levels; phrasing perceptions surveys to ask questions about behaviours as well as attitudes; and monitoring engagement with specific services.

A TOOLKIT FOR COMMUNICATORS

TARGET
Decide with operational partners the most critical or potentially beneficial crimes or aspects of crime to target with an awareness campaign - this will not necessarily be the same as the most critical targets for operations. Within those crime types, establish the specific behaviours or attitudes which would be most valuable to address.

LEARN
Gather and use as much data as possible. Encourage organised crime-related questions to be incorporated into existing studies, and repeat those studies. Develop relationships with academics and other researchers to ensure information generated as part of research projects is analysed and is both useful to and actively captured by communications groups and used to inform messages.

TEST
Where possible, and in particular prior to substantial campaigns, test messages on target groups and use results to refine approach. Focus on demonstrating the personal relevance and benefit of messages, and if possible frame the recommended actions as compatible with existing behaviours (for instance "if you would lock your home, you would use strong passwords")

COMMIT
Effective awareness campaigns are not single-day events. Commit to a suite of messages about certain crime types for a sustained period. The more organisations that buy into and can amplify the messages, the better. Agree a limited number of prevention messages and resources for each key crime type and stick to them.

MEASURE
Be sure that measurement of success is tied to the ultimate goal, rather than assumed intermediate steps. There are many free resources for measuring, for instance, social media uptake of various campaigns. However, the "reach" of a media campaign is only one of many measures necessary to evaluate a behaviour change campaign, and if used in isolation is likely to give a false sense of achievement. Wherever possible, measure the behaviours or attitudes themselves.

BE POSITIVE

Stressing the prevalence of undesirable behaviour can backfire, and make people more likely to behave that way themselves. Subjects that are consistently presented in a negative way may elicit more interest if the framing is reversed. Focus on the potential benefit of change, rather than the risk of failing to change. Where possible, present damaging behaviour as a minor, socially undesirable activity, and reference specific personal experiences wherever possible. Consider if it is necessary to use phrase "organised crime" – which carries many negative/fearful connotations.

BE PERSONAL

Frame messages in a way that encourages empowerment and emphasises how the suggested actions will make the individual feel better about themselves. Whether discussing threat or remedy, demonstrate potential personal impact rather than generalisms or statistics.

BE SPECIFIC

"Fraud", "counterfeits", "cybercrime" etc. are all useful terms for law enforcement, but in practical terms and for the purposes of public advice they can be so broad as to be almost meaningless. Where possible talk of specific risks or solutions rather than crime types which few understand. Recognise and avoid jargon. Some criminals don't understand the harm their actions cause – where possible, address this.

MAKE IT EASY

Make proposed changes to behaviour as straightforward as possible. Encourage environmental changes where possible, or where the structure of current practices enables inaction.

BE USEFUL

Whenever threat is discussed, present a solution – whether it is specific actions that people can take to protect themselves; how they can know if they are at risk; how they can know if they have been victimised; what crimes may look like; how to report the crime.

EMPOWER

Reassurance of an agency's capability in dealing with the threat does not decrease fear, as it places the threat front and centre but does not describe ways in which individual members of the public can protect or distance
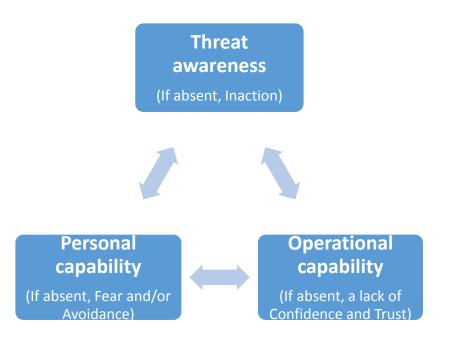
themselves from the possibility of victimisation. The primary driver of fear is not the threat alone, but a feeling of personal powerlessness in the face of it.

TARGET REPUTATION

Organised criminals rely on their reputation – and cybercriminals in particular. When there are opportunities to undermine reputation, or the expectation of reputation, do so. Challenge assumptions or attractions to organised crime groups at all opportunities – it is not just about money. For instance, when publicising cybercrime prosecutions, be sure to state both the accused's real and online IDs – those they deal with in dark markets may well not know their real name, and so the deterrent message will be lost if only it is used.

UNDERSTAND THE MEDIUM

We want to give people tools. The news media are likely to cover the large threats, cases or initiatives.   If our comments around every case are solely focused on reassurance of our expertise, we may continue to increase fear and decrease personal capability and the level of practical knowledge. Make prevention messages as newsworthy as possible, and build them into statements about newsworthy cases or initiatives. Actively seek out engagement with less traditional sources of information (e.g. television, novels, documentaries, etc.).

Proposed crime messaging model, I. Campbell, 2017

Scottish Government
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