



*Research Insight Series*



# **SERIOUS & COMPLEX:** **the business of organised crime**

July 2024

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# Foreword

Since October 2022, a dedicated Chief Constable role has been the National Police Lead for Serious Organised Crime (SOC), funded on a full-time basis by the Home Office and the NPCC. The SOC lead works closely with the National Crime Agency (NCA), police forces and a wide range of organisations to tackle the highest priority threats to the UK – including tackling the harms from drugs, firearms trafficking, child sexual abuse and Organised Immigration Crime

The NPCC response to Serious and Organised Crime involves overseeing the coordination and strategic development of the Regional Organised Crime Unit (ROCU) network, in line with the vision set out in the ROCU Strategy 2030.

The Sensitive Intelligence Network across policing and partner agencies is being developed to enable better intelligence opportunities to target the highest harm SOC nominals and organised crime networks. With the support of Home Office Ministers, NPCC are also working alongside partners to support local forces to develop their SOC response, share best practice and identify areas for improvement.

The NPCC, in collaboration with partners, are now rolling out the *Clear, Hold, Build* (CHB) model to every force area. The model aims to combine traditional ‘Pursue’ policing tactics with partnership working to build resilient communities and reduce demand from SOC. The rollout of CHB is part of a wider package of support to forces including peer review, refined SOC local profiles, the publication of Lead Responsible Officer guidance and the launch of a new SOC prevention toolkit.

The partnership between the NPCC and the University of Staffordshire makes a valuable contribution to enhancing national capacity and capability to tackle SOC by reviewing research insights and seeking creative and proactive ways of seizing the initiative away from criminal entrepreneurs.



A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Chris Haward" with a stylized flourish underneath.

Chief Constable Chris Haward

NPCC Chief Constable - Serious and Organised Crime

# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Report Purpose

The evolving nature of criminal enterprise involves an intricate web of criminal networks, where traditional boundaries blur and new threats emerge. From cybercrime to global trafficking, the focus of the workstream intrusively explores the ever-evolving landscape of criminal enterprise.

This research insight report summarises content from an ongoing think-tank series, hosted at the Institute of Policing in the University of Staffordshire, in order to inform the strategic planning development of the National Police Chief's Council's national portfolio for Serious and Organised Crime (SOC).

The format of this workstream is to bring together the best national and international research to inform policy and practice adoption opportunities in order to catalyse policing and partners to be proactive and future fit. The workstream unites practitioners and researchers to jointly co-problematise current and anticipated SOC risk, threat and harm to co-produce solutions that enhance proactive operational capacity and capabilities.

The method used a SWOT analysis framework, facilitated by James Holyoak, in reaction to a keynote context setting, delivered by Chief Constable Chris Haward. An overview briefing of the national strategy *Clear, Hold, Build* by Shane Roberts of the Home Office was followed by Professor John Coxhead introducing researchers Dr Michael Harrison, a Fintech specialist, and Dr Chris Allen, a business systems specialist, to co-present on *Organised Crime Businesses* (OCBs).



## 2. Analysis

### 2.1 SWOT: strengths

There was fledgling innovative thinking being utilised through the collaborative approach taken of pooling multi-disciplinary researcher and practitioner insights, encouraged through the strategic leadership of CC Haward to be proactive and creative. The permission to think differently and pursue radical upstream possibilities offered a paradigm shift beyond traditional policing approaches. For example, there was a proactive view that the traditional criminal justice system was not the only way to tackle SOC. By assessing SOC through the lens of organized crime businesses there were emergent ways to assess crypto networks, and para disruptive opportunities to dismantle business franchising and supply chains.

Assessing criminal businesses opened up new proactive intelligence opportunities that were not constrained by just police data, by mining a wealth of untapped data in the business and open-source environments. Thinking about the disruption of organised crime business by adopting hostile takeover tactics from the business world opened up a new tactical suite of options drawing on available expertise from financial analysis and business modelling.

Thinking OCB, rather than OCG, was a major step forward for policing and partners to be able to open up new lines of hostile reconnaissance and proactive attack into organised crime infrastructures in a sustainable, cost effective and dynamic way. This transformative mindset shift could seize the initiative by acting faster, taking criminal entrepreneurs by surprise, given that for decades accustomed ways of working have been only exercised through traditional law enforcement. Essentially, the collaborative capabilities were already in the room to facilitate this approach and all that was needed was to capitalise upon the collaboration.

### 2.2 SWOT: weaknesses

Budgets were a concern because of the backdrop of national debt and limited spending allocation on all public services, including the police, National Crime Agency and other relevant partners. Researchers too were suffering financial squeeze given fierce competitive bidding for research grants. In a new research area, such as OCBs, there would be lag in research funding bodies recognising the benefits of the line of enquiry and senior leadership intervention may be needed to break such an impasse if opportunities were to be seized in a timely fashion.

Although much of the data mining identified would be beyond police systems (and not subject to the Management of Police Information – MOPI) there would still be vetting and clearance due diligence considerations to be worked through to enable dynamic teamworking between practitioners and researchers. There needed to be a culture of trust in such a team, but this would need to be underpinned by operating frameworks to protect the process and clarify the governance of data.

Forms of exploratory piloting to concept test the transferability and upscaling potential of new tactics would need buy in from a pilot host (although EMSOU have already expressed an interest as an early adopter). The challenge would be to form a dynamic team of eclectic expertise across finance and business that could collaborate across traditional disciplines and business steams to proactive, creative and essentially maverick. Governance of ethical parameters and legal considerations would necessitate an active oversight from NPCC to achieve of balance of accountability yet

empowerment. Such teams have formed before (Bletchley Park) but are known to need strategic level support in order to venture beyond the conventional. The strength would be the dynamic lack of convention, yet the identified challenge there was that law enforcement governance traditionally can be risk averse.

## **2.3 SWOT: opportunities**

By taking a dynamic new path to 'throw a spanner' in the works of criminal entrepreneurial infrastructures, there was freedom to operate outside of traditional criminal investigative processes which tended to focus on nominal prosecution and then asset confiscation triggered by the predicate offence. The outcome of OCB proactive reconnaissance could be the sabotaging of the business infrastructure, through physical interventions amongst the franchise chain or simply via counter-intelligence deployment (guile).

Criminal markets, like lawful businesses, trade to a large extent on networks, trust and credibility assurance (such as the anonymity of Bitcoin). Sabotaging key reputational factors with the criminal business infrastructure would cause enough uncertainty for the smooth running of the enterprise to collapse. Criminal entrepreneurs are known to be highly creative and adaptive, so any initial disruptions would soon trigger adaptive change, so the OCB team would need to be working in a continual cycle to maintain to seize the initiative.

United Kingdom Research and Innovation (UKRI) might be persuaded to look upon this dynamic knowledge exchange teaming as akin to how research was supported during COVID-19 when the national need cut through bureaucratic restrictions around the release of funding. There is funding available (for example via the NPCC & UKRI partnership), but is often siloed into specialisms, and not always directed towards addressing pressing national priorities. The NPCC could broker political support for the importance of investing to return, to cut the huge national costs of SOC, by prioritising this rather than less urgent research. There is current budget being offered for new national centres of police research collaborative excellence, with funding of over £500,000 available via the NPCC and UKRI.

## **2.4 SWOT: threats**

If there is no change to the approach taken to tackle SOC there will be little difference to the current outcomes. Doing nothing would be a choice, and maybe the wrong one. The identification of the need for more proactive analytical capacity, particularly in utilising forensic financial investigation and Fintech, is a significant choice, and without being tested may be missed as a concept. Given budgetary restrictions, there is unlikely to be any substantive breakthrough in tackling SOC through current, or even shrinking resources and methods.

NPCC support would be required to elevate the OCB venture as a national priority. Without such support it is unlikely that the concept would be operationalised in any meaningful way as it needs to be and would remain merely an untested possibility. Research is ongoing about OCBs, involving professor Robert Smith (University of Staffordshire), Professor John Coxhead (University of Staffordshire and Loughborough), Dr Michael Harrison (University of East London Fintech Research Centre) and Dr Michael Harrison (London Policing College) but without testing and tracking for impact efficacy the research may not achieve its impact and remain theoretical.

## 3. Recommendations

It is recommended that NPCC consider liaising with the NPCC's Chief Scientific Advisor portfolio concerning the viability of funding an enterprise zone, potentially in the midlands ROCUs, supported by the academic partner of the University of Staffordshire, to test and track the efficacy of deploying this new proactive disruption avenue to complement existing traditional law enforcement.

This would be a national centre for SOC research (akin to Bletchley Park), exploring the efficacy of taking a business system disruptor approach to OCB ecosystems, directly tasked to support the NPCC portfolio for SOC to strengthen existing national capabilities and capacities.

This new suite of options could be collated into a policing and partnership toolkit, curated by the College of Policing, aligned directly to support *Clear, Hold, Build* and the new neighbourhood investment into *Safer Streets* by better connecting local to global awareness capabilities.

