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LAW ENFORCEMENT INFORMATION SHARING FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

Effective law enforcement practice requires the identification – and communication – of relevant and timely information. How is this currently done and how can it be improved?

THE BACKGROUND

Intelligence-led policing (ILP) uses intelligence to inform decision-making and direct law enforcement activities, and emerged in the 1990's as agencies realised a more targeted approach was needed to tackle offenders and reduce crime. However, the criminal landscape was transformed in the 21st Century as globalisation and technological advances have allowed offenders, commodities and information to travel physically and virtually with greater ease. Crime has become increasingly transnational.

It remains difficult for offenders to commit crime without leaving physical and electronic traces. These traces can be captured in various ways, including diverse camera systems (e.g., CCTV, ANPR), banking transactions, and communication mediums (e.g., texts, social media). However, capturing relevant and timely information is no easy task when it's held in different regions and countries, by different agencies, in different formats and on different systems. Multiple public inquiries worldwide have criticised law enforcement communication and intelligence failures, whereby critical information has not been communicated with partner agencies (or in a timely manner) and has resulted in the failure to prevent or effectively respond to an incident. Globally, billions of pounds have been spent in

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response (e.g., developing new agencies or technology), yet the problem persists.

Previous studies to explain barriers to information sharing have highlighted culture (i.e., trust), procedure (i.e., sharing protocols and legislation) and technical issues (i.e., incompatibility, cost). However, this insight has remained at a general level, generated from the assumption that information sharing is conducted in the same way, no matter what agency or information is involved.

INTERNATIONAL LAW ENFORCEMENT INFORMATION EXCHANGE

My UK Research and Innovation Future Leaders Fellowship looks to test some of these assumptions by exploring how international law enforcement agencies exchange information (www.ilex.ac.uk). Initially focusing on the UK, our research has established that the type of information being exchanged (i.e., tactical vs strategic) and the information recipient (i.e., outside the agency peer group such as an international entity or NGO) influences the nature of communication. Four ways in which information is shared, from most to least used are:

- i. **Inform and request:** an agency representative will (formally or informally) highlight information and ask whether another agency has further information.
- ii. **Meet and share:** an information sharing partnership is created between trusted and invited agencies. Here representatives meet (physically or virtually) to provide information on subjects of mutual interest while maintaining exclusive access to their systems (i.e., Multi Agency Safeguarding Hubs).
- iii. **Customised database:** collaborating agencies use a bespoke database to pool information. Such systems are isolated from other organisational operating systems and enable partners to interrogate the information however they wish (i.e., the organised crime group mapping system).
- iv. **Integrated systems:** an agency can directly view, in real time, another agency's data/system – or part of it (i.e., the Police National Database [PND]).

My research has revealed that an 'inform and request' approach, despite being used most, is least effective and efficient as it is resource intensive and personality driven. In contrast, an 'integrated systems' approach was the least frequently used even though the technology exists to link diverse databases and use algorithms to automatically flag criminal patterns and active offenders. Yet, despite being the purest approach to multi-agency working, practitioner reluctance remains to sharing information in this way. These findings appear consistent in Australia too.

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THE IMPORTANCE OF THIS RESEARCH

Stock mirrors the concerns of many commentators when he highlights the current “global security crisis” associated with an “epidemic of transnational organised crime”. How can offenders who exploit the jurisdictional ownership and diverse information silos of fragmented law enforcement agencies be more effectively and efficiently tackled? There appears significant scope for law enforcement agencies to improve information management. The technology exists to integrate systems to provide a more holistic understanding of crime patterns and offender behaviour. They also reduce administrative burden (i.e., double keying) while maintaining security (i.e., access, audit trail), enabling agencies to determine which information to access and analyse, how and when. Information is communicated almost instantaneously. The PND is an example of this. Yet, despite the benefits of the system and its capabilities being recognised, it's not used to its full potential and practitioner hesitancy remains. This emphasises the importance of considering all aspects of this process (i.e., cultural change and technology implementation), as well as the need for evidence to inform policy and practice to ensure investment and resources are used in the most beneficial and productive way.

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