

Police Service of Northern Ireland

Performance Report Serious and Organised Crime

January - March 2021

**we care
we listen
we act**



Keeping People Safe

Introduction

Serious and Organised Crime has an impact on all levels of society within Northern Ireland. This type of criminality is planned, co-ordinated and frequently targets the most vulnerable.

Whilst the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) lead investigations into Serious and Organised Crime in Northern Ireland, we do so in collaboration with partners, including the National Crime Agency (NCA), Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC), United Kingdom Borders Agency (UKBA), Home Office Immigration Enforcement (HOIE) and the Department of Justice (DOJ).

The PSNI's Organised Crime Unit operates as a partner in the Organised Crime Task Force (OCTF), Joint Agency Task Force (JATF) and the Paramilitary Crime Task Force (PCTF) in the fight against Serious and Organised Criminality. Through these partnerships, we are committed to targeting those who seek to exploit the most vulnerable and harm society.

Organised Crime Task Force

The Organised Crime Task Force (OCTF) provides a strategic multi-agency forum in order to tackle organised crime and reduce the harm it causes to communities, individuals and businesses in Northern Ireland. This task force aims to target this criminality through a multi-agency partnership between the PSNI, central and Northern Ireland Government Departments, the Policing Board, the business community and the community overall.

Joint Agency Task Force

The Joint Agency Task Force (JATF) was set up to tackle organised and cross jurisdictional crime. Partner agencies work together collaboratively in a concerted and enhanced effort to protect the public from the threat and harm caused by organised criminality.

The objective of JATF is to build on existing frameworks and to increase collective effectiveness within existing operational and financial constraints. The Cross Border JATF continues to provide opportunities for, and promote real time collaboration, between An Garda Síochána (AGS) and the PSNI in their combined efforts to frustrate, disrupt and dismantle the activity of Organised Crime Gangs. Collaboration results in real time intelligence sharing, co-ordination of investigative support and joint investigations domestically and internationally.

Paramilitary Crime Task Force

The Paramilitary Crime Task Force (PCTF) is a partnership initiative targeted at tackling paramilitary linked criminality in Northern Ireland. It comprises staff from PSNI, HMRC and NCA all working as part of one co-located team, sharing capacity, capability, intelligence and analysis.

Performance Ambitions

The Northern Ireland Policing Board, in partnership with the PSNI, has produced a five year policing plan. This outlines our collective policing ambitions for the period 2020-2025.

Our ambition is to reduce the capacity and capability of Organised Crime Groups (OCGs) by frustrating, disrupting and dismantling them, which will help us work towards a safer community. We will achieve this in collaboration with our partners.

About this Report

The aim of this report is to summarise the performance and activity of the Police Service of Northern Ireland in regards to Serious and Organised Crime for the reporting period of 1st January 2021-31st March 2021. This is the first quarterly report produced by the PSNI in this area and can be read in conjunction with the NCA Performance Report to give an overview of law enforcement activity impacting Northern Ireland, as we seek to disrupt Organised Crime Groups with the aim of protecting individuals, communities and businesses in line with our key purpose of "Keeping People Safe".

The keys areas focused on in this report are; Overall Disruptive Impact, Paramilitary Activity, Drugs, Criminal Use of Firearms, Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking, Cybercrime, Cash Seizures and Serious Organised Acquisitive Crime.

Overall Disruptive Impact

PSNI currently assesses and records disruptions against OCGs (and individuals involved in organised crime) on the following levels; Frustrated, Disrupted and Dismantled.

Frustrated

- Planned activity by PSNI which prevents OCGs from carrying out criminal activity, or
- The arrest and or instigation of criminal proceedings against one or more group member(s) (not main principal) for an offence that would normally warrant a prison sentence, or
- Seizure of assets on one occasion.

Disrupted

- The arrest and/or instigation of criminal proceedings against one main principal for an offence which would normally warrant a prison sentence, or
- The arrest and/or instigation of criminal proceedings against two or more group members (not main principal) for an offence that would normally warrant a prison sentence, or
- Seizure of assets on two or more occasions or a substantial single seizure.

Dismantled

- The arrest and charge or instigation of criminal proceedings against the main principals for an offence which would normally warrant a prison sentence.

Figure 1 shows the activity against OCGs for the period January 2021- March 2021.

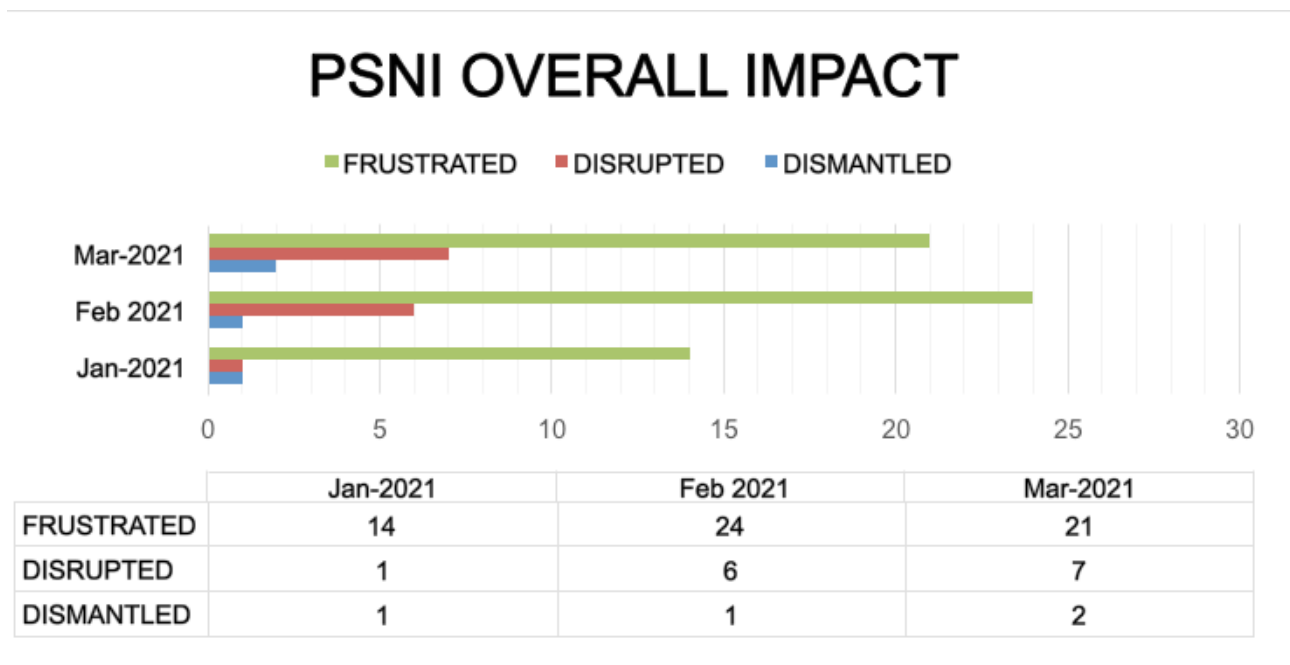


Figure 1

At present there are 72 OCGs for whom the PSNI has ownership. Whilst the number of OCGs dismantled has remained consistent during this reporting period, those frustrated and disrupted has increased significantly. This demonstrates our continued efforts in tackling the harm caused to communities by these groups.

In terms of the total number of disruptions during this quarter, 35% related to OCGs owned by the PCTF. This reinforces our ambition to target paramilitary activity and end the exploitation and harm it causes, thus helping us to achieve safe and confident communities.

Current Operating Environment

Whilst the pandemic created new opportunities to commit crime, another factor influencing the methods deployed by OCGs in the running of their operations is the final transition period of the UK's departure from the European Union. As travel routes are affected along the UK's Channel coast with stricter border controls this will impact the transportation of illegal drugs, firearms, people and illicit goods. The risks of smuggling across the Irish border are greater than the risks associated with doing so across the Irish Sea, however, logistical difficulties impact the profitability of smuggling across a sea border. Whilst NI OCGs currently make use of the common travel area, it may prove more appealing to UK based OCGs in the future.

Operation Venetic/Operation Pharmic

Operation PHARMIC is the PSNI response to the international investigation, Operation Venetic Criminal Investigation Branch's Rural Organised Crime Units are committed to investigating this operation.

The law enforcement takedown of the EncroChat encrypted communication network has provided one of the single greatest law enforcement opportunities to understand and **disrupt** organised criminality. It is clear that OCGs prefer to conceal their communications and identities through the use of secure communication platforms, including these Criminally Dedicated Secure Communication (CDSC) platforms and other Secure Message Applications (SMAs).

- Last year over 80 searches took place resulting in the arrest of 31 suspects. Significant work has continued since then with the submission of many files to the Public Prosecution Service. Since January, the PSNI has also carried out six searches resulting in the arrest of three suspects and has seized cash and assets amounting to over £700,000.
- In March 2021, the PSNI's Organised Crime Unit supported the Metropolitan Police Service in the arrest of a 21 year old man and carried out a search in the East Belfast area as part of the NCA-led operation, Operation Venetic. Police recovered approximately £40,000 in cash and a significant quantity of suspected Class B drugs with an estimated street value of £20,000. The man was arrested on suspicion of conspiring to supply class A drugs, conspiring to possess a firearm, possession of a class B controlled drug, possession of a class B controlled drug with intent to supply and possession of fireworks without a licence. He was later charged with all offences.

Paramilitary Activity

Republican and loyalist paramilitary OCGs continue to impact all areas of society in Northern Ireland. Currently around one third of Northern Ireland -based OCGs are paramilitary organisations or have suspected paramilitary links.

The PCTF are currently proactively investigating six paramilitary organisations.

- East Belfast UVF
- West Belfast UDA
- North and West Belfast INLA
- North West INLA
- South East Antrim UDA
- North Antrim UDA

These groups are involved in all forms of criminality including; paramilitary assaults and shootings, supply and distribution of controlled drugs, blackmail (extortion), intimidation, money lending and money laundering.

Despite the pressures of COVID-19, the number of searches and arrests conducted by the PCTF this year were among the highest since it was established.

ACTIVITY	Jan-2021	Feb-2021	Mar-2021
Arrests	4	13	24
Charge & Report	4	12	28
Searches	12	24	29
Drugs Seizures	4	10	11
Vehicle Seizures	2	0	2
Weapon Seizures	0	5	3
Cash Seizures	£10,000.00	£8,625.00	£9,580.00

Figure 2

Highlighted below are some examples of our most notable successes during this quarter by the PCTF in respect of paramilitary activity-

- In February, 50-60 men wearing balaclavas and face coverings gathered outside the Ballymac Centre in East Belfast in what was believed to be a show of strength linked to East Belfast UVF and an attempt to intimidate those inside. Following a significant investigation by the PSNI, 22 arrests were made under the Terrorism Act 2000 and 22 searches conducted. Of the 22 arrests, three men were charged overnight to Belfast Magistrates Court for the offences of Unlawful Assembly and Affray. The remaining 19 were released for report to the PPS. The arrests demonstrate the PSNI's commitment to tackling the harm associated with paramilitary activity.

- In March, five individuals linked to South East Antrim UDA were arrested on suspicion of conspiring to supply Class A drugs on a NCA led investigation supported by the PSNI working together as part of the PCTF. Those arrested are suspected of being high-ranking members of the paramilitary crime group.

The day of action involved over 80 officers from the NCA and PSNI. Six warrants were executed at addresses in Northern Ireland.

The arrests related to the seizure of cocaine which was recovered during searches. Following interviews by the PCTF, four men were charged with conspiracy to supply class A controlled drugs and remanded into custody. One remaining individual was released for report to the PPS. A quantity of cash estimated to be £3,000 was seized under Proceeds of Crime Act.

- The PCTF conducted a proactive covert investigation following an armed robbery series in Belfast and Antrim. Victims included cash in transit and cigarette delivery agents with a total loss of approximately £210,000. Suspects were linked to Belfast INLA and investigated as part of an ongoing operation. In February 2021, immediately following intelligence received, a containment was placed on a property in West Belfast and officers from PCTF, Armed Response Unit and Tactical Support Group searched and recovered a firearm and ammunition. A 24 year old man was arrested for possession of a firearm with intent to cause fear of violence, possession of ammunition in suspicious circumstances, possession of a Prohibited weapon, possession of class A controlled drugs, and possession of criminal property. This is part of an ongoing Paramilitary Crime Task Force-led investigation into criminal paramilitary activity.
- In March 2021, following a proactive covert investigation into Cash in Transit Robberies, an operation was executed to prevent a robbery taking place. A getaway vehicle with a gunman was in position outside retail premises in West Belfast awaiting a cash delivery that was due that morning. The area was heavily populated with adults and children due to local shopping amenities. A loaded revolver handgun was seized along with six rounds of ammunition. Given that the weapon was loaded and ready to fire these circumstances could have been tragic. Two people, aged 23 and 27, were arrested at the scene. A 30 year old man was subsequently arrested nearby. All three people were charged with conspiracy to commit robbery and possession of a firearm with intent to endanger life. Each person remains in custody following their remand at court due to the risk posed to our community.

OFFICIAL [PARTNERS]

Drugs

Figure 3, below, displays the number of drugs seizures made by officers from Organised Crime Unit for the previous financial year to date (PFYTD) compared to the current financial year to date (FYTD). In terms of value, there has been a marked increase in the amount seized during this reporting period.

	PFYTD (Apr - Mar)		FYTD (Apr - Mar)	
	Quantity	Value	Quantity	Value
Cocaine	11.65kg	656,550	24.5kg	1,769,000
Cannabis: Herbal	320kg	4,353,650	1,540.86kg	14,062,100
Cannabis: Resin	18.285kg	63,000	9kg 37,830	
Cannabis: Plants	1,397	690,000	98 49,000	
Heroin	40g	3,000	25.57g	3,125
Fentanyl	5 patches			
MDMA (kilos)	10.65kg	391,400	6.97kg	243,500
MDMA (tablets)	73 tablets	420	60 tablets	300
Amphetamine	45g	450	8.6kg	17,200
Ketamine			1.03kg	46,350
Diazepam	2,515 tablets	1,550	140,442 tablets	71,290
Pregabalin	1,580 tablets	1,550	1,196 tablets	1,190
Total (Value)		6,161,570		16,300,885

Figure 3

The graph below, published by PSNI Statistics Branch, shows the number of drug seizure incidents for the entire Service since 2006/2007. This demonstrates that the number of seizures has increased significantly during this time period. The level recorded in 2019/20 is more than three times that 2006/07. This coincides with a coordinated approach to drugs operations through JATF to tackle the importation of drugs into Northern Ireland, since its establishment in 2015.

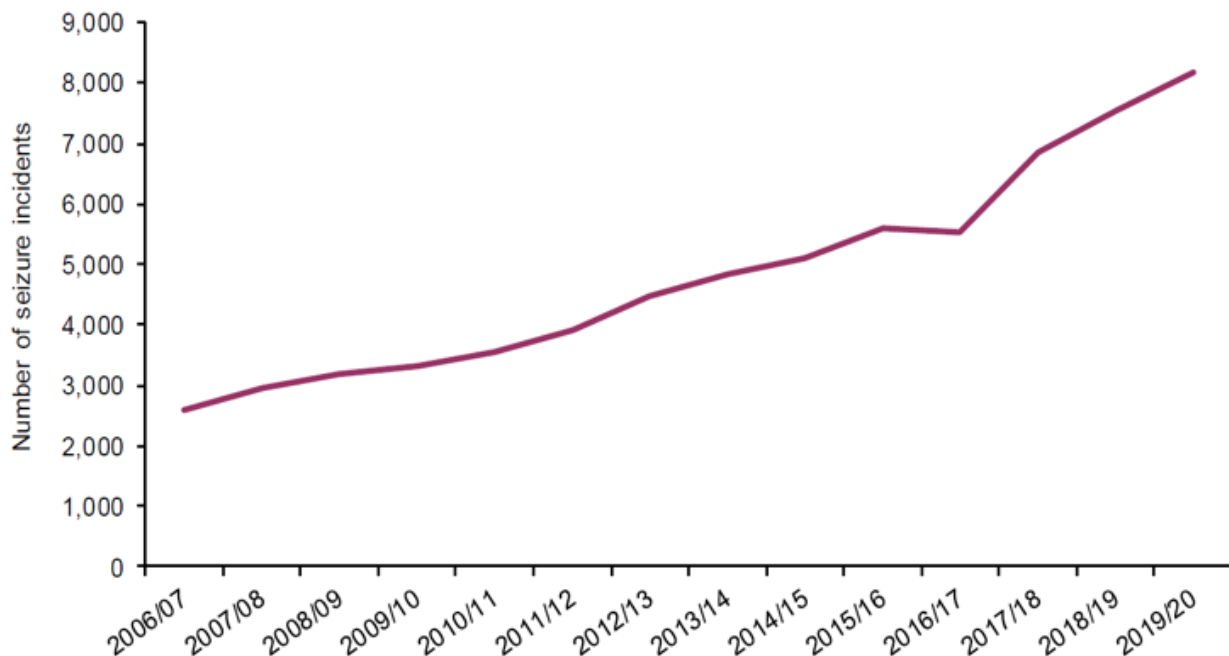


Figure 4

This information indicates that the drugs market in Northern Ireland is growing. The table below demonstrates the changes in the makeup of the type of drugs that have been seized, for example;

Drug Type	% of all drugs seizure incidents in 2012/13	% of all drugs seizure incidents in 2019/20
Cocaine	8.38%	13.61%
Other Class C	0.42%	11.26%
Benzodiazepines	10.86%	14.62%
Cannabis resin	16.47%	6.19%
Heroin	1.16%	2.94%

Figure 5

A significant area of offending for Organised Crime Groups is the trafficking and distribution of controlled drugs, most commonly cocaine, cannabis and prescription medication which are a major source of income and intrinsically linked to other areas of criminality.

The following examples have had an impact across Northern Ireland and the wider UK in respect of drug related activity:

- Officers from PSNI's Organised Crime Unit led a significant disruption linked to Operation Busine, which targets a Chinese Organised Crime Group who are involved primarily in the supply of cannabis and money laundering. By working closely with officers from UKBA to target supply routes from January 2021, this has resulted in 45kg of Cannabis being seized by UKBA with an additional 82kg of cannabis seized in a joint operation with the PSNI. This has been attributed to this Organised Crime Group and has resulted in the arrest of six nominals. In February 2021, five people were arrested for Possession and Attempted Possession with intent to supply class B drugs. Following an extensive investigation officers were aware of a number of parcels being intercepted to similar named people in Co. Down and Co. Antrim. A total of 63kg of seized Cannabis was attributed to these five people, with a potential street value of over £900,000. Properties were searched and two vehicles seized, effectively breaking the distribution cell operating across these areas. A large number of intercepted packages were identified as being linked to Birmingham. West Midlands Police seized a returned parcel for the Operation Busine cell and conducted follow up searches at an apartment in central Birmingham where they located the supply location. Cannabis, MDMA pills and packaging material were seized and two persons subsequently arrested. Significant documentation was located linking the Birmingham location to the Busine cell. Following this, the supply route via Yodel has been targeted by UK Border Force and further seizures made. Work continues between PSNI's Organised Crime Unit and West Midlands Police to identify other involved nominals and disrupt drug supply across the UK.
- Under the banner of Operation Fusion the PSNI's Organised Crime Unit work alongside Neighbourhood Policing Teams, Road Policing Unit, Belfast Harbour Police, HMRC and Driver Vehicle Agency to conduct proactive operations at Ports targeting the movement of illegal commodities throughout the common travel area. We work better together and as part of a collective effort to monitor and target criminals who seek to exploit the Common Travel area. Members of the Organised Crime Task Force (OCTF) EU Exit Crime Subgroup have demonstrated their commitment to disrupting those who seek to cause harm through the illegal importation and supply of drugs in Northern Ireland. Under the structures of the Organised Crime Task Force, the EU Exit Crime Subgroup brings together law enforcement and other statutory agencies operating in Northern Ireland and Ireland (also links with Scotland, England, Wales) with responsibility for tackling serious and organised crime associated with EU Exit. This has led to the following interventions - during February 2021, a £200 Fixed Penalty Notice was issued at Warrenpoint Harbour, two traffic related prosecutions which are being progressed by the DVA from Larne Port and HMRC have seized a HGV and issued two fines at Belfast Port. During March 2021, significant results followed from a stop at Larne Port, an offensive weapon and 34.4kg of suspected herbal cannabis with an estimated street value of £510,000 were seized from an HGV. During follow up searches approximately £3000 and 3000 Euros were seized. A 37 year old man has been charged and remanded. In this case, the illegal trafficking of drugs for profit is a very concerning issue. These criminal elements often operate as part of a wider OCG and prey on the most vulnerable in order to benefit themselves.
- In February 2021, PSNI's Organised Crime Unit assisted an NCA led operation

along with UK Border Force, HMRC, Harbour Police and Fire Service. As a result of this collaborative working an initial indication of 20Kg of cocaine worth an estimated street value of £1.6 million was seized. This was discovered hidden inside an empty fuel tank, being transported in a van which had just arrived into Belfast Port on a ferry from Birkenhead. A 39 year old man was subsequently charged and remanded in relation to detected offences.

- In March 2021, a proactive operation was initiated in NI, which led to the arrest of two persons in respect of a number of drug related offences. Members of this Organised Crime Group are suspected to have been involved in the importation of cocaine, a Class A drug, into Northern Ireland. A collaborative operation was initiated by the PSNI, engaging the support of the NCA and Belgian authorities to conduct the search of a vehicle in Belgium. As a result of this search, approximately 35Kg of suspected cocaine has been seized and two arrests have been executed. An initial assessment of the value of this drugs haul is £2.1 million pounds. It is clear that such a drugs haul would have gone on to realise much greater illegitimate wealth for those engaged in this crime and also pose a threat to the lives of those who purchase it on the streets of Northern Ireland. This investigation is a complex cross border investigation, which will continue to require the support of a range of Domestic and International partners.
- In March 2021, the PSNI carried out a search by virtue of a Misuse of Drugs Act warrant at a Haulage Yard in the area of Rathfriland Road, Newry. An articulated curtain sider lorry was searched and sophisticated purpose built hides inside pallets of Ceramic tiles were found in 24 pallets with 763 bags of suspected herbal cannabis located. This weighed approximately 916kg with an estimated street value of £13.74 million. A 34 year old man was arrested and has subsequently been charged and remanded into custody for a number of drug related offences.
- In March 2021, a proactive operation was initiated, which led to the seizure of £29,000 in cash and a small amount of Class A drugs. The cash was seized as further evidence of the proceeds of criminality by this crime group. They have, over the course of their criminality, engaged in the distribution of cocaine on the streets of Northern Ireland. Their lifestyles have been financially supported through such illegitimate earnings and the most recent attempt to frustrate such attempts by them to legitimise wealth, is indicative of the pursuit the investigation team and wider PSNI will continue to engage in, with the help and support of members of the community.

Continued overleaf

Criminal Use of Firearms

February 2021 has seen the highest number of shooting incidents (shootings or shots heard relating to the security situation including shots fired by security forces and paramilitary style attacks) with seven reported, which is the greatest number since March 2020.

In total, during this reporting period there were 13 shooting incidents. This relates to shootings utilising bullet firing firearms and not air weapons or antique firearms. These have been categorised as follows:

- 1 Murder
- 5 x Paramilitary Style Attacks
- 7 x Shooting incidents

There were 19 casualties of paramilitary style shootings during the last 12 months (March 2020 to February 2021), compared to 15 during the previous 12 months (March 2019 to February 2020).

Of these 19 shootings, the largest number occurred in Belfast (nine), followed by Derry City and Strabane (six). Of the six shootings in Derry City and Strabane, five of the six have occurred since the start of 2021.

In relation to the recovery and seizure of illegal firearms there have been 15 firearms found during the months of March 2020-February 2021, this compares to 33 found during the previous year of March 2019 to February 2020.

For this reporting period of January - March 2021 there have been seven firearms recovered by Police. These have included:

- 1 x 12 Gauge improvised single barrel slam fire shotgun
- 4 x suspected 12 Gauge improvised single barrel slam fire shotgun
- 1 x .22LR calibre Ruger semi-automatic rifle (a stolen firearm)
- 1 x suspected Webley type revolver

Continued overleaf

Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking

Offences deriving from Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking (MSHT) have been classed a National Priority Threat for Law Enforcement Agencies (LEA) since March 2017.

Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland (CJINI) has published its first in-depth assessment of how the criminal justice system in Northern Ireland deals with modern slavery and human trafficking in October 2020.

The inspection report examined the work carried out by the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) and the Public Prosecution Service of Northern Ireland (PPS) to investigate and prosecute cases of modern slavery and human trafficking, and how both organisations engaged with victims.

PSNI has been working with partners to put in place a number of recommendations arising from the report around training, analysis and a review of how we deal with child victims.

In this quarter there has been a decrease in demand for the Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking Unit (MSHTU) due to COVID-19 restrictions and the temporary closure of businesses, however the Unit have conducted:

- Nine screening assessments (a process to safeguard victims through early recognition and subsequent intervention).
- Received 43 referrals of potential victims of human trafficking (PVoT) from the National Referral Mechanism (NRM). The NRM is a system which offers the PVoT accommodation and support until the circumstances can be investigated further.

Of the 43 people referred through the NRM there were:

- 29 male adults
- 7 female adults
- 3 men under 18s and
- 4 women under 18s.
- 5 Domestic Servitude and
- 4 "unknown"

The specific forms of exploitation were:

- 6 Sexual Exploitation,
- 28 Labour Exploitation,
- 0 Securing Services

The nationalities of the 43 referrals are as follows: Eritrean (32), Romanian (2), Russian (1), Somalian (1), Ghanaian (1), Chinese (1), Syrian (1), British (1), Northern Irish (3)

Training

The PSNI has also developed online learning modules on Modern Slavery Human Trafficking. To date in excess of 5000 Police officers and staff have completed these training packages.

Continued overleaf

Cybercrime

PSNI have been engaged in the full remit of cyber activity as aligned with the national strategy to include Prevent, Prepare/Protect and Pursue.

Prevent

- Between 1 January 2021 and to 22 March 2021 the PSNI Cyber Prevent Officer has participated in 27 engagements, three of which were Cease and Desist notices. This entails the early identification of young people involved in low level offending or on the precipice of becoming engaged in cyber dependant offending. These alternative disposals have allowed for this level of criminality to be addressed, mitigated and remedied before the occurrence of any significant threat, risk or harm whilst avoiding criminalising the young people involved. This forms part of building a network of partner organisations and group who have a vested interest in the cyber prevent programme.
- Additionally, the PSNI Cyber Prevent Officer has delivered six Cyber Prevent presentations, which, due to COVID-19 restrictions, have taken place online with a variety of audiences including PSNI Officers, a Special School, University Students, NI's E-safety forum and the STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) network. The presentations have been designed and were delivered with the purpose of sharing the Cyber Prevent Key Messaging.
- The PSNI Cyber Prevent Officer adjudicated with the first Northern Ireland round of CyberFirst Schools Panel, partnering with Academia, Government and Industry. Schools from across Northern Ireland sought recognition for excellence in Computing and Cyber Security Education. The CyberFirst Schools/Colleges scheme certifies and promotes schools and colleges that share the NCSC's commitment to addressing the cyber skills gap and inspiring young people from all backgrounds to pursue a career in the field. As a result five of Northern Ireland's schools were successful with their application.
- PSNI's Cyber Prevent Officer is assisting with a Europe wide research project funded by the European Commission, looking into instances of the various types of negative online experiences that young people have been victim of, such as cyber bullying, fake viral posts, deceptive requests for personal details which are then used for nefarious reasons. Research data will be collated from countries across Europe and then used in the development of a gaming platform which is designed to help keep young people safe when online by providing a gamified decision making tool that illustrates the potential consequences of decisions made online.

Protect and Prepare

- During the same period PSNI Protect had 28 direct engagements with the local victims of cybercrime (businesses and individuals). Of those engagements four related directly to the dissemination of packages to companies and businesses who did not realise they were potentially vulnerable to a cyber-attack. These disseminations allowed companies to take remedial action to ensure the level of harm was minimised.
 - o Vulnerability notifications were made to local businesses following the publication by Microsoft of vulnerabilities in their Exchange Server.

- o Vulnerability notification was made to a public sector organisation when the sale of stolen credentials was advertised on the dark web.
- During the period PSNI Protect also engaged with 28 victims of cybercrime to assist with their recovery and to minimise the future exposure of those same companies/individuals. A further 10 Protect disseminations were actioned by the PSNI Protect Officer.
- PSNI Protect continue to engage with networks across public and private sectors for example, The Law Society and Community Pharmacy.
- PSNI have gone live with Police Cyber Alarm – this is a free tool to help member organizations understand and monitor malicious cyber activity. The service is made up of two parts; monitoring and vulnerability scanning. Monitoring refers to traffic seen by the organizations connection to the internet. It will detect and provide a report of suspected malicious activity. The vulnerability scanning is used to scan an organisations website and external IP addresses and provides regular reports of all known vulnerabilities.

Pursue – Investigations

For the reporting period January 2021-March 2021 the most impactful crime type has been the deployment of ransomware onto business networks. Ransomware effectively encrypts a network rendering all data, files and shares inaccessible to the business. The traditional criminal business model involves the threat actors demanding a bitcoin payment to provide keys to decrypt the information.

The Northern Ireland situation replicates that seen across the rest of the UK with businesses, charities and academic institutions targeted. The ransomware has not been consistent insofar as the variants deployed do not map to any particular pattern. The assessment of that would be that a number of criminal enterprises of various nationalities are behind the deployments. There is no evidence nor intelligence to suggest the Northern Ireland sector is being specifically targeted.

Nine significant ransomware attacks have taken place within the reporting period. Demands for decryption have varied from no engagement at all, to a demand for £639,000 to provide keys to allow the business to access their data. The victim's business areas in Northern Ireland include education, government, charity, construction and medical.

In terms of investigative response PSNI leads the investigation and chairs the incident response group for these attacks. The response includes representation from the National Cyber Security Centre and on occasion NCA.

Cash Seizures

The Proceeds of Crime Act 2002 (POCA) gives officers the power to seize cash over £1000 in any type of currency, cheques or bonds, if it is suspected that it has come from or is intended to be used to commit crime. This is a civil process that can run alongside a criminal investigation, however does not require the suspect to be charged or convicted of a crime. Amounts of less than £1,000 can be seized, for their evidential value, under PACE.

Additionally, if a criminal case collapses, any cash seized as evidence would normally have to be returned. If, however, the Police suspect that the cash is derived from crime or is intended for use in crime, it can be seized, detained and forfeited under POCA Sections 294 to 298. Cash seizure, detention and forfeiture is a civil procedure and can run parallel with a criminal investigation.

The number of seizures made by the PSNI has fluctuated over the last five years with an overall decline, with an average of 5.8 seizures per month in 2020/21 compared to 9.5 per month in 2019/20. However, despite this decrease which in 2020/21 can largely be attributed to Covid-19, the average value of cash seizures has increased over the last five years to a high in 2020/21 of £14,484 (with a total of £1,013,928.13). This notable increase in the average value of cash seized per seizure incident illustrates that the seizures this year have been more focused, leading to better quality results overall.

Economic Crime Unit (ECU) will also conduct restraint and confiscation investigations, which are aimed at the highest level organised criminal. When criminal assets are identified the Economic Crime Unit use the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002 to restrain all assets that may subsequently be used for the purpose of confiscation. Restraint Order is a High Court order designed to secure and preserve assets that may go towards satisfying any subsequent confiscation order. They limit how a defendant/alleged offender can deal with their property and they are generally not allowed to dispose of the property without leave of the High Court. Confiscation is the power that the Crown Court has to make orders depriving convicted offenders of their assets if it is proven that the offender has benefited from their Criminal Conduct.

Figure 6 (overleaf) shows the quantity and value of restraint, confiscation orders and POCA cash seizures made by the PSNI during this and the previous financial year to date:

Number and Value of Restraint Orders, Confiscation Orders and POCA Cash Seizures				
	PFYTD (April 19-Mar 20)		FYTD (Apr 20-Mar 21)	
	Quantity	Value	Quantity	Value
Restraint Orders	8	£1,822,836.00	21	£4,339,732.13
Confiscation Orders	12	£1,343,642.17	14	£499,795.97
POCA Cash Seizures	114	£1,013,484.66	70	£1,013,928.23
Total (Value)		£4,179,962.83		£5,853,456.33

Figure 6

- In March 2021 PSNI's Economic Crime Unit launched a money laundering investigation following the detection of a 29 year old man and 33 year old woman in Belfast in possession of £10,000 cannabis and cash. Follow up searches discovered a further £80,000. A restraint order has been successfully applied for under Proceeds of Crime Act 2002. Assets include bank accounts containing £24,000, cash of £84,000 and vehicles valued at £18,000.
- An OCG was identified in March 2018 following the report from one of the banking institutions of a fraud amounting to approximately £500,000. The fraud involved the suspect ringing the bank and gaining enough information to access the bank accounts of a company based in Co. Wicklow. In total 32 beneficiaries were identified. This is a protracted investigation led by the PSNI's Economic Crime Unit and in January 2021 eight files were submitted to the PPS and during February 2021 and March 2021 five suspects were interviewed in relation to the investigation which has further disrupted their activity.
- Economic Crime Unit initiated a standalone money laundering investigation launched in 2018, focused on the financial criminal activity of a known nominal operating across the UK and Ireland and on an international level which has involved collaborative working with both the NCA and An Garda Síochána. It has been established that there has been money laundering over a six year period totalling £215 million through over 60 companies. £12 million has been laundered through EU Member States, of which around £1.4 million has been laundered in the Republic of Ireland. A restraining order is in place with numerous properties restrained across the UK. 18 suspects have been arrested and interviewed. In December 2020, 82 production orders were granted and in January 2021-February 2021 60 of the orders were executed across GB and 22 in NI.
- A Confiscation Order was made on 22nd March 2021 at Belfast Crown Court in the sum of £144,820.00. Circumstances are that in February 2018 we conducted simultaneous searches of two properties linked to a 50 year old man under Drugs and POCA legislation. During the search a substantial amount of cash was found which in total amounted to £128,030.00 in sterling and €1,850.00 in Euros. £100,000.00 of the sterling was located in a shoe box in the attic of the property. The suspect was arrested for money laundering offences at his business premises. Phone examinations revealed hundreds of conversations regarding the sale and supply of anabolic steroids in contravention of the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 and it became evident that the suspect was a major supplier of anabolic steroids in

the Greater Belfast area and the money found during the search of his home was the proceeds of this illegal activity. During interview the suspect denied all allegations. In June 2020 the defendant appeared at Belfast Crown Court and entered a plea of guilty to Counts of Supplying a Class C Controlled Drug and Possessing Criminal Property. He received a sentence of 16 months suspended for two years. A restraint and confiscation case continued and on 22nd March 2021 a Confiscation Order was made at Belfast Crown Court in the sum of £144,820.00.

Serious Organised Acquisitive Crime

Serious and Organised Acquisitive Crime is:

“Crime which is organised (involves control and planning), involves more than one person and includes the following crime types; armed robbery, family gold, agriculture/rural crime, wildlife and environmental crime, vehicle crime, freight crime, metal theft, counterfeit currency, kidnap, and illegal money lending.”

The vast majority of Serious and organised Acquisitive Crime is committed by Mobile Organised Crime Gangs (MOCGs).

Mobile Organised Crime Gangs

Mobile Organised Crime Gangs are travelling groups of professional criminals involved in acquisitive crime, primarily domestic burglary, who utilise the road network to offend over a broad geographic area.

The JATF provides a forum to share information with AGS and co-ordinate activity against the most prolific MOCGs who operate cross border. This collaborative working has led to a number of arrests and successful convictions.

Below are two recent successful outcomes-

- A prolific Mobile Organised Crime Gang offender is known to PSNI for specifically targeting elderly, vulnerable victims for burglary, aggravated burglary and distraction type offences. The principal works mainly with immediate family including his sons. Following his release from prison in late 2020, a series of domestic burglaries were noted in the Fermanagh and Monaghan areas in January 2021 which bore his particular MO. Analytical work was able to identify his current vehicle and false plates being used. When the vehicle returned to Fermanagh, it was picked up and live alerted Interceptors and local policing teams were tasked to stop the vehicle. Having failed to stop, the vehicle traveled into the Republic of Ireland, where after a lengthy pursuit it was stopped by An Garda Síochána and the principal and his two sons arrested. The offender was wanted and returned to prison to serve an outstanding sentence and will be dealt with in Northern Ireland on his release. The sons returned to NI where one was subsequently arrested for these and other burglary/vehicle theft offences and remains in prison.
- A prolific member of a Mobile Organised Crime Gang based in Newry, with links to Belfast and Derry/Londonderry was linked to burglaries province wide and in the Republic of Ireland. The man was arrested in late March 2021 after burglaries in the Templepatrick and Belfast area. The vehicle used was pursued by the PSNI Auto Crime Team and crashed outside Lisburn – the offenders made good their escape however the suspect’s passport was recovered from the vehicle ultimately linking him to the incident.

Fraud

Throughout 2020 and early 2021 there has been a significant rise in the numbers of reported fraud offences in Northern Ireland.

- Following receipt of a Suspicious Activity Report in May 2020, which indicated financial elder abuse, officers attached to PSNI's Economic Crime Unit commenced an investigation. The victim was identified as a 73 year old man, assessed to be an adult at risk with self-identified mental health issues. Following a thorough investigation the suspect, a 19 year old man was interviewed and charged in December 2020 with Fraud by Abuse of Position, Fraud by False Representation and Money Laundering offences, which were committed between July 2019 and May 2020. The criminal benefit was calculated to be approximately £60,000. The defendant appeared in court in January 2021 following which, a full file was submitted to the Public Prosecution Service. The Suspicious Activity Report stopped the financial abuse and instigated the involvement of other agencies in the elderly man's care with his quality of life improved immeasurably.
- During the months of February and March 2021 PSNI's Organised Crime Unit assisted a HMRC led Operation in respect of a fuel laundering Operation based in North Belfast. As a result of this a laundering site has now been dismantled which HMRC believe a potential loss in revenue was estimated to be £20 million. Red diesel was seized along with the container, pumps and generator.
- **Op Grandeval-** Since January 2020 the Economic Crime Unit have been investigating a series of over 150 incidents of fraud where the suspects target the elderly and vulnerable, alleging to be Police officers and requesting the money, or jewellery is left outside their house for safe keeping; it is subsequently stolen.

Victims are placed in fear by the offenders who often threaten them with arrest/ house searches as a method of discouraging them from contacting friends or family.

Officers from ECU have arrested and charged or reported eight suspects in relation to this crime series and are trying to link the suspects to as many of the offences as possible. It is believed that there are other suspects as yet unidentified.

Incidents up to the 22nd March had predominantly been focused in the Greater Belfast area however recent incidents have noted a shift with 11 of the 51 occurring in E District (Lurgan), seven in L District (Antrim), five in B District (Lisburn) and five in K District (Larne/Ballymena).

The map below shows the geographic range of all of the Op Grandeval incidents with those occurring from 23 March 2021–9 April 2021 highlighted in black.

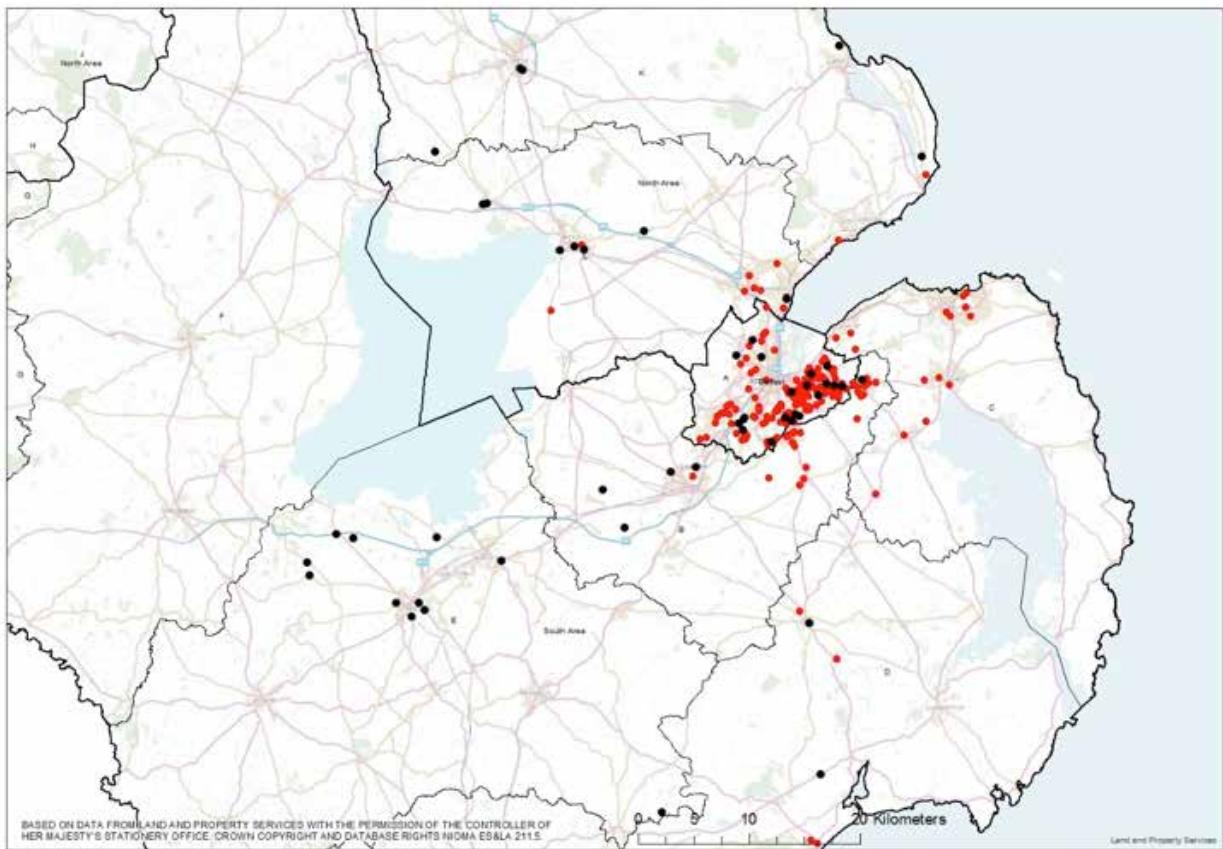


Figure 7

The victims receiving these calls have all been vulnerable due to age however some are more vulnerable than others with dementia and alzheimer's adding to the victims' vulnerability. The perception of elderly victims keeping large amounts of cash at home and possibly family heirlooms such as jewellery etc. is highlighted in the number of victims being questioned over having large amounts of cash and/or jewellery at home.

Numerous searches and arrests have taken place over the course of the year to disrupt this Organised Crime Group.

Leaflets have been developed and issued to groups that provide services to the elderly and vulnerable to raise awareness that this is a scam, and that Police would never ask for money, bank details or valuables. In addition there have been press releases issued in papers, social media and radio channels. This increased awareness has generated more calls to Police were the victim has fortunately been aware that this is a scam and as a result they have not provided any money to the fraudster. To reinforce the message, Economic Crime Unit recently undertook a week long media campaign focused upon a prevention and awareness, for inclusion on television, radio and social media.

Cash in Transit Robbery

Whilst Cash in transit robbery continues to be a rare occurrence in Northern Ireland the following incident occurred during this quarter:

- In January 2021 a cash in transit driver was carrying out a cash delivery to a local store when he was attacked with a crowbar on Great Victoria Street, Belfast. A cash box was stolen containing £3,480 and suspects made off in a vehicle from the scene. Partnership working between PSNI and G4S led police to attend a suspect address, during which officers from PSNI's Criminal Investigation Department located the stolen cash box. Three suspects located at the address were arrested on suspicion of robbery and drugs offences.

Information was received from the public, which led to a vehicle being stopped and two further suspects arrested. The quick initial response by PSNI resulted in the apprehension of five suspects on suspicion of Serious Crime and prevented further harm to the public.

Blackmail

"Sextortion" Cyber enabled Blackmail (Op Corin) saw a sharp increase from April 2020 onwards and the process of updating the Service response to "Sextortion" incidents was commenced in October 2020 with a three stage approach: The revision/simplification of Information to Police first responders, revamping the information on PSNI Intranet and a Revised Media Strategy.

Between January 2021-March 2021 all three of these objectives were completed with a significant media campaign published across all platforms on 3rd March 2021 with the tag line #StopSextortionNI for Social Media Platforms. A live Q&A on Instagram was also held on 29th January 2021 to engage with the main victim demographic to provide information and advice on "Sextortion".

An improved reporting mechanism has provided analysts with a significant data set from which to complete a Problem Profile on "Sextortion" Cyber-Enabled Blackmail, which has been shared across the Service.

Further to this an ongoing media campaign is increasing public awareness of the offence. These have led to a sharp increase in reporting during January 2021-February 2021 as can be seen from the below graph.

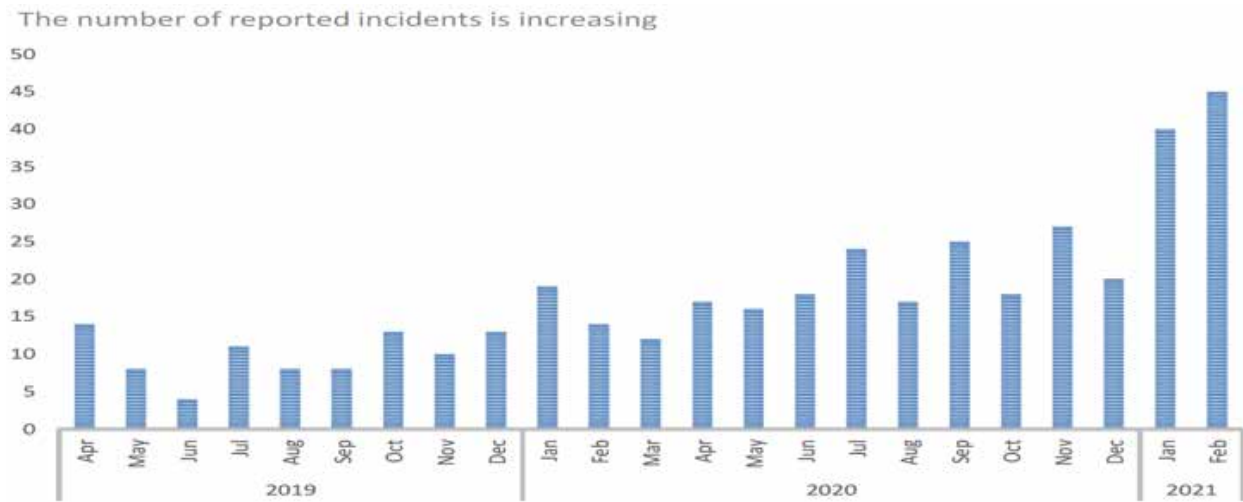


Figure 8

A much larger piece of work is ongoing to shift the focus away from investigative to the Prevent and Protect sphere, where it is hoped that much progress can be made to counterbalance the difficulty in obtaining Criminal Justice outcomes due to the vast majority of "Sextortion" perpetrators being outside NI/UK jurisdiction.



For further information visit:
psni.police.uk

