
STRATEGIC POLICE DECISION-MAKING IN TACKLING ORGANISED CRIME

Constructing and prioritising organised crime problems in
the UK

Maria Pournara

**School of Social Sciences
Cardiff University**

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Abstract

Law enforcement agencies have to constantly make decisions about which crime problems to tackle. In the context of policing organised crime, these decisions can be extremely complex as strategic decision-makers have to make proactive judgements about priorities in a politically charged environment with finite resources. Yet most studies on this topic are concerned with intelligence products and their presentation in threat assessments, and they tend to downplay the significant role of a wide array of factors that influence strategic decisions. This perspective also overlooks the role of processes of social construction in setting priorities and how they can explain rises and falls of organised crime problems within strategic agendas. This study's main aim is to explore how police organisations set strategic priorities to tackle organised crime. In doing so, it employs a multi-method research design and a longer-term perspective. By applying Best's (2016) natural history model of social problems' process the study examines changes and developments in the construction of organised crime problems over time, as well as the factors that drive these changes.

A historical review of British organised crime policing reveals trends of centralisation and amalgamation, as well as a pattern of frequent institutional changes. These changes, however, facilitate ongoing processes of organisational inheritance which renders each agency dependent on its predecessors' priorities and activities. Content analysis of annual reports published from 1993-2017 by the four national organised crime fighting agencies in the UK is used to map out patterns and trends of change in strategic priorities; interviews with former strategic decision-makers are then used to illuminate behind-the-scenes processes of change. Findings demonstrate the various pathways of crime problem construction: some problems emerge and develop into high priorities, some remain persistent (in either high or low ranks) through time, and some fall from strategic agendas; crucially, these are not clear, linear trends but reinforce Best's assertion of (2016) 'cycles of concern' across time. Finally, findings from a thematic analysis of interviews and media highlight complexities in decision-making processes by unveiling and discussing factors that shape priority-setting in national agencies (legislation, political pressure, signal crimes, mass media, performance indicators, organisational path dependency, intra-organisational dynamics). Importantly, the thesis yields policy-relevant results as both its empirical findings and conceptual approach can be useful for critically assessing new problems.

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Introduction

On 18 June 2000, 58 dead bodies were found at the back of a lorry in the port town of Dover, England. The deceased were all illegal immigrants who were trapped in the container for more than 18 hours and died of asphyxiation. The crime caused a furore in the country, received widespread media coverage and mobilised policymakers and law enforcement agencies to prioritise tackling human trafficking; a multi-agency taskforce was even established with the purpose of coordinating operations and developing intelligence to enhance the fight against this ‘abhorrent’ organised crime problem. Nevertheless, over the years it fell off the limelight until 2013, when it was re-introduced (principally by the then Home Secretary among other claimsmakers) as ‘modern slavery’ and became the National Crime Agency’s top priority. This story raises a number of questions regarding the socio-political processes that underpin the changes and developments in responses to organised crime problems over time; more specifically, how do these problems emerge, how do they rise and fall in law enforcement agendas, what drives these changes and, crucially, how do decisions about which problems to prioritise come about in organised crime policing.

This study explores how police organisations make these decisions about setting strategic priorities to tackle organised crime. As Maguire (2000 p.326) states “decisions about priorities are an inevitable feature of all policework, but they are particularly important in proactive approaches to crime control” such as policing organised crime in an intelligence-led era. This is an area of policing where the validity and reliability of available information to guide strategic decision-making is frequently limited and uncertain. Moreover, these processes are often politicised and can be influenced by a wide array of organisational factors. Therefore, decisions about which organised crime problems to prioritise are especially complex and contingent.

Before delving into researching strategic decisions about organised crime, it is important to clarify how this study uses this rather amorphous concept. The conceptualisation of organised crime has been evolving for years, but commentators have failed to find consensus over its definition (Von Lampe 2019). In the United Kingdom (UK), the most recent legal definition in the 2015 Serious Crime Act¹, is loose and flexible enough so that, as noted by earlier

¹ See the 2015 Serious Crime Act section 45(6), according to which “organised crime group” means “a group that (a) has as its purpose, or as one of its purposes, the carrying on of criminal activities, and (b) consists of three or more persons who act, or agree to act, together to further that purpose”.

commentators, a wide range of different and diverse phenomena can be included under the same label (Finckenauer 2005; Levi 2007; Calderoni 2010; Lavorgna and Sergi 2016; Leukfeldt et al. 2017). However, this study is not interested in reproducing the vigorous academic debate on defining organised crime, nor in examining how police organisations construct organised crime as *one* problem. The main focus is on the diverse crime *problems* that the label ‘organised crime’ consists of, their relationship with each other, their changing meanings and ultimately, their rise and fall from national law enforcement agendas as ‘high’ or ‘low’ strategic priorities respectively.

Organised crime was recently defined in the Home Office’s Serious and Organised Crime Strategy as “the most deadly security threat faced by the UK” (Home Office 2018b). It seems almost axiomatic to suggest that such a ‘deadly’ problem must require a concerted, national response with international reach which utilises scientific, intelligence-led methods for targeting those problems that are threatening to the UK. In this vein, the official line of police organisations is that strategic priorities are set based on information provided by objective and ‘evidence-led’ threat assessments and intelligence systems. However, this study aspires to illuminate the complexities of strategic decision-making processes at a national level, by highlighting its implications for the construction of organised crime problems, and tracing the various ways in which these change and develop over time.

Drawing upon a social constructionist framework, the empirical and conceptual work conducted has been framed to describe the way people assign meaning to the world through language, in order to categorise, classify and understand social phenomena. More specifically, the study uses Joel Best’s (2016) model of natural history of problems as a theoretical framework for the analytical work that follows. The model consists of six stages which are presented in Table 1 along with explanations of the processes involved in each stage. At first glance, the process of setting strategic police priorities seems to fit in nicely in the ‘social problems work’ stage where law enforcement agencies implement organised crime legislation and policies by making strategic decisions about how to categorise and prioritise organised crime problems. However, this thesis argues that priority-setting is a much broader process which can be influenced and shaped by elements in each and every stage of the problems process. Indeed, activists and experts, media workers, members of the public and policymakers (re)construct initial claims about a particular organised crime problem – adopt, promote, ignore or repackage it – and thus take part in the wider social process that results in dedicating more

organisational effort in responding to certain organised crime problems (drugs, human trafficking and cybercrime) instead of others (economic and environmental crime).

Natural history of the social problems process, source: (Best 2016)

Stages	Claimsmaking →	Media coverage →	Public reaction →	Policymaking →	Social problems work →	Policy outcomes
Process	People make claims that there is a social problem with certain characteristics, causes and solutions.	Media report on claims so that news reach a broader audience.	Public opinion focuses on the social problem identified by claimsmakers	Lawmakers and others with the power to set policies create new ways to address the problem.	Agencies implement the new policies, including calls for further changes.	There are various responses to the new arrangements.

At its core, this study is an exploration of how organised crime problems are categorised by law enforcement as strategic priorities. Police organisations are responsible for responding to a number of rather diverse criminal activities which have come to be categorised under the slightly “amorphous, open-ended concept” (Campbell 2014 p.83) of organised crime. These are constructed as problems of varying seriousness and compete with each other for a place in the national strategic agenda, within an environment where police capacity and resources seem to always be outweighed by the number and scale of organised crime problems. Central to understanding the various dimensions of the strategic decision-making process is an appreciation of the relationship between each organised crime problem – its emergence and categorisation – and the institutions that respond to it. Then, the ways these problems rise and fall in strategic agendas over time are explored, along with the factors that contribute to their development and construction process.

The study is structured as follows: Chapter 1 is a review of criminological literature on policing organised crime, which identifies certain deficiencies in this body of work and, hence, an area of potential for the research to develop. More specifically, the plethora of empirical evidence on intelligence systems assumes that improving intelligence processes and products, such as threat assessments, would automatically improve police decision-making as well. This study

aspires to generate empirical evidence to show that strategic decision-making is an inherently complex process influenced by politics, organisational dynamics and other factors as much as (if not more than) intelligence. Moreover, it is shown that research in this area principally conceptualises organised crime problems as real, observable phenomena, and emphasizes the importance of measurement in assessing the harms caused by organised crime. This study views organised crime activities as social problems through the lens of social constructionism, and examines the ways in which they get (re)labelled and (re)constructed by national law enforcement agencies as higher or lower priorities in strategic agendas. Finally, a methodological limitation is highlighted, namely that research on policing organised crime focusses on current developments, thus overlooking the history of organised crime problems and their shifting social constructions. This study critically examines how recent understandings and framings of organised crime problems are distinct from those of previous years by taking a longer-term, historical view in order to track and trace how national strategic priorities have changed and developed over time and across institutions. The three limitations are used to shape the study's three research questions.

Chapter 2 explains the research strategy, design and methods of the study. The dataset consists of 31 annual reports published by the four British national agencies, a sample of newspaper articles and 15 semi-structured interviews with former strategic decision-makers. The discussion of the research strategy includes a discussion of the study's interpretivist epistemological position; also, the study's moderate social constructionist framework and socio-historical approach are explained in more detail. The research design of the study is described as hybrid, in that it shares elements from both fixed (quantitative content analysis) and flexible designs (qualitative thematic analysis). The study is principally rooted in interpretivism; however, it adopts an adaptive approach to the theory-method relationship, which facilitates the intersection of pre-set ideas or hypotheses with new information arising from the dataset. The merits and challenges of triangulating 'reading' and 'talking/listening' methods are also discussed. The analytical techniques through which documentary and interview data were collected and analysed are presented, including sampling techniques, details of the sample, as well as data manipulation and categorisation (documents). Finally, some ethical considerations are discussed.

Chapters 3 to 5 are empirical chapters, that address the study's three research questions. Chapter 3 includes an analysis of the budgets of national agencies in relation to the national

overall policing budgets from 1993 to 2017. The findings of this analysis set the background for the historical review of national organised crime policing in the UK that follows: from the establishment of Regional Crime Squads by the Police Act 1964, to the creation of the National Criminal Intelligence Service and the National Crime Squad in the 1990s, the various inter-agency strategies during the early 2000s, the creation of the short-lived Serious Organised Crime Agency in 2006 and, finally, its amalgamation along with some other organised crime fighting institutions into the more powerful and centralised National Crime Agency in 2013. Through the various transformations of the organisational policing architecture, the review in this chapter is underpinned by a particular focus on the evolution of strategic priority-setting.

Chapter 4 tracks and traces how police constructions of organised crime problems change and develop over time, with an eye to explore specifically how and why there are rises and falls of specific problems (and specific framings of problems) in prioritisation during different time periods. The findings of a content analysis of national agencies' annual reports are presented and discussed in order to map out the changes and developments in official constructions of organised crime problems over a period of 24 years (1993-2017), as they are prioritised by national law enforcement. The second half of the chapter provides a more nuanced interpretation of the trends and patterns revealed by official accounts of strategic prioritisation. Through a discussion of data from interviews with key players involved in strategic decision-making, a four-fold taxonomy of organised crime priorities is presented.

Chapter 5 provides a comprehensive discussion of the factors that influence and shape the setting of strategic priorities. Building on findings from the two previous findings chapters, the chapter outlines the main influences on priority-setting in British national law enforcement agencies. A fine-grained analysis and discussion of the various ways in which the drivers identified impact on constructing organised crime problems as strategic priorities, is presented.

Finally, Chapter 6 consists of a discussion of the findings and conclusions.

1. Chapter 1: A review of empirical, methodological and conceptual aspects of research into organised crime policing

1.1 Introduction

Exploring strategic decision-making and setting national police priorities to tackle organised crime starts by identifying and reviewing existing literature on this cluster of topics. This process leads to the generation of specific research questions informed by the identification of deficiencies or limitations in the existing literature. This study explores strategic decision-making processes – more specifically the setting of strategic priorities – in national organised crime fighting agencies. To that end, the study adopts a long-term view on priority-setting by reviewing the main institutional transformations in British organised crime policing since the early 1990s with a special focus on national law enforcement agencies and their decision-making processes. Moreover, it takes a closer look at a number of organised crime problems and examines how their constructions as strategic priorities change and develop over time. In particular, it explores how problems rise and fall in police organisations' agendas. Importantly, it is also concerned with identifying and outlining the factors that drive these processes and shape constructions of organised crime problems.

The study initially set out to challenge assumptions of rationality in police decision-making processes. The central aim was to investigate how police officers make operational decisions about how and when to intervene in respect of organised crime. The study aspired to produce new insights into the ways in which a variety of influencing factors shape and guide operational policing decisions; in doing so, it would be able to identify systematic errors when police officers have to make “judgements under uncertainty” (Tversky and Kahneman 1974).

However, during the early stages of this review several new issues and areas of potential interest were identified in this body of literature, which led to a significant shift in the central focus of the study – namely, from operational, street-level decision-making to strategic priority-setting – as well as, inevitably, to the generation of reshaped research questions. More specifically, the chapter presents a review of literature on organised crime policing and identifies three limitations: an *empirical*, a *conceptual* and a *methodological*.

Empirical research on decision-making in policing organised crime focuses upon how intelligence products are generated and disseminated, and in doing so leads to the implicit

assumption that improved intelligence processes lead to rational decisions. This study explores strategic decision-making processes and shows that they are influenced by internal organisational politics, inter-agency as well as external liberal democratic politics, organisational dynamics and other factors as much as (if not more than) intelligence. Secondly, the study conceptualises organised crime threats as social problems and examines the ways in which they get (re)labelled and (re)constructed by national agencies as higher or lower priorities in law enforcement agendas. Finally, studies in this area frequently adopt methodological viewpoints that focus on present day practices and processes. This study, however, takes a long-term, historical view in order to track and trace how national strategic priorities have changed and developed over time and across institutions, thus also critically examining how current conceptions of organised crime threats differ from those of previous years.

1.2 International developments that influence organised crime policing in the UK: concepts and policymaking

Before discussing these three aspects of literature on decision-making and policing organised crime in more detail, it is important to place them in an appropriate context in terms of the policy developments at the international level that have influenced strategic decision-making in many countries, including the UK. These developments are inherently linked to the conceptual history of organised crime. A closer examination demonstrates how “external factors that have little or nothing to do with the reality of crime” (Von Lampe 2016 p.16) have influenced understandings as well as policy framings of organised crime to construct organised crime as a serious, global social problem.

Many organised crime scholars argue that organised crime is a term that owes its existence and trajectory in international political and social spheres to American policies, research and discourse (Von Lampe 2001; Woodiwiss and Bewley-Taylor 2005; Woodiwiss and Hobbs 2009; Hobbs and Antonopoulos 2013; Von Lampe 2016). The origins of the term can be traced back to the beginning of the 20th century when the Chicago Crime Commission, a nonpartisan, anti-crime organisation established by businessmen in 1919, framed modern crime as a of centralised, organised, business oriented criminal class (Simpson 1935). During the Depression era, this original understanding of organised crime gave its place to ‘racketeering’ with notorious gangsters organised in syndicates or criminal organisations and being labelled as public enemies (Von Lampe 2001).

The term 'organised crime' was revived by the Kefauver Committee (1950-52), a Senate Committee which was established in order to investigate organised crime in interstate commerce. The Committee's significant role in the social construction of the 'organised crime problem' in the USA is evident by the fact that it introduced the notion of the 'Mafia' as a "sinister conspiracy of foreign origin" (Wade 1995 p.371) that controls criminal activity not only locally within municipalities, but on a national scale. The Federal Bureau of Narcotics gave evidence to the Kefauver Committee to assert the existence of the Mafia, which marked the first time that American law enforcement not only acknowledged organised crime in this form, but also actively participated in its conceptualisation as an 'alien conspiracy' (Von Lampe 2001; Antonopoulos 2009).

The concept of organised crime remained equated with the Mafia and policies to combat it were focussed primarily on New York City until the late 1960s (Von Lampe 2001). In 1969, President Richard Nixon framed drug use as the number one threat to the national security and subsequently declared war on drugs (Hobbs and Antonopoulos 2013). The Reagan administration continued and reinforced this rhetoric that propelled drugs to take over from other highly publicised addiction-related problems such as alcohol and gambling, as the top priority strategic priority for American law enforcement (Woodiwiss and Hobbs 2009). This rhetoric of anti-drug wars coupled with the alien conspiracy conceptualisation of organised crime formed the rationale for intensively pursuing and establishing international policies that would ensure other countries across the world were prioritising the problems of drugs and organised crime (Nadelmann 1993). According to Von Lampe (2005 p.227), "the mafia-centred imagery of organised crime in the United States, came across the Atlantic in the 1960s and 1970s through the dual channels of Hollywood films and international law enforcement cooperation, government agencies and journalists". This extract illustrates the power of influence of American rhetoric and concepts on international policies designed to tackle organised crime.

In 1988, the UN Convention Against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances introduced more measures against drug trafficking and money laundering which largely mirrored American prohibition policies (Woodiwiss and Bewley-Taylor 2005). The Convention also aimed at strengthening co-operation between countries as conceptualisations of organised crime as a problem created by 'others', usually of different ethnic identity, remained prevalent (Antonopoulos 2009; Hobbs and Antonopoulos 2013). Six years later, the

United States and the member states of the European Union took part in the UN World Ministerial Conference on Organized Transnational Crime and agreed that organised crime should be framed and treated as an international problem because it is evident that criminal organisations learn to swiftly adapt and function within the new globalised society (Edwards and Gill 2003b). It was in the mid-1990s when constructions of organised crime (especially drug trafficking) as an international problem first appeared in the UK as well. Although the traditional architecture of British policing is rather decentralised, the National Criminal Intelligence Service was established as the country's first national organised crime fighting agency in 1992. NCIS annual reports demonstrate that the agency largely identified strategic priorities in terms of ethnic groups (Turkish, Italian, Russian, Triads). Hence, it can be argued that UK strategies were thus influenced by American-led, 'alien conspiracy' approaches to organised crime.

At the European level, the leaders of the 15 member states met at Tampere, Finland, in October 1999 for an EU summit. It was there that the European Council gave a kick-start to the EU's justice and home affairs policies, including organised crime which was elevated to a European priority (Van Duyne et al. 2004). More specifically, one of the main themes covered in the summit was 'a unionwide fight against crime' which entailed closer and more consistent cooperation between countries' law enforcement organisations and legal systems. The leaders of members states decided the creation of joint investigative teams in cross-border areas, especially to combat trafficking in drugs, human beings, and terrorism, and called for a multiannual European strategy against drugs to be adopted for the four years following the summit and, finally, for the powers and competence of Europol to be extended in order to combat money laundering more effectively.

A very significant international policy development for establishing organised crime as a serious social problem with a global reach is the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (UNTOC), also called the Palermo Convention (2000), which is a United Nations-sponsored multilateral treaty against transnational organised crime (Van Duyne et al. 2004). It includes three supplementary protocols: 1) the protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children, 2) the protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Sea and Air, and 3) the protocol against the Illicit Manufacturing and Trafficking in Firearms. The inclusion of these protocols is indicative of the broadening of the term of organised crime to encompass many more criminal structures

and activities. The UNTOC came into force in 2003 and established extensive mutual obligations for international law enforcement assistance. Research demonstrates that these revolved around American anti-organised crime policies, mainly based on prohibition especially with regards to drugs (Antonopoulos and Papanicolaou 2010; Hobbs and Antonopoulos 2013).

The UNTOC is the main legal international instrument to fight organised crime. However, its efficiency depends on each country's ability to implement the suggested policy framework. To ensure that there is an appropriate mechanism to exert pressure onto countries which do not fully comply with the provisions of the UNTOC, the U.S. State Department's office to monitor and combat trafficking in persons issues the 'Trafficking in Persons Reports' (or TiP reports). TiP reports are issued annually and their main purpose is to rank governments based on their perceived efforts to acknowledge and combat human trafficking (Department of State 2019)². The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime has also developed a mechanism for the review of the implementation of the UNTOC.

It is important to highlight the connection between these policy developments and the conceptual history of organised crime. Von Lampe (2016) delineates two competing views within this history. The narrow view that focusses on criminal organisations such as the Italian-American Mafia dominates public perceptions of organised crime, whereas the broader one prevails in legislation, criminal policies and strategies as well as in the practice of law enforcement. This flexibility, coupled with the plethora of activities and structures that can fit into the broader view of the term allow for its use in ways that are "not inherently and inadvertently linked to the the reality of crime" (Von Lampe 2016 p.26). This inevitably affects strategic decision-making in law enforcement agencies and the subsequent prioritisation of organised crime problems, as well as they change over time.

Notwithstanding the significance of these developments – both in terms of policy and concepts – for the study of decision-making in policing organised crime, the study does not examine

² The report divides nations into tiers based on their compliance with standards outlined in the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) of 2000. These tiers are:

- Tier 1 countries whose governments fully comply with the TVPA's minimum standards.
- Tier 2 countries whose governments do not fully comply with an TVPA's minimum standards but are making significant efforts to bring themselves into compliance with those standards.
- Tier 2 watchlist countries whose governments do not fully comply with the TVPA's minimum standards, but are making significant efforts to bring themselves into compliance with those standards
- Tier 3 countries whose governments do not fully comply with the minimum standards and are not making significant efforts to do so.

them empirically, although they play an important role in providing an understanding of the international context that inevitably influences UK policies. However, this study adopts an inductive approach to data analysis and interrogation partly due to the researcher's positionality as an 'outsider' (see sections 2.4.1 and 2.5.2. for a more detailed account of the research design and elite interviews respectively). Interview participants interestingly did not discuss these developments as important influences on the setting of strategic priorities in national agencies; when a few were mentioned, they were not framed as factors that affected how decisions were made. On the contrary, participants tended to refer mainly to national legislation and policies when commenting on decision-making processes. Therefore, the theme of international policies seemed to be neither frequent, nor significant in the dataset and hence, under the principals of an inductive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006), it was decided not to be discussed in the empirical findings chapters of this thesis. Nonetheless, a review of these developments is crucial in order to contextualise the following discussion of literature on police decision-making and the construction of organised crime problems as strategic priorities.

1.3 Questioning rational decision-making in tackling organised crime

Previous studies on police decision-making in tackling organised crime tend to place increased emphasis on intelligence processes and threat assessments as factors that inform the setting of strategic priorities. At the same time, most studies understate or often completely overlook the realities of complex decision-making processes which are influenced by a bewildering number of competing drivers and pressures, such as different problems claiming their spot in the decision agenda (Burstein 1991; Kingdon 2003). This section shows that most studies implicitly adopt 'rational actor' frameworks in relation to the organisational *strategic level of decision-making* – a relatively neglected topic especially when compared to operational decisions and police activity (Almond et al. 2011; Mullins et al. 2011). It is worth noting that in the terminology of the National Intelligence Model (ACPO 2005), the term 'strategic' is applied to the process of business planning, resource allocation and priority-setting at each of the structural levels within UK policing – local, regional and national (Flood and Gaspar 2009). This study is concerned with the national level.

Implicit representations of rational decision-making processes are mainly achieved by overemphasizing the role of intelligence in strategic decision-making, and therefore, focusing research almost exclusively on how intelligence products are generated, disseminated and presented in threat assessments. This increased emphasis on intelligence has been further

exacerbated within criminological literature by the prevalence of intelligence-led policing approaches (Ratcliffe 2002; Innes and Sheptycki 2004) and ‘scientification’ techniques (Ericson and Shearing 1986; Tusikov 2012) since the late 1990s.

The shift towards intelligence-led policing (ILP) has been a significant trend in contemporary policing of organised crime (Cope 2004; Maguire and John 2006; Ratcliffe 2008a). It is defined thus:

Intelligence-led policing is a business model and managerial philosophy where data analysis and crime intelligence are pivotal to an objective, decision-making framework that facilitates crime and problem reduction, disruption and prevention through both strategic management and effective enforcement strategies that target prolific and serious offenders

(Ratcliffe 2008a p.89)

Over the past two decades, the role of police organisations, especially (but not exclusively) with regard to organised criminality, has morphed from *reactive* enforcement activities to more *proactive* approaches to managing human security risk (Innes and Sheptycki 2004; Coyne and Bell 2011). In the United Kingdom, this can be traced back to the Audit Commission's report ‘Helping With Enquiries: Tackling Crime Effectively’ (1993; see also Maguire & John, 1995) whose main aim was to maximise ‘the three Es’ (efficiency, effectiveness, and economy) of publicly provided policing in the UK by encouraging greater use of intelligence. More specifically with regard to strategic decision-making, oriented from data-driven approaches is the argument that “police managers must be able to obtain valid information to make rational decisions” (Eck and La Vigne 1994 p.164 cited in Ratcliffe 2002 p.61). This trend of developing and disseminating intelligence to make more precise, ‘objective’ decisions about targeting interventions and allocating resources is what Ericson and Shearing (1986) label, as the ‘scientification of policing’, which also falls under the ILP paradigm.

In recent years, the National Crime Agency (NCA), the UK’s central organised crime fighting agency at the national level, has been described in its first annual report as an intelligence-led agency driven by a central intelligence hub (NCA 2014a). This provides a single picture of all the threats from serious and organised crime. This collective intelligence directly informs the decisions of the NCA, allowing it to have maximum impact when it comes to fighting crime” (NCA 2014b p.1). Indeed, the *National Strategic Assessment of Serious and Organised Crime* places particular emphasis on intelligence and its pivotal role in NCA’s strategic priority-setting processes.

Intelligence-led policing has been enshrined in Britain as the philosophy underpinning the National Intelligence Model (NIM), which is a well-established and recognised business model for policing managers to help them set strategic direction, make prioritised decisions and allocate resources intelligently (ACPO 2007; Flood and Gaspar 2009). Launched by the National Criminal Intelligence Service (NCIS) and adopted by the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) in 2000, the NIM has become a cornerstone of policing in England and Wales. The NIM proposes an alignment of law enforcement business processes, strategy, tactics and operational intelligence products with the problem of organised crime. At the heart of this business management in the NIM are intelligence-related processes and products; the success of the model is dependent on their effective delivery to managers in a tasking and coordination process both at strategic and tactical levels. Flood and Gaspar (2009 p.61) explain that from this evidence based process flows a ‘control strategy’ which ultimately “sets the priorities for intelligence, enforcement and prevention”. In other words, the strategic agenda (including strategic objectives and priorities) is set – or should ideally be set – on the basis of strategic intelligence analysis. The NIM has faced many criticisms regarding its complexity, facilitation of intelligence gaps between national and local levels of policing and inadequacy to provide cost-effective data (Kirby and McPherson 2004; ACPO 2005; Carter and Carter 2009). Crucially, the NIM does not account for constraints, pressures and an array of other factors such as lack of knowledge and intelligence expertise that influence strategic decision-making within higher management ranks (Kleiven 2007; Ratcliffe 2009).

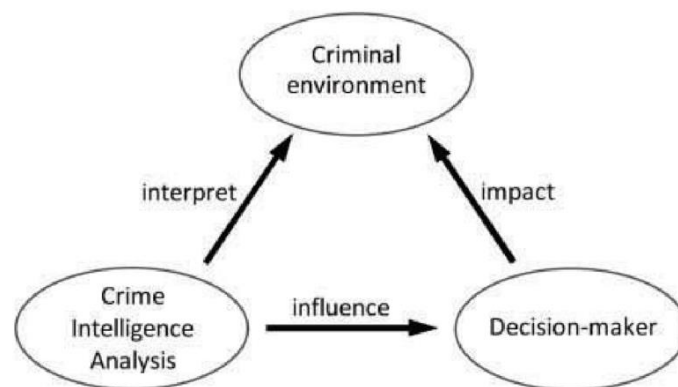
Nevertheless, Ratcliffe argues that the intelligence analytical process should be used as a decision-making and strategy-setting methodology in its own right (Ratcliffe 2008a; Ratcliffe 2008b; Ratcliffe 2008c). A useful way of illustrating the role of intelligence in the police decision-making is with Ratcliffe’s *3i model* (Figure 1), which is by his own admission, a rather simplified model for what can often be a much more complex process (Ratcliffe 2003). However, it is useful for the purposes of this review because it explicitly incorporates decision-making into the process. In this model, the arrow from ‘intelligence’ to the ‘criminal environment’ highlights the requirement on analysts to actively interpret the criminal environment rather than merely receive and collate information. Ratcliffe (2009 p.2) further emphasizes the importance of understanding and accurately interpreting the criminal environment and the risks it entails for organisations and communities:

Priorities are usually determined on the basis of an understanding of the impending risks that an organisation or community will face.

Importantly, the arrow from the ‘intelligence analysis’ cell to the ‘decision-maker’ demonstrates the expectation that decision-makers should only be influenced by intelligence within an ILP paradigm. Thus, the relationship between analysts and decision-makers is stressed to a greater degree than any previous approach to policing organised crime. As Ratcliffe (2009 p.3) maintains:

...without the ability for the intelligence process to influence the thinking of decision-makers who then implement strategies that impact on the criminal environment, there is no intelligence-led policing.

Figure 1.1: A simplified 3i intelligence-led policing model



Source: Ratcliffe (2003 p.3)

The main problem with studies and official documents presenting intelligence-led models, such as the NIM and the 3i model, is that they often can lead to an assumption that the reality of analysis and policing of organised crime actually follows these models. The reality of the intelligence cycle is that a number of constraints play a limiting role and the process is more messy and complex (Gill 2000).

Ratcliffe and Sheptycki (2009) provide an overview of the mechanisms that are used to define national law enforcement agendas, and consider the limitations and opportunities for intelligence products and processes to influence decision-makers. They argue that over-reliance on law enforcement data can lead to significant limitations of strategic intelligence analysis cycles, namely create self-fulfilling prophecies: in particular, ‘traditional’ sectors of criminal activity tend to remain higher strategic priorities due to “their already established presence” (Ratcliffe and Sheptycki 2009 p.249). In turn, existing law enforcement priorities

influence new strategic intelligence products and priorities. Ratcliffe's vision about ILP entails significant re-adjustment of organisational structures in order to accommodate the central role of intelligence (Ratcliffe 2008a; Schaible and Sheffield 2012). This can be achieved by ensuring that intelligence products and tactical decisions are informed by strategic priorities, as well as that intelligence and priorities are actioned, resources are allocated where needed, and results are evaluated (Ratcliffe 2008a; Carter and Carter 2009). Therefore, the important role of strategic priorities in informing intelligence products (not only the other way around) is recognised within law enforcement organisations seeking to implement ILP. However, there is no further analysis or discussion of the complex processes and various factors that drive the setting of these priorities at the strategic level.

In the same vein, Sheptycki (2004) draws links between 'scientific' police work and organisational pathologies in intelligence systems, which are usually internal to police and law enforcement agencies. The study's aim is to identify organisational flaws in these "formally rational systems" (Sheptycki 2004 p.309). Sheptycki (2004 p.313) identifies eleven 'organisational pathologies': digital divide; linkage blindness; noise; intelligence overload; non-reporting; intelligence gaps; duplication; institutional friction; intelligence-hoarding and information silos; defensive data concentration; and the differences of occupational subculture. However, these pathologies all pertain to police intelligence systems rather than strategic decision or prioritisation processes. Therefore, even though they undeniably constitute a valuable contribution to the lexicon of ILP and a nuanced insight to some of the challenges and constraints of intelligence systems, they can only account for intelligence-related influences on decision-making. Thus, by not acknowledging other distinct complexities of the latter, such as political or media influences, it is implicitly assumed that, if these pathologies are treated, rational processes of strategic intelligence analysis will support the setting and re-ordering of police priorities.

Similarly, Ronn (2013) argues that existing intelligence-led policing strategies that emphasize rationalisation of processes and 'objective' decision-making frameworks are faced with a series of challenges, such as conceptual vagueness, inherent subjectivity and incommensurability (Ronn 2013 p.53). The study advocates for a participatory approach or 'democratisation' to intelligence gathering and analysis, which subsequently also inform the design of threat assessments. The main idea is to include interests and values from an extended community of stakeholders, such as victims, officials, experts, communities and even offenders, in order to

reduce over-reliance solely on intelligence analysts as expert advisors, as well as law enforcement data. Ronn (2013 p.63) suggests that:

Democratizing strategic intelligence thus constitutes a way (in combination with empirical facts on specific and ‘measurable’ elements of organized crime) to ensure accountability and reasonability of the decision-making process related to setting police priorities.

Hence, it is argued that by changing the inputs to the internal flows of intelligence systems, a democratic approach contributes to more reliable and accurate priority-setting within police organisations (Sheptycki 2017a). Research has yet to demonstrate whether the proposed democratic governance of police intelligence can succeed in optimising strategic intelligence systems; even if it does, however, it still cannot guarantee that agenda-setters will base their decisions solely on intelligence products.

A more complex view of issues concerning democratic governance of police organisations is presented by Sheptycki (2017b). In his study of intra-organisational police intelligence ‘division-of-labour’, he acknowledges that “projecting an image of formal rationality is very important to police decision-makers and police actors” (Sheptycki 2017b p.621). Additionally, a number of structural conditions (such as differing levels of police discretion and boundaries between internally circulated information and intelligence) are discussed in terms of their implications for democratic governance. Those help in part explain the organisational pathologies of police intelligence systems (Sheptycki 2004), but are still not addressing complexities originating from strategic decision-making beyond intelligence systems, perhaps even outside police organisations.

More recently, Carter and Phillips (2015) analysed original survey data to examine organisational factors that can facilitate or inhibit a police agency from adopting intelligence-led policing in the USA. Their findings suggest that formal policies, lack of sufficient personnel and lack of training appear to inhibit organisational change towards the ILP paradigm. Carter and Phillips (2015 p.325) maintain that “a lack of training could result in poor intelligence products and thus poorly informed decision-making”. As straightforward as this statement might seem, it implies a direct causal relationship between intelligence products and decision-making without acknowledging other factors that might influence police decisions. It is also important to note that the survey question ‘how often is intelligence formally integrated into your agency’s decision-making process?’ received a neutral score, and thus can be interpreted as a relatively weak driver of change. Moreover, findings showed that intelligence did not

frequently contribute to arrests, which indicates that this driver is referring mainly to operational, not strategic decision-making.

James (2016) in his discussion of directing intelligence work within police organisations, considers some influences on decision-makers such as expert intuition (Kahneman 2011), as well as findings from experiment-based research. Studies show that individuals' receptivity to advice is influenced by the character of the adviser and the decision maker's psychological or emotional state (Tost et al. 2011), as well as the credibility (relevance, timeliness, expertise) of intelligence products (Peterson 2003). Although these influences play an important role in setting priorities, the discussion is framed within the intelligence-analyst–decision-maker nexus which has already attracted a great deal of attention from policing research. Therefore, even though James touches on some of the potential constraints and complexities of decision-making beyond intelligence systems, the scope of the discussion remains somewhat limited in its focus solely on individual-level influences and could benefit from an examination of other organisational, political or socio-historical factors.

In relation to the use of strategic intelligence, Evans (2009) presents a series of factors that can influence the process of linking intelligence products to decision-making. Decision-makers are defined as individuals who control access to resources and are able to make reasonable choices about their allocation. Influences on decision-making are presented to intelligence in almost an instructional way, as “tenets that are useful to know” (Evans 2009 p.195) about decision-makers. The influence of media is mentioned briefly (Evans 2009 p.197):

Understanding that decision-makers are faced with multiple, competing demands: intelligence may be important in making choices, but other factors will also weigh heavily. A long-running media campaign against a particular crime problem or a sensational headline will often set the agenda. Though such issues may appear to be a distraction they cannot be ignored. Intelligence has an important role to play in helping decision-makers to deal more effectively with these problems.

Other influencing factors pertaining to resources, time and other practical limitations are also noted (Evans 2009 p.198):

Be aware of the constraints on decision-making: All law enforcement decision-makers operate in a world of finite budgets, limited resources and time constraints [...] Intelligence outputs that fail the test of real-world understanding are likely to be of limited value, and analytical units that establish a reputation for being disconnected from the day-to-day realities of policing will generally find it difficult to have any meaningful input on decision-making.

These observations, albeit presented briefly and in the form of instructions towards intelligence professionals, provide a glimpse into the much more messy and complex stage of strategic decision-making and hint to the fact that intelligence is but one influence that can shape the setting and re-ordering of organised crime priorities. Hence, the study sets to contribute to literature on intelligence-led policing and police decision-making in tackling organised crime by producing new empirically informed, nuanced insights on processes, actors and influences on this strategic stage (see Figure 2 in bold).



Figure 1.2: Typical decision-making process in an ILP law enforcement agency.

Therefore, for all its rigour and sophistication, empirical research on policing organised crime is limited in relation to the way it presents organisational decision-making to be overly dependent on strategic intelligence. By implicitly adopting this ‘rational process’ view, the studies discussed in this chapter are limited in their examination of the realities of setting strategic priorities within policing organisations. Mann (2017) in her study of policing organised crime in Australia explores the processes through which ILP, and especially increased surveillance in intelligence systems, is used to make rational strategic and resource allocation decisions. It is suggested that “future research should set out to explore how processes of strategic intelligence operate to construct problems and define police priorities” (Mann 2017 p.14). This study aspires to do precisely that within UK organised crime fighting

agencies: to produce empirical evidence that sheds light to this under-explored stage of policing organised crime within an ILP paradigm. In doing so the study will provide new insights into the ways in which strategic decisions to tackle organised crime problems are made as well as the kinds of factors that can enable change or re-ordering in police priorities.

1.4 Conceptualising organised crime priorities as ‘real’ or constructed problems

Studies predicated on assumptions of ‘rational processes’ in making intelligence-led, strategic decisions play an important role in shaping conceptualisations of organised crime problems as ‘real’, observable phenomena. For example, Ratcliffe’s 3i model places a requirement on the analyst to observe and interpret the criminal environment (see figure 1) in order to provide information to decision-makers who are in turn responsible for making decisions which will have an impact on the criminal environment. However, processes of constructing organised crime problems seem to be overlooked by intelligence-led policing models (assuming that those who design and use ILP models are informed by criminological research and critiques) even though criminological literature has repeatedly conceptualised organised crime as a social ‘construct’ (Sheptycki 2003; Alach 2011; Hobbs and Antonopoulos 2013).

Indeed, organised crime has been repeatedly presented by law enforcement as a serious criminal activity that causes serious harm to society (SOCA 2006; SOCA 2008; Home Office 2009; NCA 2019c). It is thus portrayed as a “social condition or pattern of behavior that has negative consequences for individuals, our social world or our physical world” (Leon-Guerrero 2018 p.4). Even though organised crime problems undeniably have harmful consequences to individuals, communities and even states, this perspective tends to over-emphasize the nature of social problems as *harmful conditions*. Conversely, it does not highlight the important role of subjective elements such as human perception and social interaction in constructing social phenomena or conditions into troubling conditions and, in turn, social problem of varying seriousness. Although the wording of such definitions varies across the literature on the topic, this approach to social problems is often called objectivist as it clearly attempts to frame them in terms of objectively measurable characteristics or conditions (Schneider 1985; Dello Buono 2015).

Harms caused by organised crime are often rather obvious and uncontested (such as threats to life or severe bodily harms) as opposed to negative consequences linked to other social problems which may not yield a policing and legal response. In that sense, conceptualising

organised crime as an objective condition might seem acceptable, but a closer look reveals some problems with it. Firstly, some conditions that might be deemed harmful have not always been identified as social problems; this is the case with emergent types of criminal activity that were not considered organised or serious in the past. Also, the same condition may be identified as a social problem for different reasons (people may disagree about why a certain organised crime problem is harmful). Finally, lists of social problems include wildly diverse phenomena from mental illness to racism and global warming; even within the term ‘organised crime’ there is such a wide variety of problems from child abuse to fraud and drugs trafficking.

For all those reasons, to define social problems exclusively through an objectivist lens would be rather problematic because it seems that the only quality shared by all these diverse phenomena is the mere fact that they are considered social problems. Best (2016) argues that harm itself is not as important as people’s perceptions of some conditions as being harmful. Similarly, Loseke (2017 p.14) notes that “conditions might exist, people might be hurt by them, but conditions are not social problems until humans categorize them as troublesome or in need of repair”. Therefore, a subjective (or constructionist) approach to social problems addresses the process through which a condition becomes defined as a problem. Berger and Luckmann argue in their seminal book *‘The Social Construction of Reality’* (1966) that the varied, subjective meanings attached to different conditions or experiences are made real when perceived as problematic. Hence, if the subjective aspects of organised crime as a social problem are recognised, research on policing organised crime can achieve a deeper, more critical understanding of how and why some criminal activities are defined as serious threats by certain people or institutions but are at the same time relatively ignored or downplayed by others.

However, studies on assessing, policing and prioritising organised crime largely do not deal with questions about the emergence and social construction of crime problems. Indeed, realist perspectives, which seem to dominate police decision-making research, tend to adhere to objectivist approaches by implicitly or explicitly treating organised crime problems as phenomena about whose existence there is a universal agreement (Albanese 2008; Hamilton-Smith and Mackenzie 2010; Alach 2012). On the contrary, there is a prevalent focus on helping the police to create efficient tools for assessing organised crime based on pre-existing conceptualisations of problems and, more importantly, *measurement* of harmful characteristics or conditions. Since studies of police decision-making in an intelligence-led era are primarily

concerned with how ‘objective’ and ‘scientific’ knowledge can be produced in order to assess organised crime threats and inform strategic priorities, this implicit realist conceptualisation of crime problems is particularly evident in studies of organised crime threat assessment.

Priority-setting within the ‘UK activity model’ (Sergi 2017) introduces a need to rank criminal activities using a common scale against which the harm or threat caused by different activities can be meaningfully measured and compared. A number of studies have explored and critically examined harm and threat assessment methods and models, but in doing so, most have implicitly adopted objectivist perspectives reinforcing the notion that quantification and an increased emphasis on numbers can prevent subjective factors from influencing strategic priority-setting (van Dijk 2007; Albanese 2008; Zoutendijk 2010). For example, in a comparative study of five policing methods to harm measurement, one of the critical questions Tusikov (2012 p.112) poses is whether “measuring and ranking organised crime-related harms (either from specific criminal networks or, more broadly, from crime issues) are empirically feasible and, if so, can be undertaken in a manner that meaningfully informs law enforcement’s decision-making and limits politicisation”. This argument seems closely affiliated to objective conceptualisations of crime problems as real events that produce measurable harms. Nevertheless, the study recognises issues of path dependency which benefits “data-rich or former high-priority issues over lesser-known, data-poor issues” (Tusikov 2012 p.112) and reinforce self-perpetuating priority-setting (Sheptycki 2007). Another reason that has been found for increased attention towards certain problems is that state or police organisations had allocated significant resources to tackle a crime problem and did not achieve the desirable results (Dorn and van de Bunt 2010). These processes incorporate elements of subjectivity that would have been conceptualised more appropriately through a social constructionist lens, thus capturing the effects of law enforcement labelling some activities as more harmful or more ‘serious’ (Lavorigna and Sergi 2016) and therefore investing more resources and organisational effort towards them.

Hamilton-Smith and Mackenzie (2010) touch upon this issue in their review of law enforcement approaches to assessing the risk posed by organised crime. More specifically, they conclude that subjectively constructed intelligence reinforces ‘conventional practice’ that police organisations often fall back on:

...the analytical ‘comfort zone’ centres on assessments focusing on known criminals and known criminal activities, rather than moving onto the uncertain ground of predicting

trends, emerging criminal markets or nascent criminal networks (Hamilton-Smith and Mackenzie 2010 p.275).

However, the study advocates the significance of measurement in assessing risk; in fact, it is suggested that risk assessment tools should include as simple and precise measurement criteria as possible because “conceptually smarter” categories could generate “ambiguities and uncertainties when it comes to measurement” (Hamilton-Smith and Mackenzie 2010 p.271).

Additionally, Sullivan et al. (2018) conducted a survey, followed by a workshop with key people involved in the investigation of organised crime in New Zealand to establish the best criteria for ranking organised criminals. Evidently, New Zealand, similarly to other countries such as Italy, identifies organised crime problems as ‘structures’ instead of ‘activities’, which is the predominant model in Britain. This distinction in policing and legal strategies is argued to be significant for explaining fundamental differences in the ways in which different systems respond to organised crime (Sergi 2014). More specifically, systems focused on organised criminals have been found to be more embedded within social realities and highly rely on prosecution and conviction “as a symbolic weapon against the social status” (Sergi 2014 p.70) of criminal networks whereas the British activity model is centered around the use of intelligence aiming at risk and harm reduction caused by organised crime, as it is viewed and categorised as a national security threat, not unlike terrorism (Walker 2009).

Notwithstanding socio-legal implications of the ‘structure’ oriented model and the study’s rigorous approach to prioritising organised crime, it remains largely embedded within traditional police understandings about what organised crime is, and therefore does not explore processes of problem construction. Instead, the proposed assessment tool is designed to rank criminals based on a series of criteria such as community harm, corruption or infiltration and geographical influence, according to already established, uncontested priorities. Importantly, the study is framed by the idea that “globalisation, the development of new technologies, and the changing economy are all major contributors to the growth in organised crime” (Sullivan et al. 2018 p.16). This reinforces the perception that organised criminals’ actions are or can be attributed to external factors and conditions such as globalisation and new information technologies in the real world, as opposed to social, political and institutional conceptualisations and constructions.

Much the same could be claimed about a study undertaken by Alach (2012) which proposed a new assessment model, namely the ‘Criminal Group Risk Assessment Model (CGRAM)’. The

study uses police officers' opinions to design a prioritisation tool for organised crime-fighting agencies, which would be based on a broader definition of organised crime, as opposed to previous tools (Beken 2004; Hamilton-Smith and Mackenzie 2010), thus increasing its utility. A series of core attributes of organised crime groups are assessed in the first two sections named 'intent' and 'capability'; the next phase of the model involves an estimation of the level of threat based on scores accumulated from the first two sections, while the next step "assesses the quantity and quality of police activities against the group" (Alach 2012 p.500). The relatively simple series of steps and straightforward score system are thought to increase CGRAM's user friendliness. This tool, however, is better suited for investigating areas of criminal activity where there is already availability of intelligence; additionally, it is not appropriate for strategic planning and decision-making as it is designed mainly for informing operational decisions. Despite including a well-rounded discussion on definitional approaches to organised crime underpinning risk and threat assessment tools, the study is immersed in processes of 'scientification' such as ranking of organised crime groups, harm measurement and quantification which are meant to produce objective knowledge about crime problems and groups. The authority of this scientific method produces knowledge which is implicitly legitimised as a social reality (Mann 2014), while the subjectivities of the methods and the various influences on processes through which this reality is constructed are largely overlooked (Innes et al. 2005).

In recent years, researchers have advocated assessing 'harm' for measuring the impact of organised crime (Paoli and Greenfield 2013). Proponents of the use of the term 'serious' instead of 'organised' have even based their arguments on the fact that the former provides a basis for policymakers to define priorities according to the harm they cause to individuals or communities (Dorn 2009; Sheptycki et al. 2011). However, the majority of harm assessment frameworks have attempted to simplify harm, either by reducing it to the 'costs of crime' (Kopp and Besson 2009) or assessing it according to public perceptions of how serious some crime types are (Sherman 2007). More recently, the proposed 'Cambridge Crime Harm Index' uses the national sentencing guidelines as a starting point to define the number of days in prison for each offence type in order to rate the harm they cause (Sherman et al. 2016). A counter-point to this is Paoli and Greenfield's (2013) endeavour which pivots around intellectual and philosophical search for a more comprehensive harm assessment framework which allows decision-makers to prioritise crime problems by "identifying the possible physical, financial, and other harms associated with particular activities and borne across different segments of

society, evaluating the severity and incidence of actual harms with quantitative and qualitative evidence from official records, interviews, press reports, etc.; and establishing the causes of the harms” (Paoli et al. 2017 p.282). Their framework has been tested on drug production, drug trafficking (Paoli et al. 2013), and human trafficking (Greenfield et al. 2016) and empirical results seem promising so far. The framework even provides the analytical tools to gather and examine qualitative information, for example expert opinion, instead of only focusing on harms that are quantified. Even so, the study’s increased emphasis on ‘measurement’ of harms makes it conceptually affiliated to objectivist framings of organised crime activities as *harmful conditions*. However, a successful social construction process of a problem - in other words a process through which both the public and policymakers are convinced that a particular problem is worthy of special response or intervention – can ‘create’ more harm simply because it managed to attach this label and attracted more concerned attention to it, hence more knowledge was generated about it. Nevertheless, the aforementioned studies fall sort of examining or taking into account these processes.

It is evident that organised crime problems are often portrayed as clear and coherent phenomena, while social, linguistic and cognitive elements of their observers’ viewpoints are not even brought into the discussion (Von Lampe 2008), especially in studies concerned with decision-making in an intelligence-led era. Sheptycki (2003) argues that “what we have become accustomed to thinking of as ‘organised crime’ is, in fact, largely an institutional construction”. Indeed, organised crime does not exist independently of its observers – it is shaped by police organisations, law enforcement personnel, as well as academics and politicians (Alach 2012). Adopting a social constructionist viewpoint to organised crime policing and strategic priority-setting is not very common among existing criminological literature, despite having many merits as a conceptual framework.

The paradigm of this study is social constructionism which holds that the meaning of acts, behaviours, and events is not an objective quality of those phenomena but is assigned to them by human beings in social interaction (Berger and Luckmann 1966). Therefore, because meaning is socially constructed, produced and reproduced, it is also subject to social change. From a social constructionist perspective, an act, behaviour or phenomenon becomes a social problem through a process of successful claims-making. Mann (2014 p.34) argues that “criminology, as a claims-making discipline, plays a central role in the process of construction and legitimation of organized crime as a social reality”. The same can be argued about law

enforcement and police organisations who are ultimately responsible for tackling organised crime – they essentially make claims about the seriousness, urgency or impact of organised crime problems through *documents* (threat assessments and reports they publish), as well as *actions* (their strategic planning and investigations).

It is worth clarifying here that suggesting that organised crime is a socially constructed problem does not mean that it does not exist, that it somehow does not occur in the real world and does not have a real impact on individuals and communities (Best 1990; Lilly 2001; Best 2016). However, the language used to describe organised crime activities (for instance ‘human trafficking’ or ‘modern slavery’ instead of ‘immigration crime’), as well as the explanations and recommendations about tackling them are meanings created and used by social entities – individuals, organisations and institutions (Hacking 1999). Therefore, this study adopts a moderate approach to social constructionism (Elder-Vass 2012b).

Hobbs (2013) describes the construction of organised crime in the UK as a typical example of a ‘domain expansion’ (Best 1990), a process through which the contents of a previously accepted social problem expand through social interaction (Loseke 2017) mainly between police organisations and policy-makers, media, experts and the public. Hobbs (2013 p.39) argues that:

Since the 1980s this domain has become increasingly broad. Via the hegemony of the US, and the insecurities that have accompanied new political formations in Europe, fresh problems were piggybacked onto what was originally an undefined cluster of malignant cosmopolitanism infused with local mutant proletarianism, and the term organised crime came to encompass a plethora of global transgressions.

Hobbs has pointed out and discussed the fluidity and lack of organisation of criminal groups that are labelled as ‘organised’ by law enforcement since the late 1980s (Hobbs 1988; Hobbs and Hobbs 1995). Yet, constructions of organised crime as a global threat have been featuring in political and criminological narratives since the term was conceptually institutionalised in the 1990s (Audit Commission 1993; Home Affairs Committee 1994). The emergence of national law enforcement agencies, especially established to fight organised crime in the UK, is another step towards the same direction – to establish the policing of organised crime as a taken-for-granted fact of sociopolitical life (Hobbs 2013). In the same vein, Sheptycki (2003) notes that:

Organized crime is not so much something happening “out there” in society as it is a product of the institutionalized thinking that goes on in some of the major social institutions that govern social life. (Sheptycki 2003 p.490)

Both Hobbs’ and Sheptycki’s type of thinking and arguments about organised crime are clearly rooted in social constructionist approaches; however, these ideas are notably underrepresented in studies concerned with the assessment of and decision-making with regards to organised crime problems. Conversely, they tend to put emphasis on evidence provided by quantitative data and objective harm measurement. As a result, any kind of change in strategic priorities is linked exclusively to some kind of change in the real world, such as an increase in the number of incidents of a particular crime problem.

This view overlooks, however, the power of influence of various other factors and social processes that assign different meanings to organised crime activities, thus labelling and constructing them as entirely new or already known problems that grew in scale or seriousness. These processes are especially evident at the strategic level of decision-making because it is during the agenda-setting stage that most of the categorisation, labelling and prioritisation of problems takes place. Therefore, when researching strategic priority-setting in organised crime policing it is vital to explore processes of social construction alongside critical examinations of intelligence-led systems, measuring variables and ranking problems according to the ‘objective’ harm they cause. A way to achieve this, inspired by the social problems literature, would be to conceptualise organised crime activities not as *harmful* conditions, but instead as *troubling* conditions – thus the emphasis is transferred from the element of objective harm to people’s subjective reactions. Crucially, this moderate constructionist framework (Elder-Vass 2012b) allows the study to critically examine the setting of and change in strategic priorities with a special focus on the use of language and application of ‘labels’, through both official ‘documentary realities’ (Atkinson and Coffey 2011) and decision-makers’ ‘oral histories’ (Seldon and Pappworth 1983) and a number of organised crime problems as they compete for a place in the agenda.

1.5 The history of ‘making’ social problems: taking a long-term view of setting strategic priorities to tackle organised crime

Moderate social constructionism is especially useful for researching how perceptions and definitions of social problems change over time as it can provide a baseline onto which social researchers can make meaningful comparisons between different problems and their

constructions (Elder-Vass 2012a; Elder-Vass 2012b; Weinberg 2014). It also provides a framework for examining not only shifting objective conditions (e.g. crime statistics show a dramatic decrease in acquisitive crime) but also, importantly, changes in names (or labels) and meanings attached to different social problems (e.g. immigration crime/human trafficking/modern slavery), as well as their shifting institutional categorisations as high or low priorities.

Moreover, time is an integral element of social construction processes. Social problems such as organised crime do not appear overnight; they have long histories, often spanning over decades, and have known numerous developments both in terms of measurable ‘objective realities’ (Leon-Guerrero 2018) as well as socially constructed definitions that have important implications for policy-making and strategic agenda-setting. Scholars have examined the history of organised crime in the UK (Woodiwiss and Hobbs 2009; Hobbs 2013), Australia (Mann 2014), America (Albanese 2014) and elsewhere (Gilinskiy and Kostjukovsky 2004; Fijnaut and Paoli 2007; Ellis 2016). Nevertheless, examinations that adopt a long-term view of social construction of organised crime problems are less common.

The previous two sections illustrate empirical and conceptual limitations in the research literature on organised crime policing and strategic decision-making; this section highlights a methodological one. Notably, most studies in this area – some of which discussed previously in this chapter – examine very recent, present and sometimes potential future developments in policing of organised crime or strategic priority-setting within law enforcement agencies. Thus, they either overlook or swiftly – and sometimes superficially – outline the historical development of organised crime problems. In doing so, the institutional transformations, political climate and shifts in language used to talk about organised crime, which can have critical implications for the prioritisation of different crime problems over time, remain under-explored.

Sproat (2011) conducted one of the very few studies to utilise information from national agencies’ annual reports; however, documentary data are used merely to compare quantitative ‘output’ data of the Serious and Organised Crime Agency (SOCA) versus its predecessor organisation, the National Crime Squad “within the context of the extra financial resources given to the former” (Sproat 2011 p.343). In other words, the study examines whether SOCA’s increased budget was justified based on how effective it was in presenting demonstrable results (i.e. ‘output’ data) in annual reports. The study therefore adopts a historical view in the

traditional sense of historical enquiry that involves “a specific engagement with time” (Churchill 2018 p.9). However, the study does not go into any critical discussion of the ways in which strategic priorities are set and presented in the reports, nor does it question the effectiveness or suitability of performance measures. Rather, it limits itself to a numerical analysis of quantitative data on costs, budgets and performance results. Conversely, a qualitative exploration of the ways in which different crime problems enter the agenda as priorities could offer a more nuanced context for understanding the changes and developments in law enforcement agencies’ work, including performance, outputs and outcomes. For example, results pertaining to drugs investigations can be much easier to quantify in terms of traditional performance indicators such as seizures and convictions, as opposed to human trafficking offences which emerged as high strategic priorities in the first few years of SOCA.

It is worth clarifying here that advocating the need for researching the history of constructing organised crime as a social problem in the UK is by no means an attempt for a ‘historical prediction’, a process through which the researcher seeks to uncover the ‘laws’ or ‘trends’ that underpin the evolution of history in order to be able to predict change (Popper 2013). Luhmann (1998) argues that societies cannot learn from history because the future is only determined by human action and decision-making. However, decisions in the present about an uncertain future (Beck 1992) are inevitably influenced by history. More specifically in the case of organised crime policing, one of the main influences comes from institutional ways of thinking about, labelling and tackling organised crime problems (Sheptycki 2003).

However, most studies exploring police decision-making in tackling organised crime are situated within the intelligence-led, future oriented policing context and tend to treat prioritised organised crime problems as elements “we tend to feel are without history” (Foucault 1980 p.139). A particularly useful method for researching such elements is Foucault’s ‘genealogy’, a historical technique in which the researcher questions the widely accepted emergence of a number of philosophical and social beliefs by accounting for the scope, breadth or totality of discourse (Foucault 1977). It is also worth noting that Foucault’s genealogy entails not just documenting the changing etymological meaning of concepts, but also the social basis and potential implications of their changing meaning (Garland 2014), which is one of the aims of this study. It is important to clarify, however, that the study does not endeavour to deconstruct historical truth by using Foucauldian genealogy techniques per se; rather, the aim is to complement the main social construction of problems framework. Indeed, by appropriating

elements of Foucault's conceptualisation of historical progression as an inconstant and non-linear process, the study is able to document the changing meaning of various organised crime problems not merely on an etymological, but also on a socio-interactive basis.

The threat assessment literature is not largely concerned with processes of genealogy and historical change in strategic priorities in a similar way that it fails to explore social construction aspects in decision-making. For example, in one of the most important studies in this field, Chainey and Chapman (2013) reviewed one hundred strategic intelligence assessments (SIAs) from police forces and Community Safety Partnerships in the UK and conducted interviews with practitioners on their experiences in using these intelligence products to determine strategic priorities. The authors offer a nuanced critique of threat assessments that are based on either 'crime-type' or 'strategic priorities' and advocate the adoption of a "problem-oriented approach" (Chainey and Chapman 2013 p.474). Despite the methodological rigour of the study, including sample representativeness in terms of covering a wide range of documents from police forces across the UK, the time period covered in the analysis is only three years – from 2008 to 2011. Hence the study does not adopt a long-term view of the ways in which SIAs have influenced strategic priority-setting over time. This perspective could, in Foucauldian terms, create a 'history of the present' (Foucault 1970; Roth 1981). Even though this is clearly beyond the scope and aims of Chainey and Chapman's study, this perspective would facilitate a critical understanding of the relationship between knowledge of a social problem at certain points in time and the strategic decisions made to tackle it. It would also create the basis for meaningful interpretations of problems within their socio-historical context. A historical and critical view of individual crime problems and the ways in which they compete with each other for a higher place in the strategic agenda would seem methodologically appropriate, especially in light of the authors' recommendations about a problem-oriented approach.

As briefly mentioned above, time is an important element for constructing social problems. This is evident in most models of social construction of problems (Blumer 1971; Spector and Kitsuse 2009) including Joel Best's (2016) natural history of problems model which the present study uses as a theoretical framework for the discussion of its findings. The model is explained in more detail as it is applied across the findings chapters of this study. Here, it is worth noting its suitability in highlighting the relevance of time in exploring the setting of strategic priorities through a social constructionist lens; more specifically to track and trace change in

constructions of organised crime problems as strategic priorities across time. Therefore, adopting a long-term view can help showcase change, as well as continuity in strategic priorities, or in other words, the rise and fall of organised crime problems (Hilgartner and Bosk 1988); in doing so, patterns and trends of change are identified and interpreted critically as problems compete to enter and remain in the highest places of the law enforcement agenda.

1.6 Concluding remarks

This chapter reviewed existing literature on decision-making processes in policing organised crime and, in doing so, identified empirical, conceptual and methodological limitations. Firstly, most studies in this field provide empirical evidence on the role of intelligence and threat assessments as the main factors that inform strategic priorities. However, this implicit acceptance of a rational intelligence-led process results in an empirical limitation: the complex realities of strategic priority-setting processes in police organisations that fight organised crime remains underexplored. Secondly, the chapter identified a conceptual limitation, namely that research in the field of policing organised crime conceptualises and defines crime problems as harmful conditions, and consequently emphasizes the need for assessing the harm caused by them. However, for all their potential merits, these approaches are aligned with ‘objectivist’ definitions of social problems with a heightened need for measurement and impact on the real world. Hence, processes of social construction, in other words institutional thinking about organised crime problems, including labelling and categorisation remain neglected, along with their potential implications for organised crime policing. Finally, a prevalent feature in policing research is a tendency to focus on present day phenomena, or possible future developments. This chapter highlighted the gap for a long-term, historical perspective in researching police strategic decision-making processes; this methodological viewpoint, coupled with the social problems process framework, facilitates a more critical understanding of historical changes and developments in strategic priorities.

2. Chapter 2: Methodology

2.1. Introduction

The central aim of the research is to track and trace how national-level, strategic organised crime priorities have been constructed by police organisations and how and why these have evolved and changed over time. A key focus for the study is to identify factors that influence the setting of these priorities and shifts in their relative positions. The dataset consists of: a) 31 (out of a total of 32 published) annual reports covering the years 1993-2017 and published by the four national law enforcement agencies (NCIS, NCS, SOCA, NCA) that have functioned consecutively in the UK since 1993; b) a representative sample of 314 newspaper articles published by British national newspapers in the years 1993-2017, and c) 15 semi-structured qualitative interviews with former law enforcement decision-makers who were involved in setting national strategic priorities during the study's timeframe. This chapter explains the study's development and delivery, and discusses some of the decisions and methodological choices made during the various stages of the fieldwork and analysis, from finding the study's epistemological position, to designing the research strategy and linking it to methods and analysis. It also discusses some of the challenges and limitations, as well as ethical considerations of the study.

2.2. Research aims and questions

The main research aims had to be pragmatically re-positioned through the course of designing the study. The initial intention was to research operational police decision-making and assess the influence of rationality as well as cognitive biases on 'fast' and 'slow' individual decisions (Kahneman 2011) to prioritise and tackle organised crime threats, made by law enforcement agents and crime analysts of the National Crime Agency. The previous chapter explained the process through which the initial focus of the study shifted due to the identification of *empirical*, *conceptual* and *methodological* limitations in studies of strategic thinking in policing organised crime during the literature review stage.

However, the initial research aim also had to be changed for pragmatic reasons. Law enforcement agencies are considered particularly hard, especially for students, to access and this study is no exception. Getting access to the National Crime Agency to research their current priority-setting and decision-making processes proved a particularly difficult and time-consuming task. After considerable efforts, it became evident that the gatekeepers and

networks were simply not working, and consequently, the study had to shift its focus on something that was pragmatically researchable.

Therefore, the study's aims and research questions had to be reshaped from researching present day police decision-making to exploring these same processes in the past. The original intention to identify and examine the factors that influence strategic decision-making remains relatively unchanged – findings would refer to the past 24 years instead. The shift to researching the recent history of organised crime policing solidified the change of focus from individual to organisational decisions as well – trying to elicit meaningful responses from interview participants about their cognitive processes that took place 10 or 20 years ago simply would not have produced valid results. Nevertheless, the longer-term perspective adopted by the study provided another opportunity, namely to explore how understandings and constructions of problems by law enforcement change, and then track and trace these changes and developments in strategic priorities.

The study's reshaped main aim is to explore the decision-making and priority-setting processes (including changes in strategic priorities and factors that influence these changes) that British law enforcement organisations have been employing in tackling organised crime problems at a strategic level since the mid-1990s. To address this overarching aim, the study seeks to answer the following research questions:

Q1: How do national police organisations construct and calibrate their strategic priorities in tackling organised crime?

Q2: How do constructions of organised crime problems change and develop over time?

Q3: What kinds of factors play a role in shaping the setting of organisational, strategic priorities in terms of organised crime, and what implications do they have for the design and delivery of operational responses?

The study adopts a 'moderate constructionist' theoretical framework (Berger and Luckmann 1966; Elder-Vass 2012a; Best 2016) which is underpinned by the main principles of interactionist approaches and labelling theory (Ditton 1979; Hacking 1991; Bowker and Star 1999). This particular theoretical viewpoint facilitates a critical examination of the ways in which understandings of priority-setting processes are presented within criminological literature and discourse. This social constructionist stance plays a fundamental role in

determining the appropriate methodological tools that this study employs to explore police decision-making in tackling organised crime. The study also adopts a socio-historical perspective and long-term view of strategic priority-setting. In doing so, it attempts to combine two seemingly contradictory approaches to socio-historical research: the more orthodox or traditional historical techniques through analysis of official documents produced by UK's national law enforcement agencies and newspaper articles, as well as qualitative oral history techniques (Cockcroft 2005) through a series of 15 qualitative semi-structured interviews with elite interviewees who have been involved in priority-setting in the aforementioned agencies.

2.3. Research strategy

2.3.1. Epistemological positioning

Strategic research decisions are firmly rooted in epistemology, and consequently, the epistemological basis of this study informs and shapes all the theoretical and methodological choices outlined above. So before the research strategy is set out, it is vital to briefly outline the epistemological position of the study.

Epistemology is a branch of philosophy preoccupied with the nature and origins of knowledge, and whether absolute, 'true' knowledge can be achieved (Crow and Semmens 2007). In criminological work, the empirical approach suggesting that knowledge is acquired through observations of recurring patterns or relationships, using *inductive reasoning*, is traditionally linked to the positivist school of Criminology (Semmens 2011). Conversely, rationalism proposes that knowledge can be obtained by reason alone and does not necessitate verification from experience; knowledge can therefore be acquired by beginning with a basic principle and subsequently building on that through the process of *deductive reasoning*. Both empiricism and rationalism, as positivist approaches, suggest that the world is external to our understanding of it and that there is an objective reality, independent of the researcher's perspective, beliefs or social interactions.

However, a number of anti-positivist schools, commonly referred to as interpretivist approaches, have criticised overly 'fixed' positivist ways to research social reality. According to them, knowledge is "socially constructed through interaction rather than objectively determined and perceived" (Carson et al. 2001 p.5).

In recent years social research has moved away from this rather sterile empiricism-interpretivism dichotomy and recognises that it is more useful for researchers to conceptualise epistemological philosophies as a spectrum, rather than as distinct schools of thought

(Henderson and Horgan 2011). Consequently, there are various different ‘shades’ of empiricism within interpretivist approaches and vice-versa. The emergence of these collaborative approaches is consistent with interpretivist beliefs that the social researcher – as any other human being – has the ability to adapt, and that no one can acquire knowledge *a priori* of time- and context-bound social realities (Hudson and Ozanne 1988), contrary to what rationalists advocate. The ‘adaptive’ researcher remains under the umbrella of interpretivism, yet enters the research process with some sort of prior insight of the research context which, however, is assumed to be insufficient in developing a fixed research design due to the complex, and unpredictable nature of what is perceived as reality (Hudson and Ozanne 1988). Thus, the researcher remains open to new knowledge throughout the study and lets it emerge and develop from the data themselves.

As theory is an essential element of the data collection and analysis process (Noaks and Wincup 2004), adopting an adaptive approach to the theory-method relationship allows for theories to lend their conceptual and typological models to the research as frameworks, but at the same time remain open, revisable and flexible (Layder 1993). Furthermore, approaching the theory-method relationship adaptively provides the basis for operationalising concepts from a number of theoretical frameworks, based on what might emerge from the data.

Therefore this study, despite being principally rooted in interpretivism, adopts an adaptive approach to the theory-method relationship. Thus, it is able to create various intersections of inductive and deductive reasoning. This adaptability is particularly significant when criminological research is concerned with exploring internal processes of typically impenetrable organisations such as national law enforcement agencies. Indeed, on the one hand, it is quite common to begin with a set of hypotheses that conform to a specific theoretical framework. On the other hand, the secretive nature of policing organised crime means that inevitably new information is bound to be revealed and potentially generate new knowledge from the data.

2.3.2. A moderate social constructionist framework

Similarly to interpretivists, social constructionists perceive knowledge as a construct, as something that is produced and constantly evolves through human interaction rather than it being a static depiction of reality (Burr 2003). From a constructionist point of view all social phenomena, including social problems, are socially constructed through language which is the main mechanism that individuals and organisations use to give meaning to their world (Elder-Vass 2012a). The long and fascinating debate on defining social problems provides some useful

theoretical concepts to view organised crime activities as social problems. Firstly, the normative approach views social problems as conditions which are “defined by a considerable number of persons as a deviation from some social norm that they cherish” (Fuller and Myers 1941). Merton (1971) introduces various categories of “*judges of social problems*” which are powerful enough to define events or phenomena as social problems. The study’s data – annual reports, newspaper articles and interviews with former decision-makers in national law enforcement – are situated amongst the ‘*judges*’ of organised crime problems, along with politicians, activists, policy-makers, and experts. By assigning the label of ‘problem definers’ to them, the study recognises their power to shape strategic priorities and co-construct organised crime problems.

Another theory that is allied to social constructionism and also central to the study’s research strategy is labelling theory. Labelling theory has shifted the focus of criminological research from the crime and the criminal to the rule-makers and therefore the response to crime; it focuses on asking ‘how do people define acts as deviant?’ instead of ‘what makes people commit deviant acts?’ (Wilkins 1964; McLachlan and Swales 1982). For proponents of labelling theory, the answer is through social interaction. Radical interactionists maintain that there is no crime prior to the social reaction and legal response to it (Becker 1963; Lemert 1967). This view has been criticised, however, for an inherent contradiction in its main argument: it inevitably presupposes an objective as well as subjective aspect of deviance (used here as an example of social problems), because there is a need for some sort of objective fact, an act that could be defined as deviant, to constitute the starting point of the societal reaction (Ditton 1979). In other words, something that ‘problem definers’ can react to and then subjectively label as ‘deviant behaviour’ or ‘social problem’.

Therefore, there is a version of labelling theory that is compatible with a moderate social constructionist framework which maintains that *social* reality is being socially constructed, as opposed to *all* reality (Elder-Vass 2012a). The study is thus broadly aligned with the main principles of a moderate social constructionist approach, which recognises an objective facet of reality as the starting point of the process of constructing organised crime problems of varying seriousness.

2.3.3. A socio-historical approach to policing organised crime in the UK

The construction of organised crime priorities is a continuous and fluctuating process that is time and context dependent. Therefore, while still functioning within a social constructionist

framework, it is vital for the study to adopt a socio-historical perspective as well, as the units of analysis cover a 24 year period from 1993 to 2017. This particular timeframe was chosen because 1993 was the first time in the history of British policing that a national law enforcement body, the National Criminal Intelligence Service (NCIS), published an annual report on tackling organised crime. The interviewees are people who occupied a variety of high- and middle-rank positions in national law enforcement organisations and were involved in priority-setting processes during the same timeframe. The methodological decision of using both textual and interview data in this study becomes especially significant if we conceptualise the two methods as representations of two approaches to socio-historical research that have traditionally been in tension with each other: orthodox, written history and oral history, respectively.

However, before analysing this relationship any further, the distinction between history and social history, or rather historical criminology, needs to be addressed. Historians are typically concerned with what has happened in the past just in order to understand how the world and people in it used to be (Knepper and Scicluna 2010). On the other hand, criminologists who adopt a socio-historical perspective explore topics that are not part of the mainstream political history, so as to give them an understanding of what is happening now. Knepper (2010 p.408) suggests that “they bring a theoretical perspective to the study of the past to uncover social processes behind institutions and practices, and use this understanding to assess contemporary developments”. Socio-historical research can also be significant for contemporary policing because it can provide “a baseline for the measurement of both continuity and change” (Noaks and Wincup 2004 p.110). Therefore, by adopting a long-term, historical view of strategic decision-making, the study aims to provide insights into the various processes through which organised crime problems have come to be categorised as strategic priorities. In doing so, aspects of a “history of the present” (Foucault 1970; Foucault 1977) are appropriated, in order to map shifts and changes in the social construction of various organised crime problems over time with an eye to bring forward important, yet potentially hidden or forgotten, meanings in current understandings of organised crime. In other words, historical processes and patterns of shaping strategic priorities during the last 24 years in the UK can be used to get a better understanding of how labels are assigned to current problems and how – given that processes have not yet radically changed – they are prioritised by the National Crime Agency.

Therefore, this study has not approached documents as impersonal historical ‘traces’ (Cockcroft 2005), but instead viewed them through a lens of subjectivism that social history affords. As Garland proposes, methods in criminological research are “analytical rather than archival” (Garland 2001 p.2) and therefore documents are approached critically, with an aim to analyse their modes of discourse, examine their narrative techniques and uncover implied meanings. No matter how distinct from an orthodox historical approach this study’s perspective is, however, annual reports remain the official public versions of the records that UK law enforcement agencies keep. In this sense, there is still a temptation to treat the reports as historical ‘traces’ which uncover the ‘truth’ about what happened with regards to organised crime problems in the UK on an annual basis, and thus implicitly accept the notion that there is a universal truth with regards to history (Cockcroft 2005).

Closely allied to that view is the assumption that texts can be seen as *objective*, therefore for historians to deal with, while oral histories as *subjective*, and therefore in the interest of sociologists. This sterile dichotomy has become rather ingrained in academic culture but from a social constructionist point of view, the study adheres to Tonkin’s claim (1990) with regards to the multi-faceted nature of history. He advocates that “histories are arguments created by people in particular conditions. These conditions include the very social worlds in which they live, and which, by their telling, they model and sometimes seek to alter” (Tonkin 1990 p.29). Similarly, as this study adopts an interpretivist epistemological position, it can only view the reports as subjective accounts of a version of social reality that the organisations have constructed rather than records of objective reality.

Therefore, the suitability of oral histories to examine changes in organised crime priorities should be judged as complimentary to another subjective account of the same phenomenon. Oral history is traditionally used as a means of learning about those groups in society that are considered to be marginalized or whose activities remain unknown or who are not, generally, encouraged to publicize their opinions (Cockcroft 2005). Ostensibly, police organisations might not be considered to be aligned with such notions of exclusion. However, criminological research that has used oral history to explore police culture (Cockcroft 2005) demonstrates the many merits of this method for policing studies. In this study, the interviewees can be considered elites, so it is hard to conceptualise them as a marginalised group. However, both historical and academic literature on policing of organised crime indicate that the majority of decision-making processes both on strategic and operational levels, is often secret and can be

considered to be ‘hidden’ (Manning 1978; Van Maanen 1983); especially in organised crime policing where any information about the organisation’s strategy can reveal operational activity to organised criminals. Notwithstanding the fact that organised crime groups may often be aware of law enforcement methods and tactics, police organisations always have to navigate the fragile balance of revealing some activity (for reasons of accountability and demonstrating results), but not enough that would give away important information about strategies and ongoing operations. Therefore, the people interviewed in this study would have been more restricted in speaking publicly about organisational agendas and priorities during the time they were working in national law enforcement as opposed to when they were interviewed after they had stepped away from their roles.

2.4. Research design

2.4.1. A hybrid (fixed and flexible) research design

After a brief outline of the study’s research strategy and the theoretical perspectives that underpin it, this section discusses the particular qualities of the research design, especially the elements that make it both ‘fixed’ and ‘flexible’. The different research designs can be referred to in different ways in the literature; some common distinctions include positivist vs interpretivist or quantitative vs qualitative designs. Another way to think about research designs that captures their theoretical and practical features more effectively is Robson’s (2002) categories of fixed and flexible designs.

An adaptive approach to theory-method relationship, as described previously, allows the study to incorporate elements from both categories into a two-stage, hybrid design, although it has to be noted that the majority of features are consistent with a flexible design. Fixed designs often involve the collection of quantitative data, as the researcher typically seeks to maintain as much control as possible on the research setting by controlling and manipulating variables to test hypotheses. This study did not generally use prespecified concepts or measures to research the setting of strategic priorities in policing organised crime, but it did use summative content analysis to identify and quantify terms attributed to various organised crime problems in the annual reports for the purpose of exploring their usage and measuring their frequency (Hsieh and Shannon 2005). This approach to analysing textual data can be described as quantitative, in that it seeks to count the frequency of specific content in the textual data and, in that sense, it adheres to a fixed design.

On the other hand, flexible designs are usually linked to the collection of qualitative data and their key feature is that the design evolves as the research progresses, therefore the researcher allows the concepts to emerge naturally and examines them as they manifest, looking for themes and relationships to develop (Robson 2002). Despite some inevitable preconceptions regarding decision-making in organisational settings and more specifically some factors that might influence these decisions, maintaining a flexible approach by allowing for themes to emerge from both official documents and interviews has been a fundamental methodological stance of the study, especially given the researcher's position as an "outsider" which will be discussed in more detail below. Hence, the study uses content analysis in the reports, and thematic analysis in newspaper articles and interview transcripts in order to "capture the intricacies of meaning within a data set" (Guest 2012 p.11). Thus, it is able to move beyond 'simply counting' and explore implicit and explicit meanings that organisations and individual decision-makers attribute to processes of prioritising organised crime problems within the data, principally in an inductive way.

2.4.2. A multi-method qualitative study

It is evident from the outline of the research strategy as well as the description of the research design as a 'two-stage, hybrid design' that the study combines different features of research strategies and designs in order to improve validity, a process that in qualitative research is known as *triangulation*. Denzin (2012) distinguishes between four types of triangulation: theoretical, data, method and investigator. This study adopts a between-method triangulation approach, a combination of different methods to measure or explore the same phenomenon. It is a qualitatively driven design in that the study is, at its core, a qualitative study. Quantitative data are generated via content analysis in order to supplement and improve the qualitative findings by providing deeper, more insightful and analytically rigorous answers to research questions (Hesse-Biber 2010).

Narrow views of the world are often misleading, so approaching the research questions from different viewpoints may help to gain a more nuanced perspective. Indeed, while for example annual reports provide an official version of organisational decision-making and priority-setting, it is only one account with particular strengths and weaknesses. The media analysis explores the ways in which the British press has influenced and framed the construction of various organised crime activities as social problems by law enforcement in the UK. Therefore, triangulating documentary analysis with in-depth interviews is very useful in shedding light on

‘unofficial’, in-house structures and cultures, as well as eliciting the participants’ views and opinions with regards to the role of the media. These accounts constitute the interviewees’ ‘oral histories’ of events and processes in their professional life and provide a wider, deeper and more insightful perspective to the study.

Another benefit of multimethod approaches is that different methods may have particular strengths with respect to different levels of criminological research. While document analysis of reports and newspaper articles may be suitable to explore organisational and social facets of policing decision-making processes, elite interviews may help create a clearer picture of cognitive and cultural aspects, and therefore lead to more adequate explanations.

As already mentioned above, the two main categories of qualitative methods the study draws from, as grouped by Semmens (2011), are research by ‘reading’ and research by ‘talking/listening’. The first category consists of documentary analysis of annual reports published between 1993-2017 by national law enforcement agencies in the UK, and media analysis of newspaper articles sampled from all UK national newspapers during the same time period. The ‘talking/listening’ part is a series of semi-structured, elite interviews with former high-rank officials who have been involved in strategic priority-setting with regards to organised crime in the UK.

A significant challenge that is common in multimethod designs is to avoid overreliance on one type of method, as it can undermine the benefits of triangulation. In this study, the researcher had to always be aware of this danger with regards to the analysis of annual reports. There were many reasons for that. Firstly, document analysis was the first stage of analysis, and given the plethora of information and richness of data these documents generated, it was very tempting to keep looking deeper and potentially overanalyse some findings or overcomplicate the research process. Additionally, official documents are designed to appear like authoritative, ‘true’ accounts of internal organisational structures and activities (Atkinson and Coffey 2011) which may deter the reader/researcher from approaching them critically. However, the research acknowledges that reports create a specific type of ‘documentary reality’ (Atkinson and Coffey 2011) and reflectively examines their specific purpose, audience and role in setting strategic priorities. Finally, during the first stages of the research there was a danger to over rely on documentary data as they are so rich in content. There is great potential to explore official accounts of organised crime by examining their language, methods of presentation, data tables and charts, and thus uncovering the implicit and explicit ways in which they construct

organised crime as a social problem. However, this is not the question this study is asking. In exploring how strategic priorities are set and why they change over time, interviews with people who were involved in decision-making (as well as in some cases drafting the annual reports) proved invaluable in providing insights on behind-the-scenes processes that have influenced and changed strategic priorities in ways that could not have been found in official organisational documents.

2.5. Methods and data collection

This section discusses the main data generation methods, their suitability to the research questions, and their strengths and limitations to the study of organised crime policing. As mentioned above, the methods are divided in two categories: ‘reading’ and ‘talking/listening’. The reading-based methods consist of a content analysis of 31 law enforcement annual reports and thematic analysis of 314 newspaper articles. The ‘talking/listening’ method refers to the 15 qualitative semi-structured interviews with former high rank officials in the four national law enforcement agencies that have been tackling organised crime in the UK for the past 24 years. Thus, the documents and interviews provide valuable data about the processes of setting priorities, their changes over time, and the various factors that influence them.

2.5.1. Documentary analysis

Documents are a valuable resource which many qualitative researchers use in the criminological field, either as a standalone method or as part of multi-method designs. This is particularly relevant to studies on police or law enforcement organisations where access can be problematic. There is often confusion, however, between using documents as resources to gather information on a subject of interest and analysing documents as data (Noaks and Wincup 2004). A significant part of the data in this study is generated by two types of documents: annual organisational reports and newspaper articles. They are treated as data and are viewed through a social constructionist perspective as ‘problem definers’, powerful enough to not merely represent social problems but also construct them, as least within the context of the documentary reality they create. To be able to define or construct a problem within social reality, it would imply that the reports are powerful and important enough to significantly influence strategic decision-makers, media workers, members of the public or policymakers – any actor in the problems process. However, there is no evidence to suggest that they are so

widely disseminated to – let alone read by – all these actors, maybe with the exception of Ministers and some journalists.

In researching policing organisations and how they make decisions about tackling organised crime, documents are an extremely valuable tool to use both as a resource and as a topic of criminological research (Brookman 1999). If used as an informational resource, organisational documents can be of great value to the study of police and law enforcement organisations which are “typically impenetrable organisations [...] which may be challenging for students to access” (Noaks and Wincup 2004 p.108). Moreover for this study, even if access to the current agency (NCA) were secured, the documents would still be the only ‘official’ account of its predecessors’ organisational structure and activities. This is a crucial element of the socio-historical perspective of the study. Hence, the annual reports published by UK national law enforcement agencies can provide a plethora of information that are useful for contextualising findings relevant to the research questions. However, given that the theoretical approach that informs this study is social constructionism, denying that the reports are social constructs themselves would be incongruous at best.

The study uses documents principally as a topic of research; as data themselves. For the study of organised crime, annual reports share the same limitations that largely characterise accounts and data provided by the authorities, namely that they reflect law enforcement activity, which in turn is affected by finite resources, the competency of agents, organisational priorities and wider political priorities (Hobbs and Antonopoulos 2014). This study, however, is interested in researching exactly these priorities. Annual reports can be very revealing of organisations’ agendas and priorities, especially because they are produced ‘in-house’ (Noaks and Wincup 2004). By highlighting and comparing the changes in their structure and content over time, the study can signal and illuminate shifts in the organisation’s strategic priorities, as well as operational activities. Moreover, they can afford useful accounts of structures and processes internal to organisations that no longer exist. In this sense, they provide a unique and invaluable function to socio-historical research that is paramount to this study.

It is worth noting that the study uses the public versions of annual reports. These are considerably smaller in comparison to confidential versions which are kept away from the public eye even two decades later.³ A particular advantage to the analysis of public reports is

³ A confidential report from the mid-90s was shown – not read – during a scoping, unofficial interview with a future interview participant. It was a volume at least 3 times thicker than the public one of the same year.

that they are readily available to the researcher and facilitate access to organisational processes and cultures, and related representations of them, where physical access might not have been possible. On the other hand, all the crucial information that is included in the confidential reports but are left outside of the public versions analysed, coupled with lack of clarity in the texts with regards to the organisation’s specific priorities, are considerable limitations of analysing annual reports as a method to explore priority-setting in an organised crime fighting agency.

Despite these challenges – or partly because of them – the study adopts a coherent and consistent strategy on how to approach them in terms of sampling, data collection and data analysis. The use of multiple strategies to enhance validity could be viewed by some as deviating from the principles of a coherence approach, but integrating research strategies are increasingly considered a feature of more nuanced research.

A sample of 31 annual reports were gathered for the first part of the document analysis (see table 2.1). Some of them were easily located in digital form from www.gov.uk and www.nationalcrimeagency.gov.uk, but the majority of those published before 2002 are not digitized. Hard copies were found in British Library and the College of Policing library. Four NCS and two NCIS reports were kindly given in hard copy form to the researcher by interviewees.

Table 1: List of annual reports included in analysis

Agencies	Reports by year of publication
NCIS* (11)	1993-1994, 1994-95, 1995-96, 1997-98 1998-99, 1999-2000, 2000-01, 2001-02, 2002-03, 2003-04, 2004-05
NCS (7)	1998-99, 1999-2000, 2000-01, 2001-02 2002-03, 2003-04, 2004-05
SOCA (8)	2005-06, 2006-07, 2007-08, 2008-09 2009-10, 2010-11, 2011-12, 2012-13
NCA (4)	2013-14, 2014-15, 2015-16, 2016-17
Total: (31)	

*The 1996-97 NCIS annual report is the only one within the study’s timeframe that couldn’t be found in either digital or hard copy form.

The fact that 11 out of 31 reports were only available in hard copy form presented a challenge in terms of the ways they needed to be processed. All the documents needed to be converted in editable pdf files in order for the qualitative data analysis (QDA) computer software NVivo to be able to recognise the words as text rather than images. The study uses NVivo to conduct content analysis on the annual reports. This involved a lengthy but effective process of scanning the documents' pages in non-editable pdf files, merging them in a single file and then using an online Optical Character Recognition (OCR) software which turned them into editable pdf files while maintaining their formats to an extent.

Another important note about the sampling process concerns a significant operational decision about the documents that are not included in the analysis even though they could offer some insight on organised crime policing priorities in a broader sense. Of course there is a plethora of documents produced by the four agencies such as the national threat assessments (UKTAs), the Suspicious Activity Reports (SARs) or the Child Exploitation and Online Protection (CEOP) reports, prior to its merger into the NCA in 2013. There are also local assessments produced by Regional Organised Crime Units and European serious and organised crime threat assessments (SOCTAs), as well as reports from other authorities, such as HMIC (now HMICFRS), which assess the effectiveness of the national response to organised crime. All these documents are thought to influence the construction of organised crime priorities as presented in the annual reports in various ways, so most of them are used as resources; to use them all as data would simply not be manageable. However, a special note should be made regarding the decision not to include the national threat assessments (UKTAs) in the analysis as data. Admittedly, it could have been useful, as UKTAs can be viewed as precursors to the annual reports. They assess the seriousness of organised crime threats and their potential impact to Britain; they are published at the beginning of the year and one of their proclaimed purposes is to inform UK law enforcement priorities for tackling organised crime. However, the main reason for their exclusion is that they state very explicitly that the organised crime threats listed in the UKTAs (a long list of diverse organised crime activities) should not be considered priorities and that law enforcement agencies are responsible for setting their own strategic priorities which should in turn drive operational responses to tackle specific organised crime threats.

After gathering the sample, it was essential to assess the quality of the documentary evidence to ensure that the study maintains a high level of methodological rigour. Scott (1990) developed

a typology, that is considered very helpful for document quality assessment, consisting of four criteria: ‘authenticity’, ‘credibility’, ‘representativeness’ and ‘meaning’. The specific elements of their definitions and how they apply to the study are outlined in Table 2.2.

Table 2 Scott’s quality assessment typology applied on study’s document dataset.

Scott’s criteria	Scott’s definition	Applicability to study
<i>Authenticity</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Original document - Full Text - Clarity of author 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Yes. - ‘Statement of Accounts’ sections in SOCA and NCA reports were removed. - Clear writing, lack of individual author.
<i>Credibility</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Sincerity - Accurate narrative 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To the extent that secretive nature of policing allows. - Assumed. Some corroboration from interview data.
<i>Representativeness</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Survival - Availability 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Yes. - Online availability for recent ones; older ones can be found in libraries with few exceptions.
<i>Meaning</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Literal - Interpretative 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Text is easy to read, written in English. - Some challenges in understanding the full context can be improved by referring to other documents and triangulating with interview data.

2.5.1.1. *Content classification in annual reports*

Content analysis is a research technique used to make replicable and valid inferences by interpreting and coding textual material, thus converting qualitative data into quantitative data (Weber 1990; Bengtsson 2016). This approach is very helpful in researching the setting of strategic priorities, as it allows the study to create categories and develop rankings of organised crime problems systematically and rigorously, through quantification of textual data. Indeed, the reports do not explicitly present ranked strategic priorities; therefore, through content analysis the study is able to capture implicit representations of organised crime problems in the documents.

Bowker and Star (1999 p.10) define a classification system as “a set of boxes (metaphorical or literal) into which things can be put to then do some kind of work – bureaucratic or knowledge production”. Therefore, classification systems are integral in any working infrastructure; policing of organised crime – and indeed policing of all crime – is not an exception. Even though there are several different ways to classify criminal offences – for example according to their seriousness or intentionality of the perpetrator – organised crime offences are typically classified according to their subject matter, or else the apparent behaviour shown by the perpetrator of a crime (UNODC 2015). The NCA currently classifies the threats that the UK faces from organised crime in fourteen categories (NCA 2018a). However, the study does not adopt the NCA’s or any other institution’s contemporary classifications of criminal offences, such as for example the UK classification index (Gov.uk 2017). Instead, aligned with the concept of WPR’s ‘*implicit problem representations*’ (Bacchi 2009), the study produces a new classification scheme based on detailed accounts of organised crime problems provided in annual reports.

By listing all the possible manifestations of organised crime presented in the reports and classifying them in a two level system, the study was able to arguably capture the emergence of organised crime problems at various points in time using the categories created by the law enforcement agencies at that particular time. Thus, even though the boundaries of classifications created by this study are artificial, it can be argued that the constructed categories can more accurately reflect the evolving meanings of organised crime problems during the various stages of the social construction process (Best 2016).

In using content analysis to explore changes in priorities as presented in annual reports, the first fundamental issue is reducing the large amount of textual data in order to capture

meaningful analytical categories. This is achieved by excluding the sections of annual reports that document staff remunerations and pensions and only inputting into NVivo the sections on performance and operational activity, which are relevant to prioritisation processes. In doing so, the study maintains content validity by ensuring that mentions of crime categories in pages that do not relate to organisational decision-making are not counted.

A number of criteria have been used to build a hierarchical structure of analytical categories that can both accurately represent the organised crime types prioritised in the annual reports, but also provide meaningful answers to questions of trends and comparisons in organised crime priorities over time. At this first stage, the priorities were not allocated to pre-existing categories. Instead, the content was classified inductively, largely following the ways that organised crime priorities were presented in the text.

Content classification begins with defining the basic units of texts to be classified. To that end, a coding scheme was created and tested to ensure it could measure the frequency of occurrence for each analytic category of interest to the study. The most meaningful way to count instances for each organised crime type mentioned in the reports was to code each word, instead of sentences or themes. However, NVivo cannot distinguish among the various senses of words with more than one meaning or indeed, more crucially, various words that refer to the same organised crime priority. It can search for references with stemmed words which was selected, but for example, in the case of cybercrime, to be able to code all the variations of the word, such as ‘cybercrime’, ‘cyber-crime’ or ‘cyber crime’, and the different words, such as ‘high-tech crime’ or ‘computer crime’, that represent each priority, all the different words were manually entered in the text search for cybercrime. The reasons for coding the word variations altogether under one node while the different terms as separate categories subsequently aggregated to cybercrime, will be explained in more detail later (and for each category). However, the main rationale is that the different words are either different organised crime priorities or signal changes in the language used to describe the same priorities; hence, they are worthy of analysis in their own right and this is why they needed to be kept separately.

Following the definition of the recording units, the study defined the categories. Since the units are words, their only essential characteristic was to clearly represent an organised crime type. Most of the categories at this stage were quite narrow in the sense that they cannot be broken down more, while some others were rather broad, such as ‘drugs’ or ‘economic crime’. However, at the testing stage the study followed the principle of exhaustiveness in that every

possible organised crime type that appeared in the reports was included in the classification (Weber 1990). Despite having adopted this principle, decisions to exclude certain categories had to be made subsequently due to what would be feasible to analyse. Some crime types were mentioned in such low numbers that classifying them would hamper the attempt to create a comprehensive list of all organised crime types tackled by British law enforcement. Finally, it was decided that the categories would be mutually exclusive; allowing a recording unit to be classified simultaneously in two or more categories could have unnecessarily complicated the analytical process, especially since the study was only interested in counts of word use at that point. Even in cases where two terms appeared in such proximity in the text which clearly signalled a strong relationship, since the recording units are words, they were easily coded under different categories. For example, the phrase ‘online child sexual exploitation and abuse’ could be easily broken down to code ‘online’ under ‘cybercrime’, whereas ‘child sexual exploitation and abuse’ under ‘CSEA’. If the study had opted for sentences or themes instead of words as recording units, establishing mutually exclusive categories would have presented significant challenges.

To test the reliability and validity of the category definitions, a small sample of text was coded derived from eight reports (two from each agency). The first step of the testing process was to inductively create analytical categories by reading the sample text. A total of 41 categories were created, consisting of 20 first-order and 21 second-order categories. Though the categories were coded accurately by NVivo, some changes were needed to ensure reliability of the coding process. ‘Reproducibility’ - which is perhaps the most relevant type of reliability for content analysis - refers to the crucial requirement that the categories are ‘sufficiently precise to enable different coders to arrive at the same results when the same body of material is examined’ (Silverman 2014 p.116).

All the second-order and some first-order categories were coded inductively from the text, whereas some first-order categories were formed subsequently by classifying certain priorities (second-order) to them. One issue for concern identified from this process however, were potential inconsistencies in the way the priorities were grouped in first- and second-order categories. Specifically, priorities such as ‘fraud’, ‘money laundering’ or ‘firearms’ were initially categorised as headline priorities because of the emphasis placed upon them in the reports. Some problems have been explicitly described as ‘high’ priorities in some documents, but this is neither common, nor consistent in annual reports. In fact, during the initial stage of

familiarisation with the data, it became clear that defining and ranking organisational priorities was not among the primary aims of the reports; therefore, it was left as vague as possible in the majority of the documents. Thus, problems that were obviously defined as separate categories in the reports, were categorised separately in the testing classification too. However, it would be inconsistent to include organised crime activities such as ‘human trafficking’ and ‘smuggling’ grouped under ‘immigration crime’ and yet not have ‘fraud’ and ‘counterfeiting’ under ‘economic crime’. Moreover, another important reason for revising the classification scheme was that 20 first-order categories would make the task of mapping and visually presenting change in priorities through time rather problematic. Thus, the decision to re-classify certain priorities during the revising stage was made mainly for analytical purposes. Decreasing the number of first-order, and inevitably increasing the number of second-order categories, would allow the analysis to be conducted at two levels: at the first level, the analysis captured trends and patterns of change to the broader categories of organised crime problems; at the second level, the study discusses each of the second-order categories individually to trace how they change and evolve over time.

2.5.1.2. *Multiple and assumed categories*

The final classification scheme consists of 9 first-order or ‘headline’ categories (in bold) and 38 second-order categories which can be seen in Table 2.3.

Table 3 Total number of references by coding category

	Nodes	Number of coding references	Aggregate number of coding references	Number of reports coded (total=31)
1	CSEA (Child sexual exploitation and abuse)	83*	215	21
1.1.	CSEA\child sexual exploitation	50	50	5
1.2.	CSEA\paedophilia	82	82	15
2.	Cybercrime	124	439	25
2.1.	Cybercrime\online	151	151	19
2.2.	Cybercrime\computer crime	9	9	6
2.3.	Cybercrime\e-crime	27	27	11
2.4.	Cybercrime\Hi-tech crime	128	128	10
3	Drugs	1557	2594	31
3.1.	Drugs\cannabis	107	107	25
3.2.	Drugs\Class A drugs	212	212	25

3.3.	Drugs\cocaine	383	383	29
3.4.	Drugs\heroin	280	280	28
3.5.	Drugs\steroids	10	10	5
3.6.	Drugs\synthetic	45	45	12
4	Economic crime	97	1175	31
4.1.	Economic crime\Corruption	130	130	24
4.2.	Economic crime\Counterfeiting	287	287	30
4.3.	Economic crime\Fraud	341	341	29
4.4.	Economic crime\Money laundering	320	320	30
5	Immigration crime	-	501	30
5.1.	Immigration Crime\Human trafficking	107	107	20
5.2.	Immigration Crime\Illegal immigration	53	53	18
5.3.	Immigration Crime\modern slavery	31	31	4
5.4.	Immigration Crime\Organised immigration crime	199	199	25
5.5.	Immigration Crime\smuggling	111	111	28
6	International organised crime	-	89	22
6.1.	International organised crime\Chinese	17	17	12
6.2.	International organised crime\Eastern European	18	18	12
6.3.	International organised crime\Others	15	15	6
6.4.	International organised crime\Russian	5	5	4
6.5.	International organised crime\Turkish	8	8	4
6.6.	International organised crime\West African	26	26	7
7.	Property crime	2	290	30
7.1.	Property crime\Organised Vehicle Crime	165	165	28
7.2.	Property crime\Robbery	24	24	13
7.3.	Property crime\Stolen art	15	15	10
7.4.	Property crime\Theft	84	84	21
8.	Violent crime	-	585	30
8.1.	Violent crime\Contract killings	1	1	1
8.2.	Violent crime\Firearms	371	371	28
8.3.	Violent crime\Kidnap and extortion	213	213	26
9.	Other	-	37	19
9.1.	Other\Environmental Crime	5	5	5
9.2.	Other\Lifetime management	19	19	9
9.3.	Other\Motorcycle gangs	3	3	3
9.4.	Other\Wildlife crime	10	10	7

* It is worth clarifying that only the numbers in the aggregate column correspond to counts for headline categories. The terms that have a count next to them were counted as second-order categories separately as well, before they were used to name the headline. For example, the terms used to describe the crime ‘child sexual exploitation and abuse’ identified in the documents are 3: paedophilia (82); child sexual exploitation (50); and child sexual exploitation and abuse (83). Overall count is 215 for the headline category ‘CSEA’. Conversely, violent crime does not have any coding references for itself, it is only used as a ‘headline’ for grouping together the second order categories ‘firearms’, kidnap and extortion’ and ‘contract killings’.

The nine headline categories are assumed categories, in the sense that they are constructed by the researcher from words or subcategories of ‘similar meanings or connotations that do not covary’ (Weber 1990) and imposed on the data, rather than inferred categories of those who produced the text. They constitute the first level of analysis, where broad trends and patterns of change in priorities can be detected. The thirty six second-order categories are aggregated to the nine ‘headline’ categories, but they will also be viewed independently, as they can provide alternative modes of classification that are bound to reveal more detailed patterns of change in prioritisations in British law enforcement. Before that, however, it’s important to take a closer look at these categories and briefly explain the reasons for their construction, following the testing of the initial classification scheme on the sample.

The count for the headline category ‘drugs’, consists of seven counts: six second-order categories (‘cannabis’, ‘cocaine’, ‘heroin’, ‘steroids’, ‘synthetic’, ‘Class A drugs’) and the count for ‘drugs’. The reason for including both ‘Class A drugs as well as ‘heroin’ and ‘cocaine’ is to track the change in narrative in the years of the transition to SOCA from ‘drugs’ to ‘Class A drugs’ as a priority – cocaine and heroin are usually used when specific operations are being described, but not as a priority.

‘Economic crime’ comprises five categories: the four second-order categories ‘counterfeiting’, ‘fraud’, ‘money laundering’, ‘corruption’ and the first-order category ‘economic crime’. The criterion for grouping these categories together is their financial nature, which primarily involves fraudulent activity. Even though it should be noted that corruption is a concept that covers a much broader range of activities than just those concentrated on monetary gain (Kleinig 2005), it was decided to be grouped in this category as the financial element seems to be prevalent in the way corruption is represented in annual reports.

The first-order category ‘immigration crime’ consists of five second-order categories, ‘illegal immigration’, ‘modern slavery’, ‘organised immigration crime’, ‘human trafficking’, and ‘smuggling’. The latter three terms, which represent different criminal offences, share the common characteristic of people illegally crossing borders with (smuggling) or without their consent (trafficking). The ‘child sexual exploitation and abuse’ and ‘cybercrime’ categories

consist of all the different terms used to describe the same crime in the reports since 1993. Similarly, 'international crime' is an assumed category which consists of the counts of crimes which are being presented not by the criminal activity, but by the nationality of the criminal network. All references for this category were checked after each NVivo query to ensure validity of the word senses, for example 'Russian crime group' is a valid reference, whereas 'Russian law enforcement' would be excluded from the count.

Finally, the categories 'property crime' and 'violent crime' consist of the counts of entirely different criminal activities which share some common fundamental element. In the case of 'property crime', the second-order categories 'organised vehicle crime', 'robbery', 'theft' and 'stolen art' are all crimes committed with the intention to gain possessions. 'Violent crime' consists of the counts of 'firearms', 'kidnap and extortion' and 'contract killings' whose most prevalent common element is the use or the threat of use of force upon a victim. The last category 'other' includes the counts of second-order categories which represent crimes that did not conceptually fit in any other category, such as environmental or wildlife crime.

2.5.2. Elite semi-structured interviews

During the very first stages of document analysis – the familiarisation with the data and generation of initial codes – it became clear that, for all their merits, the documents' capacity to illuminate all aspects of strategic priority-setting in policing organised crime was limited. More specifically, data in annual reports do not and could not reveal 'behind the scenes' negotiations and discussions underpinning how and why certain problems became established as priorities, and others did not. Hence, even though the original intention was to rely on documentary data, the need emerged to conduct interviews with individuals who were involved in setting strategic priorities in national agencies. A series of semi-structured, qualitative interviews was conducted to complement the document analysis and provide a more naturalistic and nuanced understanding of how priorities were constructed in the organisation, how they changed over time and what kinds of factors have influenced these changes.

The first phase of data collection consisted of purposive and snowball sampling which is considered efficient and cost-effective to access people, such as elite populations, who would otherwise be difficult to find and approach (Lune and Berg 2016; Naderifar et al. 2017). Snowball sampling was a gradual process which continued over a period of six months until sample saturation. More specifically, it became evident that the last few participants were suggesting people who have already been interviewed. This confirmed pre-existing hypotheses

that phenomena of organisational inheritance would lead to a relatively small pool of potential participants involved in strategic decision-making in national British policing.

Fifteen participants were interviewed in total, fourteen of whom are former leaders and decision-makers from the high and middle ranks of the four national agencies, and one is a retired HMIC officer. Participants were contacted and approached through convenience sampling, in other words established academic networks. Potential interviewees were sent formal emails inviting their participation in the research, with a brief overview of the study and a draft interview schedule in an attached file. Research highlights the benefits of this method for qualitative interviews as providing an indication of what sort of questions would be asked gives the impression of a well thought out piece of research and also allows interviewees time to consider the questions and prepare answers (Lilleker 2003). This is particularly relevant to this study since some participants would be interviewed about events of more than 10 or 15 years ago and are asked to give their 'oral histories', so giving them the questions beforehand gave them time to prepare and retrieve memories from that time period. There are of course disadvantages to 'oral history' interviews, which include fallible memories, reconstruction of information in hindsight and a tendency to recall events in a linear progression over time (Cockcroft 2005).

Data from interviews were analysed thematically using NVivo. The study's hybrid research design was applied here as well, in that some of the themes were already set and some others derived inductively from the data. More specifically, a set of themes that already existed before the phase of transcription and interrogation of interview data were the organised crime problem categories generated from the documentary content analysis (see previous section). Therefore, the same coding framework established for analysing the reports was used for identifying the 9 'headline' and 38 'second-order' categories of organised crime problems in interview data; they are placed in a four-fold taxonomy and presented in section 4.4. However, all other themes were identified using inductive thematic analysis, hence no predetermined theory, structure or framework was used (Braun and Clarke 2006; Graneheim et al. 2017). These themes emerged from the data, thus strongly relate to it, and fall under two main themes of 'processes' and 'influences' which are presented in Chapters 3 and 5 respectively. To avoid creating an overly fragmented analysis, the themes were kept rather broad, so they do not consist of different levels or many sub-themes. For 'processes', themes demonstrate a temporal dimension as well, which was expected as participants were involved in national-level, strategic decision-making

over a 25 year period (1992-2017). This is one of the reasons findings in Chapter 3 are presented in a historical review. For ‘influences’, eight main themes are identified, namely ‘legislation’, ‘political influences’, ‘policy entrepreneurs’, ‘signal crimes’, ‘media’, ‘measuring performance’, ‘organisational path dependence’ and ‘top-down/bottom-up decisions’ – they are presented and discussed in Chapter 5.

The term ‘elite’ is not clearly defined in the literature. However, elites have loosely been defined as those with close proximity to power or policymaking, including those at the top of hierarchies in police and law enforcement organisations (Lilleker 2003). Getting access to such groups of people is essentially a sampling issue, and while it is undoubtedly challenging to ‘get the interview’ with an elite respondent (Goldstein 2002), this challenge was mitigated by the fact that the majority of participants are retired and those who are still active professionally, work in different environments and positions.

The main methodological issue arising from interviewing elites is the central question of the researcher’s positionality which is important not only for getting access, but for building rapport and eliciting the interviewees’ own perception of events (Mikecz 2012). The status imbalance between interviewer and interviewee is considered by some scholars as widely problematic (Hunter 1995; Welch et al. 2002). A common assumption is that in elite interviews there is a shift in power dynamics in comparison to non-elite interviews which makes elite interviewees more powerful than the interviewer (Smith 2006). However, even if this is the case, thorough preparation and knowledgeability of the interviewee’s background as well as the topic of research can help normalize the imbalance, and indeed happened during the vast majority of interviews. Thus, the researcher aimed to take the position of the “informed outsider,” which describes a neutral outsider with an inside view (Welch et al. 2002), and is considered to be effective in accommodating an informed discussion, rather than a typical interview with the elite respondent. Outsiders are often at an advantage at obtaining information as they are more likely to be trusted because they are not perceived as a threat to the interviewee’s status and position (Mikecz 2012).

Indeed, the dynamic between an outsider/student researcher and an insider/teacher interview participant was well established during the interview process. The control of the interview often swayed between the interviewer and the interviewee, which was made possible by a rather flexible interview style. Although the interview design was semi-structured, at times the researcher made the conscious decision to let the interviewee direct and guide the interview,

especially when a novel topic or idea was raised that was not part of the interview guide (Henn et al. 2005; Ruane 2005; Lune and Berg 2016). Implicitly, this points to the issues they consider more important. More specifically, this led to a situation where each interview evolved around those organised crime problems that the interviewee was more concerned with. Their opinions revealed in this manner were considered particularly valuable, since the interviewees are the people who used to be at the forefront of priority-setting processes in national law enforcement.

Despite the many advantages that this outsider positioning had for the study, it also presents certain dangers with regards to understanding and interpreting the obtained information due to lack of the 'insider view' (Mikecz 2012). This challenge has not been overwhelmingly present in this study, even though the researcher is aware of her positioning as an 'outsider' and has strived to maintain a reflexive stance.

2.5.3. Media analysis: a thematic analysis of newspaper articles

The role of media in shaping public perceptions and attitudes towards crime, the justice system and police has been extensively researched (Dowler 2003; Gillespie et al. 2003; Boda and Szabó 2011). However, not many studies have investigated how the media shape law enforcement's perceptions on crime and more specifically organised crime. Hence, the analysis of newspaper articles sampled from national UK newspapers seeks to explore what role – if any – 'the headlines' have played in priority-setting processes within the four agencies from 1993-2016 and how the media influence the construction of organised crime threats by law enforcement. The study follows the media analysis five steps process set by Altheide (1996). Firstly, identify units of analysis, in this case the newspaper articles, develop a protocol for data collection, code and organise the data, data analysis, and report (Altheide 1996).

The database Nexis UK (Nexis UK) was used to collect newspaper articles from the time period of 23 years that corresponds to the published reports, so a custom date range was used: 01/01/1993 – 01/01/2016. Each article returned constitutes a unit of analysis, similar to the annual reports. The search was limited to 'all UK national newspapers' instead of 'all UK publications' which would include a wide range of media publications such as news transcripts, press releases, magazines, web-based publications, newsletters etc. The twenty newspapers that are included are: 'MailOnline', 'The Independent (United Kingdom)', 'telegraph.co.uk', 'The Guardian', 'The Times (London)', 'The Sunday Times (London)', 'The Daily Telegraph (London)', 'The Mirror and The Sunday Mirror', 'The Sun (England)', 'mirror.co.uk', 'i-Independent Print Ltd', 'Daily Mail and Mail on Sunday', 'The Observer', 'The Sunday

Express', 'The Express', 'Daily Star', 'Daily Star Sunday', 'Morning Star', 'The People', and 'The Sunday Telegraph (London)'.

After several test searches in the database with a number of single keywords for all the organised crime threats which are mentioned in the reports, it became clear that the search terms needed to be narrowed down to produce a more manageable number of articles and also more targeted to the study's subject of interest - UK national law enforcement's construction of organised crime threats. This challenge was tackled by running a series of proximity searches instead of using single keywords. Proximity searches are often used in media analysis research to look for words or phrases that are located a certain distance – measured in words – from one another. They are a very useful method to explore the use of *textual co-location* (Richardson 2007; Young and Allum 2012) in individual articles, which allows the researcher to make an assumption regarding the intention of the producer of the article intended to form a connection between two specific words in the reader's mind, for example 'human trafficking' located within 20 words from the word 'threat' or 'NCA'. Indeed, the number of times a term appears on its own and in proximity or co-location with others is thought in itself to be "an important factor in the communication process" (Richardson 2007 p.18). Therefore, after several trials using different combinations of keywords, proximity searches were able to narrow the scope and focus of the sampling process on articles which included an organised crime type within 20 words of the word 'threat' or 'priority', and within 20 words of either of the four national agencies.⁴

A sample of 653 articles was assembled which was reduced to 314 after filtering and excluding duplicates. Special attention was placed on the fact that law enforcement often changes the way they refer to certain organised crime threats. This is the case for various threats throughout the years and it has probably been reflected on media representations as well. To avoid missing some articles which might have used different terms to describe or refer to the same organised crime threat, multiple proximity searches were run for each of the terms and subsequently their results were combined in a single category. For example, for human trafficking, three proximity searches were run for 'human trafficking' (28 results), 'modern slavery' (10 results) and

⁴ For example, the proximity search for drug trafficking is: *drug! w/20 (priority! or threat!) w/20 ((NCS or National Crime Squad) or (NCIS or National Criminal Intelligence Service) or (SOCA or Serious Organised Crime Agency) or (NCA or National Crime Agency))*.

‘organised immigration’ (45 results), which were subsequently grouped in a single category with 83 articles.

Similarly to interviews, an inductive thematic analysis approach was used for the analysis of the newspaper articles as well. In this case, two levels of themes (see table 4.2) were created but the quality of the analytical approach is likely not compromised because of the relatively small number of themes and sub-themes (Altheide 1996; Braun and Clarke 2006).

MEDIA ANALYSIS THEMES AND SUB-THEMES						
1 st level themes	Focus of article	Nature of OC	Organised criminals	Performance	Response	Word count
2 nd level themes	Agency or politician or government	Domestic	Foreign OCGs	Successes	Harm reduction	Long
	Criminals, offenders or networks	International	Gangs	Failures	National security	Medium
	Event or phenomenon		Loose networks or lone offenders		Law enforcement	Short
			Mr Bigs			

Table 2.4. Media analysis themes (1st level) and sub-themes (2nd level).

The analysis of rich-text data through NVivo facilitates the identification of trends as well as their frequency in a more efficient way than manual coding for example. This study is particularly interested not only in capturing something important about the data in relation to the three overarching research questions, but also themes that represent some level of patterned meaning in the media dataset in order to be able to make some trustworthy inferences about the role of mass media in influencing the setting of organised crime priorities.

2.6. Ethical considerations

Ethical dimensions are fundamentally pertinent to how criminological researchers conduct their work throughout the research process. This study was granted ethical approval by Cardiff University's School of Social Science Research Ethics Committee and abides by the guidelines provided by the British Society of Criminology.

Criminological researchers – as well as researchers in other fields of the human and social sciences such as sociology, anthropology and psychology – are commonly confronted by four main ethical issues: confidentiality, informed consent, harms and benefits, and various relationships between researcher and participants (Israel 2004). This study has shielded itself from most difficulties associated with these subjects, as the nature of written text as well as the characteristics of elite interviewees do not raise major ethical issues.

However, some ethical considerations with regards to confidentiality and anonymity of elite participants needed to be addressed over the course of the present study. The fact that all participants are retired or have moved on from their decision-making role in national agencies, diminished the danger of organisational constraints with regards to information they were able to reveal during interviews. Nevertheless, since they could still consider risks to their reputations, they were offered a choice of anonymity or not, and were given the liberty to decide at any stage during the interview or later, whether they wanted any part or all of the interview attributed to them. In the end, all of them wished to remain anonymous. In order to further protect participant anonymity the study does not include a detailed table of participants; further details associated to specific participant's identities relating to their role in particular agencies and time periods could potentially render some participants identifiable.

Participants were initially sent an overview of the study along with a draft interview schedule prior to the interview. They were also encouraged to ask questions or request clarifications. Before the beginning of the interview, each participant was given a simple consent form in order to provide written consent to the recording of the interview, which they all did without exception. Finally, they were assured that recorded interview audio files would be kept safe and that there was a strategy in place to ensure confidentiality. It is unknown what effect those assurances had on their comments.

2.7. Concluding remarks

The chapter explained the study's aims, epistemology, and paradigm rooted in moderate social constructionism. It also discussed the study's hybrid research design which facilitated the combination of quantitative, deductive ('fixed') techniques such as quantitative content documentary analysis, and a qualitative, inductive ('flexible') approach to findings emerging directly from the data. The three methods of the study, documentary, media analysis and semi-structured interviews were outlined and the significance of their triangulation for researching police decision-making was explained. Sampling techniques were discussed, along with issues arising during data collection, manipulation and analysis.

Importantly, the study strives to remain reflective of the fact that its own conceptual and methodological choices inevitably shape the identification of themes throughout the research process. Indeed, the findings discussed in the following three chapters are products of subjective interpretation of documents and newspaper articles, and of co-construction in the relations and interactions between the researcher and interview participants. Hence, presenting the methodological and analytical choices of the study in a transparent way is of paramount importance, as they have directly influenced the interpretation of research findings.

3. Chapter 3: A historical review of building institutions and constructing the organised crime problem in the UK

3.1. Introduction

Organised crime has been portrayed as an emerging, ever-growing and serious social problem in policing policy and criminal justice discourses since the 1970s. As the various constructions of the problem grow in size and seriousness, similar developments seem to occur in the state response to serious and organised crime. For law enforcement in England and Wales, this translates both into increased budgets directed towards fighting organised crime, as well as into continuous centralisation of organisational efforts from territorial police forces and regional squads to national agencies with increased powers. This chapter's main aim is to outline and chronicle the emergence and development of national organised crime-fighting agencies in the UK, with a particular focus on how these institutional and structural changes have influenced the setting of strategic priorities.

The overview of the institutional structures and political transformations of organised crime policing in the UK covers the space of the last two decades. Through a historical review of the various configurations of organisational landscapes, and with a focus on the four main national agencies that have been in existence since 1992 (NCIS, NCS, SOCA and NCA), the chapter seeks to examine strategic decision-making processes, with an emphasis on priority-setting. Firstly, an analysis of the budgets of national organised crime-fighting agencies compared against national police grants is presented, as an approximate measure of the state's perceptions of the scale, as well as the nature – worthy of local or national response – of the problem. Secondly, the long-term trends of amalgamation and centralisation are illustrated through the evolution of national organised crime policing. These trends, however significant, are not entirely pure as is shown by their juxtaposition with structural transformations at the local level (for example the establishment of the regional organised crime units in 2010). Finally, the analysis demonstrates how patterns of institutional change in British national organised fighting agencies affect law enforcement's ability to set long-term strategic plans and priorities in order to (as they intend) more effectively tackle organised crime.

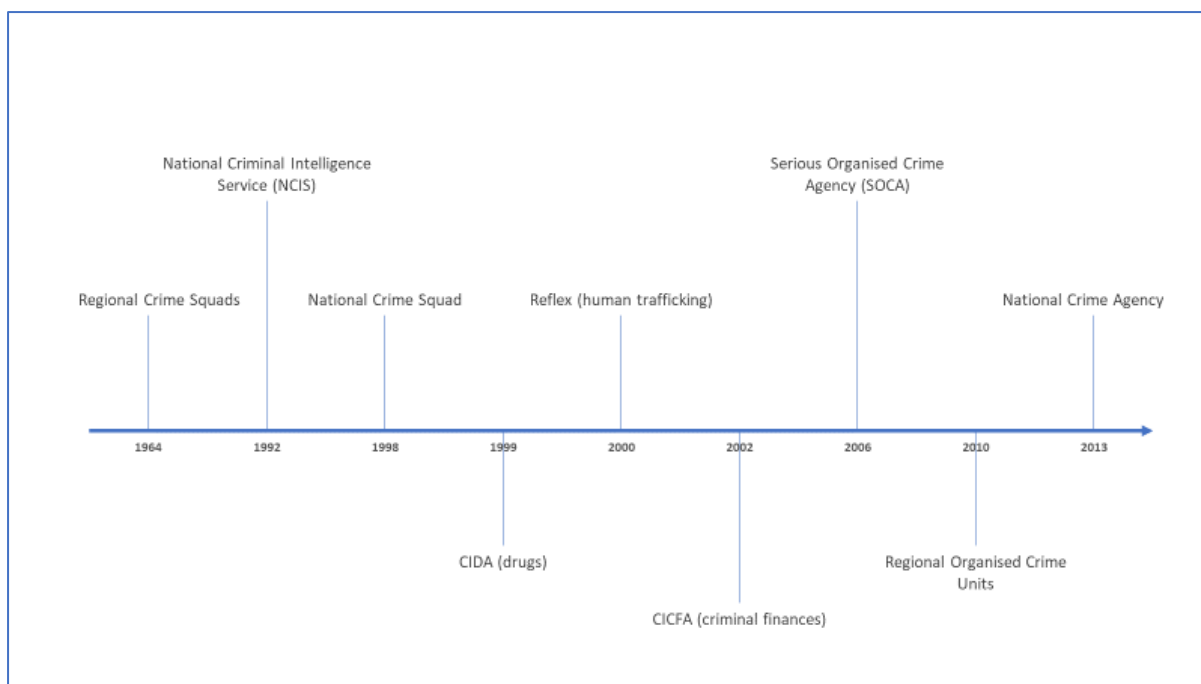


Figure 3.1 History of the main policing responses to organised crime in England and Wales

The main time points in the history of policing responses to organised crime in England and Wales that are discussed in this chapter are presented in Figure 3.1. The study’s dataset spans from 1993-2017; however, this chapter’s historical review goes back to the establishment of Regional Crime Squads (RCSs) in the mid-1960s in order to provide the context for the development of centralised, national agencies in the midst of a traditionally local and fragmented police response to crime in the UK. Additionally, interview participants have discussed RCSs and their role in policing organised crime.

Preliminary research findings indicate that the process of setting these priorities is rather complex and multidimensional, therefore triangulating data collected by different methods and from different sources can provide a more well-rounded understanding of the various organisational processes and the ways in which they have developed throughout the years. Therefore, the chapter builds on documentary, media and interview data to discuss the various processes of decision-making over time and across organisations.

3.2. The growing policing response to organised crime in the UK

During the past two decades, there has been considerable amount of work to measure the scale of organised crime, as well as the economic and social costs associated with it (Dubourg and Prichard 2007; Levi et al. 2013; Heeks et al. 2018; Fell et al. 2019). In the UK, a number of studies, including some exercises commissioned by the Home Office, have attempted to assess

the harms of organised crime using a variety of measures ranging from straightforward financial losses to health and crime harms, the level of public concern, as well as the size and profitability of the criminal markets involved (Home Office 2004). Therefore, attempts to measure the scale of organised crime have primarily focused on assessing the costs, losses and harms caused by all forms of organised crime to individuals, businesses, and communities (Greenfield and Paoli 2013; Levi et al. 2013).

These studies face various limitations in accurately measuring the overall cost of organised crime. In terms of the economic cost, estimations for crimes such as fraud are usually based on industry, HMRC or private sector data and are linked mainly to direct financial losses, which may not correspond to gains for organised crime actors (Levi et al. 2013). Moreover, the lack of reliable data with regards to drugs trafficking, which is inherent in the illegal nature of the products, lead most economic studies to research the demand side of the market, where statistical information is most readily available. Even so, the difficulty of obtaining good information about consumption and prices is a major obstacle. Supply and market structure are grossly under-researched, largely as a result of the difficulty of observing the organisation and activity of drug suppliers (Ours and Pudney 2006). On the other hand, monetising the social costs of organised crime, presents a different set of challenges. Organised criminal activities such as human trafficking or people smuggling are extremely difficult to quantify, partly because they are by their very nature largely unreported. Therefore, estimates are very approximate, and are often based on limited empirical data, such as for example the costs of running the asylum system (Dubourg and Prichard 2007; Fell et al. 2019).

Notwithstanding the aforementioned challenges in identifying and measuring the direct economic and social costs of organised crime using reliable evidence, research in this area tends to largely overlook the costs of responses to organised crime (with a few exceptions – see (Levi et al. 2013) and their potential in providing an alternative way of measuring the problem. The main aim for commissioning research on the economic and social costs of organised crime is to improve the response to it by producing better estimates of its negative (and sometimes positive) impacts on individuals, businesses, communities and states. The framing of the above rationale indicates that police and law enforcement efforts to tackle organised crime are solely viewed as a direct response to organised criminality occurring in the ‘real’ world. Indeed, research on organised crime control policies is not usually predicated on interactionist and labelling approaches which put emphasis on human actions and interactions

in understanding the social world. Adopting a labelling perspective could justify shifting the focus from the criminal activities onto the response of fighting organised crime, and the ways in which it can contribute in defining and measuring the problem.

Hence, given its moderate constructionist theoretical framework, the study maintains that an appreciation of the scale of organised crime can be achieved by measuring the reaction to it. This can be further supported by 1950s and 1960s scholars' (such as Becker, Lemert and Cicourel) widespread conceptualisation of social and institutional reactions to crime as a *variable*, not a constant (Downes et al. 2016). Furthermore, Leslie Wilkins's revisited amplification model suggests that deviancy should not be viewed as being amplified indefinitely in a spiral, but rather in a cycle, representing *feedback*, which can have a negative as well as a positive effect in the case of attenuation (Ditton 1979). This new formulation is not conceived as endless in principle, as with Wilkins's original deviancy amplification spiral (1964). On the contrary, it consists of stages connected by a 'loop' which essentially ensures that "no part of the system has hierarchical causal priority" (Wilkins 1964 p.88), and that as with every circuit "each element has an influence on all other elements either directly or indirectly" (Maruyama 1963). Ditton (1979) suggests two deviancy-regeneration models to explain the system(s) of mutual interaction between crime and control, which have been adapted to depict organised crime and its control policies/policing in Figs 3.2 and 3.3:

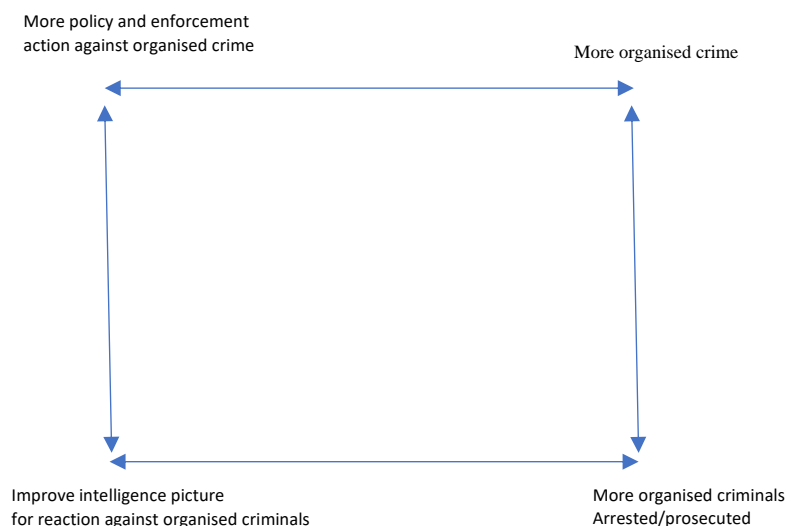
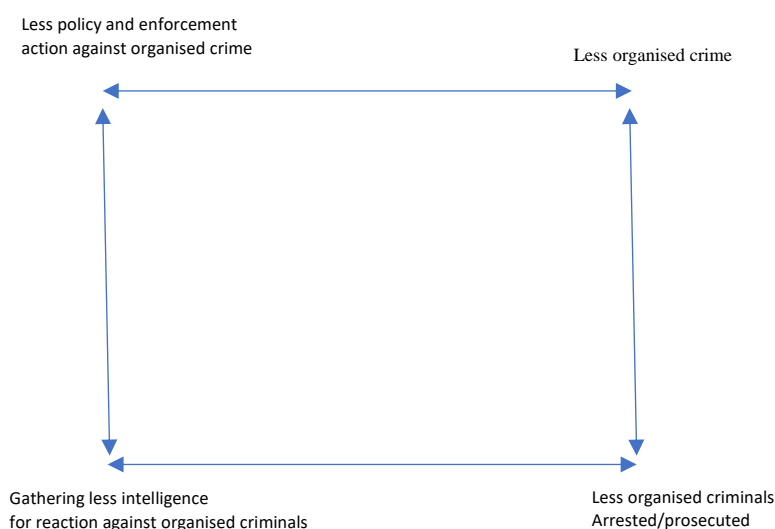


Figure 3.2. Feedback amplification model (vicious circle: negative effect)

Figure 3.3 Feedback attenuation model (virtuous circle: positive effect)



Thus, for the purposes of the study, this approach can provide the theoretical foundation on which to base arguments relating to the causal relationship between organised crime fighting agencies, crime control policies and the social problem of organised crime itself. Undoubtedly, there is real criminal behaviour occurring in the world irrespective of whether police organisations know it or not or even more so, construct it is as an organised crime ‘problem’. However, if we accept that the response to organised crime by law enforcement has a direct or indirect influence on it and vice versa, it could be argued that the annual national budgets for policing can be used as a reliable proxy for measuring (in direct economic terms) the problem, or even more accurately, the construction of the problem, its seriousness and development over time. To that end, the study presents an analysis of national organised crime fighting agencies budgets in relation to the overall national police funding. The results per year are presented in Table 3.1:

Year	National Police Revenue Funding*	National agencies budget**	OC	Percentage (%)
1995-1996	8754806000		-	
1996-1997	8734509000		-	
1997-1998	8707708000		-	
1998-1999	8875709000	131183500		1%
1999-2000	8971704000		-	
2000-2001	9272147000		-	
2001-2002	9745190000	203634640		2%
2002-2003	10151963000	220158666		2%
2003-2004	10946678000	223718011		2%
2004-2005	11295717000	270311220		2%
2005-2006	11697073000	296024487		2%
2006-2007	12044899000	452166000		4%
2007-2008	12337037000	468272000		4%
2008-2009	12483813000	504868000		4%
2009-2010	12648876000		-	
2010-2011		-	461681000	
2011-2012		-	433507600	
2012-2013		-	432972000	
2013-2014	7909474303	536935000		6%
2014-2015	8007358984	553000000		6%
2015-2016	8164870113	584060000		7%
2016-2017	7621971522	729170000		9%

Table 4 National organised crime fighting agencies percentage (%) of overall national police funding. The table contains only real term amounts, i.e. normalised by the annual inflation rates.

**Note that the annual police budgets do not include funding for national agencies.*

***NCIS and NCS (1998/99-2004/05), SOCA (2005/06-2013/2014), and NCA (2014/15-2016/2017).*

The data for central government ‘police revenue funding’ is readily available via a series of consistent police revenue funding numbers online publications (Home Office 2018a). The raw data used to produce the numbers from 1995/6 – 2009/10 is adjusted to take into account

changes in funding structures over this time period, in order to become directly comparable. Two main structural changes in police revenue funding are mentioned in the technical explanation document: a move from Regional Crime Squads (RCS) funded by contributions from police forces to the National Crime Squad (NCS) which was initially funded by the forces but subsequently directly funded by the Home Office, and the creation of the Pensions Top-Up Grant in 2006/07. In terms of crime squads, the amount of funding given by forces to the Regional Crime Squads (RCS) as direct funding, and to the National Crime Squad (NCS) through the NCS levy is deducted from the Home Office Main Grant in those years in which the RCS and NCS were funded by forces rather than by the Home Office. This ensured that the numbers are directly comparable. Data from annual police grant reports are used from 2013/14-2016/17 to calculate the real term amounts of aggregate police grants determined by the Home Secretary. Data for the years 2010/11-2012/13 are missing because grant reports for these years only provide information about the Home Office Core Settlement grant amount, not taking into account the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) Formula Funding, thus rendering the numbers for these years not comparable.

The funding for national agencies is calculated from detailed data provided in annual reports, normalised by the annual inflation rates. These figures begin in 1998/99, the year NCS was established. For the years the NCS co-existed and cooperated with NCIS, their budgets are combined. In the funding for NCS, the levy on the 43 police forces is also included. Data for only three years are missing, hence there is adequate information to form a representative and reliable dataset to compare national agencies budgets over time. The real term aggregate amounts are plotted in two line charts which demonstrate the fluctuations in funding for national police and national organised crime agencies (Fig. 3.4. and 3.5 respectively).

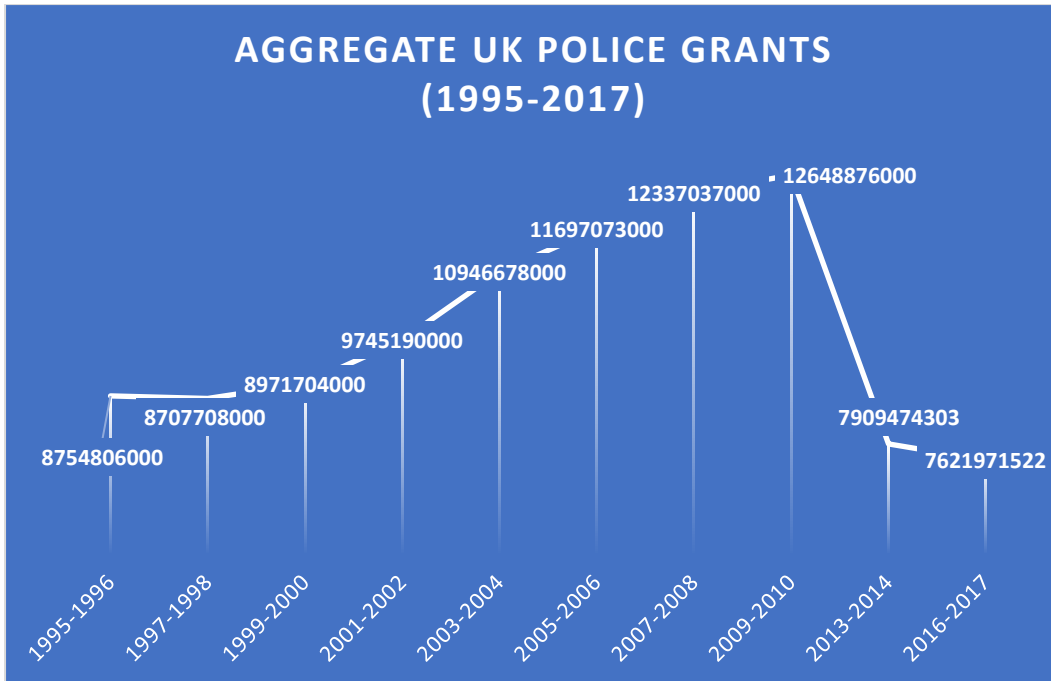


Figure 3.4. Central Government police revenue funding (1995/96-2016/17), excluding funding for national agencies.

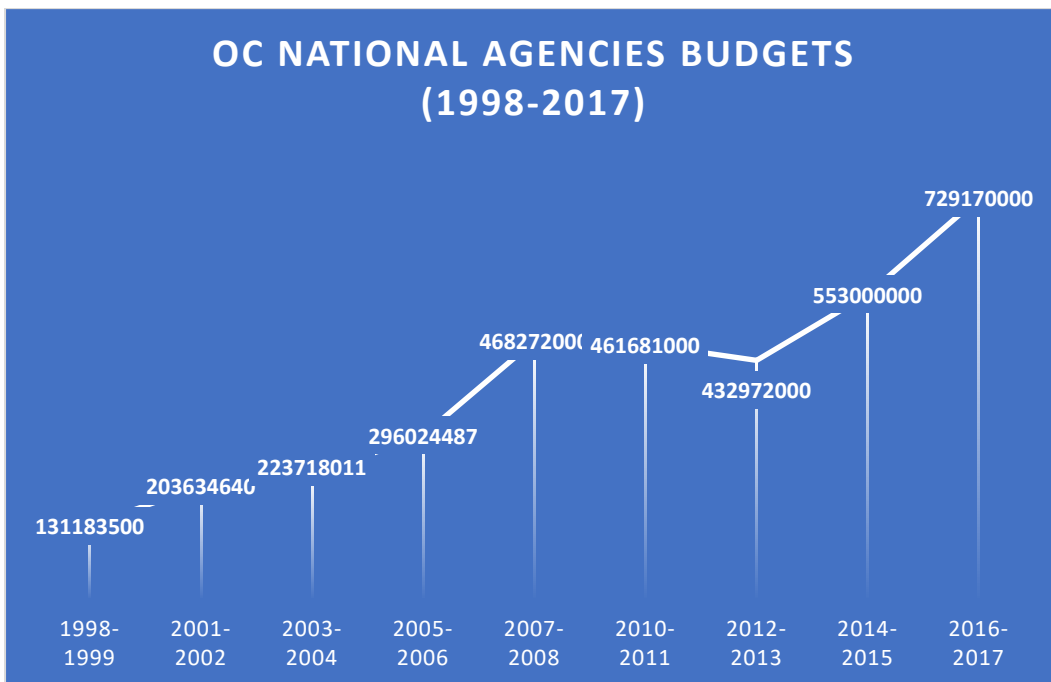


Figure 3.5. National organised crime fighting agencies revenue funding (1998/99-2016/17). The numbers for the years 1998/99-2004/05 are the sums of NCIS and NCS budgets.

For more than two decades in the study's timeline, national police funding grants have gradually increased until their peak in 2010. However, following the financial crisis of 2008/09,

harsh austerity measures were implemented in an attempt to reduce the country's budget deficit and increase economic growth; police organisations did not avoid massive cuts in their funding. The October 2010 Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR) outlined a 20% cut (in real terms) in the central government police funding grant for all 43 forces in England and Wales by 2014/15 (HMIC 2011). The cut can explain the significant decrease shown in figure 3.4 from approximately £12.65bn in 2009/2010 to £7.9bn in 2013/2014, which is even lower than the aggregate grant in 1995/6 (£8.7bn) in real terms.

However, austerity measures did not seem to have the same dramatic effect onto organised crime fighting agencies. SOCA's budget slightly decreased from £461.68m in 2010/11 to £432.97 in 2012/13, while NCA was established with a budget of £553m in 2014 (see figure 3.5). This is also evident from the steady increase in percentages in table 3.1 (**1%** in 1998/99, **4%** in 2005/06-2008/09 to **9%** in 2016/2017). This discrepancy between fluctuations of aggregate police grants and organised crime agencies' budgets seems to indicate that there is a steady growth in the British national response to organised crime, as increased budgets lead to more organisational efforts, as well as intelligence gathering and investigative capabilities. In turn, this realisation – under the principles of the crime-control feedback loop explained previously – seems to allow the argument that since the law enforcement response to organised crime is expanding as the funding increases, social constructions of the problem of organised crime must be increasing as well. However, this is not the only possibility. Since social problems do not exist in isolation, resources to tackle organised crime could have increased also because it remained more persistent in relation to other problems in the social problems 'marketplace', or because it would require greater effort to cut resources than not, or finally, because it would be difficult to justify politically. Nevertheless, if we accept social interactionism's premise that more policy and law enforcement action is causally linked to more organised crime, it can be argued that the problem is at least implicitly labelled as growing in scale.

The following historical review of institutional structures and configurations of the organisational landscape of policing organised crime is set against the background provided by this analysis. More specifically, constructions of organised crime as an ever-growing problem can justify both the gradual but steady increase in government funding, as well as the tendency to 'centralise' its policing and gradually increase the powers of national agencies who lead the fight against it.

3.3. The early years of organised crime policing in England and Wales

3.3.1. Specialist squads and the policing of a local problem

Organised crime in Great Britain has traditionally had, similarly to policing, a local identity. Notorious families like the Krays and the Richardsons in London, but also other criminal groups such as the razor gangs in Glasgow or the racecourse gangs in Brighton were viewed by law enforcement as local problems linked mostly to the urban space (Levi 2004; Sergi 2017). In the mid-1960s, the main organised criminal activity that caused increased concern was illegal gambling, especially the unregulated use of ‘fruit machines’, which led to the introduction of the Gaming Act 1968 (Levi 2004). Apart from gaming, acquisitive crimes sometimes serious and organised were committed across the country, while violent street wars were a common result of local gangs fighting for hegemony over territories and illicit markets (Hobbs 1995; Wright 2006). Police primarily targeted British indigenous gangsters or ‘homegrown criminals’ as one interview participant named them. Foreign groups at the time were seemingly not of particular interest to law enforcement.

According to interview data, interestingly drugs were not a priority for local policing of organised crime either:

“Drugs were springing out in the 1960s, but nobody gave a damn about drugs really, [...] just simply because statistically the Home Office didn’t count them as a crime, where the ‘clear up’ was credited. The ‘clear-up’ was you had a burglary; the offender’s arrested; that’s a ‘clear-up’. And the clear up was the credible measure of the police service in the 1960s, and that was that. [...] So statistically, senior detectives weren’t interested.” IP 9

Indeed, most performance indicators at the time were based around priorities such as burglary and vehicle crime, which were also crimes of particular public and political concern. Therefore, it was difficult to shift resources and organisational efforts towards any long-term investigation, especially if it involved intelligence gathering and crossing police force boundaries (Doig et al. 2001). Moreover, public attention was mainly focused on welfare and health consequences related to drug use. Hence, details around the supply side of drugs trafficking were largely unknown and did not attract much concern. Indeed, British newspapers in the 1970s/1980s often reported ‘drug horror stories’, including *Daily Mirror’s* ‘Heroin: The Scourge’ title and front page on 27 November 1984 which instigated a next day response from then Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher who had ordered ‘an instant Government inquiry into drug abuse

yesterday after seeing the Daily Mirror shock issue on heroin' (Woodiwiss and Hobbs 2009 p.118).

Similarly, mafia-type families and local gangs had some 'glocal' features and ties with international networks (Hobbs 1998), but they were not considered serious enough to attract national political concern. However, a point worth making is that since the nature of British policing has been historically localised, a response at force-level was the only solution to the problem of organised crime; the mentality, vernacular and architecture for a national response did not exist at the time. Therefore, the main British response was to set up specialist squads within constituent police forces, which were focused on specific types of criminal activities such as fraud, vice, and drugs offences. Once established, most specialist squads were effectively permanent, as forces rarely gave substantial consideration to the need to continue, or disband them. According to Morgan *et al.* (1996), specialist squads were established when there was a need for: particular expertise in a defined area; a unified, force-wide, approach to a problem; a limited need for particular (and often expensive) facilities; development of a common 'best' practice across the force; and/or – one clear point of reference within the force for external agencies. However, there was neither close supervision of their work, nor any serious effort to define the problems they were supposed to tackle within each constituent police force's borders (Morgan et al. 1996). This was corroborated by an interviewee who argued that once established, specialist squads:

"...started then to pick upon the more serious players, but there was never really a great focus; organised crime was one of the things that happen in America, you know." IP 15

However, by the mid-1960s, concern started to grow about both increasing number of crimes committed across police force borders, as well as the insufficient capabilities of local police forces to deal with such crimes (Levi 2004). As a result, nine Regional Crime Squads (RCS) came into existence on 1st April 1965, following the 1964 Police Act (Maguire and Norris 1992), with the main aim to counter this problem of border-crossing organised crime (which was perceived as growing), and in so doing, act as the operational counterparts of the pre-existing regional criminal intelligence offices. In 1993, they were amalgamated to six regions, with 44 locations across England and Wales. Their priorities were expected to address problems of the particular region they covered (Levi 2004), as opposed to conform to a national strategic plan which did not exist at the time.

Police officers with exceptional ‘thief-catching’ abilities (James 2011) were seconded to the RCS from police forces within each region. Detective chief superintendents were appointed as regional coordinators for each region and were responsible to a chief constables’ management committee made up of the chiefs of the participating forces, and an HMIC representative. Regional coordinators reported to the national Executive Coordinator based at the Home Office (Maguire and Norris 1992), in an attempt to maintain the Home Office’s influence on policing policy as well as increase supervision over RCS (Reiner 2010). The squads employed intelligence gathering and covert policing techniques in order to target suspect individuals or groups. RCS officers used informers extensively, as well as telephone ‘tapping’, and other methods that were not routinely available in mainstream policing (Clutterbuck 2006), which only widened the cultural divide between divisional and specialist officers (James 2011).

The use of intelligence-led techniques clearly demonstrates the presence of considerable investigate expertise in RCS. Nonetheless, and despite Home Office’s involvement in planning and setting up RCS, and there did not seem to be an overarching strategy which could guide squads’ efforts towards problems that were worthy of concern for each specific region. Indeed, one of the study’s interviewees admitted that:

“...officers who went to the Regional Crime Squads took their informants with them. And they used to do what they called ‘roll over jobs’, so the intelligence gained from one operation would spawn the next operation. There was really no overarching controlling mind that said, ‘this is where we should be going’ and that was recognised as a fault of Regional Crime Squads.” IP 14

So evidently, even though RCS constituted a significant development in British police investigative practices in the twentieth century, they seemed to still be following traditional routine policing methods in the sense that their work was mainly operationally-led. ‘Roll over jobs’ increased arrests of individuals closely or loosely connected to each other. Consequently, more intelligence about the same individuals’ activities was gathered and would create the basis for the next operation. This fragmented approach to tackling organised crime was highlighted in the mid to late 1990s, as also demonstrated by interview data:

“Before 1990 the priorities... how they were selected was ‘who made the most noise’ basically.” IP 5

This lack of any coherent strategic decision-making process became more prevalent as social constructions of organised crime gradually moved away from street gangs and family-crime

firms with restricted, local influence. Organised crime was subsequently labelled a matter of national concern by claimsmakers within law enforcement, media and politicians (Home Affairs Committee 1994); such claims helped pave the way for a change in the strategic direction at the Home Office as well as some major changes in the British response to organised crime, all of which were characterised by a tendency towards centralisation of intelligence and policing bodies.

3.4. Building a national response to organised crime

During the early years of the emergence of organised crime as a social problem, it was conceptually linked to either constrained and perhaps easier to control urban centres or crime families like the Krays and the Richardsons, which were certainly not considered sophisticated or organised enough to warrant a national response (Hobbs 1998; Wright 2006). However, during the 1980s and 1990s, while small family crime firms transformed into small entrepreneurial criminal systems characterised by both a local identity as well as a global reach, perceptions of organised crime seemed to shift from local to ‘glocal’ conceptualisations of the problem (Hobbs 1998). On the one hand, it could be rather simplistic to imply a direct causal relationship between alien conspiracy theories from the United States and the growing concern in British media and law enforcement with regards to foreign-based crime groups (Woodiwiss and Hobbs 2009). On the other hand, it seems that organised crime started to be socially constructed as a more complex and serious problem when the focus shifted gradually more on structural elements such as ethnicity of groups, rather than activities. As one interviewee stated regarding police organisations’ understanding of organised crime at the time:

“it was a narrow and simple view, but that’s because actually it was a narrow and simpler problem [...]; the polyglot nature of crime started to grow probably from the late 1990s onwards. Until then our view was quite simple about you know, white criminal gangs effectively” IP 13

The fact that foreign criminals were reported to often transcend national boundaries in order to take part in illegal markets within British cities, undoubtedly contributed towards constructing organised crime as a much more complex, national problem. However, it cannot be certain that structural organisational changes towards centralising part of the response to organised crime in the early 1990s can be attributed to the appearance of foreign crime groups. It seems to be one of the contributing factors alongside various “growing European Union activities (TREVI

and the first money-laundering directive), and a change in strategic direction at the Home Office” (Levi 2004 p.830).

3.4.1. The role of NCIS in setting priorities and constructing the organised crime problem

The National Criminal Intelligence Service (NCIS) was established in 1992 about a year before the number of RCS was reduced from nine to six. It began its life as the National Drugs Intelligence Unit before it emerged as a discrete entity with the aim “to provide leadership and excellence in criminal intelligence” (NCIS 1994). It was one of the first services to be set up in Europe to deal with the development of criminal intelligence at a national level with approximately 500 staff in its early years; more specifically, according to the second published annual report by NCIS (1994) 232 police staff, and 212 civilian staff were drawn from the Home Office, Customs, and local authorities. NCIS comprised the Headquarters (HQ), United Kingdom (UK) and International divisions. HQ Division included an operational support unit, an intelligence co-ordination unit, policy and research unit and a strategic and specialist intelligence branch. Five regional offices in London (South East), Birmingham (Midlands), Bristol (South West), Manchester (North West) and Wakefield (North East) were overseen by the UK Division which also included a Scottish/Irish Liaison Unit.

Documentary analysis data show that NCIS set its own strategic objectives which were to process intelligence, to give direction in the intelligence process, and to provide services and strategic analysis; these objectives remained relatively unchanged until 1997. From 1998 until its merger into the Serious Organised Crime Agency (SOCA) in 2006, NCIS’s strategic priorities were directly set by the Home Secretary along with the new Service Authority, which was established on 1st April 1998 to provide direction and accountability to NCIS, as well as report on its performance on an annual basis, as required by Section 5 of the Police Act 1997 (NCIS 1999a). NCIS was established as an independent organisation on the same date. An overview of the subsequent NCIS annual reports shows that strategic objectives used to change almost yearly: from eight in the 1998/99 report, to five in the 2001/02 report, to four in the 2002/03 report, which were:

“i) To produce intelligence assessments on serious and organised crime affecting the interests of the United Kingdom.

- ii) To produce operational intelligence on major criminals, their methods and their organisations.
- iii) To disseminate criminal intelligence and advice on certain specialist areas of crime.
- iv) To provide a range of coordination and access services which support the multi-agency operational law enforcement effort against serious and organised crime and the development of criminal intelligence” (2003a p.6).

Interview data show that these strategic objectives were important for setting the organisation’s work in a certain framework, within which the focus on activities was still prevalent:

“Well there’s two sets of priorities here [...] Inherently, our strategic product was to focus around the crime types. But our organisational priorities, if you’d like, were never defined in quite the way that I’ve just defined the 4 strategic priorities [...]. We were really following two sets of priorities, you know; these are the plans – the priority for the work we have to do; and having defined the work we’re going to do, we now must concentrate on the priority crime types” IP 9

Therefore, the organisation’s outputs had to address these organisational priorities, but they also had to assist operational activity against a list of serious organised crime problems. In the early years, the Specialist and Organised Crime Branch of NCIS prioritised crimes such as counterfeit currency, football, paedophilia, kidnap and extortion, and organised crime; the latter was tackled by the Organised Crime Unit which seems to be the only one that was not focused on activities, but rather on structures (Sergi 2014), as its subjects of special interest included, among some others: the Italian Mafia and US Cosa Nostra; Afro-Caribbean criminals and their drug-related violence; Triads, Vietnamese and Far-Eastern crime groups; criminal motorcycle gangs (including Hell’s Angels); Eastern European organised crime; and Israeli and Australian criminal groups (NCIS 1994). There was also a separate drugs directorate which focused on producing intelligence products and strategic overviews on known and emerging drug crime threats. The directorate operated a system of drug liaison officers, whose work was to primarily provide assistance and advice to HM Customs and Excise, as well as RCS operational teams (40% of total workload), and to proactively gather tactical intelligence (30%), while they were also responsible for gathering strategic intelligence (10%) (NCIS 1994 p.13). Evidently, NCIS’s role in the early years was mostly linked to operational assistance rather than strategic overviews and assessments, as also confirmed by interview data:

“The best example is a wheel; and we were the hub – we were the central part of the wheel. And that went out to all law enforcement agencies; police, Crime Squads, Customs etc. And we were about providing timely and actionable intelligence” IP 5

Nevertheless, this clear focus on operational, *actionable* intelligence shifted with the Police Act 1997, which was the first legislation to set out specific functions for NCIS. Alongside *operational intelligence*, NCIS was to also provide *problem profiles* (they describe and assess specific geographical and thematic aspects of an organised crime problem), *target profiles* (based on findings from the problem profiles, they summarise intelligence on key, major organised criminals and groups), and, finally, *strategic and tactical assessments*. The most important intelligence product of the latter category was the United Kingdom Threat Assessment (UKTA), whose main functions included examining overall major threats, informing strategic thinking and priorities for action, and identifying progress against objectives (NCIS 2003b).

Even though the significance of UKTAs in setting strategic priorities, and thus contributing in constructing organised crime problems, will be explored in more detail when the study discusses inter-agency work (see section 3.5.2), it is important to highlight that UKTAs do not set priorities themselves, but rather merely present a list of identified organised crime threats, as they explicitly state in their introduction. So, it was up to law enforcement agents or inter-agency strategies to set their own priorities in their internal control strategies or corporate plans. As an interview participant aptly observed:

“If you go back to some of the early NCIS stuff you’ll see there was wildlife crime, football crime, West African crime, frauds which actually, you know, the latter maybe not, but you know wildlife crime, is it really a threat? [...] In a regulatory fashion can you, do you need to have the top-end law enforcement capabilities dealing with it? So, I think at one stage NCIS had about 47 different threats? I can’t remember, that sort of number. Which you know, clearly they can’t all be priorities.” IP 13

Hence, in spite of increasing emphasis on producing high quality strategic intelligence products, such as the UKTA, an equally – if not more – important objective for NCIS was to produce actionable intelligence which could be used in operations by RCS and police forces during its early years, and by National Crime Squad (NCS) after its establishment in 1998. This seemed to have helped mitigate to an extent the difficulties in establishing and assessing

meaningful performance indicators for an intelligence agency, as traditional performance measures tailored for operational policing could be used with some adjustments to suit NCIS intelligence products. Document analysis shows that the majority of performance indicators presented in NCIS annual reports are inherently quantitative in nature and directly refer to operational results: ‘intelligence packages/reports disseminated to operational teams’, ‘number of arrests, seizures, prosecutions and convictions as a direct result of NCIS intelligence’. Some qualitative measures were established in order to correspond with Service Authority’s first objective: “*To improve the quality of criminal intelligence available to combat serious and organised crime within the United Kingdom*” (NCIS 1999a p.41). For the first time, intelligence disseminations were assessed against a quality matrix, determining factors such as the level of importance of the subject (criminal), the impact that resources properly directed were expected to achieve, the area of criminality and the value added by NCIS.

“Throughout this process, the Authority has been mindful of the difficulties associated with developing meaningful ways of measuring performance in the area of intelligence. This is a new field and is not an exact science.”

(NCIS 1999).

Service Authority’s acknowledgement of the challenges in measuring NCIS’s performance is also corroborated by interview participants:

“How many people have been arrested? How much money has been captured? The trouble is that with NCIS, you’re not going to get a product necessarily that year. It’s intelligence”

“I wanted to personally go to every special desk – every special unit – in NCIS and say ‘have we produced product? What is our product? Is our objective to cause people to be arrested, or for people to be disrupted, or save money, or get money for the Government or money for us or for the pot?’ you know, ‘what’s our objective?’ and I just never had the time to do that, and I should have done it.” IP 9

These interview extracts are indicative of some participants’ perceptions of NCIS strategic priorities as both not entirely clear, as well as difficult to translate into meaningful measures of performance. Additionally, the setting of performance indicators based on results such as arrests and prosecutions carried out by either local police forces or RCS (and later the NCS) presupposes a direct, smooth link between intelligence products and police operations. However, as Sheptycki (2004) notes, the process of producing intelligence in a policing environment is fundamentally about the ways in which information sharing is managed within

and between organisations. Given that NCIS was the first national intelligence agency with an objective to cooperate with local police forces, the cultural shift towards sharing of information and cooperation across agencies was a huge one. In the early years, it seemed to be rather difficult to overcome (Richards 2010). The fact that about half of NCIS agents were civilians and the rest were seconded from either specialist squads or HMIC did not help bridge cultural gaps.

Furthermore, some interview participants seem to view NCIS as an overly bureaucratic, or effectively powerless organisation mainly due to lack of operational capabilities:

“NCIS has had almost no power, you know [...] It could try to influence through things like the strategic assessment, but it had no real power” IP 1

“If you want to die a death by a thousand cuts, end up in the Home Office. Nobody really thought about what [NCIS] was doing, it was a bureaucratic... and it was a failed intelligence agency” IP 8

NCIS’s alleged shortcomings along with many other factors, such as inter- and intra-agency information flow blockages, the rapid evolution of information technologies, and narratives in the press that highlighted the increasingly more complex nature of organised crime, contributed in streamlining trends of centralisation which were once inconceivable in British policing.

3.5. Operational policing of organised crime

3.5.1. The National Crime Squad

The move towards a new national agency with operational capabilities to tackle organised crime gathered force in the mid-nineties – another change that further ‘centralised’ policing of serious organised crime in Britain. The influential 1995 report by Home Affairs Select Committee which put forward a compelling case for the need to tackle the ‘emerging threat of organised crime’ and assess its impact on the UK. The report also maintained that ‘if the response to serious and organised crime is to be sharpened and made more effective the present structure of Regional Crime Squads need to be replaced by a more nationally co-ordinated structure’, thus implicitly endorsing the Home Secretary’s announcement at the 1995 Conservative Party conference that he intended creating an operational national body to deal with serious crimes (Newburn 2003). The National Crime Squad (NCS) was established in April 1998, following the publication in March 1996 of the White Paper, *Protecting the Public*,

which confirmed the Government's intention of forming NCS. The NCS headquarters was at Pimlico in London, with three Regional Operational Command Units: Northern, Eastern, and Western. Right before its amalgamation into SOCA in 2005, NCS consisted also of the Financial Organised Crime Unit, the Paedophilia Unit, the National Hi-Tech Crime Unit, and the Immigration Crime Team (ICT). The Director General of NCS had to hold the personal rank of Chief Constable and was appointed by and accountable to the Service Authority:

“It was a Chief Constable role because you had to sign off surveillance, and rather intrusive surveillance, and you needed to be a Chief Constable to do that, and also, it was an agency that you work with other Chief Constables’ police forces” IP 15

NCS was established with the main aim to provide “a new service under one central command with a clear objective of deploying police resources at a national level to inflict the maximum damage on organised crime” (NCS 1998). The new agency's Mission Statement was ‘to provide leadership and expertise to combat serious and organised crime nationally and internationally’. Therefore, NCS was closer culturally to traditional territorial forces, in contrast with NCIS which was purely an intelligence agency:

“NCS as you know was effectively the amalgamation of the old Regional Crime Squads to provide a national response because it was recognised that regional responses weren't good enough. And then [...] it became the 44th force in England and Wales so it was actually a police force. NCIS wasn't but NCS was actually a police force. So, it was still clearly within the police community.” IP 13

The acceptance of NCS as the ‘44th police force’, with similar functions and operational capabilities to police forces, was further facilitated by the fact that most of its personnel was seconded by the amalgamated RCS – at the end of its first year, the police officer establishment of NCS was 1450, and the support staff establishment was 380 (NCS 1998). Even though NCS was considered to be a rather large agency by that era's standards, according to documentary sources, cooperation with territorial police forces was crucial to its success, even more so because they had to largely rely on requests by forces to assist in cases, unless the agency had become aware of a case in another way such as widespread media coverage. As stated in its first annual report:

“The NCS is not a national police force investigating ‘national’ crime, but succeeds on the basis of a partnership approach with the forty three territorial police forces in

England and Wales; it also works closely with the Scottish Crime Squad, the Royal Ulster Constabulary, the National Investigation Service of HM Customs and Excise (HMCE) and other law enforcement agencies” (NCS 1998).

The emphasis NCS had to place on providing support to and working with partners is also depicted on the second of NCS’s targets and objectives, which were set directly by the Home Secretary and the Service Authority. In its first year, its strategic aims were:

- i) to concentrate effort on successfully bringing to justice and/or disrupting those responsible for serious and organised crime;
- ii) to provide appropriate support to police forces and other law enforcement agencies in relation to serious and organised crime;
- iii) to create and maintain a recognised, robust, professional and ethical national organisation staffed by people of integrity, ability and commitment.

However, NCS’s cooperation with police forces had some problematic aspects as well, mainly due to the fact that – again in contrast with NCIS which was centrally funded – NCS was mainly funded by a levy placed on police forces, proposed by the Service Authority and approved by the Home Secretary (Penrose 1999). Documentary data show that NCS’s second objective was achieved by two performance targets: to provide support/cooperation in 90% of all requests for assistance, and to achieve satisfaction in 90% of responses provided by the NCS. Interview data corroborate that indeed forces were regarded as ‘customers’ that needed to be kept both satisfied and fully informed of the agency’s activities and performance, which is likely the reason behind the very detailed nature of NCS reports:

“So, these people were holding us to account on behalf of the money that was being paid for by the other authorities, and that’s how that worked. And therefore, that’s why the transparency was necessary, so that they could go back and say, ‘Well this is how the money has been spent; this is what they’ve done for it; and that’s how they’ve achieved it’.” IP 10

The 2001 Criminal Justice and Police Act transformed NCS into a non-departmental public body (NDPB), and with effect from April 2002 introduced a new direct grant funding regime. In his first foreword as Director General, William Hughes stated his hope that “this necessary and welcome change surrounding funding for the Squad will minimise the confusion and often unnecessary conflict between ourselves, local forces and police authorities” (NCS 2001 p.10). So, the levy on the police forces to fund NCS was lifted after six years, but that was evidently

not enough to release certain tensions between local forces and NCS. Interview data indicate that support provided by NCS was often perceived as undermining the Chief Constable's power and authority over his territory. Hence NCS operations were often treated with scepticism by police forces:

“These people [i.e. Chief Constables] had always had absolute autonomy in their force areas; now, there's another 'jumped up' person, coming in, and doing things in their areas and not telling them what they're doing. And they were a bit upset about that. And they all said, 'You've got to tell us!' and we said 'No, no-no. I need to know! 'Nice to know' is gone; this is all need to know. And NCS officers get it wrong, then NCS stands the liability for any of their actions.' So, they then said 'Ok, as long as we're not liable.' No, no-no; NCS is liable for anything that its officers do'. So, we agreed to that. And there was always a very good relationship.”

“[Deducted constabulary] was always a bit of a troublesome... 'Do you realise that that's taken...' oh, I don't know, 'Five or six policemen off the street, and I can't do this, and I can't do that, because I'm paying for you.' You know... what do you say? Do you say sorry? 'Well no, actually I'm contributing to the reduction of crime in your area, because if I'm taking out multi-tiers of cocaine, heroin and all the rest of it, it's not reaching [Deducted constabulary], and therefore you're not having the problem.'” IP 10

In terms of priority-setting, NCS strived to keep the same level of transparency. Documentary as well as interview data indicate that there are at least two quite distinct processes of setting strategic priorities for NCS: one before, and one after 2000, when the Organised Crime Strategic Group (OCSG) in the Home Office came into existence and NCIS started publishing the UK threat assessment.

Before 2000, annual reports clearly broke down three categories of strategic objectives, set by the Home Secretary (national and international cooperation), the Service Authority (focus resources on organised criminals, intelligence sharing, support and assist partners) and the Director General (corporate and staff support). Interview data confirm that:

“So, government set their strategy of priorities for organised crime at that level. Down from that level, then, comes the Service Authorities focusing on NCS and NCIS, that they then set their strategic goals, which impact on NCIS, then NCS. And then in some cases, the Directors General set their own

'mini targets'. But these are the critical ones to which the organisations are working to.' IP 10

Once these priorities were set, they were translated into specific performance targets for the agency to hit. According to interviews, there were quarterly meetings in which new intelligence that came in from NCIS or police forces would be examined, and the DG or heads of units would decide if there were valid reasons of a change of focus mid-term or not. There was also a 'big' meeting about two months before the annual report's publication, in April, in order to recap the year, as well as summarise and assess the organisation's performance. Another part of decision-making in NCS was the control strategies – a quite common process in law enforcement agencies – which were mainly focused on types of criminal activity, and aimed to internally divide operational effort in a rigorous and systematic way that would correspond with strategic objectives and indicative proportions set in annual plans. However, the day-to-day realities of operational policing were inevitably creating some anomalies for these formal processes:

"We had 18-19 control strategies, and there was a sort of... some work was done to try to apportion operational effort against those and... But the operational effort of course was slightly different, you know. In the NCS when you were a straightforward operational law enforcement agency so effectively you know, pretty much we investigated, and we took cases through prosecution with the Crown prosecution service." IP 13

Another prioritisation system that was functioning alongside the traditional activity model (Sergi 2017) in the National Crime Squad involved the labelling of organised criminals as 'current nominals' and 'core nominals'⁵. By applying these labels to individuals participating in illegal networks, the agency alternatively targeted organised criminals instead of activities in an effort to identify and act against the more prolific offenders. In fact, in NCS reports after the year 2000, there are arrests and convictions figures specifically for core nominals and current nominals. One participant explains:

"So, we ascribed these you know, call them the Kingpins, core nominals status um you know they dropped off in SOCA, SOCA didn't particularly want those as the term, the NCA's tried to bring them back; they're talking about iconic

⁵ A *core nominal* is "a major criminal of international, national or regional significance believed to be involved in the commission of crime at the highest level", while a *current nominal* is "major criminal of international, national or regional significance who does not qualify for the status of core nominal but nevertheless is actively engaged in the commission of serious crime" (NCIS 1994 p.24).

individuals. But essentially, so we had nominals, we had core nominals and there was a certain set of criteria that you had to meet to have someone as a core nominal and that attributed potentially greater investigative resource as well as a degree of status to the individual.” IP 13

In 2000, NCIS published its first national UKTA. This document became the starting point for strategic priority-setting at the highest level of organised crime policing in the early 2000s. The OCSG consisted of senior representatives from government departments and agencies most closely concerned with tackling serious and organised crime, such as NCIS, NCS, the investigative division of HM Customs and Excise, MI5, MI6, GCHQ, and Immigration Service. The fourth NCS annual report declares in its first page:

“We target, with increasing effect, the type of priorities agreed with partner law enforcement organisations” (NCS 2001)

According to an interviewee who has taken part in OCSGs, the outcomes of the meeting would directly inform the Home Secretary’s objectives:

“The outcome of that [OCSG meeting] goes into the Home Secretary’s private office. I’m quite sure it would be accompanied by a paper recommending the Home Secretary to consider these as the strategic aims; and unless the Home Secretary knew something we didn’t, or there was something ‘hot potato’ in Parliament that we were unaware of, he would almost certainly – with discussion – say ‘Yes, I’m happy with those, that those are the strategic priorities’. So those came out as the Home Secretary’s strategic aims” IP 10

So the Home Secretary’s objectives were based on OCSG recommendations, which was in turn based at least primarily on the most comprehensive national intelligence product at the time, the UKTA. Even though this process provided the official aims for the organisation, interview data demonstrate resistance in adopting these aims especially if they deviated from the organisation’s ongoing operations:

“Now we have got the Home Secretary’s objectives; and with 2 or 3 other people, this is the strategic planning group – or operational group – and we would say, in model copy: ‘there’s the direction of travel for this year, folks; no, we don’t stop what we’re doing. If we need to swerve into a different way, we swerve gradually.” IP 10

This extract demonstrates a clear distinction between what is said and what is done in organisations, especially law enforcement agencies which do not ever stop their operational

activity in order to design strategy. Indeed, if the priorities needed for whatever reason to change, this change would have been hindered by conventional, activity-driven police practice. Also, the rationale seems aligned with traditional, action-oriented, operational approaches to policing organised crime where intelligence gathered from an operation informs the next one. As a result, NCS's organisational efforts over the years ended up being dominated by one of its highest priorities which was also historically the primary area of expertise for national law enforcement agents: drugs trafficking. It is a truism of policing that operational activity is often opportunity driven and ends up shaping strategy even more so than official strategic directions. As an interview participant asserts:

"We finished up with 75% of our operational activity had to be against Class A drugs and 11% had to be against organised immigration crime and then the rest, the other 14% was other stuff so it could be money laundering, it could be robbery, it could be contracts to kill, it could be firearms etc."
IP 13

Moreover, it is important to note that the requirement on agencies to work in partnership was not limited to the strategic level. Intelligence sharing and operational support was at the heart of the government strategy for tackling organised crime in the early 2000s, which meant ensuring smooth multi-agency cooperation was a key element for efficient and effective performance by national agencies (after all, they had specific performance targets designed to address the 'work with partners' objective). A detailed and graphic example of inter-agency cooperation between NCS and NCIS during an operation is provided by an interview participant. At the end of this extract, there is also evidence of the aforementioned 'chain-smoking' tactic – rather common in law enforcement – where after the end of an operation, officers can continue in the same investigative line based on intelligence gathered from the previous one:

"Part of our remit is to feed intelligence back into NCIS – the things that we find – and they start building a case, in the intelligence side. The intelligence case is brilliant, but it doesn't fit, so you need to go out and find the evidence. Their intelligence says that X meets Y in the Blind Beggar pub; 'Yeah, have you seen X meeting Y in the Blind Beggar? Who's got a photograph?' Surveillance team; cha-ching! Got you! 'Yes, they do meet'. So that's confirmed; but why do they meet? 'Don't know'. Well, is this sufficient to actually apply for a warrant to intercept their telephones? Apply to the Home Secretary. If there is – fine. So, we'll be live, they'll be talking

to each other; now we know what they're talking about, and we'll learn who else they're talking to." IP 10

However, inter-agency cooperation has not always been such a smooth and successfully undertaking, as the one described here. The challenges created by cultural and barriers or competing organisational priorities, coupled with the Government's unflinching emphasis on multi-agency collaboration, led to increasing and rather convincing arguments for further amalgamation and centralisation – an idea that had been repeatedly rejected in the 1990s:

"So NCIS provided the information, NCS was the operational arm, there was talk at one time of putting the two together but a lot of people thought 'No, you shouldn't do that, you need to split it otherwise it'll just be you know one big agency' which is essentially what SOCA turned out to be but at the time people thought it was better to keep them separate and I don't really... it was nonsense to do it then and it still is as far as I'm concerned" IP 15

3.5.2. Inter-agency initiatives: setting strategic priorities in partnership

Before the study goes on to discuss the regime and priority-setting mechanisms of SOCA, it is important to take a closer look at some of the 'sectional' inter-agency strategies which were a significant part of strategic decision-making in tackling organised crime around the beginning of the century.

The Concerted Inter-Agency Drugs Action (CIDA) group was formed in 1999, under the chairmanship of HM Customs and Excise, and brought together the agencies and departments most concerned with tackling Class A drugs availability in the UK. CIDA devised 'end-to-end' multi-agency strategies for tackling trafficking mainly in heroin and cocaine. This was thought to have led to significant improvement in partnership working between law enforcement agencies, along with better intelligence and a more coordinated and efficient use of resources (NCIS 2003b).

In 2000, approximately a year after the establishment of CIDA, Reflex was initiated under the chairmanship of the NCS. It was another multi-agency taskforce coordinating operations against traffickers and smugglers and developing the intelligence and strategy to underpin them; in other words, it was the equivalent of CIDA for organised immigration crime. Like CIDA, Reflex had an 'end-to-end' multi-agency strategy, a key strand of which was "the improvement of the intelligence picture of the nature and scale of organised immigration crime,

including the methods and routes used to move illegal migrants, key nexus points where they were recruited or gathered for onward transportation, and the exploitation of illegal immigrants in the UK in the vice trade, as cheap labour and as kidnap victims used to extort money from families back home” (NCIS 2003b p.7). Apart from NCS, partners included, the Immigration Service, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, other government departments and police forces.

The Concerted Inter-Agency Criminal Finances Action Group (CICFA) was the final multi-agency initiative, established in 2002. It was similar in concept to CIDA and Reflex and was chaired by HM Customs and Excise. Its main aim was to improve the UK’s response to the financial aspects of crime, particularly the recovery of criminal assets and the detection and prevention of money laundering. It consisted of the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO), NCS and NCIS. According to the UKTA (2003b), CICFA was looking *inter alia* to capitalise on the Proceeds of Crime Act (PoCA), which had been passed earlier in the same year, and the creation of the Asset Recovery Agency (ARA).

From 1999-2006, there was an increased requirement on national agencies to adapt their aims and objectives in order to take full account of the inter-agency strategies; this was directly influencing organisational targets⁶. These groups had the power to manage and assign funding to member organisations in order to enhance their knowledge base, as well as strategic and operational capabilities to deal with these three organised crime problems. The following

⁶ For example, the Home Secretary’s objectives set for NCIS (2005) are:

Objective 1(i): where appropriate in partnership with other law enforcement agencies, in support of the Government’s inter-agency strategy for reducing **Class A controlled drugs** in the United Kingdom

Objective 1(ii): where appropriate in partnership with other law enforcement agencies, in support of the Government’s inter-agency strategy for combating **organised immigration crime** (people smuggling and human trafficking) affecting the United Kingdom

Objective 2(i): in support of disruption of criminal enterprises, in order to increase disruption of criminal enterprises engaged in **money laundering and related financial fraud** within or affecting the United Kingdom, and maximising mutual support and cooperation with law enforcement agencies, at local and national levels.

Objective 2(ii): in order to increase disruption of criminal enterprises engaged in other criminal activity including firearms related crime within or affecting the United Kingdom, and maximising mutual support and cooperation with law enforcement agencies, at local and national levels.

interview extracts demonstrate the significance of resource allocation specifically towards organised immigration crime:

“One of the roles was trying to make sure who got the bits of... spots of funding; and that built some momentum within the different agencies. So, they were getting a little bit of funding to set up little units within their policing service, or within different agencies; for example at NCS we were able to pay for a team comprising of immigration officers working alongside NCS police officers, in the same operational team.”
IP 3

“It was striking that the only way they could get these agencies to do anything about [human trafficking] was if they’d put a separate, ring-fenced pot of money to focus on just these sorts of crime types. It was very difficult to say to the agency ‘I want you to do less of this and more of something else’, so there was always more money to go particularly to this one cause.” IP 12

Finally, even though inter-agency strategies played a central role in improving co-operation between intelligence and law enforcement agencies over the years, there were always some challenges in them working effectively, not unlike the OCSGs. In spite of their focus on one specific organised crime type (in this sense, they could avoid dealing with the challenge of prioritising competing crime problems), they may have not been entirely successful in communicating meaningful strategic priorities to member agencies, according to interview data:

“[The strategy groups] tended to be rubbish basically. Everybody would sit around a table and say ‘oh, this is a problem, we must do something about it’ and then they’d all go off and tell their organisation ‘yeah, we can’t actually do it’.” IP 14

The problems discussed in this section around the setting of overarching strategic priorities at the national level through inter-agency cooperation reinforced arguments of proponents of the need for a new organised crime fighting agency, which would encompass new increased powers. The White Paper ‘One Step Ahead’ identifies a number of issues with cooperation that perhaps a different institutional structure would help tackle. In particular, the White Paper notes that “the review of our institutional structures found a general consensus that if we were starting again, we would not design the institutions in the way they have developed over time” (Home Office 2004 p.22). Also, the dividing line between institutional responsibilities remained unclear in several areas, which was proving challenging for maintaining good relations between

agencies. Moreover, the review identified areas of overlap, or even duplication, between some of the key players; for example, both HMCE and NCS had roles to play in combating drug trafficking. Overall this fragmented effort against organised crime made co-ordination difficult, and led to a lack of critical mass in some less traditional but important skill areas, such as financial crime, including VAT fraud, excise fraud and counterfeiting (Home Office 2004). Against this background, the Home Secretary decided to create a new agency, which would be the unquestionable leader in the British response to serious organised crime. This huge step towards almost entirely ‘centralising’ British policing of organised crime, and its implication on priority-setting processes, will be explored further in the next section.

3.6. The Serious Organised Crime Agency and the ‘harm reduction’ era

The creation of SOCA was announced on 9 February 2004. The new agency would bring together the NCS, NCIS, HMCE’s investigation and intelligence work on serious drug trafficking, recovering related criminal assets and the Immigration Service’s work on organised immigration crime. NCS and NCIS two final annual reports present a series of arrangements, including consultations with stakeholders, which were undertaken in order to ensure a smooth transition to the new organisation. SOCA was established under Section 1 of the Serious Organised Crime and Police Act 2005 as a non-departmental public body with Home Office sponsorship and existed from 1 April 2006 until 7 October 2013.

The White Paper ‘One Step Ahead’ describes the Home Office’s expectations about SOCA: “the new Agency will be much more than the sum of its parts. Its creation should lead to greater consistency of approach; a critical mass in key skill areas, address current problems of duplication and co-ordination, limit bureaucracy, provide opportunities for economies of scale, and represent a ‘one stop shop’ for our international partners. In particular, it should address some of the key weaknesses in the generation, dissemination and use of intelligence material” (Home Office 2004 p.22).

There are not many empirical studies that assess the extent to which SOCA managed to live up to these expectations during its short life. However, SOCA’s performance was found to be relatively poor by a study which analysed publicly available data on SOCA and compared it to National Crime Squad, one of its predecessors (Sproat 2011). This study, however, based its analysis on quantitative ‘output’ data figures such as the number of operations, seizures, convictions and recovery of criminal assets. SOCA, however, was created on the premise that

to tackle organised crime, agencies needed to invest more on long-term, strategic building of the intelligence picture, and also on utilising intelligence-led policing techniques that do not necessarily conform with traditional policing performance measures (such as seizures and arrests). The same author has found that despite the claims made by the Home Office regarding SOCA's effectiveness, "it convicted just over one percent of the people said to be involved in [organised crime] in the UK" (Sproat 2011 p.347). Nevertheless, as James (2016 p.48) points out "the inability to compare like for like data or to be able to measure the impact of the conviction of that one percent should give pause for further reflection on its true meaning". Indeed, SOCA was established under the premise that a traditional policing response was suboptimal for dealing with the problem. Especially when several agencies share the responsibility for tackling organised crime, "they cannot be as effective as a single body which can focus its combined resources on a single strategy" (Caroline Flint MP, *Hansard* (Standing Committee D), 11 January 2005, column 66, as cited in Harfield 2006).

In its first year, the SOCA board determined five overarching priorities to guide its business⁷. The first strategic priority highlights the need to understand the *harm* caused by organised crime (SOCA 2006). That is indicative of the new emphasis on the importance of harm reduction as a goal for SOCA which became rhetorically more powerful than criminal justice or order maintenance for its own sake (Sparrow 2008). The new harm reduction mandate, however, was not merely rhetorical; interview data show that their strategic and tactical priorities were set based on a 'harm matrix' which was included in the confidential version of the SOCA reports.

"If you read SOCA legislation, the Serious Organised Crime and Police Act 2005, it says in there that SOCA will be a 'harm reduction agency', right? [...] Now if you look in the back of one of our later reports, annual reports, you'll see that we tried to put a 'harm matrix' together, of the harm caused by serious organised crime, and therefore the factors that we could do something about, to deal with it. So that in effect set some of our strategic and tactical priorities."

⁷ SOCA's strategic priorities according to its first annual report (SOCA 2006) are: i) To build knowledge and understanding of serious organised crime, the harm it causes, and of the effectiveness of different responses. ii) To increase the amount of criminal assets recovered, and increase the proportion of cases in which the proceeds of crime are pursued. iii) To increase the risk to serious organised criminals operating in the UK, through proven investigation capabilities and in new ways. iv) To collaborate with partners in the UK and internationally to maximise efforts to reduce harm. v) To provide agreed levels of high quality support to SOCA's operational partners and, as appropriate, seek their support in return.

Therefore, there was a clear shift and commitment to the new mandate. There are indeed merits in using the concept of ‘harm’ as the basis for criminal law and crime control policy, not the least of which is the conceptual centrality of harm for crime and criminalisation – indeed, harm is considered by criminologists and legal theorists as the most important criterion to legitimise criminal law intervention (Paoli and Greenfield 2013). More specifically in a law enforcement context, assessing and comparing harms across different criminal activities is considered to lead to the establishment of cost-effective, long-term strategic priorities by “ranking activities according to their harmfulness” (Paoli and Greenfield 2015 p.94). However, when it comes to implementing a harm assessment framework or matrix within a law enforcement setting, many challenges both conceptual and analytical may arise (Sherman 2007; Caulkins et al. 2011; Paoli et al. 2013), as described by an interview participant:

“So, when SOCA was established we did a lot of thinking, agonising, over 'how do you measure impact?', and could you do it on a 'harm' basis? So, could you prioritise against the harm that different sorts of organised crime caused, and could you measure your organisational impact in terms of reduction of harm? Um... and we were clear that that was exactly the right approach, but we really struggled with how to measure it in quantifiable terms.” IP 6

However, harm assessment was not the only way in which SOCA set strategic priorities. It is important to remember that SOCA was created as an amalgamation of several organisations, in an effort from government to “rationalize resourcing and negate debilitating inter-agency competition” (Harfield 2006 p.744). Therefore, similarly to NCIS in the mid-1990s, it did not begin with a clean slate; on the contrary, it inherited resources, personnel, operations and intelligence gathering capabilities from its predecessors. Hence, interview data confirm that in the first few years they had to apportion organisational activity to particular crime problems, such as immigration crime and financial crime in order to avoid succumbing to the ‘status quo’ of drugs investigations:

“We said to them ‘Look, we haven’t got anything ongoing at the moment; we’re running down from all the cases that were held by Crime Squad and the rest of it before, and start a new case up; so there’s going to be a hiatus before we can give you reports on operations’. They interpreted that as ‘We’re not going to tell you anything’, which was a little peculiar way of looking at it, but it was partly because they’d heard whispers from various people ‘Ah, they’re trying to turn it into

another intelligence agency; that's why they got the head of MI5 to... it was all rubbish, but it started badly." IP 15

"In the first year or two, that was quite a crude set of measures, as I said, to try and counteract this kind of... this status quo. And so, we would get percentage figures agreed for, say, 25% of SOCA's work will be focused on immigration crime. 'X' percent will be focused on financial crime; still quite a hefty percentage will be focused on organised drugs." IP 3

Despite its potential ability to balance organisational efforts across crime problems, this percentage system was not conceptually aligned with the much more sophisticated harm assessment and reduction mandate. On the contrary, it was a rather authoritative way to set priorities that was not necessarily intelligence-led, but came directly from the Home Secretary who had the power to set strategic priorities for SOCA; they had to be taken into account when the control strategy and annual plans were drafted (SOCPA 2005 s. 6). The statute also allows SOCA to set its strategic agenda, under the direction of the Home Secretary, without considering the views of police forces or other organisations involved in organised crime policing. The main justification for SOCA not being a part of the tripartite relationship, which is the foundation of traditional British policing⁸, was that SOCA was not a police force (Jones et al. 1996; Bowling and Ross 2006).

Even though that was the main foundation upon which SOCA's innovation was introduced, the potential lack of accountability, increased powers and unprecedented centralisation created a lot of tension with police forces. This also exacerbated cultural differences at two levels: firstly, within SOCA there were on the one hand people mainly in management, top and middle ranks with an intelligence services background, and on the other hand, personnel that transferred to SOCA from predecessor organisations with conventional police experience and training. Interview participants discussed and reflected upon implications:

"SOCA is a really interesting case study, because what we did was we took two whole existing organisations and parts of two other organisations and we pulled them together, and the few people at the very top had a real sort of clear theology of what they wanted to achieve. I mean the original blueprint

⁸ The 43 forces of England and Wales are all part of the tripartite structure of police accountability which remained the fundamental basis of police governance until 2012. Established under the 1964 Police Act, the tripartite system distributes responsibilities between the Home Office, the local police authority, and the chief constable of the force. It is worth noting that SOCA's predecessors, NCIS and NCS, were both established under this framework. They were both originally funded by a levy on local police forces which meant that the national agencies were accountable to police forces which they also had to be represented on the agencies' Service Authorities.

that Stephen Lander wrote I think is very good. But we left in place a very high percentage of the people who were in the previous organisations, probably most of whom were quite happy with the way things worked before. And then you had a few people parachuted in from outside, but they were always in the minority [...] and that's of course where the culture in the people meets the written down priorities and there's a tussle as to what actually happens." IP 6

"The Director General of SOCA was given to the ex-Director of MI5 and it was a disaster. He gathered all the senior Chief Constables into the House of Lords and said you know, he was now running SOCA and they had to adjust their expectations because the intellectual values of police officers were far lower than he'd actually (laughs loudly) being used to; which was probably right! (laughs). But not to be said. From that day on, he didn't get cooperation from the 43 forces." IP 8

The problematic relationship between SOCA and the police service had significant implications for policing of organised crime, especially in the context of the National Intelligence Model (NIM). This framework theoretically enables coordinated law enforcement activity across three levels – local, regional and national – for identifying and prioritising regional crime issues. However, the lack of means to ensure collaboration between local forces and SOCA to deal with issues at the regional level created the so-called ‘level 2 gap’ (Harfield 2008). One interview participant comments:

"SOCA decided 'we're going to cut all of our links with police forces' and that was, single-handedly, the most stupid thing that could have been done; because 120,000 police officers out there are your eyes and ears! So, to decide strategically – as they did, SOCA – firstly not to maintain their strong links with police forces, which was really stupid, and equally stupid was the fact that they decided to become a more secretive organisation that didn't have a public relations strategy! Well, if you're trying to do something about crime, first of all you need the public to help you when you're investigating because they're witnesses; secondly you want to try and prevent crime anyway, so the public need to know in general terms what the threats are, and how they can protect themselves. You know, SOCA was a complete disaster!" IP 5

Therefore SOCA's decision to distance itself from policing and from the NIM exacerbated the problem of intelligence gaps (Silverstone and Whittle 2016). The government responded to the ‘level 2 gap’ by establishing 10 regional crime units (ROCU) which have become a vital part of the national response to serious and organised crime. It is argued that the introduction of ROCUs “addresses what senior police have been saying for nearly two years: that there is a

huge policing gap between the intelligence work of SOCA at the top of the scale and the capabilities of local police forces to tackle organised crime that crosses county boundaries” (Laville 2009). An HMIC report (2015) identifies some problems relating to their inconsistent development, collectively insufficient and sometimes unnecessarily duplicated capabilities, but also states that ROCUs play an important role in connecting police forces and the National Crime Agency while they oftentimes conduct sensitive and covert operations.

Jones and Lister (2019 p.553) discuss the effects of centralisation on police governance especially in terms of “continuing interventionism by ‘the centre’ primarily via a range of national bodies within the policing landscape”. Although Britain seems to have experienced an emergence of a de facto ‘national’ police force, as Reiner (2010) claims, the establishment of ROCUs shows that this is not a clear trend for organised crime policing. However, even if ROCUs are viewed as a sign of decentralisation, they should not be seen as a manifestation of localism in policing organised crime as they represent regional “auspices of power” (Jones and Lister 2019 p.557). Nevertheless, the juxtaposition of regional units with centralised national agencies (SOCA, then NCA) with increased powers points to the diverse, complex and nuanced nature of organised crime policing both structurally (a variety of structures needed to tackle a complex phenomenon) and conceptually (the trend of centralisation is not entirely pure).

Parallel to these structural developments, a broader paradigm shift was taking place in the way that organised crime is perceived. The White paper “*One step ahead: a 21st century strategy to defeat organised crime*” (2004 p.1) states that:

The threat we face from organised crime, often operating across international frontiers and in support of inter-national terrorism, has probably never been greater. A successful approach to organised crime is therefore inseparable from our wider effort against threats to national security.

The construction of organised crime as a national security threat has come under significant academic criticism mainly due to lack of empirical evidence, the ramifications of this for investigative tactics in different jurisdictions, as well as the potential legal procedural consequences (Hobbs 1998; Edwards and Gill 2003a; Campbell 2014; Sergi 2016). Researchers have also argued that the subsequent ‘securitisation’ of policing inhibits effective policing of organised crime (Mitsilegas et al. 2003; Murray 2005; King and Sharp 2006; Bratton 2007). SOCA was therefore established with an eye to situate organised crime in the area of ‘high policing’ and empower the intelligence community to provide specialist

capabilities suitable for threats to national security (Harfield 2008). These came with new methods and techniques that police organisations had not been used to, which involved an element of secrecy which is depicted on the thin and stripped down annual SOCA reports, and corroborated by interview data:

“There are sort of definite echoes of the way in which national security agencies operate which is to... a significant part of effectiveness of a national security agency is the uncertainty that the enemy has in the extent of your powers and your ability to sort of deal with them. So, to expose your hand completely and to be so open about everything that you do means that your enemy actually knows what your strengths and weaknesses are and therefore can exploit them.” IP 1

Apart from the increased secrecy, SOCA’s ambition for an alternative approach to tackling organised crime caused another wave of criticism from politicians and the media. Indeed, the rhetoric surrounding SOCA’s disbandment announcement – which came only four years after it had started work – revolves mainly around two factors. On the one hand, the agency was scrutinised for not hitting traditional police performance targets such as numbers of arrests and convictions due to prioritisation of innovative techniques that did not always produce demonstrable, quantifiable results. On the other hand, the prevalence of asset recovery as a measure of success for law enforcement agencies often led to unrealistic expectations (Mann 2017), again based almost exclusively on SOCA’s inability to demonstrate quantitative evidence, and specifically to show that it is – in neoliberal terms – a cost-effective organisation:

“Britain’s discredited version of the FBI has been criticised for including among its priorities “understanding” crime and making a “difference” - but not catching criminals. Sources claimed that the failure to make the successful prosecution of criminals a priority was one of the reasons Theresa May announced that the Serious Organised Crime Agency (SOCA) was being replaced by a new force, the National Crime Agency (NCA). The Home Secretary said the NCA would be “more powerful” than its predecessor, which cost taxpayers £1.2billion but recovered less than a 10th of that from criminals.”

The Daily Telegraph, 30/07/2010

“In the first year that we started SOCA, Tony Blair – the Prime Minister – decreed that we were going to bring in about £150million from asset recovery; and therefore, the Home Office, for example, built that into their budget! So of course, when we didn’t – because it wasn’t as easy as people thought – there was a budget shortfall.” IP 15

The tension between police forces and SOCA is also cited by some participants as a reason for the return to a policing approach to tackling organised crime at the national level in the UK. For many scholars, SOCA had a sophisticated and innovative approach that had many advantages not the least of which was the central role of the concept of ‘harm’ in setting strategic priorities (Bolt 2009; Greenfield and Paoli 2013; Sparrow 2018). For others, it was merely an unsuccessful experiment (Sproat 2011; Brocklesby 2012; Sproat 2014). This debate in literature is mirrored among practitioners involved as participants in this study as well. Interview extracts cited above demonstrate the main criticisms against SOCA’s practices and philosophy, but in fact opinions among interview participants were divided as others appeared to be very supportive of SOCA and genuinely believed in the alternative methods and approaches used:

“Looking back on it now with a period of reflection, that the damage was done in those first couple of years or whatever, in terms of; a lot of people lost faith in this kind of new approach, so there was a lot of tension with the operational – not just the operational elements within the agency – but also from the wider police service, who saw SOCA as being... bureaucratic, not particularly operation-focused. And they were right, to a degree. But it was all in an attempt to try and change how we measured exactly what you’re looking to research; and it’s difficult, because you’re doing it at the same time as you’re running activity – and that’s never easy.” IP 3

“SOCA was of its time and at that time it was really trying to do something different I think and something that was necessary. I dropped out at a point where I thought things were moving backwards actually in the thinking. And therefore, driving SOCA and now NCA back towards a sort of policing model and whilst pragmatically I could see that that made sense, conceptually I wasn’t on board with that.” IP 1

Finally, it is important to note that SOCA had been functioning only for approximately four years when it was announced that NCA would replace it, and in the end, it was active for seven years in total. Evidently, SOCA was a short-lived agency which strived to implement different approaches to crime control, but its long-term strategies could never have materialised in such a small timeframe. Interview participants discuss how SOCA was not afforded the time – or the trust for that matter – to establish the networks and capabilities necessary in order to have a substantial impact on organised crime:

“You need to say 10 years, but if you want to change how law enforcement measures its activity and goes about its business

against serious organised crime, you need to give it a period of as long as that to build itself up and... I mean, you need to have the trust that it's able to do it. We didn't have the right people to support it. We did at the start; we had the right people – we had the right support – doesn't last. Political imperatives change; others get frustrated.” IP 3

3.7. The National Crime Agency

In October 2013, after six months of ‘shadow working’ with SOCA and other precursor organisations, the National Crime Agency (NCA) replaced SOCA and became the newest national organised crime fighting agency which was launched by the coalition government. The establishment of NCA further demonstrates the previously described trends of amalgamation and centralisation. The agency took over the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (CEOPC) which had been functioning independently (but at arm’s length) to SOCA until then and assumed some of the responsibilities of the UK Border Agency and of the National Policing Improvement Agency (NPIA). Following the widespread scrutiny that SOCA received the government wanted to show that they take the fight against organised crime seriously, by creating a new organisation, as is shown in this extract by the Serious and Organised Strategy (2015 p.27):

The launch of the Serious and Organised Crime Strategy, alongside the establishment of the National Crime Agency, demonstrates that this Government is prioritising work to tackle serious and organised crime [...] As this report shows, the Government has continued to provide the NCA, police forces and other law enforcement agencies with the powers and capabilities they need.” (Home Office 2015 p.27)

The NCA’s mission is to tackle serious and organised crime, strengthen the UK’s borders, protect children and young people from sexual exploitation and abuse, fight fraud and cybercrime, and liaise with European, international and transnational police and law enforcement agencies (NCA 2013). The agency works under an intelligence-led regime still, but in all its official documents, there is a decisive shift in language from ‘intelligence gathering to reduce harm’ to ‘combat the threat of organised crime’, a clear signal towards the return of national agencies to a policing response to the problem; this is also corroborated by interview data:

“They thought we [SOCA] should be police, not something else, you know; which is one of the reasons why the NCA is a police agency.” IP 11

“They decided to replace... effectively re-badge it; SOCA and NCA, there’s no real difference in terms of its powers, its structure, its remit; but they’d sent a message that ‘We don’t want all this intelligence, we want proper crime-fighters.’” IP 12

One noticeable difference, however, is that NCA has become much more visible than SOCA in terms of strategies, priorities, operations and outcomes. The agency has claimed that it aims to operate with a culture of transparency and openness (NCA 2015). This is described as a deliberate shift in strategy in order to counter previous criticisms of SOCA’s lack of transparency, accountability and effectiveness of national organised crime fighting agencies (James 2016). This shift is also discussed by an interview participant:

“Government – and police authorities – and the press, all like tactical operations, because that gives them headlines. That’s why you’ll see with the NCA, they publish far more of the things they do than we did in SOCA.” IP 15

A more significant change in terms of how NCA structures its response and prioritisation processes is that its ‘Serious Organised Crime Strategy’ is modelled on the UK’s counter-terrorism strategy. The CONTEST, otherwise known as the ‘4Ps’ strategy, is built on four principles: *prevent* – aims to stop people from becoming engaged in serious and organised crime, *pursue* – aims to prosecute and disrupt people engaged in organised crime, *protect* – strives to increase protection against serious and organised crime and *prepare* – attempts to reduce the impact of organised crime where it takes place by developing political, economic, social and technical resilience (Kirby et al. 2015). An interview participant reflects on the significance of the strategy:

“There were 2 events in October 2013, on the day the NCA was launched; one was massively more significant than the other, but it was the other that got all the publicity. So, it was the launch of the NCA, and lots of film – news film – of men with guns, and doing raids and all that sort of thing... That was the least significant, in my view. What was really significant was the publication of the Serious Organised Crime Strategy which, for the first time, looked at organised crime within the framework of the CONTEST” IP 4

Another participant provides some useful insights into the process behind the adoption of a counter-terrorism strategy by organised crime policing. The following extract refers to the merger within the Home Office of the counterterrorism and organised crime offices into the

Office for Security and Counter Terrorism (OSCT) which was responsible for drafting the Serious Organised Crime Strategy:

“In the Home Office, I think the feeling there was that there was lots to be learnt by the counter-terrorism approach which was deemed to have been really successful. Whereas on the serious organised crime side the feeling was that we weren't really making progress. We weren't putting a dent on the serious organised crime side. They're still enjoying the proceeds of their criminality and it carries on. So, this line of demarcation fell, and the two bits were put together and became OSCT, the Office of Security and Counterterrorism in the Home Office under one Director-General. But within the remit of 'let the organised crime learn from the counter-terrorism side' in terms of having that structured strategy of the '4 Ps'.” IP 2

Lavorgna and Sergi (2016 p.181) discuss how the defining characteristic of organised crime has become its 'seriousness' as a consequence of its characterisation as a national security threat and conceptual affiliation with terrorism. The linguistic shift in discussions about the amalgamation of CEOPC as a command within NCA is cited as an illuminating example. Even though there are similarities between organised crime and a large amount of child sexual exploitation and abuse, oftentimes the latter is committed by lone offenders and even when it is a group offence, offenders are not usually motivated by profit; however, child sexual exploitation and abuse is “often extremely serious and complex in both execution and impact” (CEOP 2013 p.6). The authors further argue that “the seriousness of the criminal activity was the ground to use the organised crime connotation, and the organised crime narrative was used to give reason for merging within a national intelligence agency” (Lavorgna and Sergi 2016 p.181).

In the years leading up to the establishment of the National Crime Agency, further centralisation was objected by experts, media as well as the private sector (ICAI 2014). The power of structural transformations in shaping strategic priorities is the basis of arguments formed against NCA's upcoming accumulation of more powers. In other words, the amalgamation of organisations that are dedicated to tackling only one crime problem into a big agency would lead to a situation whereby many problems, such as corruption, fraud or child exploitation would effectively receive less attention. They would have to compete with problems such as drugs and human trafficking, for which SOCA had already built a big intelligence picture and therefore were already systematically investigated priorities; this

would inevitably drive other problems in lower places in the agenda. In turn, this would reduce their funding, and would also potentially eliminate any chances of developing serious expertise necessary to tackling them. These arguments emerged in the press as well, following the announcement that the National Crime Agency would absorb the Serious Fraud Office (SFO) and CEOPC (in the end, it took over only the latter):

“Lawyers who specialise in white collar crime fear that if the SFO is absorbed into the new agency, fraud will be given less priority and that its budget will be diverted.

‘It’s basically a territory grab by the Home Office for the SFO’s investigative wing and its resources’, one lawyer said. ‘Fraud won’t, under the NCA, be anywhere near the top of its list of priorities.’

Such fears are echoed by children’s charities concerned about plans for the NCA to swallow the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre. Eleven such charities wrote to the Home Office last month asking ministers not to dilute the importance of child protection.”

The Times, 21/02/2011

However, these concerns proved to be rather unfounded as NCA’s strategic priorities were drastically different from SOCA’s. The most obvious difference is a deliberate shift from drugs investigations towards criminal activities such as human trafficking and child sexual exploitation and abuse:

“If you look at the prioritisation across the NCA, while there’s still a big chunk of effort that goes on drugs there’s now much more focus on modern slavery, child sexual exploitation, internet crime and so on. And that’s been a real big cultural and operational shift. And as I said, part of that was... well a considerable part of that was driven by the Home Secretary setting out in broad-brush terms where she thought the agency should focus its efforts.” IP 6

In 2015, to further strengthen its ability to tackle its new priorities more effectively, NCA released numerous senior police officers who were not hugely digitally competent. At the same time, hundreds of trainee investigators and trainee intelligence officers were directly recruited in an effort to shift the agency’s workforce to be more contemporary. The goal is to have a significant proportion of NCA’s personnel consist of code writers and engineers whose roles would be “based on the intellectual and professional challenge of tackling the most difficult cyber criminals and people who would exploit children” (Home Affairs Committee Oral Evidence, 2015: Q66p16, as cited in Loveday 2017 p.107).

More recently, the NCA has drastically changed the way it internally categorises crime problems which, presumably, has a direct influence on the way priorities are set, resources are allocated, and operations are managed. In its 2016/17 annual report, the agency announced that it categorises organised crime threats into three broad areas, or ‘pillars’ of response (NCA 2016): *prosperity*, which includes cyber-crime and financial crime, *vulnerability*, which includes child sexual exploitation and abuse, modern slavery and human trafficking and organised immigration crime, *commodity*, which includes firearms and drugs trafficking. So far, there is no evidence as to whether this new categorisation has any significant empirical or conceptual implications for the setting of strategic priorities.

3.8 Concluding remarks

This chapter provided empirical evidence of a steady growth in national organised crime fighting agencies’ budgets in relation to the overall funding for national policing. The analysis used interactionist and labelling perspectives to explain why the problem of organised crime – or more accurately the construction of the problem – could be appreciated by ‘measuring’ the reaction to it. In this sense, the budgets of national agencies provide an indication of perceptions with regards to the scale of organised crime, especially because law enforcement is one of the more powerful claimsmakers that construct organised crime problems in many ways; one of the most common is the setting of strategic priorities. Therefore, since organised crime policing budgets keep increasing despite fluctuations in the national overall policing budget, it is argued that organised crime is constructed as an ever-growing social problem in the UK.

Further to these findings, many scholars have noted that the history of organised crime policing in Britain has been characterised by a steady accretion of power over the police to national agencies and central government (Jones and Newburn 1997; Reiner 2010). This is corroborated by data in this chapter that demonstrate a trend of centralisation in British policing of organised crime since the mid-1990s. Despite being quite clear however, this trend is not entirely pure, as is evidenced by the creation of ROCUs. The centralisation of national organised crime policing does not release national agencies from the responsibility to maintain ties with local and regional structures, as well as the extended police family because many (if not all) manifestations of organised crime problem remain local (Hobbs and Dunnighan 1998).

Another important finding of this chapter is that the rationale for establishing each new national agency has been the same: that the response to organised crime needs to be different in some

way from what was previously done. Indeed, each historical period discussed in this chapter is characterised by a rhetoric that promotes a need for change in approach, remit, mandate and philosophy. Change seems to be an integral part of the organisation of organised crime policing and its evolution in the UK. The traditionally local response to organised crime was succeeded by NCIS in 1992 who provided police forces with intelligence but did not have operational capabilities. Hence, within a few years, the National Crime Squad was established as the first national police organisation in England and Wales and worked in collaboration with the 43 police forces and NCIS for approximately 7 years. In the early 2000s a few inter-agency strategic groups were created to investigate particular crime problems (Class A drugs, human trafficking and financial crime) that were deemed to need even more concerted attention. The priorities for the agencies were set in inter-agency organised crime strategic groups in an effort to design an overarching strategy. However, problems in coordination among all the different agencies tackling organised crime at the time, coupled with a rhetoric of the changing nature and growing scale of organised crime led to the establishment of SOCA in 2005. Similarly, the new agency was set to have a different approach than its predecessors, namely an intelligence-led regime and priority-setting processes that were informed by the assessment of the ‘harm’ caused by organised crime. SOCA was active only for 8 years when it was replaced by the National Crime Agency. The new agency launched once again with the promise that it would do things differently than SOCA. Indeed, the new agency is a ‘step back’ to a law enforcement approach that combines intelligence gathering methods with more conventional crime fighting practices.

In spite of the many structural changes in the national organisational landscape of organised crime policing, it seems that through the various amalgamations of police and law enforcement agencies a situation is created whereby each time the new amalgamated agency (first SOCA, then NCA) inherits resources, personnel, intelligence and even operations from its precursor organisations. This process is inevitable because some ongoing operations cannot be abandoned, but also beneficial for newly established law enforcement agencies as they can utilise intelligence, skills and expertise already developed by their predecessors. However, this pattern of historical dependence has its disadvantages in terms of strategic decision-making. Namely, it reinforces priority-setting processes that favour already existing and systematically investigated problems, for example drug trafficking, instead of encouraging the development of an intelligence picture for new, emerging problems. The next chapter uses findings from this

historical review as a backdrop in order to discuss how particular organised problems are constructed during different points in time within the context of the four national agencies.

4. Chapter 4: Police constructions of organised crime problems: continuity and change over time

4.1. Introduction

This chapter explores how police constructions of organised crime problems change and develop over time. The first section tracks and traces continuity and change in constructions of organised crime problems as national strategic priorities over time. In doing so, it discusses findings of a content analysis conducted on 31 annual reports published by the four national law enforcement agencies (NCIS, NCS, SOCA and NCA) which have operated in England and Wales from 1993-2017. The second section builds on content analysis findings to explore the emergence of new problems and new framings of problems in British organised crime policing in the space of the last two decades. A discussion of findings from 15 qualitative interviews with former key decision-makers who have played a role in the priority-setting processes of national organised crime fighting agencies offers nuanced insights into the realities of organisational processes that lead to change in priorities. By applying Joel Best's (2016) natural history of social problems model, the study outlines the various ways in which a series of organised crime problems have emerged and developed over time, including disparities in starting points, processes and sequence of stages. The analysis mainly seeks to explain three phenomena: how some organised crime problems stay persistently as strategic priorities – either high or low – over time, how some emerge and develop into high priorities, and finally, how and why there are rises and falls of specific problems in prioritisation during different time periods.

Firstly, the chapter briefly outlines the main stages of Best's model and explains the theoretical concepts which frame the analysis. It then presents and discusses findings from the content analysis on annual reports in order to map out trends and patterns of change in constructions of strategic priorities. Subsequently, trends of continuity and change identified by the content analysis are discussed and interpreted using interview data. More specifically, eight 'headline categories' of organised crime problems are discussed, namely drug trafficking, immigration crime, cybercrime, child sexual exploitation and abuse (CSEA), property crime, international organised crime, economic crime, and violent crime. These are mapped onto a four-fold taxonomy according to their ascending or descending routes in strategic agendas.

4.2. Natural history of organised crime problems process

For the purposes of theoretically framing the analysis in this chapter, it is important to briefly outline the study's theoretical positioning on the 'palette' of social constructions which spans from extreme, to moderate, to even realist approaches to social constructionism. This theoretical choice has a profound impact on the analytical value and critical potential of social constructionism for researching prioritisation processes of organised crime problems.

Thus, by applying a moderate constructionism paradigm to policing organised crime, this study seeks to examine how and why particular conditions come to be constructed as social problems, without however arguing that all organised crime problems are entirely the products of social construction. Therefore, it is accepted that features of problems can sometimes exist independently of the ways in which people or organisations think or talk about them (Elder-Vass 2012a). This becomes particularly relevant in the case of crime problems such as cybercrime which did not, and could not, have existed before the creation and rapid development of information technologies. Hence, it is evident that the emergence of cybercrime as a social problem has an undeniable element of 'reality' to it which cannot be explained by pure constructionist approaches. Indeed, social constructionism has been criticized for leaving open crucial questions about the nature of the subject, as well as the initiation of the construction process (Hacking 1999; Elder-Vass 2012a). In other words, constructionists who do not accept any version of objective reality have failed to provide a convincing explanation with regards to what exactly is being constructed, and in what ways. More importantly, if this study was to subscribe to the view that *everything* is a social construction, this could deprive it of any basis on which to make judgements between alternative problem constructions (Elder-Vass 2012b).

Furthermore, framing and conceptualising organised crime as a social problem can be very insightful as "it helps us to point to the historical and social processes that make an act a criminal one" (Silverstone 2014 p.140). More specifically, Joel Best's natural history of social problems' model is a very useful tool for understanding the process of emergence and development of social problems. In its basic form, the model identifies six stages: claimsmaking, media coverage, public reaction, policymaking, social problems work, and policy outcomes (Best 2016). Even though not every organised crime problem – and indeed not every social problem more generally – fits this model, it can provide a simplified overview of what is usually a much more complicated process.

The chapter addresses these complexities in detail by discussing construction processes of individual organised crime problems. Firstly, to track their development comparisons are drawn on three different bases of *similar troubling conditions*, *similar constructions*, and – most importantly – *time*. By definition, crime problems tackled by national agencies are understood to belong to the same category of social problems, so to base comparisons on similar troubling conditions seems quite obvious: they are all organised crime activities after all. For example, research examines the ways that different drugs have been constructed as social problems (Reinarman 1994). However, the criminal activities that are included in national agencies’ agendas are many and extremely diverse in nature. Moreover, the lists of activities that are considered threats to the UK and consequently become law enforcement targets seem to only grow longer as the years go by and police responses get more powerful and centralised. Therefore, comparing problems such as drugs, white-collar crime and child abuse with each other even at the same time period is complex not only because of the broad and vague nature of most of these terms (Tombs 1999; Sarre 2007), but also due to the nebulous concept of organised crime (Von Lampe 2008). The second basis for comparison is the claimmaking rhetoric used to construct individual organised crime problems. For example, Best compares freeway shootings, stalking and other crimes on the basis of their similar constructions as “random violence” and examines how claimsmakers construct different problems that involve victimisation (Best 1999). In the context of policing organised crime, the analysis shows how some problems such as human trafficking and child abuse seem to be constructed in a similar way as ‘emergent’ problems with a focus on the extremely harmful consequences for victims, while others such as cybercrime are constructed as national security threats. Importantly, the focus of this chapter is comparing the construction of crime problems – and consequentially their rise and fall from the strategic agenda as ‘high’ or ‘low’ priorities – over time. Most of these problems have been targets for police and law enforcement for a long time so it is possible (even though not very common in criminological literature) to track and trace their development in the same place during different time periods.

Secondly, the starting point of constructing crime problems as policing priorities does not seem to be exclusively claimmaking but can be pinpointed in various other stages in Best’s model. This is particularly relevant, for example, in cases where signal crimes draw media and public attention to a certain organised crime problem (Innes 2014), so either media coverage or public reaction can trigger the whole process. In some cases of very dramatic signal crimes, there is neither time nor need for claimsmakers to promote an organised crime problem. In the same

vein, data from this study indicate that the sequence of stages of problem construction can be significantly altered. To elaborate on the signal crimes example, media coverage might trigger public reaction that leads to activists or experts making claims about the problem's seriousness, which might lead policymakers to focus on particular organised crime problems. In turn, the new policies are fed back to national agencies for renewed strategic focus, also reflected on operational activity.

Finally, the chapter discusses different outcomes of organised crime problems' constructions. It is important to note that not every crime problem is constructed successfully. Some 'unusual suspects', such as fraud as part of economic crime, are good examples of problems that have not been as successful as others in attracting resources, as well as media and policymakers' attention. On the contrary, in the history of policing organised crime many problems have been dismissed or ignored, and therefore, have never been considered serious or threatening enough to become a top law enforcement priority. Hacking (1991 p.254) maintains that "one of the more attractive features of Western civilization is the way that we occasionally refine our sense of values and engage in consciousness-raising". Organisational documents present the 'official line' while interview participants provide invaluable insights into 'behind the scenes' processes through which this occasional refinement of values takes place in law enforcement, allowing some claims about organised crime problems to move up the stages of social construction, while at the same time hindering the progress of others.

4.3. Documenting continuity and change in strategic priorities: a content analysis of annual reports

This section discusses the findings of a content analysis of 31 annual reports published by national agencies over a period of 24 years (1993-2017). The most important finding of this analysis is that 'drug trafficking' is by far the most frequently mentioned crime problem across the document sample (Figure 4.1). It is followed by economic crime with a little over 1,000 references, and then violent crime, immigration crime and cybercrime (all around 500 references).

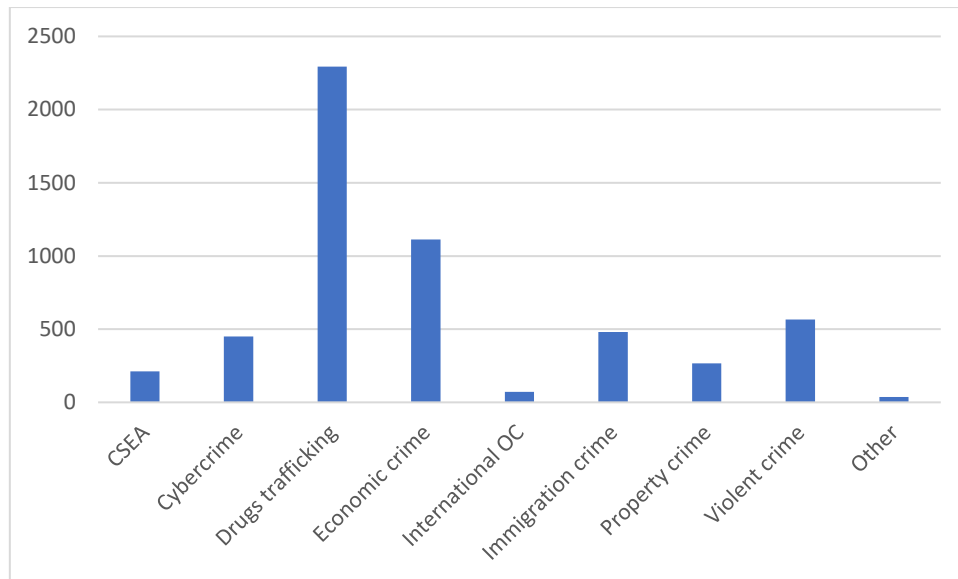


Figure 4.1 Headline categories of crime problems (total raw counts)

Importantly, the study is concerned with tracking and tracing change in documentary representations of strategic priorities over time. To that end, the headline priorities are also shown in Figure 4.2, charted by agency⁹. This chart confirms the undeniable prevalence of drugs as the most frequently mentioned priority but also reveals a dramatic decrease from 707 in SOCA to only 165 in NCA reports. This finding is consistent with the argument presented in Chapter 3 that historical, organisational dependency exacerbates prioritisation of already existing and systematically investigated problems such as drugs trafficking. The emergence of new high priorities which ‘dethroned’ drugs trafficking from the top place in the national strategic agenda in 2013/14 is not necessarily caused by the emergence of new problems, or even new awareness of problems. Instead, new conceptualisations of organised crime as a national security threat at the time, are consistent with prioritisations of problems such as cybercrime and immigration crime that lend themselves more easily to the securitisation rhetoric. Moreover, NCA’s subsequent changes in personnel to improve the agency’s expertise in tackling these new priorities further facilitates the fall of ‘drugs’ from the national strategic agenda.

⁹ As discussed in Chapter 3, agencies functioned sequentially. More specifically, NCS and NCIS co-existed for seven years (1998-2005); SOCA functioned from 2006-2013 when it was succeeded by the NCA (see Chapter 3). Therefore, the counts of categories for each agency represent different time periods.

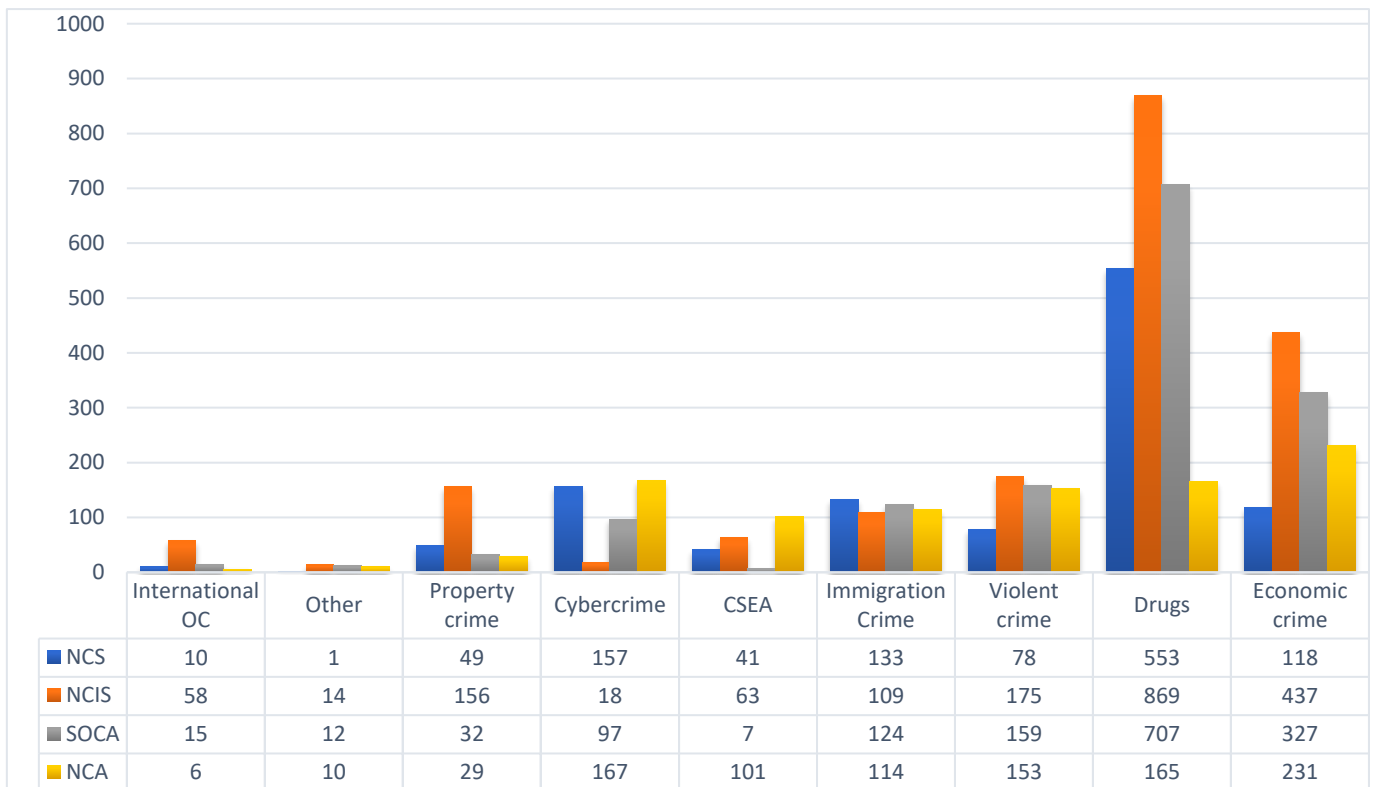


Figure 4.2 Headline category references per agency (raw counts)

However, the number of references of each category is also influenced by the length of each report. For example, NCIS reports generally tend to be rather long documents consisting of detailed descriptions of the agency’s activities and targets and performance, whereas some SOCA reports are very brief in comparison. Therefore, to control for these discrepancies, the categories’ proportions are plotted in a stacked bar chart to show how percentages of each crime problem change over time¹⁰. Another reason to examine the percentages instead of counts of references is that between the years 1998-2005, both NCS and NCIS were publishing reports. Hence the raw counts are generally higher for these years, but this is more an indication of more pages dedicated to certain organised crime problems, rather than evidence for their rise in strategic agendas. The stacked bar chart (figure 4.3) shows the change in all nine categories. The category ‘drugs’ is once again dominant in the chart, with percentages ranging from 37%-65% in every year before 2014; after that, it descends from 19% in 2014 to 12% in 2017. ‘Cybercrime’ not surprisingly does not feature at all in the first five years and then it gradually appears more in the early 2000s, ranges from 10%-16% of the total references in the years 2003-06, then falls down again during the SOCA years and finally picks up after 2013. The

¹⁰ The NCIS 1997/98 report is the only one missing from the dataset.

higher percentage of references to it in 2014 (21%) coincides with the elevation of cybercrime as a Tier 2 threat to national security (Jeffrey 2014).

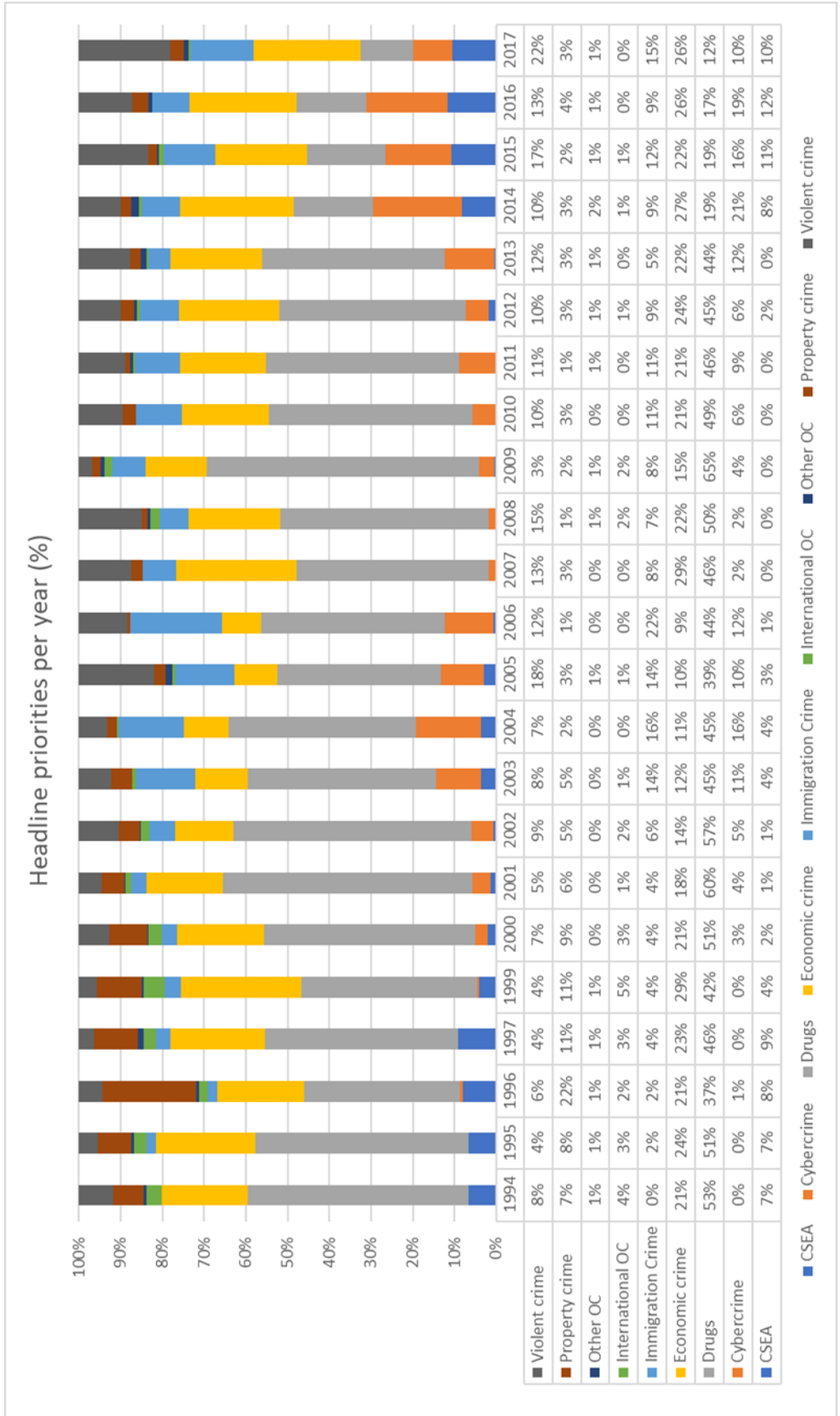


Figure 4.3 Headline categories of crime problems per year (%)

It is worth taking a closer look to some interesting trends that appear when some categories are plotted together. For example, ‘cybercrime’ and ‘CSEA’ seem to pick together around 2003-04 and even more distinctly in 2014 which can be attributed to the increased emphasis placed on online child sexual exploitation (figure 4.4).

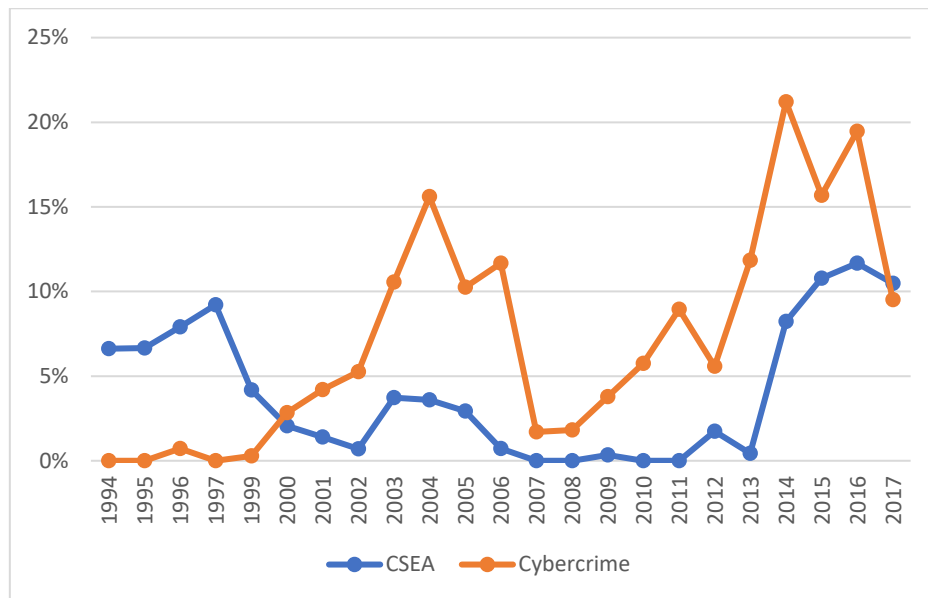


Figure 4.4 Line chart child sexual exploitation and cybercrime over time

Conversely, ‘drugs’ and ‘immigration crime’ seem to converge after 2014 (figure 4.5). This significant change (especially with regards to the dramatic decline of ‘drugs’) occurs a year after the launch of NCA which, under the direction of then Home Secretary Theresa May, was established to tackle immigration crime as one of its top priorities. May confirmed NCA’s public mission is to fight ‘modern slavery’ in a public speech she gave two months after NCA’s launch:

“[...] Earlier this Autumn, I launched the National Crime Agency. Organised criminals are often behind modern slavery, and the National Crime Agency has created a strengthened central focus for the UK’s response to this disgusting crime. Utilising its enhanced intelligence capabilities, the National Crime Agency will be able to identify the routes and the methods used by human traffickers.” (May 2013a)

Furthermore, the narrative around ‘modern slavery’ perpetuates understandings of human trafficking as “a manifestation of cross-border criminal enterprise” (Shen et al. 2013 p.44) that

is robust, structured and insensitive to changes in socio-political or cultural contexts, as is evident by the following extract from the same public speech:

“The new agency will also improve our international response to human trafficking, which is critical to stopping this horrific trade in human beings.” (May 2013a)

However, this conceptualisation of the problem as a ‘transnational organised crime’ fails to take into account the local context and its implications on how organised crime functions and manifests (Hobbs and Dunnighan 1998; Shen et al. 2013).

Moreover, in 2005-06, ‘immigration crime’ peaks while ‘drugs’ slightly decreases. This can be corroborated by interview data which suggest that there was a mandate for SOCA in its early years to deliberately shift some organisational effort towards human trafficking:

“It certainly I think changed the balance of effort... No, there was a deliberate attempt to change the balance of effort away from drugs and towards some of these other things, like human trafficking” IP 1

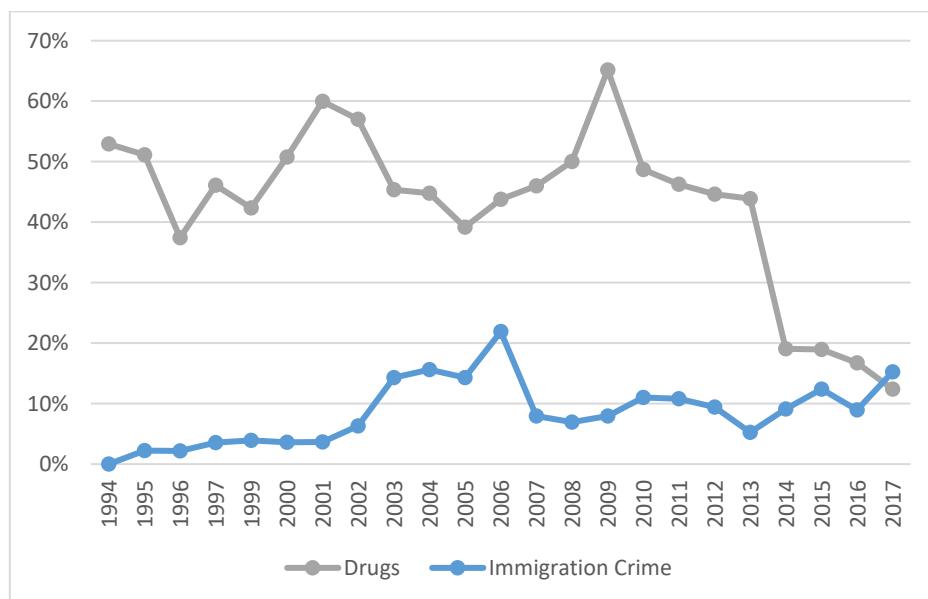


Figure 4.5 Line chart drug trafficking and immigration crime over time

After discussing the first-order categories, their trends and relationships over time, this section explores each of them individually and break them down into the second-order categories they consist of, thus highlighting more detailed patterns of change over time.

For example, within the headline category ‘drugs’, it is clear from figure 4.1 that the term ‘drugs’ is by far the most frequently used across agencies, with NCIS having the highest count which can be at least partially attributed to the length of its reports as well as the emphasis put on drug trafficking. Class A drugs has 74 and 75 references in NCIS and NCS, 57 in SOCA, but only 6 references in NCA. This is most likely a reflection of the decrease in references of the headline category. This study corroborates findings from previous research that steroids trafficking is a low priority for law enforcement (Antonopoulos and Hall 2016). Finally, the numbers did not reflect the shift of narrative and organisational focus towards Class A drugs during the first years of SOCA, although this is clearly indicated by the sharp increase in the counts of ‘cocaine’ and ‘heroin’ (see figure 4.6).

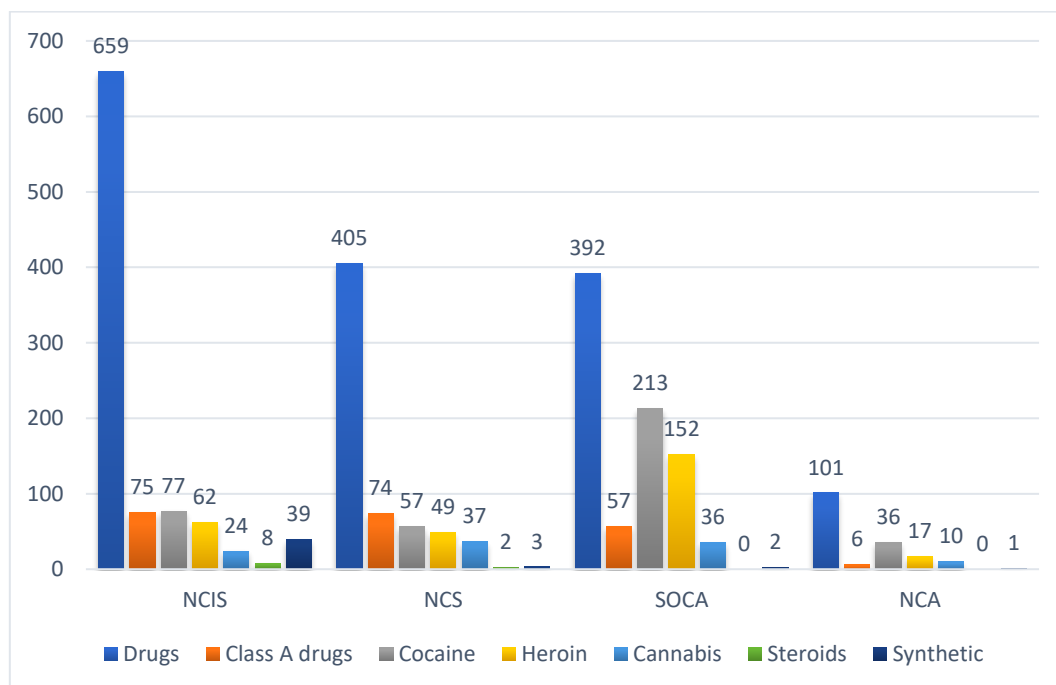


Figure 4.6 ‘Drug trafficking’ second-order categories per agency

In terms of economic crime, it is worth noting that National Crime Squad has relatively low counts for all second-order categories. NCIS has the highest count for counterfeiting (175), while SOCA for fraud (179). Money laundering comes second in both with 131 and 90 counts respectively. Corruption is present in all the agencies’ counts with a small but steady increase (figure 4.7).

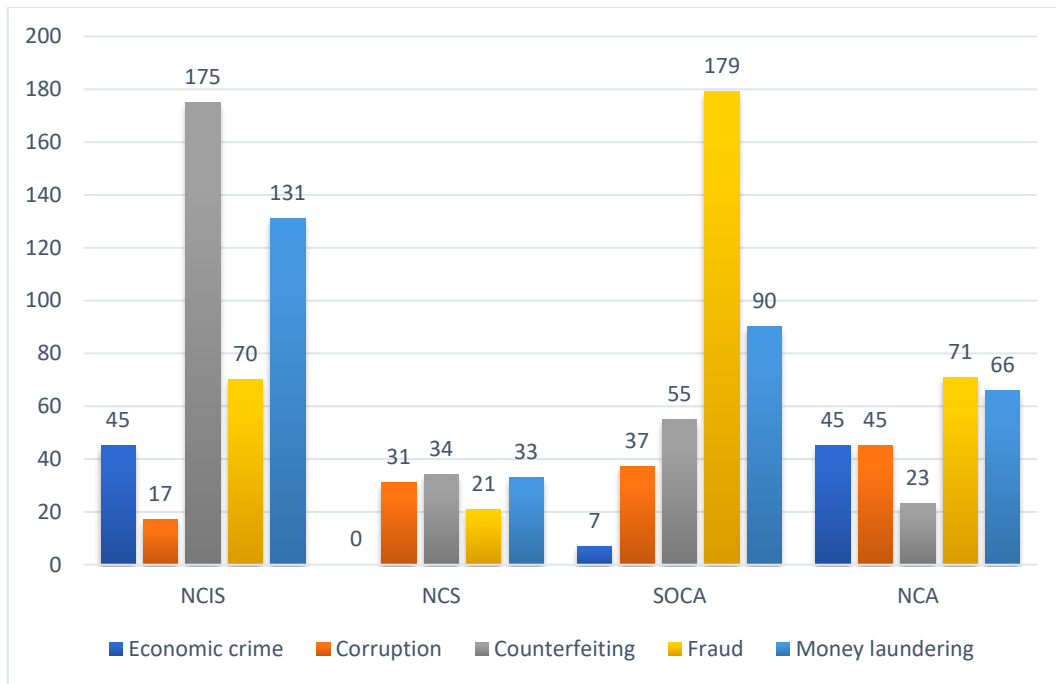


Figure 4.7 'Economic crime' second-order categories per agency

The second-order categories for 'cybercrime' are also plotted in a bar chart by agency (see figure 4.8). The categories 'e-crime' and 'computer crime' have low counts; the latter only appears in NCIS and NCS reports, so the term has not been used since 2006. Cybercrime category 'hi-tech crime' serves as a predecessor to 'cybercrime', as it features in both NCIS and NCS but disappears once cybercrime starts featuring in SOCA and NCA. Also, the use of the term 'online' shows a gradual and steady increase.

Some of these changes in terminology seem to be merely semantic, in that they are not distinguished by any discernible difference. For example, the terms 'computer crime' and 'e-crime' seem to be used interchangeably with 'cybercrime', essentially constituting a 'distinction without a difference' (Martinich 1999 p.99). However, there seems to be a rather distinctive and decisive shift from the use of the term 'hi-tech crime' to the almost exclusive use of the term 'cybercrime' from the establishment of SOCA in 2006, which has also coincided with a rise in the level 1 cybercrime category counts. This indicates that this distinction might not be merely semantic. On the contrary, in many ways it is a 'rebranding'; the starting point of its construction process as a 'new' and more 'serious' social problem (Best 2016). Indeed, this change seems to signal the beginning of a new rhetoric that promotes cybercrime as one of the highest organised crime priorities.

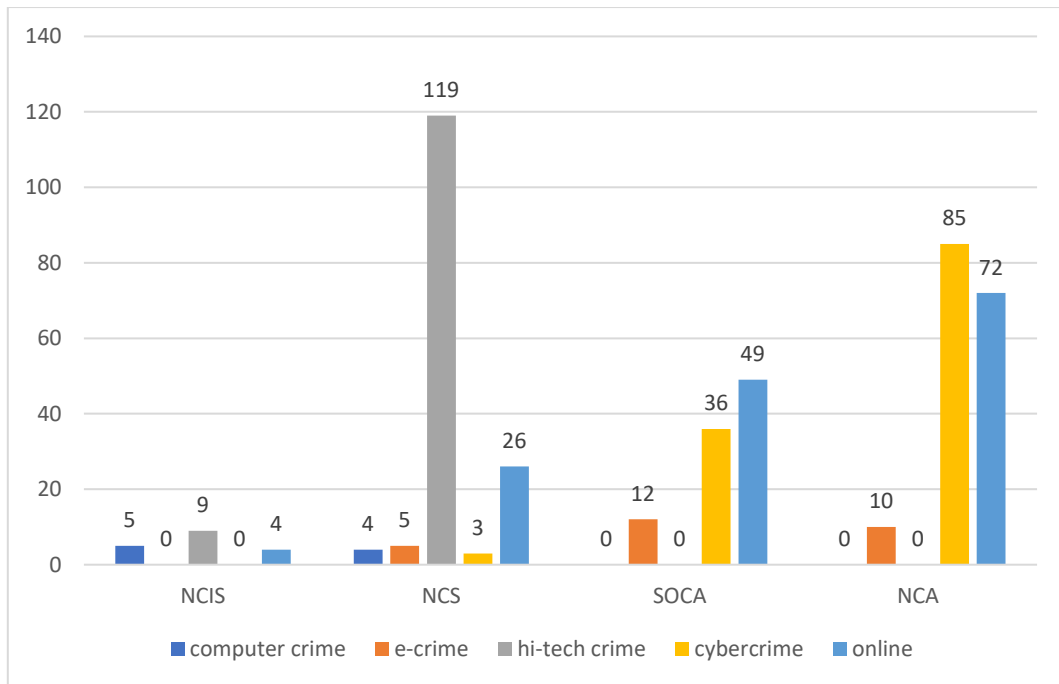


Figure 4.8 'Cybercrime' second-order categories per agency

Some interesting patterns emerge in the second-order categories for 'immigration crime' (see figure 4.9). First references to any of the categories appear in the 1995 NCIS report ('illegal immigration' and 'smuggling'). 'Human trafficking' emerges as a term in 2001 and continues to feature until 2017 with a modest increase in frequency. 'Organised immigration crime' and smuggling' always feature alongside 'human trafficking' too. Moreover, 'modern slavery' emerges in 2014 with the first NCA report. The term was first used by then Home Secretary Theresa May in a series of speeches and public statements in late 2013 – early 2014. For example, she writes in her article on the Telegraph:

"It is all around us, hidden in plain sight. It is walking our streets, supplying shops and supermarkets, working in fields, factories or nail bars, trapped in brothels or cowering behind the curtains in an ordinary street: slavery [...] Tackling this abhorrent crime is a personal priority for me." (May 2013b)

The language used to re-label the old, well-known problem of immigration crime into the 'new' problem 'modern slavery' reveals a great deal about the social processes of repackaging a problem that is perhaps falling off the spotlight and, therefore, it is not receiving a lot of attention from social problem workers (in this case police organisations), policymakers and the public. Interestingly, all 31 of its references are co-located with 'human trafficking', which suggests that its role is either to highlight the seriousness of human trafficking offences or

perhaps to signal this problem repackaging – that ‘modern slavery’ is a newer label assigned to the previously known crime of ‘human trafficking’.

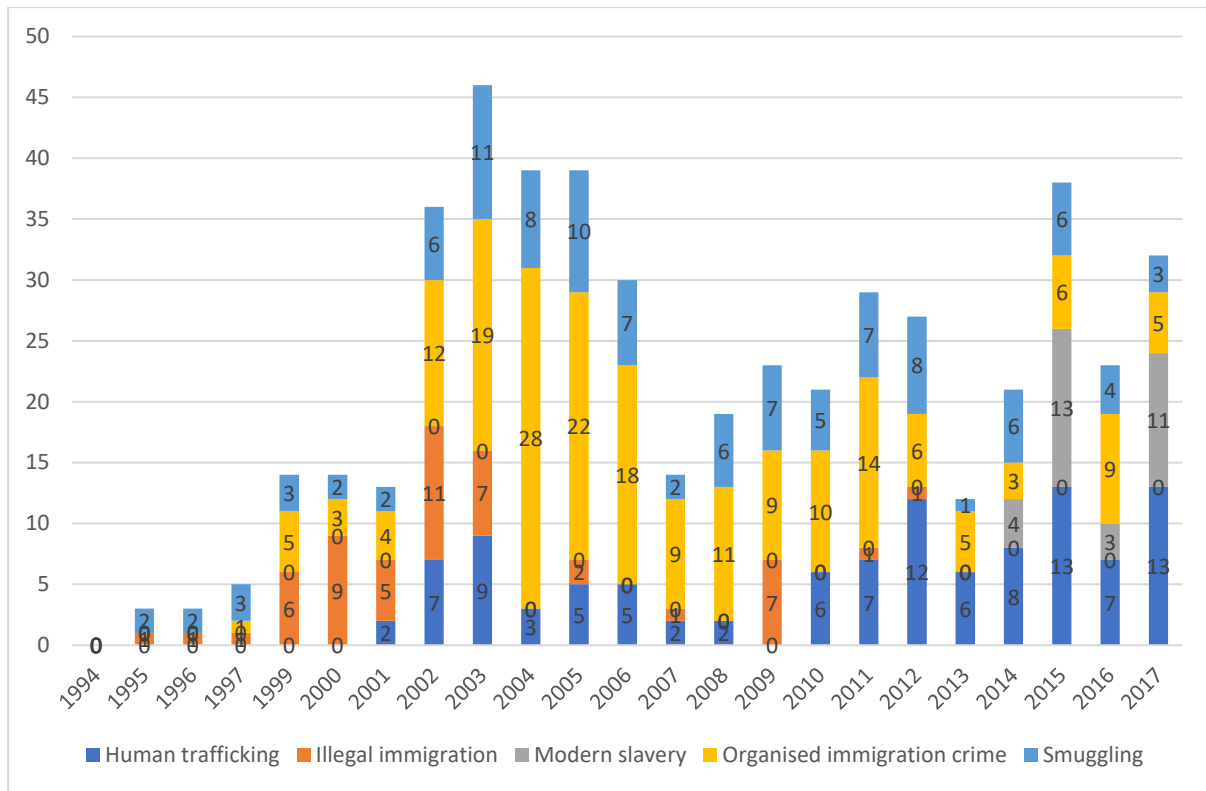


Figure 4.9 ‘Immigration crime’ second-order categories per agency

The two main categories included in the headline ‘violent crime’ are ‘firearms’ and ‘kidnap and extortion’. The latter category features in reports from all four agencies but shows a considerable decrease. The opposite can be observed for ‘firearms’: from 38 references in NCS reports (88 in NCIS but this can be attributed to its lengthier documents, as mentioned above), to 127 in SOCA and 118 in NCA reports (figure 4.10).

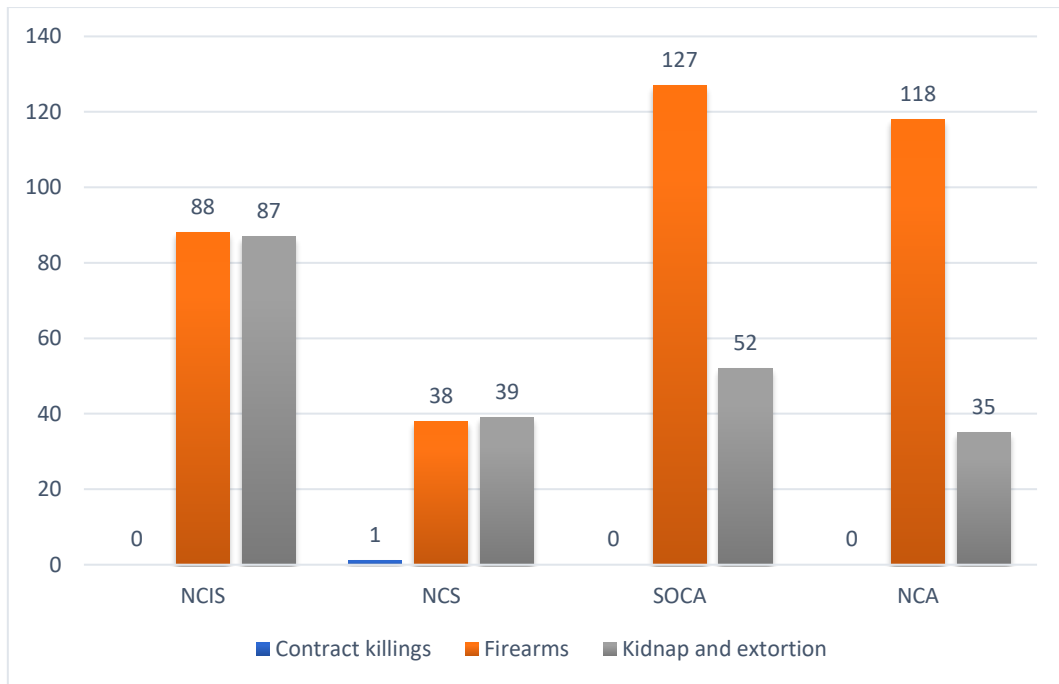


Figure 4.10 'Violent crime' second-order categories per agency

'Property crime' has relatively low counts as a headline priority, hence most of its second-order categories have low counts too (see figure 4.11). It is worth noting that 'organised vehicle crime' is by far the more frequently referenced, especially in NCIS reports (118), followed by theft (48), and that, even though there are only a few in the other three agencies, there is not even one reference for robbery in NCA's reports. This decline is discussed in more detail by interview participants in the next section of this chapter. Nevertheless, it is worth noting here that this change seems to be attributed to real changes to the frequency of occurrence of bank robberies in the real world (which decreased significantly), rather than some socially constructed shift.

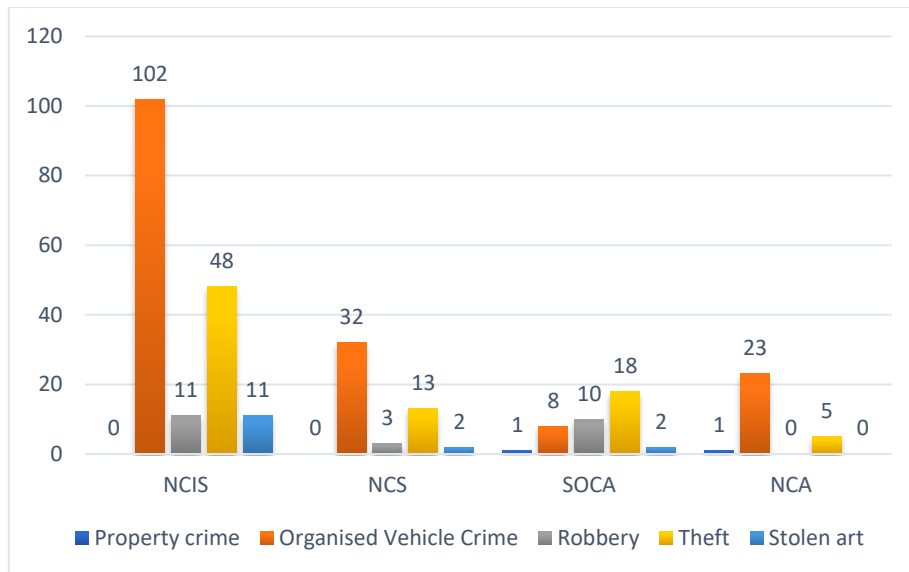


Figure 4.11 'Property crime' second-order categories per agency

Finally, the categories included in 'CSEA' demonstrate some interesting trends (figure 4.12). The category 'child sexual exploitation and abuse' first appears in 2012 (2 references) and then after 2014, in all NCA reports. Prior to that, from 1994-2005, 'paedophilia' was featuring. It is evident that these categories do not represent different crimes, but rather different terms, one of which has clearly replaced the other over the years. Finally, there are no references to any categories for CSEA in SOCA reports due to the publication of specialised CSEA reports by CEOP. This is a significant example of the implications that the division of labour in organised crime policing has in examinations of documentary data. Especially before the establishment of SOCA, even the national response to organised crime was extremely fragmented (NCIS, National Crime Squad, Customs and Excise, Immigration Service are some of the main government agencies responsible for tackling organised crime). Notwithstanding the amalgamation of these organisations and the continuous centralisation of national organised crime policing, this fragmentation – evident in this finding about constructing child sexual abuse as a problem – has implications for exploring national strategic priorities and presents data limitations.

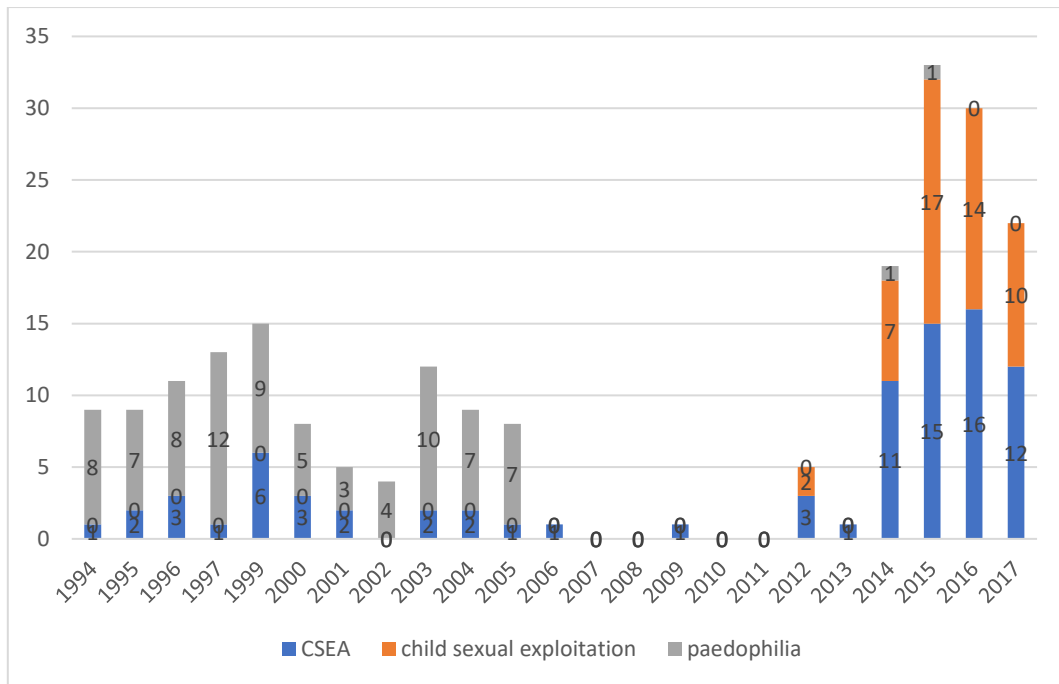


Figure 4.12 'Child sexual exploitation and abuse' (CSEA) second-order categories over time

4.4. Reflecting on patterns of change: the rise and fall of organised crime problems

The study maps the 'headline' organised crime problems onto a four-fold taxonomy according to their ascending or descending routes in priority-setting agendas. The four categories are:

- 1) The 'usual suspects' – these are priorities that are always found amongst the first places of the agencies' agendas, dominant and persistent throughout time.
- 2) The 'new joiners' – these priorities have emerged at a later point in the lifetime of national agencies, hence also in the study's timeframe.
- 3) The 'downfallen' – these have downgraded in the priorities' list.
- 4) The 'unusual suspects' – finally, these priorities have remained on the agencies' agendas but never really managed to climb up the priority list to receive concerned attention.

4.4.1. The 'usual suspect' – *drug trafficking*

One of the most significant findings from the content analysis of annual reports is that drug trafficking has consistently been the top priority for British law enforcement at least until the establishment of the NCA in late 2013. This is confirmed by interview participants:

“If you look at the prioritisation across the NCA, while there's still a big chunk of effort that goes on drugs there's now much more focus on modern slavery, child sexual exploitation, internet crime and so on. And that's been a real big cultural and operational shift.” IP 6

This big shift is also reflected quite clearly in the content analysis findings that show a significant decrease in the proportion of the ‘drugs’ count from 44% in 2013, to 19% in 2014.

However, the dominant place that drug trafficking has occupied in the prioritisation of organised crime problems by British law enforcement and police organisations prior to the NCA era seems unquestionable. The amalgamation of six former Regional Crime Squads into the National Crime Squad in 1998 was accompanied by the secondment of the majority of its police officers from police forces from England and Wales, supported by directly recruited specialist and police staff members. Especially those officers who came from specialist units brought with them specific skillsets which mainly revolved around drugs investigations. In a similar vein, the NCIS absorbed the work and some of the staff of the National Drugs Intelligence Unit, along with some other bodies. Inevitably, strategic priorities were also transferred from the predecessor organisations and formed almost automatically a big part of the NCIS priorities, which is indicated by one of the interview participants:

“We had started a force – we inherited as an independent organisation, the priority was around drugs, because the NCIS as a part of the Home Office was, in effect, created out of a specialist intelligence cell that had been created. [...] So, we didn't start with a fair bit of territory and say, ‘what's the problem?’, ‘Well, hey, drugs is important’ and of course in 1998 nobody really was worried about human trafficking, at that time.” IP 9

The predominance of drugs as an organised crime priority was not challenged until discussions to establish SOCA were well under way. SOCA's main role and core objective was to ‘reduce the harm caused by organised crime’ (Home Office 2005 p.5), not necessarily by means of arresting or convicting organised criminals. This shift towards harm reduction triggered a series of reviews and evaluations commissioned by the Government to assess the harm caused by organised crime on communities, as well as the social and economic costs associated with organised criminality. Notwithstanding limitations regarding the availability of data to assess certain types of organised crime such as human trafficking or smuggling, the reports indicated inconsistencies between the organizational effort dedicated to illicit drugs trafficking and the assessed economic and social harm caused by it, as stated by another participant:

“We came to the assumption that drugs were probably 80-90% of the total effort [...] that was around the time they commissioned the work on the economic and social costs of organised crime, and that demonstrated that although drugs were a very significant crime harm it was nothing like 80-90% of the total in the globe, that the resources were all wrong. And this is sort of the mid-2000s.” IP 12

In examining the shifts and changes in the prioritisation of drug trafficking by British law enforcement, distinctions in tackling different kinds of drugs cannot be overlooked. In the same way that the previous section discussed distinctions between second-level categories within the first-level clusters, formed by documentary data, the analysis of the interview data uses the same categories to highlight changes or shifts in specific aspects of drug trafficking. Many interview participants have pointed out the different ways in which police organisations have dealt with illicit trafficking of different drugs. More specifically, the distinction between cannabis and Class A drugs (cocaine, heroin) seems to be quite a clear theme, mentioned by interview participants during discussions regarding the general predominance of drugs in organised crime strategic priorities and their aforementioned relegation in NCA’s prioritisation:

“I wouldn’t say drugs was downgraded; certain aspects of it were downgraded. I mean, for example, cannabis; if you’re talking about commodities, then cannabis played a lesser role; cocaine and heroin and others were always up.” IP 3

Content analysis data do not entirely reflect this finding, as ‘cannabis’ counts seem to follow quite a stable course across the time period in question, even though cocaine and heroin show a significant increase from NCS and NCIS to SOCA reports (see fig. 4.6). But even if strategically cannabis was downgraded as a priority, organised crime policing – as well as policing in general – has been to a great extent operationally-led. Therefore, the official organisational priorities might not always reflect the operations presented in the reports, some of which were also discussed by participants:

“Class B drugs you know, cannabis, that’s completely gone, even in... you know... big tonne quantities. Interestingly, in the last year of the NCS we seized I think it was 27 tonnes of cannabis without looking for it just because they... it came peripherally to other investigations that were ongoing. So, no one would take a cannabis job now, it’s very unlikely. Unless it was you know multi, multi-tonne.” IP 13

4.4.2. The ‘new joiners’ – emerging organised crime priorities

4.4.2.1. *Immigration Crime*

It is worth noting that under the umbrella term ‘immigration crime’, this study includes ‘human trafficking’, ‘smuggling’, as well as a few other variations in terminology used to describe immigration crime at different time periods or agencies. Due to the many conceptual and definitional differences between the two main aspects of ‘immigration crime’, the analysis at this point has to distinguish and approach each one separately as it is clear that they follow particularly different routes both as organisational priorities, as well as social problems. Even though the term ‘organised immigration crime’ is not commonly used in recent NCA years, it was the one used more often by predecessor agencies which included both human trafficking and smuggling, as highlighted by one participant:

“At the beginning of all this, we grouped all that together, and we said these are two elements of organised immigration crime.” IP 3

In terms of human trafficking, it is worth noting the distinction in categorising this priority as a ‘usual suspect’ based on the documentary analysis, whereas it is now analysed as a ‘new joiner’ based on interview data. In fact, interview participants have referred to human trafficking as the most important emerging priority that had to fight against drugs for a place high in the agencies’ agendas at least since the early 2000s. One participant, while referring to the period prior to the establishment of SOCA, states:

“The difficulty really was trying to break down the well-established intelligence picture – not to break it down, sorry – to compete with the well-established and well-oiled operational response to tackling drugs” IP 3

This ‘battle’ would continue for many years to come, until the creation of NCA which was created with a mandate to tackle human trafficking – among other organised crime threats – as one of the most serious, ‘hidden’ threats against the UK (May 2013a). Political pressure for more organisational effort to be put towards tackling human trafficking increased around the same time as the introduction of ‘modern slavery’ – a new label for this particular type of organised criminal activity. Given the extremely significant role of language in social constructionism, this repackaging has the power to re-establish a problem as a high priority for law enforcement and gain renewed media and public attention; new policies are also designed to address the re-introduced problem (Elder-Vass 2012a; Best 2016). As discussed in the

previous section with regards to the upward trend for ‘immigration crime’ identified in the content analysis, Theresa May became the principal claimmaker for the ‘shocking and abhorrent crime of slavery’ which she branded as her ‘personal priority’. At the time, the Lambeth case¹¹ was dominating British media. May’s successful claimmaking – using the Lambeth case as a typifying example (Best 2016 p.32) – about the ‘hidden’ crime of modern slavery was largely picked up by media and led to the introduction of the Modern Slavery Act (2015). Human trafficking was thus established as an important organised crime threat. The establishment of the Act provided one more important boost in its construction as a serious social problem in the UK, as it constitutes the ‘policymaking’ stage in Best’s problems process model (Best 2016 p.199).

Despite the recent changes in the way which human trafficking is seen, it has not always been considered a serious crime problem. More particularly, until the early 2000s it was labelled as ‘immigration crime’ and was dealt with mainly by the Immigration Service, even though the National Crime Squad also had a special ‘immigration team’ since January 2002. The main operational focus for both agencies used to be on the facilitation of illegal entry of immigrants in the UK, rather than trafficking:

“The initial focus in the UK was around smuggling, not trafficking. And it was largely because the intelligence picture was showing these large inflows of illegal immigrants. Trafficking was regarded as a sort of... a nasty but nevertheless a small... kind of a lesser problem; that’s what the intelligence picture was telling us. And so, it was difficult, even though the legal position changed, to get traction around trafficking. I think it’s probably reversed now; I think particularly through political pressure, human trafficking is seen as the more heinous crime – and it is, undoubtedly” IP 3

Indeed political discourse around immigration crime seems to have changed quite rapidly in the early years of the new millennium from facilitation or illegal transportation of immigrants towards human trafficking. Smuggling and human trafficking, as mentioned previously, were categorised at the time as two strands of the same problem; the distinguisher for police and law enforcement agencies was – and is to this day – around the notion of ‘consent’. Therefore, both the intelligence picture and operational responses had to be adjusted to whether people were being smuggled out of their own volition – in which case smuggling was seen essentially as a

¹¹ Three women were extricated by Scotland Yard officers from a house in the heart of London where they were allegedly held for at least 30 years, in what police said could be Britain’s most enduring case of domestic slavery.

series of payments to get the person across Europe, or the world, into the UK – or, people who were being coerced into moving from their country in order to be used as a commodity once they were in the UK. In the former case, most if not all of the business is conducted abroad, as facilitation usually stops as soon as people get into the country, while in human trafficking, networks have to be based and work inside the UK in order to continue exploiting the victims. Of course, it soon became apparent that, despite its usefulness for law enforcement, this initial distinction was quite simplistic as the lines between smuggling and human trafficking cases can often become blurred – consent can be rather difficult to ascertain or prove.

The need for a shift of focus towards human trafficking became evident for national agencies in the years prior to the establishment of SOCA when, according to one participant:

“There was a clear signal from government that we needed to do more in relation to human trafficking” IP 1

This clear direction from government can be partly explained by the fact that the UK did not have as many undocumented or smuggled migrants as other European countries such as Italy, Spain and Greece (Antonopoulos and Winterdyk 2006), so people smuggling was not very high in the list of serious, highly publicised crime problems. On the other hand, human trafficking was considered to be an increasingly troubling condition, especially since a dramatic incident took place in the UK which played a significant role in constructing the social problem of human trafficking according to interview data:

“I think one of the key issues was the Dover thing – a realisation of the scale of human trafficking” IP 10

Indeed, the majority of interview participants who talked about the emergence of human trafficking as an organised crime priority referred to the ‘Dover incident’ as the event that characterised the problem as very serious, as it can involve real, terrible harm. In June 2000, 58 Chinese immigrants were trapped and found dead in a lorry in the port town of Dover, England. In the aftermath of this tragic incident, a classic example of a signal crime which had a huge impact on people’s perceptions of human trafficking (Innes 2014), the Labour Government’s immediate response was to treat it essentially as a policing issue, while Home Secretary Jack Straw denounced the spread of trafficking in asylum-seekers and refugees by criminal gangs as a “profoundly evil trade” (Hyland 2000). The majority of interview participants framed the Dover incident as the starting point for the construction of human trafficking as a serious social problem:

“I’ll tell you when there was a major shift and you’ll be able to date it [...], it was the 58 dead Chinese found in a lorry at Dover. We didn’t know that’s what was going to... once we started getting back into that and unpicking it, then we realized that people trafficking was more of a problem than we thought.” IP 10

“It took the events in Dover with the death of the 58 Chinese down the port, you know, to raise that [human trafficking] as an issue and a priority. So, then law enforcement started to think about it, but we got a nudge from the Home Office: could the NCS take on coordination of it?” IP 13

Building on this narrative, discussions about the social – not only economic – harm associated with organised crime problems such as human trafficking became prevalent in the media:

“That started as you would imagine a big furore in the country and that led to there needs to be something more about trafficking, well who can we give it to?’ Kent Police? It was their area of Dover, but they just wouldn’t take it on, so it was given to the National Crime Squad. So, we formed an operation called project ‘Reflex’ at that time, which was dealing with human trafficking and smuggling.” IP 15

Reflex was a strategy set up by the government in the aftermath of the Dover incident, to coordinate action on organised immigration crime. Its main purpose was to bring together intelligence from the NCS, NCIS, Customs and Excise, the Immigration Service and various police forces, in order to identify and disrupt organised immigration crime networks. Hence, it could be argued that Reflex constituted the first manifestation of the policymaking stage of Best’s social construction model – a new way to address the emerging problem of human trafficking.

4.4.2.2. *Cybercrime*

Interview participants describe cybercrime as another ‘new joiner’ that came in the priority agenda in the mid-1990s, but was not seen as a high priority by the national agencies until much later. Customs and Excise, the Serious Fraud Office and the Inland Revenue have also had computer investigation resources since the mid-1990s, but these have been tailored to the remits of the individual organizations; for example, Customs and Excise focused on VAT fraud and drugs smuggling, while Inland Revenue towards tax evasion (Sommer 2004). In 1996, NCIS started Project Trawler to assess the overall scale and range of the then called ‘computer crime’, even though one of the key judgements of the report is that there were no authoritative statistics available to gauge the exact scale of ‘computer crimes’. Even though it identifies

some present (e.g. paedophilia, hacking) and emerging problems (fraud, criminals' use of secure internet communications), the report argues that "the vast majority of incidents are nuisance attacks rather than serious, malicious assaults" (NCIS 1999b). Therefore, it seems that Project Trawler did not construct cybercrime as a serious organised crime problem, mainly due to the lack of authoritative quantitative data and limited intelligence. However, it certainly contributed to the social construction process as one of the main claims it made is that "criminals will make ever more use of internet communications to organise their illegal activities... Potentially, this would seriously damage law enforcement's ability to fight Serious and Organised Crime" (NCIS 1999b). So, the publication of the findings of Project Trawler in 1999 identified 'hi-tech crime' as an emerging threat. Even though this did not seem enough to attract media and public attention, it did trigger the bidding process for more funding for national agencies to fight cybercrime, as corroborated by interview participants:

"As a result of project Trawler, we developed the first National Crime Strategy, [...] and I asked the Government for £50 million, and I think they gave us £13 million [...]. But at least we were, you know, we were there." IP 5

So, following the results of Project Trawler and along with protracted law enforcement lobbying, the first national structure – the National High-tech Crime Unit (NHTCU) – is established in 2001, and forms part of the NCS with 40 officers based centrally and more in every English and Welsh force (Sommer 2004). The unit was active for five years until 2006 when many of its staff and duties were transferred to SOCA's e-crime unit. This structural change, also coincided with the renaming of 'computer' or 'hi-tech crime' to 'cybercrime'. Similarly to 'human trafficking' and 'modern slavery', this rebranding does not seem to be merely semantic; the use of a different term provides an opportunity to re-introduce cybercrime as a 'new' problem that deserves more concerned attention by law enforcement and policymakers. At the same time, the funding obtained following on from Project Trawler, along with the creation of NHTCU allowed for more organizational effort to be directed towards fighting cybercrime. In turn, this gradually led to both building a better intelligence picture around various forms of cybercrime, as well as more operational activity during the SOCA era:

"Now cybercrime was another area which was largely fringe activity within SOCA to start, but over the course of its life became almost the centre ground" IP 3

However, the merging of NHTCU with SOCA in 2006 – only five years after its creation - raised some criticisms mainly originating from the private sector, claiming that the merger lessened Britain’s defences in a time when cyber-attacks to British businesses were escalating:

“Business figures claim that the merged group is excessively secretive and have criticised it for not producing results. SOCA’s [...] priority areas are drugs and fraud, but it is understood that the Home Office wants the agency to concentrate more on human-trafficking. Critics say that leaves cybercrime and web-based industrial espionage too far down the agenda.”

The Times, 04/12/2007

Despite these criticisms, cybercrime would go on to become one of the highest priority areas in SOCA’s and subsequently NCA’s strategies.

This gradual elevation of cybercrime to the higher ranks of law enforcement’s agendas reached its pick in 2010 when the National Security Strategy classed cyber security as one of UK’s top priorities alongside international terrorism and natural disasters (HM Government 2010). The transformation of cybercrime from a niche issue in the beginning of the 21st century to a tier-one national security problem, is perhaps the best fit for Best’s (2016) social construction process out of all the organised crime priorities that fall under the scope of this study: from the initial claimsmaking around the late 1990s with the publication of Project Trawler, to receiving more media and public attention, to finally feature among the four top national security priorities and naturally occupy a significant percentage of NCA’s operational effort.

4.4.2.3. Child sexual exploitation and abuse

Child sexual exploitation and abuse (CSEA) is a crime type that similarly to human trafficking and cybercrime is framed by interview participants as a ‘new joiner’, an emerging threat that over the years received increased attention by national law enforcement agencies. The term CSEA first started featuring in threat assessments, annual reports and more generally law enforcement outputs in the years prior to the establishment of the NCA. However, ‘paedophilia’, which is the term used until then to describe the same range of criminal acts, featured among the strategic priorities of the national agencies since the mid-1990s. More specifically, NCIS includes it in all their annual reports, and so does NCS as they conducted their first transnational operation targeting an international paedophile ring using the internet

to exchange large quantities of child pornography in the agency's very first year. One interview participant explains how NCS got involved with in the case:

“Did we look at paedophilia as a specific in the first year? That depends on when we got a report from Sussex Police funnily enough; and then discovered this ‘wonderland’ as it was called, website in the dark side and identified 14 nations contributing to it. That took us to a major piece of work because nobody else could take it on.” IP 10

Operation Cathedral resulted in 106 searches and 56 arrests during coordinated raids across 12 countries. In the UK this included the seizure of approximately 750,000 computer images and 200 computerised videos of children (NCS 1998). The operation's high profile was mainly due to the unusually high, for the late 1990s, number of images involved, possessed and distributed by the 'Wonderland Club', as the child pornography network was called. Shortly after the 'wonderland' case, the Paedophile Unit in the NCS was established which specialized in tackling paedophilia, including the online distribution of indecent images of children.

It is evident that this case shifted law enforcement's focus towards online paedophile networks in a similar way that the 2000 Dover incident gained attention for organised immigration crime. The establishment of a specialised unit within the organised crime fighting national agency provided opportunities for further investigation, intelligence gathering and operational activity. This demonstrates the importance of organisational structures in shaping strategic priorities; when a taskforce or unit is established in order to look into a problem, they will undoubtedly find out information about it – at least a lot more than what was known before – hence, they have part of the power to define what is in the agenda. One participant shares an interesting policing proverb:

“They say ‘if you don't have a drugs squad, you don't have a drugs problem’. So, you will see some force reports that say, ‘there were no Class A seizures in this force last year’. And the police force's Chief Constable will stand up and say, ‘this shows that there isn't a real drugs market in this county’. No, it doesn't, it just shows that you're not looking for it.” IP 14

Therefore, similarly to NHTCU, the new paedophilia unit inevitably shifted part of NCS's organisational effort to go towards fighting paedophilia, which in turn produced some results such as the identification, arrest and prosecution of more perpetrators and the protection of vulnerable children. This broadened the scope of the unit to such an extent that when SOCA was established in 2006, the unit was not absorbed in it, but it rather transformed into the Child

Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (CEOPC), an organization separate from SOCA, which was responsible specifically for tackling child online exploitation and abuse. So, even though the establishment of SOCA can be viewed as a decisive step in the long-term trend in policing organised crime towards centralised law enforcement agencies with increased powers (Sheptycki 2007), it seems that CSEA was categorized at the time as a social problem that required a special and separate response to all other types of organised crime. This might have also had to do with problematic issues relating to categorizing CSEA as an organised crime category, as one participant mentions:

“Organised crime up to a certain point was always around profit, and this is where it became problematic around the child exploitation area, because you couldn’t really make a profit from it a lot of the time. And it was also around the definition of 3 or 4 people coming together to make a profit out of criminal activity. Did it fit the model of child exploitation? So, there was this big debate about how we’d kind of broaden the understanding of what organised crime is” IP 3

Therefore the fact that there was a separate agency tackling CSEA independently for 7 years played a significant role in socially constructing it as a rather particular crime problem, which requires both police powers and expertise from various sectors such as business, government, specialist charities etc. In 2011, the ITV documentary *Exposure* about allegations of sexual abuse made against Jimmy Savile a year after his death stirred up discussions about high-level paedophilia and cover-ups (Greer and McLaughlin 2013). The impact of the case on policing CSEA and criminal justice policy is significant with police re-opening old cases such as Operation Pallial allegations made against care workers in North Wales in the 1990s, and sexual crimes now constituting a massive proportion of court business (Smith and Burnett 2018).

Finally, in October 2013, CEOPC was absorbed in NCA, according to the Crime and Courts Act 2013, and currently continues to function as one of its commands. Following the Jimmy Savile scandal, as well as the exposure of grooming rings in Oxford, Telford and Rotherham (Phillips 2018), Theresa May, the Home Secretary at the time, ordered all 4,000-plus officers in NCA to be given special training in how to spot the signs of child abuse. CSEA is situated among the top priorities for the agency, an upward trend that is also corroborated by content analysis findings.

4.4.3. The ‘downfallen’ – downgraded organised crime priorities

4.4.3.1. *Property crime*

The first category of organised crime priorities that follows a downward trend since the mid-1990s is property crime. Indeed, this can be viewed as part of the more general steady and significant decline in crime rates that has been well discussed and researched in Britain over the last two decades (the number of crimes has more than halved, according to the official Crime Survey for England and Wales). More specifically, and in terms of the crimes that fall in the first-level category ‘property crime’ constructed for the purposes of this analysis, official statistics show that vehicle theft has fallen by 86% and burglary by 71% since 1995 (ONS 2017). This dramatic decline in property crime types, is inevitably also reflected on the priority lists of national law enforcement agencies, as one participant states:

“Some things have really fallen in priority for good reasons, in that the underlying crimes have fallen. So, the classic example is armed robbery which is now very rarely done”

IP 12

“The reason that bank robberies have massively reduced in recent years is that if you go on a physical bank robbery, you’re probably quite likely to get caught, and it’s probably going to be quite dangerous. I can sit in my office and do a bank robbery [...] and make lots of money, thank you very much, at virtually no risk” IP 4

This resonates with the notion – also endorsed by a substantial part of academic literature – that organised criminals are rational actors who assess the costs and benefits of their actions, and make calculated decisions in order to maximise profit and minimise risk (Cornish and Clarke 1986; Piquero and Tibbetts 2002; Gilligan 2007). Even though this is only one in a series of models put forward by criminologists striving to conceptualise organised crime, this idea that organised criminals are driven by profit seems to be particularly prevalent in policing and law enforcement discourse, as interview data on how interview participants define organised crime indicate:

“What happens is that the criminals will always go for the highest profit and the lowest risk.” IP 5

“[Organised crime] is fundamentally about profit.” IP 11

Furthermore, interview participants point to the prevalence of private security and rapid developments in security technologies as another reason for the decline of robberies and thefts, which justifies their downfall as strategic priorities as well:

“Bank robberies don’t happen anymore, because of the increased security [...]. It’s a dying profession” IP 12

Many technological advances that come from the private sector have play a decisive role in deterring certain types of organised criminal activity, including CCTV systems, sophisticated alarm and monitoring systems, pin and chip technologies, online virtual tours of design-out-crime techniques for residences and commercial premises (Ayling 2014). In recent years, all these are used as preventative measures in order to assist in protecting against loss, to identify offenders, and reduce opportunities for crime (Capobianco 2005).

Increased security and preventative measures play an important role in explaining downward trends in prioritising organised vehicle theft too, as interview participants argue:

“Cars are now less likely to be stolen because of all the work that’s gone into it. That wasn’t driven by the police force. That was driven by insurance companies because they were fed up with paying for all these cars being stolen” IP 15

“Whilst the stealing of motor vehicles is still big business – and there’s still some being exported [...], organised crime moved away from it into other areas, and we cut down our priority, it disappeared off the list, virtually. I think when I was still around in 2003, I think we had about 4 people in our motor vehicle crime group, because it had just gone down and down as a threat. [...] because other preventative measures were put in place by the car industry.” IP 5

Overall, interview data suggest that the substantial downfall of property crimes within national agencies’ strategic agendas correlates to changes in the frequency of occurrence of these types of crimes in the real world. This is exacerbated by the emergence of successful measures of prevention originating mainly from the private sector. Participants largely construct property crime quite clearly as a ‘problem of the past’, a theme that has also emerged from the content analysis of annual reports (see, section 4.3).

4.4.3.2. *International Organised Crime*

This category is constructed, as explained in the methodology chapter (see, section 2.5.1.2) not as a sum of different crime types or even different terms to describe the same crime type, but in order to represent another categorisation of organised crime that was clearly taking place during the first years of the study's timeline and certainly until the establishment of SOCA in 2006. Although popular typologies of organised crime focus on either the physical structure and operation of an organised crime group (OCG), or – even more commonly – its activities (Le 2012), documentary data from annual plans and reports indicate that national agencies also used to construct crime categories based on nationality. Indeed, there are sections in the NCIS and NCS reports referring to the agency's performance tackling 'West African crime' or 'Turkish crime'; and even though it was obvious from the content of the section which particular criminal activity it was referring to, the label was assigned based on the nationality of the members of the OCG. However, one interview participant when talking about the SOCA era, states:

“The UK talks about ‘sector of crime’ and other countries talk about nationality of criminals. So they'd say ‘Russian organised crime’, we'd say ‘fraud’. They'd say ‘Albanian organised crime’, we'd say ‘people trafficking’. They may well be the same things; but we describe the crime and they describe the origin”. IP 11

Hence, this extract reinforces views of the UK response to organised crime as focused on *activities* rather than *structures* of organised crime groups (Sergi 2017). Indeed, British policing, and more particularly national agencies, have historically organised their strategic priorities by using activity categories. However, this was not an entirely straightforward model of decision-making. As discussed in Chapter 3, the National Crime Squad used to specifically target individuals who participated in illegal networks by ascribing the labels of 'current nominals' and 'core nominals' to them. This was a way to keep track of prolific offenders and subsequently disrupt and dismantle organised crime groups effectively.

The focus on ethnicity of organised criminals and groups during the 1990s can also be demonstrated by one of the ways in which national press used to construct organised crime in the UK. Here is the opening paragraph of a 1995 article in 'The Independent' which is included in the study's media analysis:

“An assassin sips tea in a south London cafe before stepping up behind two men and firing a handgun into the back of their

heads. A Chinese restaurant-owner in Glasgow struggles to open the door of his Mercedes, the lock of which has been deliberately jammed with matchsticks. Suddenly, he is hacked down with four blows from a meat cleaver. The leader of a group of black gangsters dies in a hail of bullets fired by three rivals as he attempts to leave a London drugs den. This is modern gangland Britain. Gone are days of the working-class mobsters, ruling with a razor blade and an iron fist. Organised crime in the UK is more complex than ever before.”

Jason Bennetto, ‘The Independent’, 21/08/1995

This rather graphic description of organised crime seems to adhere to sensationalised accounts of organised criminals viewed as shady, mysterious ‘assassin’ figures who jumped out of a film noir or foreign ‘black gangsters’ involved in violent drug wars. The article even expresses nostalgia for the simpler days of good, old British organised criminals; complexity in tackling organised crime, therefore, seems to increase dramatically as criminal gangs’ ability to cross national borders rises.

Notwithstanding this emphasis on nationality of criminal groups put by annual reports as well as national press, interview participants point out that framing organised crime problems in terms of nationality of the OCGs can be problematic for a variety of reasons. Firstly, it is nowadays known that organised criminals usually are interested in profit, which coupled with their inherent risk aversion might lead them to shift their activities towards less risky, and more profitable areas for business. Indeed, there is evidence to suggest that the majority of organised criminals do not specialise in particular types of offending (Francis et al. 2013), which also resonates with interview data:

“Organised crime groups have diversified significantly both in the goods and their membership, and their links to other organised crime groups. So, to just talk about Chinese organised crime, or West African organised crime... you can do it if you like, but...” IP 5

Moreover, such an approach to categorising organised crime can have limitations with regards to identifying new threats that originate from OCGs of different or mixed ethnic backgrounds. In turn, this might have serious implications in terms of operational activity, as one participant argues:

“And we saw the Turks [...] where there was more of that Mafioso family arrangement. And we missed a little bit in the early 2000s about the South Asian crime gangs and

particularly the importation of heroin by them because we focused a lot on the Turks.” IP 13

Finally, the fact the national agencies used to have a focus on nationality of origin of OCGs seems to align with elements from the alien conspiracy theory, one of the most influential perspectives on ‘organised crime’ discourse, which highlights the centrality of ethnicity and migration to the organised crime phenomenon (Antonopoulos et al. 2008; Antonopoulos 2009). However, the alien conspiracy perspective has been criticized for resulting in further criminalisation and victimisation of foreigners, as well as for overlooking entrepreneurial characteristics of criminal networks (Antonopoulos 2006; Paoli and Reuter 2008). In terms of adopting terminology aligned with the ‘conspiring alien’ perspective, one participant also reflects on political correctness:

“The other reason was political sensitivity [...]. The trouble with using those sorts of terms is you are kind of pointing the finger” IP 5

4.4.4. The ‘unusual suspects’ – the lower places in the agenda

This last category includes priorities that have always had a place in national agencies’ agendas but have never really emerged as serious problems that need to become top priorities. From a social problems perspective, their construction process can still fit the natural history model, but as Best (2016) maintains, not all problems will be ‘successful’ in following all the stages of the model; some of them fail to be considered serious enough to dramatically influence policy design, implementation and outcomes (Best 2016). It could be argued that this is the case for most crime types included in the categories discussed in this section.

4.4.4.1. *Economic crime*

Economic crime in the context of this study consists of crime types (fraud, money-laundering, corruption and counterfeiting) some of which have received high concerned attention from the public, media, the police and law enforcement during certain time periods within the last two decades. However, it is included in the ‘unusual suspects’ category because most interview participants have argued that it neither ever got into the top priorities of national agencies, nor did it receive the spotlight it deserves given the undoubtedly serious harm it causes to markets, legitimate businesses and national economies (Levi 2009), as well as to ‘vulnerable’ people.

“Financial crime never really got into the mainstream of SOCA. I know we have other agencies primarily run, but it was always regarded as a little bit too complex, requiring specific expertise and so it never really kind of got off the ground” IP 3

“This is sort of the mid 2000s and so we tried to look at what were the things that ought to drive the priorities? And clearly harm was a very major one and those sorts of exercises really pulled out things like fraud as being an area that was hardly looked into at all but actually, certainly in economic terms, it was causing a lot of damage” IP 12

It is worth noting that even though participants were always aware of which crime types are included in the category ‘economic crime’, they were free to choose which ones they wanted to focus and elaborate on. In this case, the vast majority interestingly focused on fraud, with very few participants mentioning corruption and money-laundering.

Button and Tunley (2015 p.50) argue that ‘given it is the most costly crime to society one would expect tackling fraud to be a major priority’. However, it seems to have always been a relatively low priority in British law enforcement, as also corroborated by interview data. A recent report by HMICFRS (2019a) assesses the effectiveness and efficiency of the police response to fraud, including online fraud, by focusing on three main criteria (HMICFRS 2019a p.6):

- whether law enforcement has a well-designed strategy for tackling fraud;
- whether organisational structures provide the necessary capacity, capabilities and partnerships; and
- whether victims of fraud receive a high-quality response.

The report’s main finding is that the law enforcement response to fraud is ineffective and disjointed, although there are some ‘pockets’ of good prevention work. Crucially, it highlights a deficiency in existing organisational structures. More specifically there is a gap between national strategic assessments which include fraud, and their dissemination in the national and regional tasking processes. As a result, there are “unacceptably wide variations” (HMICFRS 2019a p.8) in how fraud is prioritised across police forces.

These findings, especially the discrepancy between what is said in principal (strategies) and what happens in practice (tasking), are consistent with the study’s categorisation of fraud as an ‘unusual suspect’. The main common themes on prioritising fraud had to do with difficulties to understand and investigate it, and with failure to conceptualize it as a serious, imminent threat, as evident from the extracts below:

“I mean [...] kidnap and extortion would be more immediate [...], it would get more immediate attention than fraud. But, wouldn't that be with everything and fraud?”

“Fraud is... ‘well, can't you do preventative measures – banks and others – to prevent fraud?’ [laughs wryly]. And you know, secondly, it isn't a direct threat to life normally. And it's difficult to investigate!” IP 5

Of course, it should also be noted that fraud is a broad term that covers various types of crime. The NCA indicatively lists identity crime, individual fraud, corporate fraud, online fraud, advanced fee fraud, fraud against the tax & benefit system and intellectual property crime (NCA 2018c). Currently the NCA works with a number of other agencies to tackle economic crime, including the Serious Fraud Office (SFO) and the Financial Conduct Authority. Over the years, there has been a plethora of counter-fraud entities with different statuses and capabilities which synthesize the architecture of fraud investigation in the UK (Button 2011). Therefore, this institutional fragmentation of the response to fraud, combined with the lack of training of national agencies' officers to deal with economic crime and fraud seems to have created a negative attitude towards tackling fraud. This seems to be exacerbated by occupational and cultural elements which seem to be present in national agencies perhaps due to the high percentage of police officers they employ, despite the fact that they are new agencies and tend to be relatively short-lived (Foster 2003; Reiner 2010).

However, participants' attitudes towards fraud seems to be greatly determined by the fact that they do not consider it to be threatening or urgent enough compared to other crimes that constitute 'threats to life'. The following recent statement by HM Inspector of Constabulary Matt Parr during the press release of the “Fraud: Time to choose” report (HMICFRS 2019a) encapsulates this rather well:

“In a time of competing priorities for the police service, we understand that police leaders have difficult decisions to make. But during this inspection, one officer told us that fraud does not ‘bang, bleed or shout’ and, as a result, it is not considered a priority. Nonetheless, people are more likely to be victims of fraud than any other crime.” (HMICFRS 2019b)

Such action-oriented perspectives are compatible with more traditional understandings of tackling organised crime within policing operations on the ground, a reality that most officers with a policing background are well acquainted with.

4.4.4.2. *Violent crime*

The category of violent crime includes ‘kidnap and extortion’, and ‘illegal firearms’. However, interview participants have chosen to speak only about the latter. As mentioned in the previous chapter, handguns were effectively banned in the UK (with the exception of Northern Ireland) after the Dunblane school massacre in 1996 with the 1997 Firearms Act (Lilly 2001). Following the Act, illegal firearms – either criminal activity using guns or the trafficking of guns – have been consistently included in the priority-setting agendas of national law enforcement agencies. Moreover, between the years 2007-8 more than 80 young men lost their lives in fatal shootings across the country, which led media commentators to swiftly claim that there is ‘gun culture’ and police organisations to declare that firearms offences are a major threat to the UK (Hallsworth and Silverstone 2009). However, and despite calls from the Home Office or the Government to prioritise gun crime, interview participants have not framed it as an emerging priority. On the contrary, they present it as a problem that has had a few peaks in concerned attention by the media, the public and politicians, but has generally remained relatively low in the priority agenda:

“There was always some effort going on around that [...] and around the registration of gun dealers and the potential that some gun dealers might be selling weapons to the criminal community and things like that. But there wasn’t a big effort around. It was sort of going on in the background.” IP 1

Moreover, crimes that involve the use of firearms and result in death or serious damage usually capture a lot of media and public attention, and thus they can have the power to channel public attention towards gun-related problems, and away from others. These signal crimes (Innes 2014) can have a profound impact on social control more generally, and policing of organised crime in particular. In the case of firearms illegal use and trafficking, three different events that seem to have the main elements of signal crimes were mentioned by participants:

“There was a point on which there’d been a spate of shootings in Nottingham and the newspaper headlines were describing Nottingham as the murder capital of the UK. [...] Certainly, at that point the sort of national concern around guns and the availability of guns was higher than it had been.” IP 1

“In 2006 there was a tragic shooting of a young lad called Rhys Jones in Liverpool and then Home Secretary added firearms as a targeting requirement” IP 13

“After the Mumbai attacks, the series of terrorist attacks in Mumbai, I remember attending a meeting at the Home Office

with the Home Secretary and a whole host of other people where there was a lot of concern about the gaps in our language around the extent of the gun trafficking, the trafficking in weapons and the availability of weapons in the UK. And so that gave another impetus.” IP 1

The second extract is especially indicative of the impact signal crimes can have on the ways in which institutions respond to specific problems, and furthermore, how they can shape strategic organised crime priorities. However, despite the channelling of public attention towards gun crime, a Home Office study published in 2007 reported that gun crime in England and Wales remained a relatively rare event (Home Office 2007). Similarly, the NCA ascertains that crimes that involve firearms still remain rare in the UK, but acknowledges that “while the rate of death and injury caused by firearms is very low in the UK compared with other countries with a similar socio-economic standing, shooting incidents often generate widespread media attention that affects the public’s perceptions of crime” (NCA 2018b).

4.5. Concluding remarks

This chapter maps out patterns of continuity and change in national strategic priorities with regards to organised crime over time. To that end, it firstly discussed findings from a content analysis on 31 annual reports published by national organised crime fighting agencies from 1993-2017, followed by findings from 15 semi-structured qualitative interviews that were conducted with key decision-makers who have played a role in the priority-setting processes of national organised crime fighting agencies. In doing so, it presented a typology of four categories of priorities, based on their positions and directions in the organisational agendas: the ‘usual suspects’ (drugs), the ‘new joiners’ (immigration crime, cybercrime, CSEA), the ‘downfallen’ (property crime, international crime), and the ‘unusual suspects’ (economic crime, violent crime). Each category was discussed with a dual aim of exploring participants’ perceptions on patterns of continuity and change in each of the organised crime priorities, as well as positioning organised crime problems on Best’s (2016) natural history model of social problems construction process.

On the one hand, some problems seem to be framed by interviewees as genuinely new, such as cybercrime which emerged due to rapid technological developments. Indeed, even extreme constructionists would agree that certainly cyber-dependent crimes did not exist prior to the existence of computer technologies. However, the development of cybercrime from a minor issue confined in the digital sphere, to a national security threat and a top priority for law

enforcement seems to involve significant social construction elements and fits well to Best's model.

On the other hand, most organised crime problems which are presented as new or rising in prominence in this chapter are essentially already known issues that are re-framed and labelled as serious problems worthy of concerned attention. Conversely, in the case of 'downfallen' crimes, the problems are de-labelled and subsequently dismissed from their places in law enforcement's priority lists.

The chapter highlighted a number of empirical patterns of change in constructions of organised crime problems at various points during the timeframe of the study. More specifically, signal crimes can have a significant effect in the construction of a problem from a low profile issue to a high priority crime threat. Also, in the case of cybercrime, changing language or terminology was used to create an impression of a 'new' and more urgent problem, even though the problem of 'hi-tech crime' was already known. Moreover, inter-agency competition for problem 'ownership' can influence both changes in language and in re-labelling of organised crime problems. Finally, another pattern that became prevalent from the interviewees' responses is the instrumental role that policy entrepreneurs can play in constructing organised crime problems as high priorities. The next chapter builds on documentary and interview findings on how constructions of organised crime priorities have changed over time, in order to coherently explore the drivers behind these changes.

5. Chapter 5: Exploring the factors that drive strategic prioritisation of organised crime problems

5.1. Introduction

This chapter provides a comprehensive discussion of the factors that drive the setting of strategic priorities in national organised crime policing, and how they influence the process of constructing organised crime problems in the UK. It builds on themes and patterns of setting and changing strategic organised crime priorities which have emerged in previous chapters. After discussing the formal and informal priority-setting processes of national agencies through the various institutional transformations during the past two decades (Chapter 3), as well as mapping out and interpreting changes in strategic priorities over time (Chapter 4), this chapter aspires to outline the main influences on priority-setting in British organised crime fighting national agencies, and present a fine-grained analysis and discussion of the various ways in which they impact on constructing strategic priorities.

The study identifies seven main influences: legislation; political pressure (including policy entrepreneurs); signal crimes; mass media; performance indicators; organisational path dependency (including intelligence); and finally intra-organisational dynamics. Joel Best's model of the natural history of social problems is once again used as a conceptual framework, in the sense that factors that drive priority-setting are positioned within the six stages of social problem construction, and therefore linked to moving from one stage to another, as opposed to existing at random points throughout the model.

5.2. Legislation

In exploring the various sources of influence on strategic priorities within a social constructionist framework, legislation is usually considered to be one of the final stages of the process. In other words, it might be intuitive to think about introducing a new law as the result of making claims and pressure by the media. However, legislation also creates a framework within which national policing bodies are allowed to function and, thus, plays an important role in influencing organisational decisions and priorities. Even though organisational strategic priorities are not directly set in legislation, agencies' responsibilities, as well as powers and capabilities are outlined in their founding legislation. Therefore, national agencies

unsurprisingly are structured by legislation in designing their strategies and in working towards their targets and objectives.

Legislation can be situated in the fourth stage of Best's natural history of problems model '*policymaking*' (Best 2016). One of the most obvious ways to adopt a social policy which addresses a troubling condition or phenomenon is to introduce or change laws¹². Lawmakers respond to claimsmakers, the media, as well as public opinion, but their own considerations and priorities can also shape the policies they create. Therefore, they are not only an integral part of the process, but can also function as a driving force for strategic decision-making.

Annual reports often make reference to chapters and sections of legal acts, and strive to demonstrate how the agencies are fulfilling the statutory requirements legislation places upon them. In fact, 25 out of 31 annual reports included in the analysis reference legislation when presenting the agency's performance against targets. Moreover, documentary data suggest that not only national law, but also European law and international treaties undoubtedly play a role in shaping the work of national organised-crime fighting agencies. Statutes such as the Schengen and Lisbon treaties are frequently quoted in annual reports and plans, especially given that these agencies have historically been responsible for maintaining strong ties with European and international partners, and promote cooperation in policing organised crime. Therefore, the decisive legislative shift that the EU has been making towards the realm of security over the last few years (Kaunert and Léonard 2012), seems to be reflected in the ways national agencies demonstrate their adherence to legislation through their official reports.

A close and detailed examination of the powers awarded to the agencies by their founding legislation is beyond the scope of this study. However, it has become evident that there is a trend of expansion of powers and responsibilities for national agencies from the Regional Crime Squads and NCIS during the early nineties to SOCA and, finally, the National Crime Agency. Of course, this is partly due to the fact that each agency was a much bigger institution than its predecessor(s) in terms of funding as well as organisational resources. Therefore, the powers awarded by legislation have reflected that growth. For example, the Serious Organised

¹² It is worth noting that the '*policymaking*' stage of Best's problems process model considers policy in a broad sense. In other words, it is accepted that policies can be designed by a wide range of governmental or organised nongovernmental bodies, such as corporations and charities, not only lawmakers. Hence, in this sense, policy should not be equated with law, although it does include it.

Crime and Policing Act 2005 provided for the establishment and functions of SOCA, and awarded new powers to the new agency, which were widely discussed in the press at the time:

“One of the most powerful weapons in the SOCA armoury will be the authority to make written agreements with suspects who testify against leading figures in crime syndicates. The deals will be made known to judges and juries.

The increased use of Queen's Evidence powers requires an enhanced witness protection programme to safeguard those who give evidence.

SOCA officers will also be given the power to compel witnesses to answer questions, disclose information and hand over documents.

The use of Financial Reporting Orders could require convicted offenders to disclose details of their financial affairs for up to 20 years.”

The Times, 27/3/2006

Research has highlighted the merits of harm reduction as a premise for organised crime policing (Paoli and Greenfield 2013; Paoli et al. 2017); but despite SOCA's focus on reducing organised crime harms, its new powers were met with skepticism from police forces, as well as some politicians and academic commentators (Bowling and Ross 2006; Harfield 2006). On the other hand, media analysis findings seem to suggest a generally positive attitude towards SOCA at least during the first few years, when arrests and convictions of infamous Mr. Bigs such as Terry Adams were presented as a direct result of new powers awarded by legislation, as this extract suggests:

“The recent conviction of Terry Adams, one of the country's most notorious underworld bosses, is seen as a model for SOCA's new powers. It took 10 years to bring Adams before the courts, where in March he was jailed for money laundering after an operation involving MI5, Scotland Yard and SOCA. Yesterday, government lawyers were before the courts again to obtain an order that would require Adams's financial affairs to be opened. Separate moves are under way to seize his assets.”

The Daily Telegraph, 19/05/2007

SOCA had clearly extended powers in comparison to its predecessors, and in turn the National Crime Agency has increased powers in comparison to SOCA as discussed previously in Chapter 3. British lawmakers have extended to law enforcement more powers than other European countries, but have not afforded them the increased powers US law enforcement have for policing organised crime. According to interview data:

“...if you really want to take it on, you’ve got to do things like the Americans did with their RICO legislation, which started to pick people up simply because they were part of an organisation that was known to be involved in organised crime. So, you don’t have to prove they’re actually doing anything; they’re just part of an organisation, so out they come! Now, that takes a lot of guts and a lot of legislation to do, which this country never did.” IP 15

Even though British legislation has never awarded national agencies the broad powers of the RICO Act, it has undeniably expanded their remits and has equipped them with a wide range of capabilities to fight organised crime, from arrests and seizures to financial reporting orders which required convicted criminals to disclose their financial information for 10 years after their conviction (SOCPA 2005). Interestingly, despite the expanding list of capabilities and powers, neither SOCPA 2005 nor any succeeding Acts included a definition of organised crime. This is explained by an interviewee as follows:

“When we put SOCA together, in the legislation that... the SOCA Act, you will notice in there, there is no definition of ‘serious organised crime’; the reason we did that was because if we put a definition, all you’ll argue about in court would be... the lawyers arguing about whether this was serious organised crime according to the definition, and didn’t want that. But it’s a bit like an elephant, you know; it’s very difficult to describe, but you know one when you see one! So that was why all we said was, you know, there are... there are clearly crimes that are serious, and they are organised, and we will deal with them.” IP 15

Both the ‘elephant test’ – which refers to situations in which an idea is hard to describe, but instantly recognisable when spotted – and the ‘duck test’ or ‘duck recognition conceptual model’ – if it looks, sounds and walks like a duck, it probably is a duck – were widely used by interview participants when they were asked in which ways their agencies used to define organised crime. Naturally, they share an intrinsic element of uncertainty as all forms of *abductive reasoning*, which can be understood as “inference to the best explanation” (Sober 2012 p.28). However, since this inference is based only on an observation or set of observations available, then the explanation can also be the *best available* or *most likely*. It is evident from interview data that while much ink has been spilled over the last two decades by academics and researchers in order to conceptually frame and define organised crime, a significant number of high ranking law enforcement officials did not place much significance on the drafting of a clear definition within their organisations or in legislation. On the contrary, interview data such

as the above extract seem to suggest that a precise legal definition was considered by many decision-makers not only unnecessary, but also potentially troublesome for prosecuting organised crime offenders.

5.3. Political influences

National organised crime fighting agencies in the UK have historically functioned directly under the Home Office. This study's historical review (see Chapter 3) has demonstrated that the Home Secretary has always had a central role in setting the official strategic priorities both in terms of broader organisational targets and objectives, as well as specific criminal activities. Not surprisingly, the Home Secretary's influence on strategic decision-making with regards to organised crime is a consistent theme of the document analysis conducted on national agencies' annual reports. Every single report includes a foreword by the Home Secretary in which they briefly present the main organised crime problems of the previous year as identified and dealt with by the national agency at the time, as well as comment on organisational performance – unsurprisingly, almost always with a positive tone. An interview participant comments on the process that the representatives of national agencies have followed in briefing and taking direction from the Prime Minister. It is evident from the following quote that the role of setting strategic priorities was assigned to the Home Secretary:

“I mean certainly the Prime Minister would have priorities when you went to see... you know... we briefed [deducted for anonymisation purposes] the Prime Minister regularly on how things were going. But the Prime Minister would not get involved in the... you know... he'd be very much a very high, broad-brush, top-level sort of thing. [...] The Home Office did more of that than... and its ministers set the priorities.” IP15

Interview data corroborate the central role of the Home Office in setting strategic priorities, and also suggest that even though the Prime Minister would not influence the agencies' agendas directly, they did exert a kind of 'top-level' influence. However, ultimately organised crime fighting agencies have always been under the Home Office:

“Obviously we picked up on the threat assessment where the major issues were and then we would discuss that with the Home Office, so 'which of these are you really concerned about? We're concerned about this, but... you know... we're not going to do anything unless' – well, that sounds daft – we would do things, 'but is that the priority that you would want to see?' Because bear in mind we're reporting back to them on what we're doing.” IP 15

“But [sighs] you know, when you’re a government agency, if your minister is generally content, you’re fine.” IP 11

These extracts demonstrate the power of influence that the Home Secretary can exert on constructing organised crime problems. The threat assessment, which is an intelligence product, seems to only be used as a guiding document which lists the ‘major issues’. Evidently, the personal opinions and priorities of the Home Secretary can drastically affect strategic decision-making at precisely the stage of the process where one would expect the organisation to primarily follow the threat assessment for an evidence-based decision. As one participant argues:

“There came a point, and it may have been just prior to the start of SOCA or it may have been shortly after SOCA was created, when there was a sort of clear signal from government that we needed to do more in relation to immigration crime. And so, that was when there was a more deliberate shift in the shape of the... sort of strategic shape of SOCA's business.” IP 1

It is therefore clear that political direction does not merely function symbolically; it actually matters for police organisations’ strategic planning and prioritisation of problems. Furthermore, some interview participants did not expect the Home Secretary to remain completely adherent in their recommendations to the threat assessment or crime statistics. On the contrary, there seems to be a consensus amongst interviewees that the directions they would receive from the Home Office could have been driven by many reasons. As one interviewee notes:

“I mean the Home Secretary will always react to what’s... politically ‘flavour of the day’.” IP 14

Indeed, politicians and policymakers such as the Home Secretary have to take action against an increasing number of competing problems which fall under the umbrella of organised crime. So swaying their decisions and directions by the ‘flavour of the day’, as intuitive or even impetuous as it might sound, it is frequently the result of significant pressure from other parties. It is in the nature of social problems to compete with each other for a better place in the policy agenda; and it is the job of claimsmakers, activists and occasionally the media, to promote one over the others. Therefore, when for example a powerful claimsmaker prevails over others and insists on taking action against a particular organised crime threat, or when a crime problem is considered a ‘hot-button’ issue, the Home Secretary can be under a considerable amount of pressure. This pressure, coupled with various constraints under which they have to operate, can

also shape their understanding of and influence on the social construction of a crime problem.

As one participant comments:

“P: I put forward a proposal that SOCA should devote a percentage of effort, so should [...] have an aim that a proportion of its effort should be effectively devoted to organised immigration crime, and I think it was 40%, I remember the figure.

R: Why did you... what were your reasons for proposing it?

P: Well because it was a Government priority (laughs).” IP 1

A significant constraint for the Home Office was set in the Serious Organised Crime and Police Act 2005, which established SOCA as an executive non-departmental public body sponsored by, but operationally independent from, the Home Office.

“One of the things we changed in the legislation was that we took away the ability to set... for Ministers to set targets for SOCA. You’ll find if you look at the legislation, it used to be a statutory thing that went away, because we thought that it was actually... had driven all sorts of perverse incentives; what’s interesting is that even without a power to set targets, they do it anyway!” IP 12

However, as the extract demonstrates, preventing Ministers from influencing priority-setting in national agencies has proven particularly challenging. This further reinforces one of the study’s most prevalent themes: the power of political agendas over constructing organised crime problems not only with their own policies, but also by directly pressuring police organisations towards the setting of specific strategic priorities.

5.3.1. Policy entrepreneurs

External political influence on constructing strategic priorities as social problems by national agencies can be exerted also by a particular type of actor called *policy entrepreneurs* (Kingdon 2003). Contrary to Becker’s *moral entrepreneurs* (1963; 1995) who make claims and mobilise campaigns in attempting to define social problems, Kingdon’s policy entrepreneurs develop policy alternatives and couple them with problems to present solutions to policy-makers when they think the timing is right for a new policy to be introduced. As such, they are extremely important actors in Kingdon’s Multiple Streams Framework. Kingdon defines them as “advocates who are willing to invest their resources – time, energy, reputation, money – to promote a position in return for anticipated future gain in the form of material, purposive or solidary benefits” (Kingdon 2003 p.179).

Roberts and King (1991; 2016) distinguish between policy entrepreneurs, bureaucratic entrepreneurs, executive entrepreneurs and political entrepreneurs. Recent studies on policy change also adopt this distinction and tend to “restrict the term policy entrepreneurs exclusively to those individuals who change the direction of policies while holding bureaucratic positions” (Brouwer and Huitema 2018 p.1259). Moreover, individuals who seek elective office to pursue their vision of policy change, or are already in office but seek to establish their political agendas are specifically called ‘political entrepreneurs’ (Brouwer and Huitema 2018; Chatfield and Reddick 2018). However this study, in line with Kingdon’s definition, accepts a broader understanding of policy entrepreneurs, from career bureaucrats, lobbyists or experts to powerful political figures such as a Minister or a member of Parliament. It is also worth noting that the policy entrepreneurs identified in this study are primarily politicians.

Mazarr (2007) applied Kingdon’s framework in his case study of the U.S. decision to launch Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2003. Adopting a more constructionist approach, he describes policy entrepreneurs as “advocates determined, for one reason or another, to fight inertia, the bureaucracy, opposing interests, and anything else in their way to get the idea through the window [of opportunity] and into law or policy” (Mazarr 2007 pp.15–16). In this sense, therefore, they can be seen as the human embodiment of the social construction of policy, “the personification of the stories that policy communities tell” (Burstein 1991 p.332). Moreover, through a constructionist lens, policy entrepreneurs can be described as highly sophisticated and powerful claimsmakers within Best’s framework, even though at times a policymaker, such as a Minister or even the Prime Minister can be a policy entrepreneur, as discussed previously. Some interview participants discussed the modern slavery discourse, and the emphasis placed on safeguarding victims of human trafficking in recent years, in a manner highly redolent of the policy entrepreneur concept:

“Theresa May was interested in the exploitation of women and it'd never been a national issue before really. It's been going on for quite a while, but it wasn't a national issue. Theresa May made it one. A new Chief Officer goes to a force and he or she says, ‘this is a big problem, we're going to deal with it’. And then two years later they leave and all of a sudden it's no longer a problem.” IP 14

“It's the current Prime Minister [Theresa May] who's made it [human trafficking] a big personal crusade of hers, for partly... for sort of political reasons, to show her human side.” IP 12

However, there were competing views on the motivations behind the modern slavery campaign. One interviewee argued that:

“[Theresa May] is genuinely committed to seeing a better law enforcement response to victims of previously neglected or hidden crimes so, you know, all the stuff that she's done about modern slavery - she genuinely believes in that.” IP 6

Even if we accept the label of a policy entrepreneur for Theresa May in the case of modern slavery, it is worth clarifying that the incentives which prompt advocacy for specific ideas or problems are not always straightforward, and certainly not easy to untangle and document. Kingdon (2003 p.123) discusses three types of incentives for policy entrepreneurs: the promotion of self-interests; the promotion of values which will in their opinion shape public policy in a positive way; and finally, some entrepreneurs are labelled ‘policy groupies’ meaning that they enjoy the game of advocacy, being part of the action and near the seat of power (although this might apply more to those who work outside the political sphere). Finally, it is worth highlighting the challenges to specify to what extent, if at all, the strategies of policy entrepreneurs diverge from other actors trying to effect policy change, such as traditional bureaucrats and politicians, particularly from the perspectives of methods and actions used, as well as their effectiveness.

Theresa May is the only individual who is more clearly framed as a policy entrepreneur by interview data in this study. Interestingly, interview participants did not define or perceive themselves in this role, although they were all holding positions that would allow them to strategise as policy entrepreneurs. This could either mean that they were not reflective enough of the ways in which this particular label could apply to them, or that most of them (at least those with a policing background) thought about their role as a police officer in the mission-oriented, hierarchical sense of the job.

The media analysis reveals a few more claimsmakers who have acted as policy entrepreneurs in promoting particular organised crime problems. For example, the Director of the Serious Fraud Office (SFO) and the City of London police commissioner were reported to intensely advocate in favour of the formation of a specialist force in order to dedicate more organisational effort and resources to tackle fraud:

“[The change in previous Government policy] follows intense lobbying by Rosalind Wright, director of the SFO, and the City of London police commissioner, Perry Nove. Both argue that fighting fraud is a low priority for many hard-up forces

and that officers would be better trained in a specialist force. A national crime squad has also been recommended by the Fraud Advisory Panel, a government-backed body set up to recommend new ways to fight white-collar crime.”

The Observer, 14/04/2002

Identifying a policy entrepreneur can be challenging especially because it is difficult to positively ascertain their consistent involvement throughout the policy change process, especially within a law enforcement context. If they are merely translating ideas into proposals, they might fall into the quite distinct category of ‘policy advocates’ (Brouwer and Huitema 2018). In 2007, a surge in gun-related crime led the Home Secretary to make firearms a top priority for SOCA:

“The police tell me that pre-1995 weapons are turning up more and more in gun-related crime and I want to address these concerns to effectively eliminate the threat from our streets.” In another move to tackle gun crime, Ms Smith has asked the Serious Organised Crime Agency, set up in 2006, to make firearms-related offending a priority”

The Times, 11/01/2008

It is rather difficult to claim with any certainty that either someone within the police or indeed the Home Secretary herself in this case was acting as a policy entrepreneur. However, the influence of the Home Secretary even as a policy advocate is yet again evident by this extract.

Media data provide a final example involving yet another politician whose rhetoric in the extract provided clearly contributes towards constructing drugs as a serious social problem. In this particular case, David Blunkett claimed drugs is an important problem which impacts on his constituents:

“Mr Blunkett was prompted to tackle narcotics smugglers as a top priority because of his experience of the damage drugs do in his Sheffield constituency. He said yesterday: “Drugs are the key corrosive element in dysfunctional families and within communities. The well-being of families is being bedevilled not just by drug pushers but the traffickers behind them who are making millions of pounds in profits.”

The Express, 09/08/2001

This kind of political expediency seems inescapable for any politician who does not wish to have a short political life, particularly in light of imminent elections or more generally the politician’s career prospects (Fleming and Rhodes 2018). Policy entrepreneurs engage in

purposive action with the goal of promoting policy change or advocating for more concerned attention on a specific organised crime problem. This does not mean, however, that their rational reasoning always leads them to minimise risks and maximise benefits. On the contrary, research has long perceived policy entrepreneurs as bounded rational individuals that act on the basis of perceived reality (Axelrod and Keohane 1985; Scharpf 1997). Therefore, their decisions to promote one crime problem instead of another are not always meticulously calculated, or even evidence-based (Fleming and Rhodes 2018) to target and successfully identify a policy window:

“Ministers felt vulnerable in this area [organised immigration crime] so they wanted more ‘showy’ activity, to show that we’re doing something. It’s not a negligible consideration ... you know... I don’t... I’m making it sound rather trivial; it’s not. You know, the fact that the public mind about it makes it important on the books too” IP 11

The extract demonstrates that policy entrepreneurs, particularly when they are in the political sphere, do not always engage in purposive promoting of problems in return for anticipated gain – as in the aforementioned example of a Minister specifically addressing concerns of their own constituents. As research on policy responses to the 2011 riots in England shows (Newburn et al. 2018), often they have to show initiative on issues of national or international concern that could be brought to public attention by a claimmaker or more frequently, a signal crime.

5.4. Signal crimes

Martin Innes defines ‘signal crimes’ as incidents that cause change in public behaviour and/or beliefs (Innes and Fielding 2002; Innes 2003b; Innes 2004b). The warning ‘signals’ of risks and threats can originate from either anti-social behaviours and other ‘trivial’ crimes which are however very visible within communities, or from serious and dramatic events. This section focuses on serious organised crimes and the ways in which they influenced organisational decision-making.

While the concept was initially coined to “capture the social semiotic processes by which particular types of criminal and disorderly conduct have a disproportionate impact upon fear of crime” (Innes and Fielding 2002 p.1), it has since been expanded to include incidents that have also induced effects on institutions, from states to police organisations (Innes 2014). The influence of signal crimes on constructing organised crime problems as policing priorities

seems to become particularly acute when agencies have failed at identifying a problem or tackling it effectively.

Interview participants largely frame signal crimes as the starting point of the social problems process. Considering this finding in the context of Best's natural history model, it seems appropriate to position signal crimes in the first 'claimsmaking' stage, as part of the rhetorical structure of claims. According to Best (1990; 2016), persuasive claims share a rhetorical structure with three fundamental components: grounds, warrants and conclusions. Every social problem claim begins with identifying a troubling condition. Statements that describe the condition are the grounds, whereas statements explaining why it should be considered troublesome (and therefore get more attention) are the warrants. Conclusions are recommended policy changes to address the problem. This part of the analysis focuses on the claim's grounds, in turn consisting of three elements: a *typifying example*, a *name* and a *statistic*. The analysis has shown that signal crimes can fit quite well into the description of a typifying example, a particular instance of the troubling condition. Typifying examples tend to be especially extreme, dramatic, disturbing events which are easily seared into collective social memory. Because they typify a particular crime type in particularly gruesome, disturbing terms, they render the rhetoric more compelling, hence people are more likely to pay attention. Thus, to conceptualise signal crimes as typifying examples can be very useful in understanding their role in constructing organised crimes as social problems. Coupled with both a new name for the problem, which can transform a horrific *incident* to an *instance* of a much larger problem, and a big number that suggests the scope of the problem, signal crimes can provide a quick, compelling case for identifying a new social problem. The discussion is now informed by interview data on two types of organised crime, namely firearms and human trafficking, and a few examples of signal crimes that have functioned as typifying examples for the formation of rather convincing claims, which triggered policy change as well as institutional developments.

Gun crime had been framed as a social problem in the UK since the 1980s. The multiple fatal shootings in the town of Hungerford in 1987 and the school shooting in Dunblane in 1996, contributed to sharp changes to the regulation of firearms ownership in the United Kingdom during the late 1990s, as perpetrators in both incidents had used licenced weapons. Interview participants mention two more recent events that took place over a decade after the Dunblane shooting and brought the issue of availability of weapons on the top of strategic priorities for law enforcement. The first is the murder of 11-year-old Rhys Jones in Liverpool in 2007. The

second is the 2008 Mumbai terrorist attacks, a group of 12 coordinated shooting and bombing attacks lasting four days across Mumbai.

“I do remember that after the Mumbai attacks, the series of terrorist attacks in Mumbai, I remember attending a meeting at the Home Office with the Home Secretary and a whole host of other people where there was a lot of concern about the gaps in our language around the extend of the gun trafficking, the trafficking in weapons and the availability of weapons in the UK. And so that gave another impetus.” IP 1

“In 2006 there was a tragic shooting of a young lad called Rhys Jones in Liverpool and then Home Secretary added firearms as a targeting requirement.” IP 13

The impact of the 2000 Dover incident on the social construction of human trafficking as an emerging, serious problem has already been discussed in a previous section (4.4.2.1.). One participant also mentioned the 2004 cockling disaster in Morecambe Bay, when at least 21 Chinese illegal immigrant labourers were drowned by an incoming tide after picking cockles off the Lancashire/Cumbrian coast, as a signalling event which drew media and public attention:

“There were 56 Chinese nationals found dead in the back of a tomato lorry in Dover. They'd been brought into the country from Fujian province in China, had been trafficked into the UK, the guy in the tomato lorry had turned off the air conditioning and there was no air getting in while he went and had his tea break and when they came back 56 were dead, 2 were alive but 56 were dead and that started as you would imagine quite a big furore in the country and that led to ‘there needs to be something more about trafficking’” IP 15

“So, you get a particularly horrific case like... take Morecambe Bay for example, the deaths of cockle pickers in Morecambe Bay some years ago. Such a horrific case of you know organised labour being exploited, neglected, public outcry, creation of the gang’s masters licensing authority, the start of sort of interest in that kind of crime. And then you get politicians, ministers, who are particularly committed to tackling a particular issue.” IP 6

Document data corroborate the importance of signal crimes in influencing not only the construction of new problems, but also the processing of establishing them as national strategic priorities. Human trafficking firstly appears to occupy its own section entitled ‘Organised human trafficking’ in the 2000-2001 National Crime Squad report which states that “during

the summer of 2000, the Squad was tasked by Government and the Home Office's Organised Crime Strategy Group, with putting together plans to take the initiative in operations against organised human trafficking" (NCS 2001 p.19). The first sentence of this section makes explicit reference to the influence of the Dover incident in priority-setting:

"The problem was highlighted by the tragic deaths of 58 Chinese nationals in a lorry at Dover docks in June 2000."
NCS 2001, p. 19

Further to the attention that human trafficking received within the National Crime Squad, the Dover incident has been framed as the typifying example which also triggered institutional reform as it led to the creation of 'Reflex', a multi-agency strategy established with the sole purpose of tackling the new problem. Coupled with document and interview data which suggest that the new name 'human trafficking' was attached to old activity (previously named 'immigration crime'), it is evident that this particular signal crime induced profound changes in the way strategic priorities were set and decisions about human trafficking offences were made, at least for a few years after it took place.

Therefore, it is evident that signal crimes play a central role in constructing emerging crime problems and framing them as serious enough to become top national strategic priorities. They are an integral part of the rhetoric of claim, in that they illustrate rather undeniably the existence of a troubling condition. Their ability to "conduct and channel processes of social reaction towards some issues, and away from others" (Innes 2014 p.1) make them ideal typifying examples for claimsmakers of 'new' organised crime problems.

5.5. The influence of mass media on organised crime priorities

A key aspect of constructing incidents as signal crimes is the interaction, or else 'symbiotic' relationship between police and their work, and journalists (Innes 1999; Innes 2004a). Media representations of signal crimes play a role not only in constructing collective memories (Innes 2003a), but also in fuelling peoples' perceptual biases with widespread and extensive coverage of certain unusual, sensational events. Kahneman and Tversky (1974) with their seminal work on forming judgements under uncertainty offer the availability heuristic as an explanation for predictable biases in peoples' estimation of the probability of certain events. This is especially relevant in situations where media coverage can increase the retrievability of a signal crime in collective memory.

Since the 1990s, mass media along with information and communication technologies have spread at a global level; and so is our growing awareness of their prevalent role in every-day life, including shaping social lives and influencing social definitions (Altheide 1996). There is a plethora of studies on media representations of crime (Dubois 2002; Boda and Szabó 2011) and its impact on public perceptions of organised criminals and groups (Antonopoulos and Mitra 2009; Leiva and Bright 2015), as well as the police (Dowler 2003; Dowler 2010). Equally, there is research which explores the influence of media on policymaking; however media effects on strategic decision-making remain relatively under-explored. Hence, this section discusses the ways in which national newspapers have constructed organised crime problems and uses media and interview data to explore their influence on prioritisation processes.

The media's powerful effect in constructing social problems has been much discussed in the fields of public policy and media studies (Shaw and Day 1966; Cook et al. 1981; Wolfe et al. 2013). Notwithstanding the undeniable power of influence of mass media in shaping public opinion and occasionally policy agendas, the processes outlined in the literature (including social constructionist approaches such as this study's theoretical framework) are very complex and thus it is almost impossible to argue that there is any causal link between media influence and setting of policy agendas; organised crime strategic priorities are no exception.

The idea that media have a logic and format which have an impact on the communication process, and more generally social affairs was introduced in media studies by Altheide and Snow (1979). Even though many scholars over the years have argued that there are many logics and not just one (Lundby 2009; Hepp 2012), the main concept that "media logic reflexively shapes interaction process, routines, and institutional orders" (Altheide 2013 p.224) remains the same. Building on this central idea, Strömbäck and Esser (2009) consider a number of conditions as parts of the media logic, for example media formats, working processes and routines, journalists' role perceptions, and more importantly the need for compelling, dramatic and sensational stories as inherent to the media. This last condition is particularly relevant to the analysis of media constructions of organised crime and its influence on prioritisation processes.

However, media and their power of influence remain a significant theme for this study. In Best's model, 'media coverage' is the third stage, situated between 'activists' and 'public opinion'. Media's power tends to be exaggerated partly because their role is an especially

visible one in the social problems process, while other lobbying or insider claimsmaking can be hidden from the public. It is the easiest and most common way for people to learn about social problems. However, it is important to note that the media “do not have a free hand in agenda-setting” (Best 2016 p.153). Similarly to policymakers, they can be constrained either by resources available to them, or by other drivers of the social construction process, such as a powerful claimsmaker who convinces them that a specific problem deserves their attention. Finally, some events might demand media coverage; in this instance, organised crime problems do not only have each other to compete within their *policy domain* (Burstein 1991), but all the events or phenomena which can be constructed as social problems.

In the area of policing organised crime, interview data suggests that in the 1990s law enforcement attempted utilising information from media sources in order to target organised crime problems more efficiently, but such efforts were largely ineffective due to lack of resources:

“I believe that we have to be monitoring the media; drawing from non-criminal sources – and we weren’t, certainly in my lifetime – we weren’t doing that well. I mean, we... we didn’t have the resources” IP 9

However, the situation changed in the mid-2000s, when the use of column inches dedicated to specific organised crime types became an indicator for prioritising problems during SOCA’s first year. Sir Stephen Lander, the first Chairman of SOCA, stated in an interview with ‘The Independent’ that:

“The priorities that are adopted by Britain’s elite crime fighting force will be partly based upon the number of column inches newspapers give to different types of organised criminality. Researchers at the Home Office have looked at about 30 newspapers, divided equally among broadsheet and compact newspapers, the tabloids, and the regional press, over the past five years. They have calculated which organised crime issues are the most pressing by measuring the column inches and number of stories devoted to each subject. Organised immigration crime came first, followed by drugs”

(Bennetto, 10/01/2005)

The article goes on to clarify that the number of column inches in newspapers serves as a proxy to the degree of public concern about organised crime threats which, he admits “is not quite right but it’s as good as you can get” (Bennetto, 2005). This focus on media and indirectly

public opinion can be in part explained by the fact that SOCA at the time of its establishment put emphasis on reducing harm caused by organised crime on communities and everyday life; therefore public opinion and fear of crime were an integral part of measuring the impact of organised crime. Moreover, organisations justifiably seek to meet the public's expectations also because favourable public perceptions about its performance are part of institutional survival. One interview participant comments on this particular SOCA process:

“The other thing we tried to look at was the public concern, to what extent if you asked the public what sort of organised crime you should be focused on. And there was no very good way of doing this so what we did was an exercise that got us a certain amount of public ridicule was the exercise of actually seeing references in the newspapers as an interesting proxy. One of the curious things about that exercise was that it kind of confirmed that organised immigration crime was of much higher concern to the public than was being implemented in any of the organisational initiatives at the time.” IP 12

Another interview participant justifies this process of using column inches to approximate public opinion as an indicator for prioritising crime problems:

“How do you know what the public think? Well, in a sort of way, what the press write about because they're nearer the public and they want... you know... they sell the newspapers; if they don't write what the Public's interested in, they won't sell them, so what they write about must be of interest to the public.” IP 11

Another example can be found in the introduction of SOCA's first annual report:

‘A criminal gang made headlines in February 2006 when it robbed a security depot in Tonbridge of £53m. The harm that organised crime causes to the UK exceeds that amount every day. But because much organised crime causes harm out of sight of the public at large, to trafficked women or the victims of drugs overdoses for example, the threat posed by organised criminal conspiracies is not so well understood.’

SOCA (2007)

After this case made headlines, armed robbery had a short-lived return in SOCA's priorities. More specifically, it was included in the Home Secretary's priorities for SOCA in the 2008/9 plan, where it is stated that SOCA was expected to apportion 7% of organisational effort to ‘tackling firearms and serious robbery’. Official reports occasionally reference media coverage

of organised criminality arguably to justify the treatment of certain problems as more serious than others.

Another example of an organised crime problem which gained national attention around 2002-4 is gun trafficking. Studies have discussed the power and mechanisms of media agenda setting in relation to gun violence especially in the United States (Jashinsky et al. 2017), and interview data from this study provide a similar account:

“[...] There’d been a spate of shootings in Nottingham and the newspaper headlines were describing Nottingham as the ‘murder capital of the UK’. And I think it was the Home Secretary noting police was struggling to cope with it and so there was a task force brought together with the NCS, NCIS, the Met I think, a bunch from the Security Service, a bunch of other people, to try and support Nottingham police and try to deal with that. That was, you know, certainly at that point the sort of national concern around guns and the availability of guns was higher than it had ever been.” IP 1

This extract also demonstrates the importance of political involvement and of structural reconfigurations and allocation of resources in constructing a problem; in this case, the creation of a special task force is described as a result of media attention which was picked up by the Home Secretary and framed as an emerging and serious problem. Therefore, it was elevated to a top priority.

Of course, the influence of the press in shaping organisational law-enforcement priorities is not usually as direct and straightforward as during SOCA’s first year with the ‘column-inch measurement’ exercise. Even though it might seem rather obvious, it is in fact quite complex, as well as fairly difficult to track back and document. In order to explore the media’s role as an influence on constructing organised crime as a problem in the UK, a thematic analysis of a sample of 314 was conducted. The sample is taken from Nexis UK and consists of UK national newspapers, including their Sunday counterparts, and their online versions. The chosen newspaper publications are found to represent three genres: quality, middle-market tabloid and tabloid (table 5.1). This typology helps to ensure a sample that represents diverse readerships in terms of age, social class and political alignment (Patterson et al. 2016).

Quality	Middle-market tabloids	Tabloids
The Daily Telegraph	The Daily Mail	The Mirror
The Sunday Telegraph	The Mail on Sunday	Mirror.co.uk
Telegraph.co.uk	MailOnline	Sunday Mirror
The Guardian	The Express	The Sun
The Independent	The Sunday Express	The Daily Star
The Independent on Sunday	Express Online	The Daily Star Sunday
Independent.co.uk		The People
Independent Print Ltd		
The Observer		
The Times		
The Sunday Times		

Table 5 British national newspapers used in this study

The nine categories constructed for the document content analysis are also used in the media analysis in order to demonstrate which crime problems appear more prevalent in national newspapers within the study's timeframe. Table 5.2 shows a breakdown of each crime problem across the three aforementioned types of publications. It is evident that 'quality' newspapers include by far the most articles relating to organised crime in all of the problem areas, with the exception of immigration crime which is included in 51.09% of quality and 42.28% of middle-market tabloid newspapers.

Organised crime problems	Genre of publication		
	Quality	Middle-market tabloids	Tabloids
<i>CSEA</i>	75.68%	17.86%	6.46%
<i>Cybercrime</i>	63.69%	32.52%	3.79%
<i>Drugs</i>	60.37%	24.03%	15.6%
<i>Economic crime</i>	71.22%	26.23%	2.54%
<i>Immigration Crime</i>	51.09%	42.28%	6.62%
<i>International organised crime</i>	93.28%	4.81%	1.91%
<i>Other (incl. football)</i>	77.97%	10.38%	11.65%
<i>Property crime</i>	57.31%	17.11%	25.58%
<i>Violent crime</i>	54.99%	20.41%	24.59%

Table 6 Percentage of crime problems by genre of publication

The word count of an article can be used as an indicator for the importance that the newspaper assigns to it or in this study in particular, the priority of organised crime as a news topic. Most articles in the analysis are medium (51%) followed by small (35%) which consist of less than 500 words, which the remaining 14% are long articles, with over 1000 words each.

However, it should be noted that a more in-depth look at the articles included in the sample suggests that short articles do not necessarily signal less important organised crime problems. In fact, success stories which often include number of arrests of organised criminals, seizures, or convictions are the topic of short articles. Research on media logic and social control argues that choosing to communicate messages “within formats that are visual, brief, action-oriented, and dramatic produces an exciting and familiar tempo to audiences” (Altheide 2013 p.226). Therefore, these articles might have more powerful influence on audiences, including politicians, other policing and public agencies and of course the public.

More critical pieces on police performance and articles including information on new crime types or newly published reports are medium; finally, long articles generally seem to go more in-depth in sensationalising and constructing organised crime as a social problem, or in some cases make detailed profiles of notorious organised criminals.

289 out of 314 articles in the sample focus on specific organised crime problems; the rest refer to either organised crime as a generic problem or to broader institutional and legislative issues. Table 5.3 shows the number of articles coded under the nine content categories divided in four year groups from 1993-2015. It is evident that cybercrime, drugs, economic crime and immigration crime feature mostly in the sample. It is also worth noting that whereas articles focusing on drugs seem to be relatively equally distributed across time, there is a sharp increase in cybercrime, immigration crime, as well as child abuse from 2011-2015. That said, it is also evident that the sample overall includes many more articles in that particular timeframe than in previous years.

	<i>1993-1999</i>	<i>2000-2005</i>	<i>2006-2010</i>	<i>2011-2015</i>	<i>Total (%)</i>
<i>CSEA</i>	0	3	2	22	27 (9%)
<i>Cybercrime</i>	2	8	6	37	53 (18%)
<i>Drugs</i>	6	16	12	14	48 (17%)
<i>Economic crime</i>	2	19	5	22	48 (17%)
<i>Immigration Crime</i>	1	9	9	28	47 (16%)
<i>International organised crime</i>	7	7	1	2	17 (6%)
<i>Other (incl. football)</i>	8	9	1	7	25 (9%)
<i>Property crime</i>	0	1	2	3	6 (2%)

<i>Violent crime</i>	0	7	3	8	18 (6%)
<i>All crimes</i>	26	79	41	143	289 (100%)

Table 7 Organised crime problems represented in UK in national newspapers

The next step of the media analysis involved the creation of a coding frame, and the coding of manifest content using the frame. All 314 articles were read and thematic categories relevant to the research topic were recorded as they emerged. The final coding frame comprises broad themes and their subthemes, as well as fields to record more routine details of articles, such as publication outlet, publication year and word count.

The ‘nature of response’ is the first theme which consists of four sub-themes that are produced inductively from the data. Table 5.4 demonstrates that organised crime is treated primarily as a police problem throughout the years. ‘Safeguarding victims’ only started featuring after 2013, approximately when it also emerged in NCA’s rhetoric. Similarly, during the first four years of SOCA (2006-2010) ‘harm reduction’ matched ‘policing’ with 22 articles each. SOCA since its establishment had focused organisational efforts primarily around reducing harm caused by organised crime. Even though there is no indication of a causal relationship in the data, there is evidently a correlation between the change in agencies’ mandates and philosophies, and the ways in which national newspapers choose to frame – and therefore construct – the nature of the response to organised crime.

	Harm reduction	National security	Policing	Safeguarding victims
1993-1999	1	5	23	0
2000-2005	10	14	52	2
2006-2010	22	9	22	1
2011-2015	8	51	73	19
Total	41	79	170	22

Table 8 Nature of response to organised crime as represented in national newspaper articles

Perhaps the most important finding of the media analysis is that since the mid-1990s national newspapers have primarily focused on tactical instead of strategic communications. The majority of articles focus on incidents of criminal cases (133), either reporting on specific incidents or providing information about a newly manifested type of organised crime. Some focus on offenders or organised crime groups (98) and, finally, less (83) focus on the law enforcement or Government agencies. In addition, 207 out of 314 articles are coded for

‘success’ or ‘failure’ to effectively tackle organised crime.¹³ Out of those, 61% present failures in tackling organised crime, while 39% report successes which mostly refer to figures of traditional performance measures such as arrests, seizures, assets recovered, and successful prosecutions. These articles focus on successful or unsuccessful operations and have no reference to strategic priorities, or to where the crime problem in question is located at the agency’s agenda.

Thus, it can be argued that when it comes to organised crime policing, the press is by far more preoccupied with tactical than strategic decision-making; no articles are referring to priority-setting, not even at the time of publication of annual reports every year. Even then, the focus is on organisational performance and financial information on budgets and remuneration. One interview participant shares a story of a meal he had with a reporter which corroborates this finding:

“I went and had lunch with some BBC journalist somewhere, and they said Well, you know, we don’t know how you’re... how you’re getting on, you know; how do you measure your performance? So, I said ‘You haven’t read our annual report.’ ‘Oh no, we never read annual reports; they’re a waste of time!’” IP 11

This can partly be explained by journalists’ need to tell a compelling story. Research on political reporting has identified some mechanisms of media reality construction. More specifically, Landener (2013) notes that media tend to use episodic and concrete frames (signal crimes, operations) more often than thematic and abstract ones (organisational strategies and priorities). By using storytelling techniques such as “simplification, polarization, intensification, personalization, visualizing, stereotyping” (Strömbäck and Esser 2009 p.213), they are able to turn raw information into compelling news stories (Meyen et al. 2014).

In sum, media analysis findings indicate some correlations between newspaper articles’ areas of focus and national strategic agendas, but these cannot establish any causal links between the media influence and strategic prioritisation processes. The triangulation with interview data does offer a few interesting examples of direct influence such as SOCA’s ‘column inch’ exercise. However, the direct impact on institutional orders and processes of policing organised crime is extremely complex to identify especially given the wide and diverse audiences targeted (not only public, but also politicians and other policing agencies), and the emphasis on tactical

¹³ The remaining articles do not point to agency performance either because they merely report on a case or provide information on issues such as the establishment of a new agency, or the emergence of a ‘new’ type of crime.

rather than strategic communications. The latter can be explained by the role of media logic in social construction of problems (Altheide and Snow 1979), as well as the competing nature of news stories (Best 2016) – signal crimes demand media attention and criminal cases in general are far more compelling to audiences than reports of strategic planning, which seem to largely be ignored by mainstream media. Nevertheless, interview participants confirm the influential role of media in constructing organised crime problems as strategic priorities, either directly or indirectly, for example by choosing to emphasize certain crime problems instead of others influencing politicians who may in turn pressure for change in strategic direction.

5.6. Performance measures

Performance measurement has become an important concern for police, routinised in their everyday practices since the 1980s, when public administration assumed a more business-like approach (Butler 1984; Pollitt and Bouckaert 2011). Aligned with the rationale of the new public management (NPM), was an increased focus on value for money and performance management from public services (Mann 2014). This shift has had significant implications for organised crime policing which have been widely discussed in the literature (Levi and Maguire 2004; Manning 2008; Barton and Barton 2011; Mackenzie and Hamilton-Smith 2011).

The annual reports reveal a clear expectation for British national agencies to deliver results. The language of performance management permeates the documents over time across all four

agencies with little variation (slightly less emphasis is put on performance in NCIS reports as it had no operational capabilities). Arguably the most significant finding of the documentary analysis is that traditional performance measures for organised crime fighting agencies such as number of *arrests*, *seizures*, *disruptions*, *prosecutions* and *assets recovered* (prevalent since 2005) have been consistently used across the four agencies (see figure 5.1 for a recent, typical example of a presentation of performance). They have been resilient to both changes in organisational priorities and, more importantly shifts to organisational mandates, philosophies and rhetoric, such

2017–18 Data



Figure 5.1 Presentation of performance in NCA annual report 2017-2018

as SOCA’s focus on harm reduction. In recent years, number of *safeguarded victims and children* has been another performance indicator frequently presented in NCA annual reports.

Designing meaningful performance measures for policing organised crime has always been a challenging task, for a number of reasons. Firstly, some police tactics might be effective in tackling organised crime, but rather ‘unmeasurable’ and difficult to compare as opposed to arrests and seizures:

“If there was a drug importation and we caught someone with the drugs so you seized the drugs and they got convicted and sent to prison for an X number of years, you could sort of count that. That was real in a sense.” IP 1

One participant commented on the merit of measuring prosecutions instead of arrests as a more meaningful performance indicator for policing organised crime. He reflects on the police role by highlighting the importance of gathering evidence that would convince the courts to prosecute organised criminals:

“The Home Secretary originally talked about the number of arrests. That is crazy, and we told him so, because anybody can arrest anybody. [...] I mean, a hundred people – you arrest a hundred people – and then you turn them all loose after that, but we’ve actually arrested them; nonsense! The only people you arrest are those you should be able to find evidence to charge them; and the Crown Prosecution make that decision, so if you can convince them, you’re now beginning to see that there is some merit in that form of performance measure.” IP 10

However, these measures have been criticised for their simplistic and reductionist nature, as well as for their suitability in assessing organisational performance (Collier 2006; Castle 2008). Interview participants argue that performance measures such as arrests and seizures are suitable for measuring police activity rather than progress in achieving long-lasting outcomes (such as completely dismantle an organised crime group) and organisational successes:

“You want the police to arrest more people? We can do that as easy as falling off a log. That’s what we’re trained to do. If you want it to make a difference, that’s not the question you ask. But of course, we enter into the ‘cops and robbers’ issue, where... you know... the press wants to see that you’ve locked up the ‘Mr Bigs’ and all that. All these cases that go to court, and people get 9 million years in prison for doing things. Well that’s all very good, but that is not the way; because all you do is, once they disappear someone else fills the gap.” IP 15

“If your role is to protect the UK against organised crime, to reduce the harm caused to the UK and its citizens, by organised crime; pretending you made a difference by saying you’ve... you’ve disrupted something, when it reappears a short time later, isn’t doing anybody any favours. It is relevant – the number of people who’ve gone to prison – because it tells you something – it tells everybody something – about the level of successful activity. But activity is not outcome; it’s just activity, and law enforcement traditionally has seen enforcing the law – not surprisingly – arresting people and bringing them before the courts – is an end in itself. For SOCA, it wasn’t an end in itself; it was a means to an end.” IP 11

Interview participant 14 specifically refers to SOCA’s intention to move away from this type of performance indicators towards some more meaningful ways of measuring the impact of policing on reducing harm from organised crime. In fact, the majority of interviewee participants focused particularly on SOCA when discussing the role of performance measures in influencing strategic priorities for a number of reasons which all revolve around the different

philosophy, mission and nature of targets that SOCA had compared to its predecessors, and ultimately its successor as well. Firstly, SOCA's efforts to change the purely quantitative nature of indicators to a more qualitative way of measuring performance where, for example, arresting a high-level member of a criminal organisation would count more towards progress in achieving outcomes than arresting a few street-level members. These efforts, however, never materialised; this is evidenced by document data (SOCA reports kept documenting numbers rather than quality of arrests and seizures), as well as interview data:

“At SOCA we tried to get away from the idea that this was simply about numbers of arrests – numbers of seizures; it was about – amongst other things – the quality of those arrests. So was it enough to go out and take all the low hanging fruit – the easy targets – of people you can arrest around the periphery of an organised crime group; the people on the street corners in a drugs operation; or was it more beneficial to actually have an arrest closer to the centre of the organisation, which caused a real hardship to the operating of the business? You couldn't make those qualitative judgements, so we lost the argument, basically.” IP 3

Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, as discussed in Chapter 3, the establishment of SOCA in 2006 signalled a fundamental change in the mandate of national organised crime fighting agencies from policing activities to reducing harm. The impact of this change on strategic and operational priorities was to some extent dependent on the agency's ability to assess harms caused by organised crime (Greenfield and Paoli 2013), which in turn would lead to constructing performance metrics appropriate for harm reduction. However, annual reports demonstrate that despite the shift of focus, SOCA maintained traditional, quantifiable performance indicators on arrests, seizures and prosecutions, as well as assets recovered. Interview participants comment on the difficulties they encountered not only in coming up with an effective and meaningful way to measure and prioritise harms (Caulkins et al. 2011; Paoli and Greenfield 2013), but also in convincing Ministers to accept and embrace alternative ways for measuring performance such as evidence of disruption of organised crime groups:

“SOCA was set up by Blair when he was Prime Minister, in effect to reduce harm, and it's very, very difficult to measure reduction in harm. I mean, we had conversations with Theresa May when she was Home Secretary, and her ministers, and they always dismissed the evidence of disruption and prevention as anecdotal. They were much more interested in how many people had actually been arrested and prosecuted and locked up.” IP 4

“The press, the other ministers, they still liked to see these old things, and so they were still being recorded – not formally as a target. And of course, arrests. You can always increase arrest figures by arresting more of the people on the periphery of the organisation; they all have... seizures – you can argue there’s more seizures, but again, you can seize stuff and let the people go away.” IP 13

Participants also refer to some significant challenges in constructing a harm matrix which could account for the impact of organised crime on individual, local, community and national harms. It is evident that conceptual and analytical difficulties in defining, identifying and measuring ‘harm’ in its various forms played a role in maintaining traditional, easily quantifiable performance indicators. In turn, this inevitably influences strategic priorities and operational activity as agencies strive have more success as defined by performance measures. In addition, SOCA had to deal with increasing demands for combining broader outcomes in terms of harm reduction with specific monetary outcomes inherited by previous agencies, such as cash seizures, forfeitures and confiscations of criminal assets (SOCA 2008 p.18):

“There was an overall recognition that the reduction of harm, the reduction of harm to the UK was the, at the highest level and the most important target. But I can't say that we ever reached a point at which that definitely could be identified or isolated. So, we would fall back into a basket of low level, essentially activity markers such as arrests, prosecutions, assets forfeited, commodities interjected that were very much suboptimal.” IP 7

“The whole notion of ‘what is the outcome of what you do?’ and you know at SOCA that became harm reduction which was probably you know pretty much a futile point; how do you describe harm? And [deducted for anonymization purposes] we tried to describe harm you know both in sort of individual, local, community, society, national harm etc. Because it's multidimensional - it's what's a bit of harm for me, is also a bit of harm for community, it's also a harm nationally... So, it was a really difficult thing to do. But I suppose, certainly pre-SOCA days, it was more about ‘what's your effectiveness in monetary terms?’ And then it moved to ‘what's your effectiveness in monetary terms and outcome terms?’ And... whereas now, you know, people now talk about impact – I don't really know what impact means... you know, anything is an impact.” IP 13

Participants also problematise fundamentally misguided expectations for linear or exponential outcomes when it comes to arrests and seizures. The realities of policing organised crime do not always correspond with performance indicators, as organised criminals can often be rather

‘disorganised’ (Reuter 1984). This statement is consistent with extensive research conducted primarily in the UK regarding the disorganised character of criminal networks and the ways in which they are involved in criminal activities on a more or less occasional basis (Wright 2006; Hobbs 2013; Wall and Christyakova 2015). Therefore, the participant argues that decisions about which problem to tackle are based on ‘science’, ‘judgment’ as well as the ‘art’ of policing:

“People say you know, ‘why haven’t you... this month you’ve not arrested as many as the same month last year. And less than the month before’. So yeah, but that’s you know... you can’t think of this as a production line event. The fact that you know... Turkish criminals are particularly disorganised. In fact, they get up today, and it’s a nice day, they’re going to go off and do something else. So, you can’t expect exponential or linear responses. There’s always going to be variations so it’s, this is where I say it’s a little bit about art, mixed with the science, a judgement about you know, where you can put effort, how long it takes to stop doing things and start doing things; and the risk of stopping doing things.” IP 13

Therefore, the unpredictable and rather ‘disorganised’ nature of some organised crime activities makes it difficult for national agencies to live up to the standards of traditional performance indicators, especially given the inherent uncertainty in judgements based on both evidence and craft knowledge (Fleming and Rhodes 2018).

“Everyone from the Prime Minister downwards, and certainly the public, expects results so the process where you target your effort where you know most is the one that’s likely to give you the most demonstrable results. So, it’s self-fulfilling in that sense whereas if you target effort where you’re uncertain, the return is uncertain and therefore you’re taking a big risk that your results will suffer. And unless you have some way of measuring the value of that effort, that can compare with the measurements around arrests, seizures, all those other... tangible things, then you’re struggling to justify that investment of effort.” IP 1

“The problem for the National Crime Agency is the same, it’s fighting the same battle as SOCA, same battle as the National Crime Squad, and it’s got to use the same measures because there aren’t any others. So, it will always come down to seizures, assets seized and terms of imprisonment.” IP 14

Governmental policies – especially neoliberal ones – often prioritise a ‘value for money’ approach to policing organised crime which can direct strategic decision-making towards

achieving short-term performance expectations instead of having a long-term plan to tackle organised crime. Research on policing organised crime in Australia shows that police work is often skewed to align with reductionist measures of ‘success’ (Mann 2017). Similarly, a review of confiscation orders in the UK demonstrates the tension between achieving demonstrable, countable results at the expense of targeting high-level offenders (Bullock et al. 2009 p.22). Nevertheless, interview participants corroborate that quick results with an emphasis on asset recovery have always been a political priority:

“It’s that appetite amongst Ministers and the press for quick results, to not only have a success, but to be able to point to ‘where’s the multi-million pounds that you’ve recovered?’”
IP 2

Political pressure and expectations to recover criminal assets are evident in the following extract from the ‘New Landscape of Policing’ report by the Home Affairs Select Committee where SOCA’s Chair at the time was called to give evidence on the organisation’s performance:

Q187 Chair: So out of a budget that the Government has given you over the last few years for each year of £500 million, you have seized £26 million in terms of drugs. Is that right?

Sir Ian Andrews: Chairman, I don’t think that was the answer that was given. It is very difficult—

Q188 Chair: What is it, then?

Sir Ian Andrews: It is very difficult putting a specific value on tonnage of drugs, because does one look at the retail value at the border, or does one look at the street value? We have also been very effective—

Q189 Chair: I am sorry to interrupt you. This has happened before in this Select Committee, when your predecessor and the predecessor Director went through this same explanation. It is not satisfactory, as we said in our Select Committee report. We need proper figures, so we know what is happening. This is taxpayers’ money and we are a parliamentary Committee.”

(Home Affairs Committee 2011 p.Ev26)

National agencies who are faced with this type of political pressure to produce tangible, monetary results have to find ways to preserve and justify their resources. Policing organised crime problems such as human trafficking or cybercrime do not produce quantifiable results aligned with performance measures, especially under neoliberal notions of value for money

policing; this can also partly explain the predominance of drugs trafficking as a strategic and operational priority demonstrated by the content analysis (Chapter 4, section 4.3). An interview participant reflects on this tension that national agencies faced between delivering results and investigating the ‘unknown unknowns’ (Wood et al. 2018) of organised crime:

“There’s a finite capacity to deal with things, there’s a sort of sense that well, if we’re doing this and we’re getting results, why don’t we just keep doing it? And then some other problem comes along and you think ‘oh, you know, we weren’t looking over there’. But you know, is that a failing? Could you have justified looking at something speculatively or you know, with less confidence of getting results? [...] So, if law enforcement is under pressure to deliver hard results, its capacity to experiment and to look at things which aren’t necessarily going to provide the same sorts of results is obviously reduced.” IP 1

This further demonstrates that traditional performance measures fail to acknowledge nuances in policing rather complex and serious organised crimes, maintaining pressure for hard results. Therefore, the construction of strategic priorities is influenced by the need to achieve productivity expectations, avoid resource reductions and, ultimately, ensure institutional survival.

5.7. Organisational path dependence

This study’s historical review (Chapter 3, sections 3.3-3.7) outlines the main structural and institutional transformations which have shaped the landscape of organised crime national policing in England and Wales. An important finding of the review is that the amalgamations of police and law enforcement agencies inevitably lead to a situation whereby the new amalgamated agency inherits resources, personnel, intelligence and even operations from its predecessors. In organisational research, this process is known as path dependence, a term which is used mostly as a broad label indicating all kinds of imprinting effects of the past on organisational behaviour (Beckman and Burton 2008). One interview participant discusses manifestations of path dependence in national agencies:

“So the tyranny of opportunity tends to drag you towards the work on which you have the most resource already; so you know the most, so you get the... most often, you get good opportunities to make trouble for the criminals. And for various historical reasons – and perfectly properly – we had

quite a big contingent of staff in Colombia; quite a bit contingent of staff in Afghanistan – cocaine, heroin – and therefore we had quite a lot of opportunities to wreak mayhem on drugs gangs. So, we were always in the position of having rather... spent rather more on doing drugs work than we had intended at the beginning of the year. And we told the Home Secretary that; we told them ‘this is the plan, but it’s not what we’ll do because we have to follow what opportunities we get, for doing the work’.” IP 11

It is evident that the participant associates organisational path dependence – in this case an increased focus on drugs – with more traditional understandings of policing as activity-led, rather than intelligence-led. The ‘tyranny of opportunity’ and inability of national agencies to target their efforts, including intelligence gathering, wherever they choose is also discussed by another participant who makes a comparison with MI6:

“Of course, many agencies, police forces don't necessarily have discretion over what they collect. What they collect is a by-product of what they're doing. Some agencies have the ability to target their programme to collect particular things, like MI6. But some don't, they just do what they do, and intelligence is created as a consequence.” IP 1

Invariably, organisational path dependence in a law enforcement context has significant effects on intelligence gathering and operational activities. Many participants discuss the process of ‘chain smoking’, in other words the process of gathering intelligence from operations and subsequently using it to target their next operation. This investigative technique is a double-edged sword: on the one hand, it can be very effective for building a rich intelligence picture and achieving demonstrable results, and on the other hand organisational efforts tend to focus on themes that are already enforcement priorities, thus creating investigative path dependence which becomes organisational once intelligence is inherited by successor organisations. Participants comment on these limitations:

“The problem was we didn’t have the rich intelligence picture in other areas to match that of drugs; which was also self-perpetuating area of business because, as I said before, the ‘chain smoking’. Everyone knew so much about it, including the Customs element, which had come in [SOCA]. It was a very rich area. You couldn’t go up against that, really, so you had to just make decisions based on ‘well, we’ve got to try and force this element, to get it moving’.” IP 3

“The predecessor organisations [to SOCA] have been really very much focused on operational results whether or not they’d actually made the effort to demonstrate the people they

were chasing were the most important and, there's a saying that we often have in law enforcement that this is like chain smoking: you light up every operation off the stub of the last one, so actually the few people that you didn't sweep up at your last drug net, you then target with your next operation. So, what you can never tell then is 'are the people you're focusing on the ones who really matter?'" IP 12

Researchers often refer to path dependence to illuminate organisational rigidities, stickiness, or inflexibility (Robinson and Meier 2006; Schreyo and Koch 2009). It is considered a very useful analytical tool as it “offers a promising template for advancing systematic historical explanations of organisational persistence” (Schreyögg et al. 2011 p.82), such as national agencies’ strategic persistence on drugs trafficking. An interview participant links ‘chain smoking’ and its effects on intelligence directly to organisational inflexibility to prioritise other crime problems:

“It was fairly easy to get into drugs investigations because of the availability of intelligence and informants” IP 13

“If you set aside all the bits of paper for a moment, you know, people are responding to what they can see in front of them. So, you know, you run one big, complicated drugs operation and you take down the gang in question. Inevitably there will be some contacts that you don't disrupt or arrest and there'll be leads generated to new drugs gangs that you didn't know about so there is a bit of sort of following what you can see. And that's one of the reasons why the shift to doing more about immigration crime, and child sexual exploitation, and particularly fraud and economic crime was so difficult.” IP 6

Path dependence can influence prioritisation processes in various ways. For example, in intelligence gathering it can enhance knowledge and effort around problems that are already systematically investigated. Sheptycki (2004) describes ‘defensive data concentration’ as one of eleven organisational pathologies of police intelligence systems. The term essentially describes extra organisational efforts to gather intelligence about a crime problem as a response to a reporting requirement. However, similarly to chain smoking, defensive data concentration usually occurs in response to crime problems that are existing priorities. Thus, as participant 12 notes, police agencies do not get the chance to develop the intelligence picture in relation to other lesser-known problems and even perhaps shed light on some currently unknown organised crime groups. The importance of identifying ‘known-unknowns’ cannot be overstated, as demonstrated by the following statement:

“I challenged our enforcement agencies to say ‘give me a sense of what you think the capacity is of your largest target organisations’, how much on past experience and intelligence, how much drugs do you think they’re capable of bringing into the country; and typically, really hard question to answer, but our sense was that we were probably the groups we were aware of, were probably only capable of bringing about 30% of the total drugs in the country. So, even if we succeeded against them, 70% of the drugs were coming in through people we had absolutely no idea of.” IP 12

Hence, organisational path dependence influences the construction of crime problems and shapes strategic priority-setting imprinting effects of the past on organisational behaviour (Beckman and Burton 2008). This happens in organised crime policing each time agencies are amalgamated to form the next one which inherits resources, equipment, operations, and most importantly, people. Finally, path dependence in both intelligence gathering and operations enhances emphasis on already existing and prioritised problems.

5.8. Intra-agency dynamics: top-down and bottom-up priority flows

The preceding sections have discussed a number of influences on setting strategic priorities in organised crime fighting agencies. However, these are moderated by realities of policing organised crime on the ground. It is evident from both documentary data as well as the broader literature that strategic priority-setting is considered to be a top-down process (SOCA 2006; Ratcliffe and Sheptycki 2009; Tusikov 2009; NCA 2014a). Moreover, the natural “unquestioned discipline” (Jermier and Berkes 1979 p.2) of the militaristic model in police organisations facilitates a top-down approach in decision-making. Flood and Gaspar (2009) discuss their ambition for the NIM to integrate a top-to-bottom and bottom-to-top intelligence system (NCIS 2000; Grieve 2009), so that high-rank decision-makers can make strategic decisions based on intelligence collected on the ground and in turn the general strategic direction would inform operational efforts. The NIM hints at a more top-down approach by referring to the issuing of strategic intelligence requirements at the national level (James 2011). There is overall a clear direction in the literature that information should be flowing both vertically and horizontally; this can be achieved by informing those at the strategic level about tactical endeavours and operations, but principally by ensuring that intelligence products and tactical decisions are informed by strategic priorities in a ‘top-down’ way (Ratcliffe 2008a; Carter and Carter 2009).”

However, the ‘bottom-up’ approach to strategic decision-making is considered to better reflect traditional police practices (Higgins 2009). This inevitably influences strategic priority-setting in a very different way than all the previous drivers discussed in this section. Grieve (2009 p.38) argues that “strategy, particularly intelligence strategy is tactics given strategic direction and comes from within hearing of the click of the handcuffs and recognising good street-level policing practice”. This is corroborated by some interview participants who state:

“Whilst there is still some sort of strategic setting of parameters and general shape, the operations had their own, had their own sort of life. So, trying to get a strategic sort of um... direction on law enforcement is actually quite a difficult business. I think policing is - I was going to say 'chaotic', it's not the right word - but it's much more organic I think.”

“And then of course there was the business of what was being driven essentially from the bottom-up in terms of operational opportunities and so, there would be targets who would be the subject of investigation and those investigations would have their own dynamic and they would be seen in the context of these more strategic bits of thinking, but you know, the sort of match as it were between the tactical and the strategic wasn't... it wasn't very precise.” IP 1

“Law enforcement organisations are... there's very little strategic leadership really. My sense was, certainly in these cultures, it's a relatively old-fashioned culture, the detective culture. And my sense is that people at the top follow rather than lead and most of the actual decisions about what you're doing start at the bottom.” IP 12

The last extract is particularly explicit about the impact of “detective culture” on intra-agency dynamics and the important role it plays in reinforcing ‘bottom-up’ approaches in setting strategic priorities (Dick and Jankowicz 2001; Cope 2004). Indeed, intelligence collection from patrolling, stops and searches, members of the public, traffic stops and forensic evidence is an integral part of British policing tradition (Higgins 2009). In this sense of course, intelligence collection becomes a by-product of police activity, which in turn renders subsequent strategic decisions dependent on ongoing operations. Another participant highlights the important role operations on the ground played in constructing strategic priorities for national agencies, and also notes that many operations were inherited by the agency’s predecessors which only reinforced a ‘bottom up’ direction to strategic planning:

“I think when we got into SOCA... I think it was... [...] a lot of the operational work that was inherited was generated from

the bottom up; and I think there was a tendency... for a lot of years, for the operational drive to be from the teams operating on the ground.” IP 3

However, one participant provides a different account of intra-agency influences in setting strategic priorities in SOCA during the same period, ascertaining that priority-setting was principally a top-down process:

“It probably could have benefited more from the ‘bottom-up’ approach as well, and meeting in the middle. Because from time to time they’d be sort of local mutinies from investigators and teams who thought they knew better than the central tasking – and sometimes they were right and sometimes they were wrong. [...] I think we were too top down actually. There was small room for local knowledge and local input to have more of an influence. Because a very grand central tasking process is going to be pretty imperfect – and it was.” IP 2

Therefore, the data suggest that SOCA may have functioned in a ‘loosely coupled’ state (Johnson and Vaughn 2016), which is a term from organisation theory that “implies that organizational elements are only loosely or minimally connected” (Maguire and Katz 2002 p.504). Loose coupling is essentially a succinct phrase to describe the simultaneous presence of rationality and indeterminacy in organisations (Orton and Weick 1990). Johnson and Vaughn (2016) maintain that loose coupling is both a beneficial and healthy attribute of police organisations as it can support a natural devolution of authority and an organic connection between the rational bureaucratic managerial level and the street-level policing. It is suggested that maintaining loose, healthy bonds between discretion-based units (operational teams) and administrative personnel (high-rank decision-makers) can reduce the chances of organisational failure, and lead to more efficient and effective priority-setting.

However, interview data show that intra-agency dynamics can influence strategic priority-setting in more complex ways than the binary top-down/bottom-up dilemma. One participant narrates his experience working in tasking and coordination and recounts the ways in which the unit exercised control over surveillance equipment used in operations:

“The one thing which did really help was control of the... particularly the covert assets, within SOCA; so, the surveillance assets etc. Once I got control over those, that’s where the real power lay in terms of determining what operations got done and what operations didn’t get done. And that was a bloody battle, but nevertheless it was an important one for the organisation to be able to say, ‘well actually, the

control of these assets and who gets them at any one time is key to actually driving this agenda forward.”

“I had pretty wide discretion, under the cover of my Director and Chairman, who were all kind of very supportive; I made the decisions – my unit made the decisions – we then had to justify them of course. So, we would allocate jobs to particular operational teams. ‘Your next job will be this’ ‘Well we want to do this’ ‘Sorry, but you’re going to be doing that; and with that comes this, this and this. And by the way, this job that you’re now doing over here; we’re going to take the support from that away, in terms of covert resources, because we need it over here’. That used to create almighty tensions!” IP 3

Therefore, decisions made at the middle ranks of the organisation seem to be able to equally, if not more, powerfully influence priorities than either intelligence coming from the ground or strategic direction coming from the higher ranks or even the Home Office. Since the allocation of covert assets at SOCA was instrumental in determining which operations were going to go ahead, tasking and coordination units were therefore able to influence in this indirect way what kind of intelligence would be gathered, but most importantly how strategic priorities would be disseminated and realised in terms of operations. The participant also attests that the unit had rather wide discretion in making these decisions even though they had to justify them to their superiors. Hence, this is a further indication of the complexity involved in power relations across ranks and units within police organisations and the ways in which they can influence operational responses and the construction of strategic priorities.

5.9. Concluding remarks

It is important to emphasize that the above seven categories of influence on strategic decision-making in tackling organised crime can only be properly understood in relation to one another. They rarely, if ever, exist independently. On the contrary, they tend to be mutually reinforcing. Media coverage of a specific crime problem, for example child sexual abuse, usually accentuates the effects of political pressure on national agencies to tackle it more effectively. Performance measures which emphasize the need for ‘value for money’ have significant effects on occupational culture; more specifically, they reinforce pragmatism and action-oriented policing (Reiner 2010) while discouraging long-term, strategic approaches which might be more suitable for tackling organised crime. Similarly, organisational path dependence can create or exacerbate bottom-up dynamics (from operations to high ranks) and lead to the persistence of traditional performance indicators, even when, as in the case of SOCA, these are

not particularly aligned with the agency's philosophy, mandate or objectives. Importantly, all these influences are linked to the inescapable limitations on human understanding, though these may be a matter of degree. Therefore, the chapter highlights the complexity of constructing strategic priorities in organised crime policing. By discussing seven drivers of national agencies' decision-making, the chapter provides fine-grained analysis of media, document and interview data. Finally, assumptions with regards to rationalised, evidence-based strategic level of decision-making are challenged by discussions that illustrate the different ways in which the drivers identified influence priority-setting processes.

Conclusion

This thesis explored strategic police decision-making processes in national organised crime fighting agencies, examined how national strategic priorities change and develop over time, and highlighted a number of factors that influence. In doing so, it provided new insights into the complex and diverse processes of social construction that have been used to set strategic priorities in order to tackle organised crime in Britain since the early 1990s. This final chapter summarises the main findings through a discussion of the empirical, methodological and conceptual contributions of the thesis.

Empirical contributions: the complex system(s) of strategic decision-making

Empirically, two findings are highlighted. Firstly, strategic decision-making processes are inherently complex as shown in the historical review of national organised crime policing (Chapter 3). Undoubtedly, intelligence products – their gathering, dissemination and interpretation – play an important role in setting strategic priorities, especially within proactive, intelligence-led policing regimes (Ratcliffe 2008a). However, this study has found that priority-setting processes have been developing, changing and evolving in ways that inevitably mirror structural and institutional transformations of the British organised crime policing architecture.

The historical review in Chapter 3 captures the trends of amalgamation and centralisation of British organised crime policing. This gradual accretion of power plays a significant role in how police organisations make decisions about organised crime, as the level of centralisation also relates to their accountability (Jones 2008). In other words, the people or authorities that the agencies are accountable to, have the power to influence strategic decisions, and therefore, determine how priority-setting processes work.

For example, notwithstanding traditionally local police responses to crime in Britain, Regional Crime Squads were formed to tackle crime that was committed across police borders. Their regional coordinators reported directly to a national Executive coordinator based at the Home Office, but there was no official overarching strategy for the nine Squads. As a result, their work was principally led by operations and intelligence gathered on the ground. The fact that they focused on identifying and tackling problems specific to certain geographical regions only rendered the need for a coherent strategic decision-making process to seem almost unnecessary. That changed with the establishment of the National Crime Squad, the first national police organisation with operational capabilities, which was accountable to a Service Authority. In

reality though, this study showed that the NCS was not a purely centralised agency. On the contrary, it was viewed as the '44th police force' and was also mainly funded by a levy placed on the 43 police forces; therefore, it was also held accountable by them (an important strategic objective was to support police forces in relation to serious and organised crime). Hence, strategic decision-making in NCS was inevitably influenced by local and regional priorities, much more than successor agencies.

SOCA was created as an amalgamation of NCS and NCIS (the operational and intelligence gathering national agencies respectively) and other law enforcement and organised crime fighting agencies and departments in order to provide a central, more coherent and consistent approach to tackling organised crime. SOCA set its own strategic agenda under the direction of the Home Secretary as provided for by SOCPA 2005. Police forces views and priorities were not part of the process anymore, but that does not mean it was a rational, intelligence-led process. The Home Secretary gave SOCA a clear direction to focus more on human trafficking offences and reduce their drugs investigations which at the time were occupying almost the entire organisational effort and resource. So, during its first couple of years SOCA used a percentage system in order to ensure that the Home Secretary's prioritised problem was tackled. To complement that authoritative way of setting priorities, some controversial exercises were used such as counting newspaper column inches of coverage of different organised problems; this was then used as a proxy to measure levels of public concern. However, it is important to note that SOCA was principally an intelligence-led organisation which utilised a wide range of surveillance and other techniques used until that time to tackle national security threats, in order to reduce the harm caused by serious and organised crime via alternative – not purely policing – methods.

Alongside centralisation, changes in mandates and organisational philosophies also shape priority-setting processes. SOCA's focus on reducing harm caused by organised crime greatly influenced the way strategic priorities were set. More specifically, a matrix was used to measure harms associated with various organised crime problems and activities were ranked according to their harmfulness. Notwithstanding analytical and conceptual challenges of using 'harm' as a central concept to set strategic priorities, undoubtedly SOCA's new mandate influenced the ways in which the strategic agenda for organised crime was set and operationalised.

Similarly, the National Crime Agency was established as a more centralised organisation with a new, changed mandate that moved away from harm reduction and back towards a policing response to the ‘threat of organised crime’. The amalgamation of even more organisations including the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (CEOPC) into NCA created a situation whereby more organised crime problems had to compete for resources as well as higher places in the agency’s strategic agenda. However, another deliberate shift of focus from drugs investigation towards problems such as human trafficking and child sexual exploitation and abuse came directly from the Home Secretary at the time. Coupled with the adoption of CONTEST, UK’s counter-terrorism strategy, NCA’s priorities were shaped to align with organised crime’s new, ‘securitised’ status.

It is evident from the history of centralisation and amalgamation in British organised crime policing that structural and institutional transformations play a significant role in shaping strategic priorities. On the one hand, these transformations come hand in hand with major shifts in organisational mandates and philosophies which are not purely rhetorical, but have real implications for strategic decision-making processes. On the other hand, the more centralised a law enforcement agency becomes, the more it gets under the direction of the Home Office. The analysis has shown that national agencies have been allowed to exercise their discretion in following governmental direction with regards to strategic priorities. However, in practice, it was found that strategic decision-makers within the agencies tend – or at least make a visible effort – to adopt Ministers’ priorities for reasons of accountability as well as institutional survival. Therefore, setting strategic priorities to tackle organised crime is by no means a purely intelligence-led task, but an inherently complex political process.

Secondly, the process of reviewing the recent history of organised crime policing – both in terms of institutional architecture and in terms of shifts and changes in strategic agendas – has revealed that a number of factors (including political agendas and directions) influence strategic decision-making within national law enforcement agencies. The role of these factors – media coverage, signal crimes, legislation, political agendas and policy entrepreneurs, performance measures, organisational path dependence, intra-organisational dynamics – in shaping strategic priorities is largely underplayed in literature, as studies on police decision-making principally examine potential merits and flaws of intelligence systems in tackling organised crime (Sheptycki 2004; Ratcliffe 2008c). However, when research focusses on more ‘scientific’, intelligence-led methods of police decision-making, it runs the risk of overlooking

the intricacies of agenda-setting procedures which often involve complex organisational dynamics, political pressures, negotiations and problem ownership debates.

The aforementioned seven factors that drive strategic decision-making in national organised crime fighting agencies were identified and discussed in Chapter 5. The chapter illustrated their role in shaping organisational priorities and, in doing so, it also discussed their dynamic, interdependent nature; indeed, these drivers do not exist in isolation. On the contrary, they are often mutually reinforcing; in cases where for example extensive media coverage of a specific signal crime increase public demand for policymaking and political intervention, it can also drive political pressure on national agencies to prioritise this particular problem over others. On the other hand, they can also potentially hinder each other's capacity to influence the prioritisation of crime problems. For example, a signal crime that works as a typifying example for claiming the emergence and seriousness of a new organised crime problem can lead to a deliberate shift in law enforcement agendas. This shift can, in turn, impede bottom-up priority flows, despite these being rather common in a police organisational context.

Hence, strategic decision-making processes are not merely influenced by these factors in a linear way or one at a time, as the basic problems process model might imply (see fig. 6.1). On the contrary, they can appear at any point during the process of constructing an organised crime problem. There, they can interact by either reinforcing or hindering each other, as well as by exercising positive or negative influence onto strategic decisions which can define criminal activities as problems, and in turn, categorise these problems as policing priorities.



Fig. 6.1 Joel Best's (2016) model for the construction of problems process

In other words, organised crime problems construction is not something that happens at once through the setting of strategic priorities; neither does it occur through the actions or claims of a particular set of actors such as politicians, media workers, criminologists, police officers or intelligence analysts. Instead, it is an ongoing, *interactive* process. Each actor within every stage of this process makes at least two choices: which perspective to adopt, among the many different understandings offered, to define a problem (for example, to categorise and tackle cybercrime as a policing problem or a national security threat); second, which organised crime

problem's construction is the most convincing in order to support and promote that instead of others (for example, human trafficking instead of fraud). The latter choice becomes even more complex if we think that many actors such as media workers or policymakers do not only have to choose among problems from within the umbrella category of 'organised crime', but quite possibly they have to navigate the much broader social problems 'marketplace'. Hence, the problems discussed in this thesis do not compete only with each other, but also with a number of other social problems from various aspects of social life – from knife crime and terrorism, to climate change and epidemic diseases.

Moreover, the role of audiences in constructing the social problem of organised crime by influencing strategic priority-setting could be mistakenly perceived as passive. This thesis has focused mainly on actors (mainly law enforcement agencies, but also individual decision-makers and some policymakers) and influences on decision-makers. However, some of these influences can have a significant impact on audiences' reactions and responses to crime problems. For example, journalists do not get convinced to adopt and rework claims about the emergence and seriousness of cybercrime based on the 'Project Trawler' report published by the National Criminal Intelligence Service, especially if they think it does not appeal to audiences. Similarly, the Home Secretary gives strategic direction to national agencies to prioritise human trafficking, but complex, intra-agency power dynamics and activity-led police work which reinforces chain-smoking intelligence gathering from ongoing drugs investigations make it difficult to shift organisational efforts towards those offences in practice.

Therefore, there are many variations of the problems process model illustrated in Fig. 6.1. Even though the model does provide a more nuanced interpretation of how an organised crime problem may come to be constructed as a strategic priority than current intelligence-led understandings of police decision-making, it still oversimplifies the process in some important ways (Best 2016). Firstly, the interactive nature of the process is not captured by the model. Influences on decision-makers are not unidirectional; instead, they create feedback, which means that audiences of claimsmakers react either positively or negatively to claims about the construction of a new crime problem. These reactions can determine whether a construction process is successful or not and, crucially, they can influence claimsmakers' actions. For example, they might decide to insist on promoting a particular problem, attempt to repackage it in order to potentially elicit a better response, or even not pursuing the claims further. It is important to note that in the context of policing organised crime, many claimsmakers are

involved in law enforcement and therefore, work behind closed doors due to the secretive nature of the job. Hence, their actions and reactions are not always available to examine; however, findings in this thesis corroborate the effects of feedback within priority-setting processes. For example, experts have long argued that fraud is one of the most harmful organised crime problems (Button 2011; Doig and Levi 2013), but these claims have never managed to elicit significant media coverage or enough attention from law enforcement in order to construct fraud as a top strategic priority, even though it has occupied a place in national strategic agendas since the early 2000s.

Secondly, actors in each stage do not solely interact with actors in the next stage. On the contrary, a claimmaker (be that a criminologist, activist or police officer) can contact a policymaker directly; that is easier to imagine in the case of a high-rank law enforcement agent who can have access to policymakers. Similarly, in the age of social media, it is easier for claimmakers to contact the public directly instead of going through traditional media channels. Thirdly, interactions between actors can occur *within* each and any stage of the process as well, not only *across* stages. Moreover, influences on their decisions about how to construct organised crime problems also occur within each stage. Policymakers do not work in isolation but extensively discuss potential policies with their colleagues. Similarly, social problems workers such as decision-makers in policing organisations interact with others – managers, heads of units, investigators – and are influenced by organisational targets, intra-agency dynamics, occupational cultures, as well as externally by media and legislation.

Findings presented in this thesis support the argument that setting strategic priorities is not as straightforward as intelligence-led models would suggest. Instead, it is a complex process – even more complex than Best's (2016 p.19) typical natural history of social problems model would suggest. Figure 6.2 provides a more well-rounded understanding of the various ways in which actors in different stages of the process interact with each other and are influenced by a range of factors that shape how organised crime problems come to be categorised as strategic priorities within national law enforcement agencies.

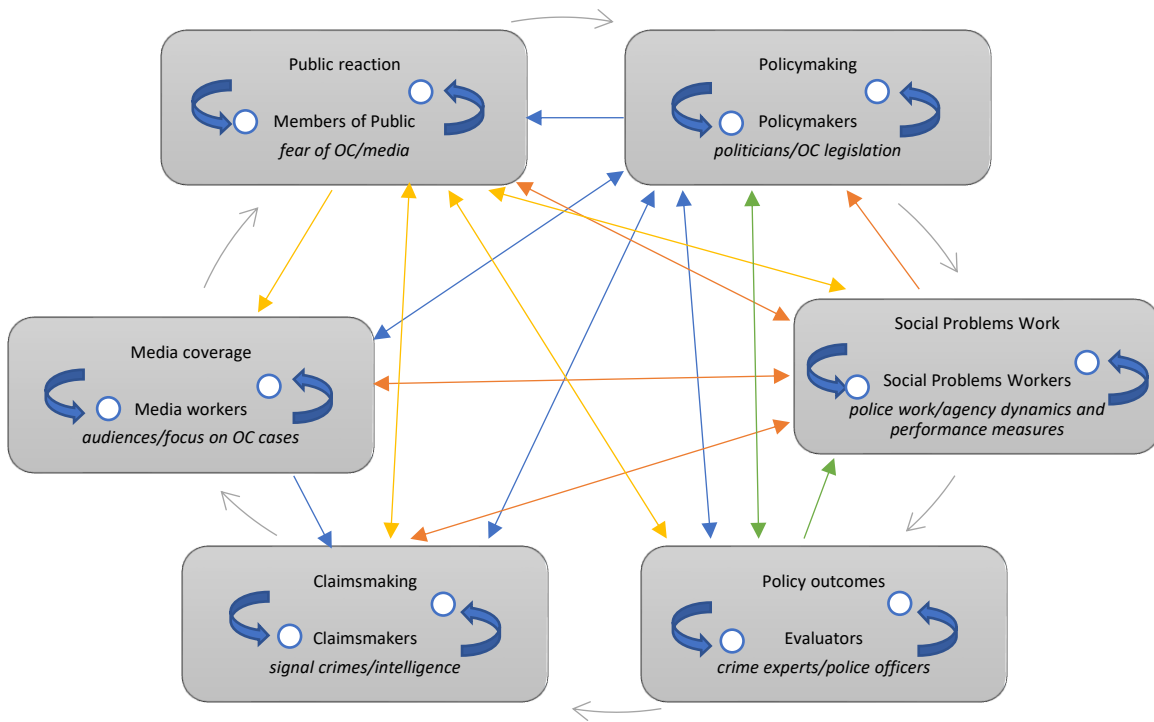


Fig. 6.2 Interactions in the social problems process (adapted from Best 2016, p. 333).

The links between the six main stages are represented by the same unidirectional arrows that can be seen in the basic model, but the shape of this model is a circle. There is a new, sixth arrow that connects the previously described as last stage (‘policy outcomes’) with the first one (‘claimsmaking’). After law enforcement agents (social problems workers) implement policies, there are often reactions from critics who can either decide that the policy works but aspects of it need refining or that it does not work well at all and the organised crime problem in question needs to be tackled more or less aggressively, or perhaps in a completely different way (Best 2016). These criticisms can constitute the basis for new claims, which in turn can spark an entirely new social problems process; thus, the circular shape of the model encapsulates this possibility of an ‘endless’ process.

The interactions among actors within each stage of the process are represented by dots and curved arrows inside the boxes (fig. 6.2). It is during these interactions that most of the influences discussed in Chapter 5 appear and shape how organised crime problems evolve into strategic priorities. For example, signal crimes are often used by experts, activists or even politicians as typifying examples in order to make new claims. The Dunblane school massacre in 1996 was used by activists to mobilise an anti-gun-crime campaign; it was then widely covered by media, gathered public attention and resulted in legislation which prohibited the use of handguns from members of the public (with the exception of Northern Ireland).

Similarly, performance measures influence how social problems workers, such as police officers of various ranks within national agencies, decide to set and implement strategic priorities as police organisations strive to produce tangible, quantifiable outcomes in order to achieve productivity expectations.

The multicoloured arrows that connect all the stages with each other illustrate the variety of routes that an organised crime problem may follow. Indeed, actors in any stage can either initiate the process themselves (for example, social problems workers become claimsmakers when they find deficiencies in the way policies are implemented) or communicate with other actors anywhere in the process. A claimsmaker, depending on their position may have direct access to a policymaker; for instance, Chairmen and Director Generals in national agencies have had open lines of communication with the Home Secretary and can have access to other Ministers when they need to promote their claims, so they do not need to go through the media to make their claims heard by policymakers. Finally, these arrows go in both directions to denote the potential influence of feedback and interaction in the model.

The complexities presented in fig. 6.2 reflect the many genuinely possible scenarios through which organised crime events or phenomena can be constructed as social problems and, in turn, categorised as national strategic priorities. This further supports the thesis's argument that strategic decision-making is an inherently complicated process involving many actors who are influenced by many factors, and that intelligence is only one source of influence in this complex system.

Methodological lessons: histories of problems and cycles of concern

The thesis' empirical findings provide a more naturalistic understanding of strategic decision-making by highlighting how complex these processes can be; there are, however, additional complexities which become particularly prevalent when organised crime problems are mapped out and compared over time. Most criminological studies in the field of policing organised crime tend to focus on current developments of organised crime problems rather than their historical evolution (Farrell et al. 2015; Hutchings and Collier 2019) – to the extent they do, they are likely to simplify it (Chermak 1997; Hartman and Golub 1999). Hence, case studies are typically used for exploring organised crime problems and their constructions. For all their merits, this thesis argues that there are many benefits in taking a long-term, historical view of setting strategic priorities. More specifically, researching more than one case at a time provides

the basis to compare and contrast organised crime problems included in national agencies' strategic agendas. In addition, it helps to recognise and understand how and why some organised crime problems are so successfully constructed that they manage to remain persistently as top strategic priorities over time, how some stay low in strategic agendas, and how some emerge and develop into high priorities. Importantly, a long term view of strategic decision-making in organised crime policing allows us to explore how particular problems rise and fall in policing priorities during different time periods.

In order to systematically analyse the various types of crime problem construction, it is worth thinking about possible outcomes of priority-setting processes as a spectrum: some processes are successful, attract widespread attention and lead to establishing priorities in the highest places of strategic agendas; others have satisfying outcomes, cause intense concern and perhaps identify a need for re-labelling the problem in order to promote it more successfully; finally, some are unsuccessful which means that audiences (journalists, policymakers, members of the public or police managers) are not convinced about the importance or urgency of claims and thus the problem stays at a low place in the agenda or completely out it. For example, efforts to raise concern and attract media attention to the problem of cybercrime, which was called 'high-tech' crime in the late 1990s, were not successful, in spite of the publication of the 'Project Trawler' report and the establishment of the specialised high-tech crime unit within the National Crime Squad. However, later construction processes had more success and the repackaged problem was eventually labelled a national security threat which is to this day one of NCA's top strategic priorities. So, by comparing the two processes, and of course also processes for other organised crime problems, at different points in time, the various pathways for constructing problems and setting strategic priorities can unfold.

The study systematises these 'problem construction pathways' in a four-fold taxonomy of organised crime problems. Organised crime problems were identified in annual reports and subsequently merged into nine broader categories in order to be able to make meaningful comparisons between them. Thus, these categories of problems are subjective, as they were constructed by the researcher through the relations and interactions with documentary data (reports and newspaper articles) and interview participants. This is the main reason for providing a detailed description of the study's content analysis (Chapter 2.5.1), including analytical choices and leaps, and also for highlighting the nuances and intricacies hidden in comparing problems within those categories. The four-fold taxonomy is based on both

documentary and interview data and reflects the various outcomes of construction processes (again, a spectrum of possibilities from successful to unsuccessful) for problems within priority-setting agendas.

Drug trafficking is the only crime problem in the category 'usual suspects'; it is found amongst the first places of the agencies' agendas and it is dominant and persistent throughout the study's timeframe (1993-2017). Findings in this thesis support the argument that organisational path dependence – inheritance of resources, infrastructure, operations and personnel – reinforces strategic focus on already existing and prioritised problems. Moreover, investigations into drug trafficking can produce quantifiable, demonstrable results which are also aligned with performance targets, such as seizures, arrests and prosecutions, set for national agencies. Therefore, in the context of policing organised crime as a social problem, drug trafficking is an example of a successful construction process. This statement does not mean to imply that drug trafficking is not a serious problem that should concern law enforcement or that it does not have harmful effects in real life; rather, it argues that an examination of its recent history reveals that is also partly a product of social construction, especially in terms of its consistently high prioritisation. In recent years, however, NCA has downgraded drugs trafficking from its top priorities, although it is of course still included in the agency's strategic priorities. The exact reasons for this significant change are not known, but an explanation from a constructionist viewpoint is that it is easier to lose interest in a criminal activity which has been viewed as the number one prioritised problem within a particular area of the social problems marketplace. Drugs trafficking had been occupying the majority of national agencies' organisational efforts since the first one (NCIS) was established in 1992; therefore, claims about other problems appear novel and fresh and may transition smoothly through the problems process stages, especially attracting attention from media, which rely heavily on appealing, new material (Boda and Szabó 2011; Berns 2017).

On the other hand, other crime problems such as economic crime and violent crime have remained persistently on the agencies' agendas through time but never really managed to reach one of the top spots on the priority list to receive concerned attention; therefore, they are included in the 'unusual suspects' category. More specifically, findings from interviews show that fraud has always been considered difficult to understand and investigate, and also strategic decision-makers – and potentially other actors in the social construction process as well – do

not consider it as a serious and imminent threat to life. Thus, it does not compete successfully in the organised crime problems marketplace.

Immigration crime, cybercrime and child sexual exploitation and abuse (CSEA) are classed as 'new joiners'; these problems emerged and became strategic priorities at a later point in the lifetime of national agencies (and the study's timeframe). Some discrepancies between documentary and interview data are noteworthy in this category. For example, documentary analysis findings show that immigration crime has been tackled by national agencies since 1994. There is admittedly a significant rise in references to it in the reports after 2003, but interview participants have largely discussed it as an new, emerging problem which came to the spotlight after the Dover incident in 2000. Indeed, at that time, the Dover incident was used as a typifying example to illustrate the seriousness of the problem which became the focus of intense claimsmaking; the claims were picked up by the media, the public reacted to them and, finally, national agencies – the National Crime Squad first, then SOCA – received clear direction from government to prioritise immigration crime (more specifically human trafficking rather than smuggling). Nevertheless, during the seven years of SOCA, human trafficking gradually slipped out of the spotlight again, until Theresa May, who was Home Secretary at the time, brought it back to national attention under the new label 'modern slavery'.

This is a typical example of what Best (2016 p.309) refers to as 'cycles of concern'. What this means is that the various trajectories social problems follow to change and develop over time are not necessarily linear, even though it may be intuitive to think of historical evolution in this way. As with the complex, circular priority-setting model presented in fig. 6.2, documenting and interpreting organised crime problem constructions as strategic priorities over time allowed the research to identify similar patterns of 'waves' or 'cycles' of prioritisation in the history of British organised crime policing. In other words, a problem such as human trafficking becomes the focus of claimsmaking often in the aftermath of a highly publicised signal crime, then interest gradually falls off again, it is downgraded as a strategic priority for a while, before it returns to attract renewed attention (Downs 1972). This comeback is facilitated by the involvement of claimsmakers, media workers, policymakers and social problems workers.

However, for some problems it is more difficult to find their way back into strategic agendas than for others, after interest in them has declined. In the context of organised crime policing, the study includes them in the third category, the 'downfallen', which consists of property crime and international organised crime. Best (2016 p.311) maintains that, from a

constructionist perspective, interest towards certain problems declines over time mainly because “the social problems process values novelty”. Given that the study adopts a moderate constructionist stance, however, it is vital to highlight that not all trends identified are socially constructed. Some are the result of real change in the frequency of occurrence of certain crimes and property crime is a prime example of that (see, section 4.4.3.1). Conversely, international organised crime is a constructed category and as such, its downgrading does not represent any real change or development. This problem represents a different, ethnocentric way in which national agencies used to categorise crimes committed by international organised criminals or groups during the first years of the study’s timeframe. After 2006, the reports did not categorise organised crime problems based on ethnicity of criminal groups anymore, and UK national agencies have consistently used the activity model for prioritisation purposes (Sergi 2017).

Furthermore, it is important to note that this study takes a long term view to explore how problems come to be categorised as *national* law enforcement priorities, instead of how *all* organised crime problems have been constructed through history. This is why the analytical timeframe of the thesis starts in 1993 (when the first annual report by the National Criminal Intelligence Service was published) and not before. Hence, the thesis covers a relatively short period of time compared to the long history of policing and also compared to other studies that have explored social construction, including rises, falls and cycles of concern, of organised crime problems such as child exploitation (Jenkins 1998) and delinquent youth gangs in twentieth century America¹⁴ (Pearson 1983). However, the analysis ventures outside the 24 year timeframe to provide some historical context of British organised crime policing structures before the establishment of national agencies. Notwithstanding the relatively short timeframe, the study manages to capture some clear historical patterns of continuity and change in constructions of strategic priorities, including manifestations of cycles of concern.

An important question arising from comparing constructions of organised crime problems across time is whether things ever get better. With the exception of old-fashioned serious property crime (bank robberies) and cannabis related offences, all the other problems are either successfully constructed or subjects of waves of concern – they rise and fall from the limelight accordingly. Claimsmakers, including law enforcement agents and organised crime scholars, rarely acknowledge progress perhaps out of fear of encouraging complacency and discouraging taking further steps to address other existing problems (Best 2001b). Best (2001a) describes

¹⁴ Some waves of concern about gangs are traced as far back as the 1840s in USA (Pearson 1983).

four cultural aspects or claimsmaking (perfectibility, proportion, proliferation and paranoia) that are quite suitable to explain why progress is typically downplayed in tackling organised crime, two of which are very relevant to organised crime. Firstly, the rhetoric of policymakers and police organisations' alike often invokes *perfectibility*; in other words, that the aim is to eradicate organised crime.¹⁵ Since the mid 2000s, law enforcement has adopted reduction (instead of total elimination) as a target. Even so, by how much would organised crime need to be reduced to constitute satisfactory progress? Since the total harm caused by organised crime is unknown, there is no baseline upon which to make this estimation and, hence this question is almost impossible to answer. Secondly, modern societies facilitate the *proliferation* of organised crime problems claims. Apart from traditional channels for promotion of claims about the need to prioritise a specific problem instead of others, the rise of social media provides the opportunity for claimsmakers to reach wider and diverse audiences; in recent years, the NCA has been having a particularly active presence on social media and is able to address the public in an easier and more accessible way than via reports or official press releases.

Overall, the thesis advocates the use of methods that allow researchers to adopt an expanded perspective – rather than focusing only on present or future – on setting strategic priorities in tackling organised crime. Examining the histories of crime problems and the various, complex processes through which they have been constructed, can help locate current claims about the seriousness and urgency of these problems in an appropriate context. Crucially, it allows a more critical understanding and assessment of claims.

Conceptual reframing: critical examination of claims about 'new' problems

It is rather evident that the methodological and conceptual contributions of the thesis are interlinked. One of the findings highlighted in the above section (also discussed in section 1.3) is that organised crime problems tend to be treated by both law enforcement agents and criminologists as “elements without history” (Foucault 1980). Often, claimsmakers speak about the urgency of a ‘new’ problem in terms of an objective threat which we need to identify, assess and tackle. This thesis, however, places crime problems in an illuminating, socio-historical context; with their histories attributed to them, they transform into more nuanced, well-rounded concepts.

¹⁵ For example, states that declare wars on drugs are determined to eliminate them off the streets.

Thus, conceptually, two findings are highlighted. Firstly, the thesis is not concerned with organised crime as one problem; rather, it views organised crime priorities as socially constructed problems which span across a wide range of diverse activities (from online fraud to human trafficking). Importantly, these problems co-exist in harmony when, under the umbrella term ‘organised crime’, they compete for attention or resources in the wider marketplace with other problems such as terrorism or epidemic diseases. However, within the social problem of organised crime there is a sum of crime problems which compete with each other as well for more resources, more policy or for a higher place in national agencies’ strategic agendas. This thesis conducted a systematic exploration of these interdependent relationships and thus offers a more fine-grained analysis of how strategic priorities are set, by focusing on and comparing distinct problems which form part of the concept of organised crime.

Secondly, by adopting a constructionist stance, these problems and their associated harms can be approached critically. Every few years, claims appear about new organised crime problems and spread through various channels (television, press, social media). People can respond to the claims in many ways – from naively believing them all to cynically reject them as false. The model used to frame the analysis of organised crime priorities throughout this thesis can provide the tools for people, including strategic decision-makers, to keep engaging critically with new claims. In other words, the model is useful for critically assessing new problems – their emergence, downgrading and historical shifts and changes.

Importantly, the different ways in which old problems had been rebranded and reintroduced as ‘new’, can help recognise these processes in the future. An excellent example of a repackaged problem is the recently introduced organised crime problem of ‘county lines’ (NCA 2019a). According to the NCA, the term is used when drug gangs from big cities expand their operations to smaller towns, use violence and exploit children and vulnerable people to sell drugs (Spicer 2018; NCA 2019b). Nevertheless, there are a few elements worthy of further discussion; more specifically the crime of ‘county lines’ does not represent purely the beginning of another cycle of concern about drugs, even though ultimately drugs trafficking is being tackled. It is almost a hybrid, consisting of drugs trafficking and the exploitation of vulnerable young people. The emphasis, however, is definitely on the latter. NCA (2019a) maintains that “tackling county lines, and the supply gangs responsible for high levels of violence, exploitation and abuse of vulnerable adults and children, is a priority for UK law

enforcement.” It is evident that the trafficking of crack and heroin, among other substances, is often viewed as secondary compared to the exploitation of young people. Therefore, it would be possible and beneficial to utilise processes of social construction when considering the emergence of county lines, especially the social construction of drugs trafficking with its successful claimsmaking, persistent top prioritisation for years and recent fall from NCA’s strategic agenda. The problems process could be useful in order to critically assess claims that county lines is a new problem worthy of concerned attention, extra resources and concerted organisational effort, or social construction is part of its makeup.

This study has some limitations. Firstly, the empirical research was conducted on four national organised crime fighting agencies in the UK, which have rather distinctive characteristics, histories and structures that are not representative of a typical police force. Therefore, the findings of this thesis may not hold for a variation of populations (other organisations) or settings (other countries). Nonetheless, the main purpose of the research was not to produce generalisable findings, but rather to provide a contextualised understanding of the processes of strategic decision-making. Moreover, the sample of documents used in this thesis only includes annual reports; it does not include annual plans, threat assessments or other policy documents that can play a significant role in constructing organised crime as a social problem. The rationale for this decision lies in Carol Bacchi’s WPR approach (2012) adopted by this study with the intention to analyse documents that present the results of operations alongside the targets with an eye to discover implicit representations of problems hidden in the reports and analyse these specifically. Another limitation relates to the suitability of reports to use as ‘problem definers’ given their limited audience. Future research could examine a much wider and more diverse sample of documents to provide a more well-rounded understanding of official problem representations by organised crime police organisations.

Additionally, the study’s interview participants disproportionately represent NCIS, National Crime Squad and SOCA. Hence, the discussion of NCA’s decision-making processes inevitably exhibits overreliance on the analysis of its annual reports. Similarly, findings regarding the social construction of organised crime problems from the period after 2013 are based mainly on document and media analysis. In the future, gaining access into the National Crime Agency, the UK’s active national law enforcement agency, would help produce findings that can offer an insight on current decision-making processes and, importantly, confirm or

contradict this study's findings on trends and patterns of change in priorities as well as influences on strategic decisions.

Finally, systematically and empirically assessing claims about the need to prioritise organised crime problems by applying a moderate constructionist framework yields policy-relevant results. More specifically, policymakers and strategic decision-makers alike can learn from the social problems process – how to develop effective claimsmaking techniques, how to react to anticipated cycles of concern, and how to distinguish between real or constructed change in organised crime problems. The main goal of this thesis has been to explore the setting of strategic priorities in British organised crime policing, as well as how and why they change and develop over time through the social problems process. Hence, the thesis does not attempt to identify ways for optimising strategic decision-making; what it does argue is that thinking critically about issues that rise or fall from agendas, engaging with claims about emerging problems and recognising the inherent complexities of priority-setting processes would make useful additions to the strategic decision-making 'toolkit' of police organisations.

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