

Policing Rural Crime: The Case of the NSW Police Force Rural Crime Prevention Team

Cameron Whiteside

Detective Chief Inspector-State Rural Crime Coordinator
NSW Police Force, Rural Crime Prevention Team
Australia

Ann Brennan

Policy and Project Officer
NSW Police Force, Rural Crime Prevention Team
Australia

Kyle Mulrooney (ORCID: 0000-0003-1457-274X)

Senior Lecturer in Criminology, Co-director Centre for Rural Criminology
School of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences
University of New England, Australia

Correspondence: kmulroon@une.edu.au



Abstract

The NSW Police Force Rural Crime Prevention Team (RCPT) was created to prevent, disrupt, and respond to crimes that impact specifically on the agricultural, pastoral and aquaculture industries. Since its inception in early 2018, the team has developed and delivered a number of novel and innovative policing initiatives which seek to make rural communities safer and increase their resilience. In this paper, we offer practical insights on a number of these developments. Specifically, we will examine innovations deployed in relation to rural policing across five key areas, including 1) investigating rural crime within New South Wales and identifying interstate links and trends; 2) identifying inhibitors within legislation and policy impacting the ability of Law Enforcement Agencies to prevent, disrupt and respond to rural crime; 3) enhancing the education and knowledge of Law Enforcement Officers regarding rural crime; 4) raising the public awareness of rural crime and increasing community engagement with relevant stakeholders within rural communities and industries; and, finally, 5) collaborating and engaging with academic research/higher education toward the shared goal of safe rural spaces. We conclude the paper by discussing these practical developments in the context of farm crime research and, more specifically, how these collective efforts may serve to address established limitations and gaps in the policing and prevention of crime in rural spaces.

Keywords: rural; rural crime; farm crime; policing; rural policing; New South Wales

The state of New South Wales (from here on NSW) in Australia has a long history of rural policing spanning over 75 years (see McKechnie, 2019). Beginning with the establishment of the Central Police Stock Squad in 1947, the New South Wales Police Force (from here on NSW Police Force) has evolved and redefined the way they perceive, target, and prevent rural crime. The most recent effort, the advent of the NSW Police Force Rural Crime Prevention Team (from here on RCPT) in early 2018, evidences the professionalisation of rural policing in NSW through a renewed, sustained, and sophisticated focus on preventing, disrupting, and responding to crimes that impact specifically on the agricultural, pastoral and aquaculture industries (Whiteside et al, 2022). Since its inception, the RCPT developed and delivered a number of novel and innovative policing initiatives which seek to make rural communities safer and increase their resilience.

In this article, we offer practical insights into a number of these developments. First, we briefly account for the history and development of rural crime policing in NSW up to the creation of the RCPT. Next, we examine key innovations deployed by the RCPT to combat rural crime across five key areas, including 1) investigating rural crime within New South Wales and identifying interstate links and trends; 2) identifying inhibitors within legislation and policy impacting the ability of Law Enforcement Agencies (from here on LEA) to prevent, disrupt and respond to rural crime; 3) enhancing the education and knowledge of Law Enforcement Officers regarding rural crime; 4) raising public awareness of rural crime and increasing community engagement with relevant stakeholders within rural communities and industries; and, finally, 5) collaborating and engaging with academic research/higher education toward the shared goal of safe rural spaces. We conclude the paper by discussing these practical developments in the context of rural criminological research and, more specifically, how these collective efforts may serve to address established limitations and gaps in the policing and prevention of crime in rural spaces.

The History of Rural Policing in NSW

On 15 January 1947 the Central Police Stock Squad, NSW Police Force, was established to investigate stock theft in NSW. These officers were not only trained in criminal investigation but they were also expected to have a sound knowledge of animal husbandry, wool classing and stock and station management. During the 1970s the Stock Squad was stationed at the Flemington Police Station and was comprised of two Detective Sergeants and four Detective Constables. Officers attached to the Stock Squad were required to attend the Flemington, Parramatta and Camden stock sales on a regular basis to proactively detect any illegal disposal of stolen stock or animal cruelty offences.

During the 1980's, the Stock Squad was dispersed and sometime later a small team of officers created the Rural Crime Project Team. This informal group assisted with coordinating targeted statewide operations focusing on stock theft. For example, formed to address the high incidence of livestock theft in New South Wales, in the 1990's Operation Nicaragua aimed to detect, intercept, and successfully prosecute those responsible for livestock theft through coordinated efforts held within Regional NSW.

As the value of stock and grain continued to increase, rural crime incidents also increased which raised concerns from rural communities and industries. In March 2000, the Minister for Police, Minister for Agriculture, and the President of the NSW Farmers Association held a meeting and created a group to identify strategies to address these concerns. This group was called the NSW Pastoral and Agricultural Crime Working Party (now known as the Rural Crime Advisory Group). The Working Party was comprised of representatives from the NSW Police Force, Rural Lands Protection Boards, NSW Farmers' Association, the Ministry for Police, and the Office of the Minister for Agriculture. The Working Party's brief was to consider crimes that are perpetrated against primary producers, such as stock theft, wool theft, chemical theft, and trespass for the purpose of hunting.

A significant outcome from the Working Party was the recommendation to create 32 specialist Rural Crime Investigators (from here on RCI). More specifically, the recommendation supported the creation of one RCI position to be located at each nonmetropolitan Local Area Commands (now known as Police Districts and Police Area Commands) within NSW. This initiative stemmed from rural communities indicating that they could work more effectively with police if they could speak with officers who were dedicated to and knowledgeable about rural issues. With this momentum, in 2002, 32 RCI positions were created. These officers were designated Detectives who had a rural background such as shearers, skilled horsemen and/or had a long history of working on family rural properties.

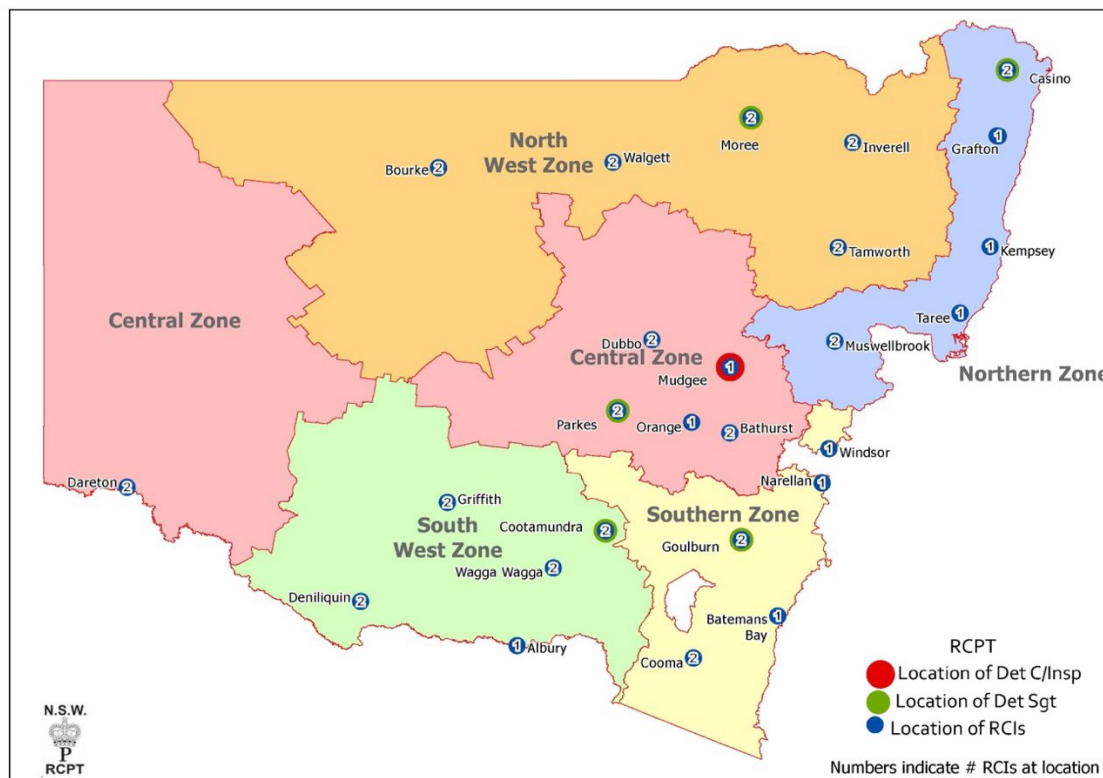
The RCIs were tasked to provide direction, support and advice to general police in relation to rural crime detection, investigation and prevention; liaise with Intelligence Officers and other Criminal Investigators to disseminate relevant information and increase the effectiveness of investigations; monitor rural crime trends; professionally investigate reported rural crime offences; regularly inspect abattoirs, saleyards, Wool, Hide & Skin Dealers, and Stock and Station Agents for irregularities and offences against legislation; actively monitor the transportation of livestock with continual inspections of documentation; deliver police station based Rural Crime Field Training to increase awareness of rural crime issues across all police; and work together to continually break down the barriers which have resulted in the reluctance by the rural community to report rural crime.

The RCIs, in conjunction with the Department of Primary Industries, developed a specialised training course to enhance their ability to investigate rural crime which has now expanded to a course recognised nationally. These specialised officers also developed a horse-riding course specifically for officers training to use horses during a rural crime investigation. In 2010, a full-time Rural Crime Intelligence Analyst position was created to provide analytical support for the RCIs to assist with their criminal investigations, identify trends and establish networks with relevant rural stakeholders. In 2014, the New South Police Force updated the definition of rural crime to provide a greater understanding for both NSW Police officers and members of the community. The new definition is: *“Incidents of crime that impact on the function of the pastoral, agricultural and aquaculture industries”*.

On 25 February 2016, the Deputy Premier and Minister for Justice and Police called for a review to be conducted, specifically focusing on stock theft, rural trespass and illegal hunting. This review was conducted by retired Assistant Commissioner Steve Bradshaw of the NSW Police Force. On 7 June 2016, Steve Bradshaw delivered the final report – ‘NSW Stock Theft and Trespass Review’ (Bradshaw, 2016). Of the 22 recommendations, a variety referred to changes to the current Police structures and processes. However, the most significant recommendations were the establishment of a standalone ‘Stock Squad’, with a rank structure, reporting to an Assistant Commissioner of Police, and dedicated intelligence analysts, and for Rural Crime Investigators to be transferred to the new standalone squad and their numbers to be enhanced.

Figure 1

RCPT Zones and Locations in New South Wales



In December 2017 the formation of the RPCT was announced by the NSW Police Force. The team was originally allocated 46 officers. As of 2022, the RCPT has increased to 53 members, including one Detective Chief Inspector – State Rural Crime Coordinator, based at Mudgee; five Detective Sergeants – Rural Crime Zone Coordinators, based at Parkes, Moree, Casino, Goulburn and Cootamundra; 43 Detective Senior Constables - RCIs at 26 nonmetropolitan locations; three Rural Crime Intelligence Analysts (civilian), based at Parkes, Casino and Cootamundra; and, one Rural Crime Policy and Projects Officer (civilian) based at Dubbo.

Investigating Rural Crime and Responding to Rural Crime

The operational officers within the RCPT are experts within the NSW Police Force, specifically trained to investigate rural crime, maintain a high level of knowledge regarding legislation pertinent to crimes committed against rural industries and established to safeguard these industries. Likewise, the Intelligence Analysts and the Policy and Projects Officer, who serve as a support mechanism for the RCPT to complement the overall response to rural crime, have been trained to analyse and research crime trends, technology, policy, legislation and many more aspects impacting rural industries. In short, the RCPT are experts in preventing and responding to crimes that impact on the function of the pastoral, agricultural and aquaculture industries, and this extends to their specialised training outlined below.

The RCIs duties require both reactive and proactive actions to target rural crime. Not only do they respond to crime reported directly to them by victims, but they also conduct proactive duties such as attending and conducting inspections at livestock saleyards, goat depots, Stock and Station agents, clearance sales, livestock carriers and Wool, Hide and Skin Dealers. These inspections ensure compliance with various legislation and assist with identifying stolen livestock and property and animal cruelty issues. The RCIs also review and assess all incidents of stock theft that are not reported directly to a member of the RCPT to ensure that the same level of service is provided to all farmers, no matter where they are located within the state.

The RCIs have a strong working relationship with their counterparts in other states and territories. This relationship has identified ‘corridors’ across state borders used by offenders to move stolen rural property and livestock. For example, several RCPT officers recently supported the Northern Territory Police in response to an alleged large-scale stock theft incident. The RCPT examined over 500 head of cattle within NSW in an attempt to identify some of the stolen livestock from a Northern Territory property and provided investigative support regarding several suspects.

The RCPT conduct multiple investigations and operations across regional NSW targeting offences such as rural stealing, stock theft, break-and-enter, illegal hunting, trespass, fraud, animal cruelty and malicious damage. Operations are also implemented to target compliance with various legislation including the Biosecurity Act, Local Land Services Act and Games & Feral Animal Control Act. Examples of recent investigations include: the recovering of over \$100,000 of stolen rural equipment and subsequent arrest and charge of offenders; recovery of stolen livestock trailers and arrest of offenders; arrest of an offender for animal cruelty and biosecurity offences; arrest and charge of an offender who committed multiple fraud offences targeting farmers across NSW; charge of hunters for illegal hunting, aggravated trespassing and dog offences; recovery of 52 out of 65 stolen goats and charge of an offender with stock theft, animal cruelty, trespassing and hunting offences after a complex investigation.

The RCPT deals with complex crimes that include a range of offences, often committed across vast distances of space, and thus require specialised expertise in rural crimes and industry. The RCPT also utilise their strong working relationship with other agencies to develop joint investigations and share resources and information to target rural crime offenders. Based on information from the community and other agencies, these relationships provide police with a broader picture of the incident and offenders. This allows the RCPT to develop specialised operations and to determine the appropriate tactic and resources required to target offenders. For example, in March 2019, the RCPT received reports of multiple trespassing, livestock theft (deer) and illegal hunting offences after a young child chased several people from a private property. The child located three pet stags shot and decapitated on the property. The officers identified four suspects by utilising a multi-agency approach to this investigation, with assistance from external agencies.

In this case, the RCIs employed covert tactics, extensive intelligence analysis and sophisticated social media scene comparisons, identifying the offenders who were responsible for various other offences. The RCPT executed simultaneous search warrants some 300 kilometres from where the offences were alleged to have been committed, seizing numerous exhibits, including firearms. The offenders were charged with a number of offences including killing cattle with intent to steal; firing a firearm into closed lands; hunting game animal on private land without consent; and stealing cattle. These offences were committed across three Police Districts and two Police Regions.

The RCPT includes officers who have expert horse and motorbike riding skills, boat navigation abilities and are trained to use all-terrain vehicles. The RCPT often use these skills during stock theft and illegal hunting investigations. For example, in June 2020, a farmer reported the theft of livestock from his property. After assessing the report, RCIs obtained supporting evidence and identified several additional victims. RCIs commenced a complex investigation and were able to identify a suspect residing in southern NSW. Specifically, the RCPT applied for and were granted a search warrant for the offender's property. Over a three-day period, with the coordinated assistance of other members of the RCPT, a total of 50 cattle and over 3500 sheep were processed, and 13 sheep were identified as belonging to one of the victims. During the process, investigators identified a co-accused. The offender was charged with 52 offences and the co-accused was charged with 29 offences relating to stock theft and related matters.

The RCPT also develop and implement operations to target rural crime not only within NSW but on a national level. This strategy is to highlight that rural crime has no borders and that offenders and members of the public are aware that all LEAs will work together to ensure rural crime offenders are targeted in all states and territories across Australia. One example of this initiative is Operation Stock Check which targets the prevention, disruption, and response to the movement of stolen livestock. Launched in 2020, the RCPT developed and implemented this operation, initially across regional NSW, and then expanded the strategy across several state and territory borders. Operation Stock Check is a

high-visibility strategy which allows officers to inspect vehicles carrying livestock to identify and target those which may have been stolen.

Additionally, the aim of Operation Stock Check is to give local police the training, confidence and opportunity to make Livestock Carrier Inspections a normal part of policing in country areas, similar to conducting a Random Breath Test. The RCPT created a training page on their local intranet site which provides all Police with relevant information (both written and visual) to enhance their ability and knowledge to conduct Livestock Carrier Inspections. The RCPT also coordinated a national social media campaign to raise community awareness of the joint effort to focus on rural crime.

Improving Policy and Legislation

The RCPT examines and highlights any deficiency that may occur over time regarding policies and legislation to ensure enforcement and compliance agencies can perform their role to the maximum standard. This is important to ensure that rural stakeholders are provided clear and concise instructions so they understand how to comply with the law, where to go to seek guidance and what will occur if they do not comply. In 2020, a Police Prosecutor was seconded to the RCPT to undertake a special project to explore the legal advice and advocacy needed to achieve the NSW Police Force objectives and provide better outcomes for the rural community. During this project, it became evident that significant legislative and policy amendments were required. The volume and complexity of the legislation governing landowners, primary producers, livestock transport and various other rural industries cannot be overstated.

That complexity is exacerbated by national policies which are implemented and regulated in different ways in each state and territory in Australia. This was particularly evident during Operation Stock Check, driven by the RCPT, to prevent and disrupt the movement of stolen livestock. During the implementation stage of this operation, it was identified that some LEAs did not have the legal authority to stop a livestock transporter. Furthermore, varying livestock movement documentation is required between each state/territory and there are conflicting regulations regarding responsibility during the movement of livestock.

To begin to address some of the regulations, policies, and processes, the RCPT has made representations for consideration to highlight and propose amendments to provide both LEAs and the general community a clearer direction. One of these, for instance, is determining the roles and responsibilities of relevant agencies when responding to straying stock on public roads. Currently, there is confusion within the community and agencies as to who should be notified, who should attend, and the description of their role. Another submission dealt with the amalgamation of legislation which refers to the movement of livestock. Information regarding the correct process for moving livestock is contained within various Acts and Regulations. Each Act and Regulation can be interpreted differently and can be conflicting.

Closely related to this is the clarification of exemptions and definitions regarding livestock movement. Currently, there are many exemptions regarding the requirements when moving certain livestock. Conflicting legislation and a lack of clarity around exemptions not only make it confusing for the community but also makes it difficult to enforce the legislation. Further representations have been forwarded for consideration pertaining to feral animals and to amend legislation to assist with deterring the illegal harvesting of feral animals.

Enhancing Education and Knowledge

Subject matter expertise is paramount in policing rural crime. Certain crimes, such as stock theft for example, require knowledge of breeds and associated values, the methods utilised by offenders to steal, transport and offload stock and the pertinent legislation, among other considerations. Illegal hunting requires similar knowledge of offender patterns and behaviours and legislative awareness, as well as a command of which agencies to liaise with when managing and responding to certain offences (i.e., NSW Department of Primary Industries).

Similar specialised considerations arise with other rural crimes, including the theft of oysters, farm machinery, water, and so on. This knowledge and expertise are necessary not only for the purposes of prevention, responding to and clearing rural crime but also for public confidence. Successive farm crime surveys conducted in Australia have noted specifically that a primary reason farmers do not report crime is a perception that the police are unable to do anything about it, and this perception relates to an awareness among farmers of the reality of rural policing (e.g., response times; difficulty in gathering evidence) and concerns that the police lack the necessary cultural knowledge and practical expertise (see Barclay, 2015; Barclay 2016; Harkness, 2016; Mulrooney, 2021; Harkness, 2021).

The RCPT, in conjunction with the NSW Department of Primary Industries, has developed a Nationally Accredited Rural Crime Investigation Course. This course provides details on relevant legislation, hands-on training regarding the safe handling of livestock, and it outlines correct procedures required during a rural crime investigation, animal welfare practices/requirements and processes for work, health and safety. This course is mandatory for all members of the RCPT and is delivered every two years. Invitations are also extended to interstate LEAs to participate in this training which is now considered the benchmark for rural crime investigation education within Australia. Officers from Northern Territory, Western Australia, Victoria, Queensland and even New Zealand have previously attended this training.

The RCPT also has more specialised skills training for their officers, which often relates to the cultural and geographical context in which they police. One specialised course includes the Horseback Accredited Rural Crime Investigator (HARCI). Prior to any RCI riding a horse during a police operation, they must be accredited by a HARCI Assessor. A

HARCI Assessor is an experienced stockman/horseman and must be approved by the NSW Police Force Corporate Sponsor for Rural Crime to be an Assessor. An RCI must demonstrate to the Assessor that they are competent in the following: Catch, Preparation & Groom, Saddle & Bridle, Trot Circle, Canter Circle/Figure 8, Jump Cavaletti (i.e., small jumps), Hand Gallop on Pattern (faster than a cantor but slower than a full gallop), Open/Shut a Gate Whilst Mounted and Crack Stockwhip Whilst Mounted. RCIs may also choose to participate in any of the following training to further enhance their skills to investigate rural crime: trail bikes, all-terrain vehicle (ATV), bee keeping, small boats and chemical card (farm related chemicals).

While the RCPT are experts in rural crime, given the sheer geographic area of NSW, the policing of rural crime depends significantly on local uniformed officers having awareness of and knowledge in these issues as well. For example, Operation Stock Check depends on uniformed officers stopping vehicles transporting stock and knowing exactly what to look for in terms of legal compliance as well as in cases of the transportation of stolen stock. To improve the practical and cultural knowledge of police officers across the NSW Police Force on rural crime, internal rural crime educational programs have been developed and delivered and are currently being updated by the RCPT.

The updated program consists of two modules: online and face-to-face. All officers within regional NSW are encouraged to complete the education program. The RCPT has developed the program to ensure it increases the understanding of what rural crime is, how to correctly record crime incidents and how to interact with rural crime victims, as well as to provide basic knowledge on how to investigate rural crime, the resources and agencies available to assist with investigations and the various key fundamental aspects necessary to improve the services provided to rural communities. This type of training is especially important, not only as a means to aid in the prevention and response to rural crime but also in the capacity to better serve victims of rural crime.

The RCPT have also developed key rural crime Six Minute Intensive Training (SMIT) resources to improve the operational knowledge of police of all ranks. SMITs are developed by creating a corresponding scenario and reinforcing the appropriate process, resources, and legislation. The scenarios include topics such as stock theft and animal cruelty. The SMITs are available for all officers via the NSW Police Force intranet and are also utilised by Education & Development Officers (EDO) in the NSW Police Force.

Other resources utilised by the RCPT to increase the ability for all police officers to understand rural crime and provide a greater level of customer service to the rural community include *MicroLearn* – creating short direct videos. These videos are created by the RCPT and the NSW Police Force internal media unit. They provide specific information delivered in a visual format to educate the participants on key topics. These short videos can be delivered via the Police Education Training Environment (PETE) and are available on the Police Intranet. PETE is a web-based learning platform that allows officers to self-regulate their

education and provides management direct access to monitor the progress of all officers across the state. The RCPT utilise PETE to ensure officers have access to relevant rural crime training resources such as the new Rural Crime Education Program.

Public Awareness and Engagement

The RCPT has made it a key priority to work with rural stakeholders, including farmers and their representative bodies, to increase community awareness and promote rural crime prevention. By engaging directly with these groups, the RCPT is able to bring public awareness to their work and efforts in rural crime prevention and build confidence through direct engagement. To do so, the RCPT attend various rural related events each year such as agricultural shows, community meetings, stakeholder workshops and industry conferences. The team utilises a custom-built community engagement display trailer and four community engagement marquee kits to encourage people to learn more about rural crime awareness and prevention initiatives.

Historically RCIs were always present at saleyards, community engagements and on operations and investigations; however, they did not have a formal presence. For instance, everyone that attends a sale knows the stock and station agent by the colour of their shirt. However, in the past, the police were not identifiable unless attending in uniform, which was not the norm. Today, all members of the RCPT have both an office uniform and a work uniform. The office uniform consists of a light blue long-sleeved business shirt, sand-coloured pants, tie, brown belt and brown boots. The work uniform consists of a royal blue work shirt, blue jeans, brown belt and brown boots. An Akubra-type hat is generally worn with all uniforms or a branded baseball-style cap with the work uniform. Once all members of the RCPT have completed their rural crime training, they are allocated a uniquely numbered and specially designed belt buckle (see Figure 2). These belt buckles remain with the individual officers throughout their careers as recognition of their specialised skills and knowledge to target rural crime.

Figure 2

RCPT Belt Buckle



Additionally, all uniforms include a unique brand, "NSW" and "P" (police) separated by a crown, hovering over "RCPT." The portion above the "RCPT" is modelled on the branding iron used by the police of yesteryear when seizing and identifying stock. Significantly, detectives, analysts and policy officers all wear this uniform, uniting the RCPT as one team. It is believed that this is the only known policing unit in the world that does this. Notably, nearly 20% of farmers and landholders responding to the NSW Farm Crime Survey said they would recognise the distinctive uniform of the RCPT (Mulrooney, 2021).

The team has also raised their presence on social media with over 55,000 followers currently recorded for the RCPT Facebook page. The RCPT use social media to highlight outcomes of operations, provide crime prevention information, promote events conducted by or with the RCPT, share relevant information from other stakeholders, seek assistance from the community and ensure the topic of rural crime remains a 'hot topic' in rural social media. The NSW Farm Crime Survey found that nearly 30% of respondents had engaged with the RCPT Facebook presence (Mulrooney, 2021). Together, this branding, married with an effective media presence, has enabled the RCPT to be identifiable nationally and arguably on the world stage. The NSW Farm Crime Survey indicated that nearly 70% of respondents were aware of the Rural Crime Prevention Team (Mulrooney, 2021). By contrast, the Victorian Farm Crime Survey (Harkness, 2021) found that 67% of Victorians indicated they were not aware of the Victorian Police equivalent of RCIs, Farm Crime Liaison Officers.

Community engagement also arms farmers with the knowledge and skills to be active participants in combatting rural crime (Harkness & Mulrooney, 2020). While research has indicated that farmers feel strong personal responsibility for crime prevention there are several issues which may inhibit this in action. In addition to social and cultural characteristics (see Barclay et al., 2004), survey research has pointed out the challenges to farmers in adopting more crime-prevention measures, including the financial cost, difficulty of implementation and a lack of knowledge around what works (Mulrooney & Harkness, 2022a; Mulrooney, 2021; Harkness, 2021). These challenges often discourage them from undertaking crime prevention efforts, which may undermine their capacity to prevent crimes.

The notion of personal responsibility for farm crime may also mean that the police are not included in the equation at all, and that the crime is not reported. For instance, farmers indicate a strong reliance on informal social controls with many reporting and discussing crime with family, friends, neighbours, and co-workers (Mulrooney, 2021). Again, this self-reliance may relate to cultural considerations and social dynamics but also to negative historical experiences and a lack in confidence in both police capacity and court outcomes, as well as an acute awareness among farmers of the reality of rural policing (e.g., response times; difficult in gathering evidence) (see Barclay, 2015; Mulrooney, 2021; Harkness, 2021), which further accentuates the importance of public awareness and engagement in the rural crime space.

It is imperative that police seek to be included as a trusted partner in the sharing of rural crime information. In rural spaces, the tyranny of distance means that crime prevention is a shared responsibility, with both farmers and police alike needing to adopt preventative practices. As such, police must engage with farmers to build trust and provide support and encouragement to uptake crime prevention efforts which can often be applied with minimal cost and effort yet yield meaningful results. Importantly, farmers indicate that they desire the police to engage with them in person more often (Mulrooney, 2021; Harkness, 2021). To this end, in addition to attending rural-specific events such as agricultural shows, the RCPT – in conjunction with the NSW Farmers' Association – have conducted two 'Tackling Rural Crime' events. The first event was in 2018 where face-to-face workshops were provided at 26 locations across regional NSW. The second event consisted of six webinars.

These workshops and webinars were delivered by members of the RCPT and provided rural landowners the opportunity to learn about a number of key issues, including: Firearm Security – details regarding the legislation and how they can ensure the security of their firearms; Illegal Hunting – what is illegal hunting, what they can do to protect themselves and how they can help police investigate these offences; Animal Movement – what is required when they move livestock within NSW; Rural Trespass – what is rural trespass, what they can do to protect themselves and how they can help police investigate these offences; Target Hardening – security strategies they can use to reduce the risk of becoming a victim of rural crime; Crime Scene – what is evidence, what they can do to preserve evidence, what to do if they can't wait for police to arrive and what police need to investigate an offence; and How to Report Rural Crime – 000, online Community Portal, Police Assistance Line, Crime Stoppers, attending the local Police Station or call the local Police Station.

In addition to delivering education, knowledge, and tools for the purposes of rural crime prevention, these workshops also serve important community policing and outreach functions which allow the RCPT to engage with farmers directly and in doing so, further develop a collaborative relationship between those with a vested interest in combatting rural crime. Shortly after attending one of the workshops, one farmer was, unfortunately, a victim of rural crime. However, due to his newfound understanding of the importance of preserving a crime scene, the farmer preserved the evidence and police were able to obtain the DNA of a known offender.

The RCPT maintained engagement with farmers through Covid-19. An example of this includes monthly virtual meetings with NSW Farmers' Association Regional Managers. These meetings are called 'Separating the Wheat from the Chaff' and are informal fireside chats aimed at ensuring that the police are not guessing what the issues are in regional, remote, and rural NSW, but instead hearing what farmers were experiencing directly from them. This type of engagement provides the RPCT information to strategically deploy and

assess situations, as well as have dialogue aimed at addressing community concerns around crime.

Aside from the farmers, the public in general has little awareness surrounding the problem of rural crime. Many people do not understand the significant financial impact of rural crime, with a conservative estimate of \$26.5M worth of cattle and sheep being reported to the NSW Police between 2015 to 2021. This estimate is based on an average market value for ‘ewe’ and ‘cow,’ being the lowest market price. This does not include the value of stud stock, loss of breeding potential or the loss of animal by-products such as milk, wool or skin. As well as the financial impact of this crime type, there is also the loss of time and the psychological and emotional bearing of having an unwelcomed person enter your property and either steal, maliciously damage or intimidate.

Victims of rural crime often experience repeat victimization, and this can have a substantial impact on a person (Hale et al, 2022). To encourage broader public awareness and engagement with these issues, the NSW Police Force partnered with Crime Stoppers NSW to develop the ‘Draw the line on regional crime’ campaign (Regional Crime, 2021). Drawing on the findings of the NSW Farm Crime Survey (Mulrooney, 2021), this campaign sought to address awareness of regional crimes, and prevention measures and to increase reporting to Crime Stoppers and the police amongst the wider public.

Collaboration and Engagement with Academic Research

The RCPT has also striven to be evidenced based in practice and to this end has worked closely with academics in rural criminology to further their knowledge and understanding of rural crime. For instance, the NSW Police Force invited Dr. Mulrooney and Dr. Harkness of the UNE Centre for Rural Criminology to the NSW Police Force State Rural Crime Conference as keynote speakers where they shared the results of the NSW and Victorian Farm Crime surveys with police command and the RCPT. Following this, in 2022, researchers from the Centre for Rural Criminology (UNE) presented at a Senior Management Team Leadership meeting for the Rural Crime Prevention Team, with particular attention to the future direction of the Rural Criminological research and how the NSW Police Force can work with the Centre to assist farmers. Such engagement provides the RCPT with key research insights and empirical data from which to identify problems, tailor solutions, and police from an evidence base more generally.

Importantly, the RCPT has itself contributed to rural criminological research and knowledge creation both in an advisory capacity and as active participants (see Harkness et al, 2022). For example, the Centre for Rural Criminology (UNE) staged a mock theft of livestock, with a live police intervention, to evaluate the ability of the Ceres Tag smart animal ear tag to combat stock theft. In this trial, the NSW Police Force oversaw the capability of the technology and checked the stock as part of a coordinated law enforcement response to the

mock-theft (“World-first smart tag trial against stock theft”, 2022; Mulrooney & Harkness, 2022b). The RCPT is also currently participating in a research project through the Centre for Rural Criminology examining rural policing in Australia. This engagement has a number of benefits. For instance, being involved with research into new and innovative crime prevention technologies puts the RCPT at the cutting edge of rural policing. Likewise, participating in the study on rural policing may provide the RCPT with unique insights surrounding best practices in rural policing which the RCPT may use to continue to improve its capacity to police rural spaces.

The RCPT has itself engaged with and contributed more widely to the academic and scholarly community by providing practical experience and insight. For instance, members of the RCPT have provided expert guest lectures to UNE Criminology students in the unit CRIM190: Crime in Rural Communities. Perhaps the best evidence of the collaboration and contributions to higher education more generally comes from their work in the UNE Criminology unit CRIM312: Professional Practice in Criminology. The RCPT was selected as the inaugural industry partner in 2020, and this is a position it has filled for four years now. The purpose of this unit is to expose students to real-world industry problems within the criminal justice system. In the unit, students are provided with a ‘live’ working brief from the RCPT to problem-solve over the course of the trimester, concluding with a proposed solution in report form.

The RCPT – including the State Rural Crime Coordinator and head of the RCPT Detective Chief Inspector Cameron Whiteside and the RCPT Policy and Projects Officer Ann Brennan – meets with students at the beginning of the trimester to explore the live brief in greater detail and, at the conclusion of the research process, evaluates the reports, providing concrete feedback to students, and participates in a live de-briefing session. Participation in this unit has been valuable to the RCPT, specifically in crowd-sourcing ideas to combat rural crime and offering opportunities for engagement with the community as well as recruitment. Additionally, students are provided with the opportunity to apply skills and knowledge they have developed in their Criminology studies to a real-world problem, bridging the gap between theory and practice.

Finally, several RCPT officers are members of the International Society for the Study of Rural Crime for the purpose of collaboration, learning and knowledge sharing. For example, DCI Cameron Whiteside contributed to an ISSRC panel on Rural Policing. DCI Whiteside also actively serves as an Executive Officer of the ISSRC. In this capacity, he seeks to help bridge the gap between police, practitioners and researchers and more recently has played a leading role in the organisation and delivery of a roundtable on the role of agricultural technology in preventing and responding to farm crime. Evidently, the RCPT has engaged significantly with researchers, higher education institutions and research societies not only as learners but as active participants. In doing so, the RCPT has contributed to its own knowledge of rural crime and rural policing and made significant contributions to policy and practice.

Conclusion

To address these key issues in rural crime, the RCPT has employed numerous strategies. Specifically, the RCPT has made significant efforts to prevent, respond to and reduce rural crime victimisation through the professionalisation of rural policing and increasing rural crime expertise by educating RCIs and LEAs more broadly. The RCPT has also identified inhibitors in policies and legislation to ensure enforcement and compliance agencies can perform their role to their maximum standard when addressing rural crime. They have engaged in community awareness and outreach efforts to increase public engagement with the RCPT, as well as educate and improve farmers' knowledge and behaviours around rural crime and crime prevention. The RCPT has also drawn on and contributed to leading research to police from an evidence base as well as to be at the forefront of advancements in the prevention and reduction of rural crime.

The NSW Farm Crime Survey highlighted a number of key issues which present challenges for the policing of farm crime: 1) very high levels of crime victimisation and worry about crime victimisation; 2) significant under-reporting of crime; and 3) low levels of confidence in the police to deal with farm crime, along with low levels of satisfaction with the police and criminal justice system more generally. Another article in this special issue also notes how these factors may interact and further discourage reporting, contribute to worry about crime and inhibit confidence in the police, impacting the capacity of rural communities to prevent and respond to rural crime (see Mulrooney et al, 2022); see also Hough & Roberts 2004; Skogan, 2009; Jackson et al, 2009; Boateng, 2016; Torrente et al, 2016).

However, it appears these novel policing efforts and initiatives in NSW are making inroads into rural communities and progress in combatting farm crime. The NSW Farm Crime Survey (Mulrooney, 2021) found that 90% of farmers agree that there should be a team of police officers trained to deal with rural crime specifically. 31% had encountered the RCPT and, of those, 36% were highly satisfied, and 37% were satisfied with their experience. Perhaps most importantly, 43% of respondents indicated they are more likely to report crime since the advent of the RCPT, with only 10% disagreeing.

Additionally, farmers who had directly encountered and/or were aware of the Rural Crime Prevention Team were significantly more likely to report crimes to the police than those who had not. The survey also found that farmers were significantly more likely to be satisfied and significantly less likely to be dissatisfied with the standard of policing overall if they had directly encountered the RCPT. The report concluded that “these greater levels of satisfaction and higher rates of reporting may result from farmers feeling seen, heard, and understood by the police (i.e., cultural awareness) and indicate greater confidence in these police to be able to respond to farm crime (Mulrooney, 2021).”

Rural policing in NSW has made significant advancements overtime, culminating most recently in the professionalisation of the policing of rural crime in NSW through the

RCPT; a renewed, sustained, and sophisticated focus on combatting rural crime. Since its inception in early 2018, the team has developed and delivered a number of novel and innovative policing initiatives which seek to make rural communities safer and increase their resilience. Evidence indicates that these advancements are making progress on key issues identified in rural criminology. Lessons learned from policing the rural in NSW may provide insights into the policing of rural spaces elsewhere, with attention to how such police practices and innovations may be adapted and tailored to distinct rural contexts.

References

- Barclay, E., Donnermeyer, J.F. & Jobes, P. (2004). The dark side of gemeinschaft: Criminology within rural communities. *Crime Prevention and Community Safety*, 6(3), 7–22. <https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.cpcs.8140191>
- Barclay, E. (2015). Crime on farms: A survey of farmers in NSW and Queensland 2001–2014. Final report to NSW and Queensland Police (unpublished). Armidale, NSW: University of New England.
- Barclay, E. (2016). Farm victimisation: The quintessential rural crime. In J.F. Donnermeyer (Ed.). *The Routledge international handbook of rural criminology* (pp. 107–116). London, UK: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315755885-13>
- Boateng, F. D. (2018). Crime Reporting Behavior: Do Attitudes Toward the Police Matter? *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 33(18), 2891–2916. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260516632356>
- Bradshaw, S. (2016). NSW Stock Theft and Trespass Review. Sydney: Department of Justice (NSW). <https://www.justice.nsw.gov.au/Documents/Media%20Releases/2017/final-report-NSW-stock-theft-and-trespass-review.pdf>
- Hale, R., Harkness, A., & Mulrooney, K.J.D. (2022). Punishment, Politics and the Realities of Rurality. In Bowden, M., & Harkness, A. (eds), *Rural Transformations*. Bristol: Bristol University Press.
- Harkness, A. (2016). Farm crime: The forgotten frontier. In A. Harkness, B. Harris & D. Baker (Eds.), *Locating crime in context and place: Perspectives on regional, rural and remote Australia* (pp. 96–107). Sydney, NSW: The Federation Press.
- Harkness, A. (2021). The Victorian Farm Crime Survey: Results. The Centre for Rural Criminology, University of New England. <https://express.adobe.com/page/H4jeQ3vvA7bsO/>
- Harkness, A. & Mulrooney, K.J.D. (2020). Conclusion: The future of rural crime prevention. In A. Harkness (Ed.), *Rural crime prevention: Theory, tactics and techniques* (pp. 319–329). London, UK: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429460135-36>
- Harkness, A., Mulrooney, K.J.D., & Donnermeyer, J.F. (2022). Surveying in Rural Settings. In Weisheit, R., Peterson, J., & Pytlarz, A. (eds.), *Research Methods for Rural Criminologists*. London: Routledge
- Hough, M. and Roberts, J. (2004). *Confidence in Justice: An International Review*. London: Home Office.
- Jackson, J., Bradford, B., Hohl, K., & Farrall, S. (2009). Does the Fear of Crime Erode Public Confidence in Policing? *Policing: A Journal of Policy and Practice*, 3 (1), 100–111. <https://doi.org/10.1093/police/pan079>
- McKechnie, G. (2019). NSW Police Force and Rural Crime. *International Journal of Rural Law and Policy*, 2. <https://doi.org/10.5130/ijrlp.2.2019.6553>
- Mulrooney, K.J.D., Harkness, A., & Nolan, H. (2022). Farm Crime and Farmer Police Relationships in Rural Australia. *International Journal of Rural Criminology*, 7(1). <https://doi.org/10.18061/ijrc.v7i1.9106>

- Mulrooney, K.J.D. (2021). The NSW Farm Crime Survey 2020. The Centre for Rural Criminology, University of New England.
<https://spark.adobe.com/page/zsV05pknxXl7N/>
- Mulrooney, K.J.D. & Harkness, A. (2022a). Acquisitive Farm Crime. In Harkness et al., (eds.), *Encyclopedia of Rural Crime*. Bristol: Bristol University Press.
- Mulrooney, K.J.D., Harkness, A. (2022b). Ceres Tag: An Evaluation for the Reduction of Livestock Theft. The Centre for Rural Criminology, University of New England.
<https://bit.ly/stocktheft1>
- Regional Crime. (2021). Crime Stoppers NSW. <https://nsw.crimestoppers.com.au/regional-crime/#:~:text=%E2%80%9CDraw%20the%20line%20on%20regional,Criminology%2C%20University%20of%20New%20England.>
- Skogan, W. G. (2009). Concern About Crime and Confidence in the Police: Reassurance or Accountability? *Police Quarterly*, 12(3), 301–318.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1098611109339893>
- Torrente, D., Gallo, P. & Oltra, C. (2016). Comparing crime reporting factors in EU countries. *European Journal on Criminal Policy and Research*, 23, 153–174.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10610-016-9310-5>
- Whiteside, C., Brennan, A., & Mulrooney, K.J.D. (2022). Police Engagement with Rural Farming Communities. In Harkness et al., (eds.), *Encyclopedia of Rural Crime*. Bristol: Bristol University Press.
- World-first smart tag trial against stock theft. (2022, February 24). UNE Connect.
<https://www.une.edu.au/connect/news/2022/02/world-first-smart-tag-trial-against-stock-theft>