“*Everything seems to be pushed onto the businesses”:* Stakeholder perceptions of the policing of business crime in Staffordshire, United Kingdom.

Introduction

The view that business crimes can be seen as distinct from broader property crime, because of the commercial environment in which it takes place, the nature of its target, meant that commercial stakeholders’ status as victims grew significantly in an international context at the turn of the last century (e.g. see Gill, 2000; Perrone, 2000). Increasingly, it has become accepted in policing circles that ‘commercial businesses’ generally suffer higher levels of crime victimisation (Shury et al, 2005). From the mid-1990s victimisation surveys (such as CVS) continually identified that commercial businesses experience higher than average crime victimization rates than individuals or households (see Mirrlees-Black, and Ross, 1995). The average number of burglaries per 1,000 across all business sectors (excluding information/ communications) is substantially higher than for households, along with higher rates of criminal damage and fraud. Additionally, many business sectors experience substantially higher rates of violent crime – such as robbery and assaults than households/individuals (Hopkins, 2016). The total cost of crime to the UK retail industry was estimated at £1.04 billion in 2021/22, of which £722 million was spent on crime prevention. Violence and abuse against retail staff is now the primary concern in that industry, well ahead of theft and cybercrime (BRC, 2023). As such, this paper outlines the limitations on how policing conceptualises “business crime” and how this, potentially, limits the police’s ability to provide meaningful responses to the varied victims of such crime.

That fact commercial businesses face higher victimization rates has created an official lexicon of ‘business crime’ within the profession of policing in England and

Wales. The National Business Crime Centre was created because of Home Office Police Transformation Funding in 2017, and an early concern with commercial victimisation has been incorporated into a range of commercial victimization surveys conducted in several European countries and now, further afield in Australia, China and Nigeria (Hopkins, 2016) Yet these surveys commonly concentrate, rather narrowly, on some business sectors. New technological developments in business, from online shopping to self-scan checkouts, generate opportunities for crime in retail settings and potential for conflict and violence between customers and retail staff (Beck and Hopkins, 2017; Taylor, 2018; Beck 2018, Taylor, 2019). Since the late 1990s the lexicon of business crime also become a key feature in discussion of crime and violence in the Night Time Economy (NTE) as well as the high levels of crime in that sector generally (Winlow et al, 2005). The Crime Report (ASC, 2018) suggests that crime costs individual retail stores £5,308 (or 7p per transaction) per year while CVS data show that the actual costs of crime across all business sectors has increased since 2012. This is partially illustrated through data presented on the median cost of shop theft which in 2012 was £237 but had risen to £626 by 2018 (Home Office, 2019).

It is not uncommon to see such trends described and detailed under the broad category of "Business Crime" and the police increasingly called upon to recognize and address this as a specific and self-contained problem. The National Business Crime Centre has a particular focus on retail crime, business crimes that include vulnerable victims e.g. violence against women and girls (VAWG), business crimes that threaten the country's infrastructure e.g. transport, business engagement in support of a national need e.g. Covid-19, major/critical incident, national coordination, private security liaison and the Community Safety Accreditation Scheme (CSAS). They currently define business crime broadly as: 'Any criminal offence where a business, or person in the course of their employment, and because of that employment, is the victim', which has led directly to the the subject of commercial victimization being a growing area of academic and policing policy focus over the past 30 or so years. The College of Policing also suggest that; "Business crime is any criminal offence that is committed against a person or property which is associated by the connection of that person or property to a business".

While this definitional move is supposed to reflect and enable a greater degree of conceptual clarity, there remains ambiguity about how and when offences are recorded as being a 'business crime'. As the College of Policing (2022) webpage notes, "There is no mandatory recording process for 'business crime'". Some forces, however, do apply a 'business crime flag' to relevant crime and incident reports. To date however, the process of flagging has received scant attention as a subject of academic research. This adds to the complexity and difficulty in adequately recognising business crimes and is aptly illustrated by the web page examples that the College have, which accompany the definitional detail:

"an SIA-licensed security guard employed by Horizon Security at a local NHS hospital. He is assaulted in the course of his employment…his employer, is a commercial business. This is therefore a business crime. PC Nagra is assaulted at work in the course of his duty. Because PC Nagra is employed by the public sector this is not a business crime." (College of Policing, 2022)

As already evidenced, this paper continues to argue that the lack of mandatory recording and data flagging of offences as business crime is detrimental to victims and organisations across Staffordshire Police force area. The article also examines police practices and stakeholder perceptions of the policing of business crime. The article does not examine police perceptions of business crime as the qualitative data collected did not allow an argument about how this may affect the recording and flagging of offences to be made. This paper, instead, focuses on the voice of those likely to be victimised by business crime and uses this to examine how and why police responses may be limited.

Methods

The research presented here comes from full access to the data and recording processes of Staffordshire police force for a one-year period. This research was conducted in support of the Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) and involved not only contact with force staff and recording processes, but a process of original empirical and qualitative data capture undertaken by the authors with business owners in the same region about perceptions of police responses to business crime. The research commenced with access to, and analysis of police coded business crime reporting and flagging in the Staffordshire Police force area (a member of the research team spending time in force HQ analyzing and examining the force data) and culminated with a period of qualitative fieldwork.

Interviewees were members of the small business community across the county of Staffordshire and 74 in-depth, semi-structured interviews of at least an hour were completed. These interviews were recorded (where permission was given) and then transcribed, or where voice recording was impractical, (often interviews were undertaken as participants went on running their business) data capture via contemporaneous notes was used. In accordance with the commitment given to participants as part of the ethical approval process and in accordance with informed consent, participants gave written and verbal consent to interviews pre and post process. We anonymised specific identifying details about the business, location, and personnel of those we interviewed beyond minor business sector details and where they were located.

For the reason of force demographics and coverage, and attempting to hear from those outside the normal large, urban commercial retailers who often dominate discourse on business crime, we deliberately identified and approached a number of businesses that fell outside of major town centre hubs and were located in small villages, on business parks or were located away from the usual force business conurbations in places such as the six towns of Stoke-On-Trent; Burslem, Tunstall, Fenton, Hanley, Longton and Stoke and Stafford. We looked for businesses that appeared in data on victimisation, but outside the regular big business that tended to dominate in police recorded reports numerically, and we approached and targeted businesses that were far broader rather than the narrow ‘retail’ and ‘Night time economy’ (NTE) businesses that often tend to feature as dominant in police and academic discourses on business crime, but this did not mean that such sectors did not feature in our interviews.

The research team were given full access to all Staffordshire Police force flagged data on business crime for proceeding years 2016-2019. Direct access was also given to historical business crime data from the police crime recording system. Some 70,165 flagged business crime records were provided to the research team for the period April 2016 to November 2019 inclusive. While this data set is worthy of analysis in its own right, the purposes here emerged out of that process, and the fact that the experiences of smaller businesses seemed marginalised when compared to the flagging of large multinational retailers as victims. It is worth noting that each flagged record related to a single crime in which a business was involved, and a police officer had deemed it appropriate on the basis of guidelines to apply the flag. These had been drawn from a larger database and adjusted to remove any duplicate records. An assessment of the quality of the data was carried out and a range of analyses were subsequently produced. Researchers spent time with analysts in force area, along with responsible police officers and key figures. However, while analysis of quantitative data captures part of the inquiry, more broadly the methodology was more applied, using observation, interviews, and documentary analysis to attempt to craft a more holistic picture and hear from those victimised, but provided with less formal opportunity to voice perceptions on policing (e.g. see Girling et al, 2000).

Privileged access to this police data set allowed us to connect with communities experiencing business crime and facilitated follow up research with willing participants whose businesses featured in the dataset. As researchers, we were keen to consider how issues at the heart of contemporary law and order politics and discourse surrounding commercial victimisation nationally are played out on the ground. A criminological ethnographic sensibility (Author, ****) was employed and armed with tape recorders and consent forms, researchers contacted businesses and took to the community to undertake detailed interview conversations in a range of market towns. A number of those we approached declined to be interviewed, for an array of reasons, but researchers had advantages of local University connections, and the fact that we declared ourselves impartial and independent to the police working with funding secured from the PCC and keen to directly hear from the often-unheard business community seemed to assist in recruitment. Even some who were unwilling to commit to extensive tape-recorded interviews were willing to speak briefly or feed into the process, and wherever this happened researchers worked in accordance with informed consent, and this meant engagement way in excess of the interviews alone.

As we have shown this far, the phenomenon is much broader than the narrowly constrained application of the term "business crime", the businesses and people contacted represented a much more diverse stakeholder group drawn with participants coming consisting of businesspeople running a small funeral directing company, to taxi drivers, tattooists and tradespeople, to smaller retail and independent non chain hospitality businesses and those working in agricultural settings. Given the way in which the literature often tends to promote and capture the views of bigger businesses, focusing on small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), and small and micro business based on revised European Commission (2019) guidance rather than the large multinational (often retail and service sector businesses) that dominated in the police recorded data (in raw numerical terms for volume of reported offences) was no doubt a useful means of establishing the various and multifaceted ways that business victimisation could and should perhaps be understood as impacting on the less heard and higher suffering smaller business victims.

Analyzing Police Force Data on Business Crime

In order to understand how large multinational businesses become overrepresented in the official statistics on business crime the research team first looked at how criminal events are recorded within Staffordshire police. The research team received data provided for all business crime flagged offences between April 2016 and August 2019. This data allowed us to consider the date that the crime was recorded on the system, (irrespective of when the crime occurred), alongside the date of offence (up to the last known date of offence), the crime reference number (URN) allocated to the specific crime (which could be used to look up the full report of the crime) before the incident was allocated a crime number, the offence description and the individual offence categories.

Local Offence Groups

There were 84 such categories on the police system and these were further grouped into what were called local offence groups. This is a Home Office system of codes which allocates a specific crime to a geo-spatial category and, in theory, allows a police force to highlight places which have spikes in certain crime types and this is done by analysts within the force in line with national crime counting rules.

This process placed certain types of business locations together and an example of the categories used would be “retail” followed by a specific type of business location like “supermarket” followed by the name of the business, the modus operandi of the crime. So, the full example code on the police system would say “Retail – Supermarket – Sainsbury’s – Theft – Stoke-on-Trent”. Such a code string could also be supported by a free text entry that could be completed to give more detail on any element of what the code string was describing. Hence our analysis was not only based only upon the data itself but, but also the documentary data and detail of each offence or offences, so far as it had been recorded on the systems and in official records Figure 1, below, shows how the crime data system allows officers to tag a main offence category followed by a sub offence category and thus create a local offence group.

Main Offence Type	**Sub Offences**						
Business Robbery							
Burglary Residential							
Criminal Damage							
Arson							
Drug Offences							
Handling Stolen Goods							
Less Serious Violence							
More Serious violence with injury	Assault Occ. GBH						
Other Offences	Take/make/distribute indecent images of children	Threat of Criminal Damage	Ill treatment of person lacking capacity to do so	Intimidation	Public Health Offences	Making/Passing counterfeit currency	
Other Serious sexual offences	Sexual assault (excl. rape)						
Other sexual offences	Sexual harassment						
Other theft	Make off without payment	Theft by employee	Shoplifting	Theft from person	theft of pedal cycles		
Other violence against the person – no injury	Personal Robbery	Possession of weapon	Public Order	Rape	Theft from vehicle	Theft of vehicle	Vehicle interference

Figure 1: Crime System Tags

Issues with Tagging

Force wide, a very wide range of offences were tagged as business crimes but looking in more detail highlighted that there were clear issues with consistency and the need for a better understanding of what best practice should be for officers when undertaking this activity. For example, 38.51% of offences tagged as business crime in the research period consisted of what might be termed “other theft”. This largely matched what might be expected in terms of offending in the retail sector and seemed to be comprised of shoplifting from various commercial premises. However, this left the majority of offences – 61.49% - tagged as business crime as being events which were not based around acquisitive crime. This included some arbitrary looking divisions such as the recording of assaults against private sector (although not state) prison officers as a business crime. Whilst this is in keeping with CoP guidance (College of Policing 2023), it is a good example of how the tagging of offences as relating to a business or not is open to subjective interpretation. Given that researchers were unable to directly watch an officer input the tags on the system, and thus do not understand how the categories are selected, we are forced to come to other conclusions about this tagging process. First, it is apparent that ‘business crime’ covered a wide array of offending, from staff conduct to shoplifting offences, and that the vast majority of reports flagged were against major national and multinational companies and involved retail crimes. Second, officers seemed to flag those offences where business was prominent as a setting, rather than because of the impact of the offence on the business per se, so an assault in a licenced premises was likely to become a business crime. As we argue further on in this paper the focus on business setting as a location, rather than as a victim change how these statistics should be viewed and is, potentially, one of the drivers for why SMEs are not given as much voice victims as big multinational chains.

Structural Issues Causing Poor Data Quality

The recorded data raised several pertinent issues and questions. It was clear from looking over examples that police staff would view, submit initial details, and code business crime quite differently and very inconsistently. The lack of consistency across the process clearly impacted the quality and reliability of the data overall. There was some considerable overlap/duplication about the location types, which calls into question the accuracy of the data and therefore the value of any analysis. In part it seemed that this was due to the lack of clarify about why to flag, but drilling down further, the parameters for recording were unclear. There were separate codes for newsagent, supermarket, hypermarket, department store, general store, and shop in the recording system, and we found that it was highly likely that the coding of a location was dependent upon the subjective view of the individual officer recording an offence. As a significant bulk of all data concerned acquisitive offences involving commercial victims, with over a third of all crime flagged as business crime in this category, it was clear that individual officers tended to conceive of crimes such as shoplifting more universally as business crime, whereas frauds or thefts against smaller businesses and alternative business properties might not be considered that way. Simply put, when officers were called to thefts and acted, it was likely that the label of business crime would be applied. While the data set contained very useful information, allowing us to look at specific offences, there were issues with completeness relating to fields where data was missing or not recorded. Several data fields in the overall data set have a high proportion of blank records, notably the following (n=70165) Location type (short description) – 6384 (9.1% of total records). Organisation name – 38959 (55.5% of total records)).

Additionally, organisational names when recorded could be used extremely inconsistently. For example, there appeared to be at least 119 variations of the name of the Co-operative shops, including Coop, Co-op, Co op, Cooperative, Co-operative, Co operative, Coop retail, Co-op retail to name but a few. Whilst this seems pedantic, the system would create a new local offence group for each of these variations rather than automatically collating them. In turn this created a workload for analysts at the force headquarters who had to spend time cleaning the data before it could be used.

What did emerge from the picture of data capture recording and business crime flagging in the force area was the widespread variation in how 'business crime' was being understood, conceived of, and then flagged by frontline police officers. A great deal of shoplifting was being flagged as a business crime, but so too was rape, with 1% of the forces total rape cases flagged as a business crime. The inclusion of sexual offences recorded as business crime struck the project team as somewhat strange, but often reflected places of report such as hotels. While the analysis suggested that this comprised of very few flagged offences of the total (N= 2675 offences) it constituted 1% of the force total crime and from the recorded data it was impossible to identify how and indeed whether the victim or the offender in the offence was in some way connected to the business setting and if so how. We could not determine if the crime was specifically connected to the setting in which the offence occurred, and despite various further analysis of this data, the decision-making process around its flagging as a business crime was very unclear. It was impossible to say more about offender victim dynamics, so the research team hypothesised that these are almost certainly offences that had taken place on a business premises rather than being a crime that was either committed by a business or victimised one. This hypothesis stemmed from the fact that the research team found no evidence that business employees were involved as offender or as victim.

Violent Business Crimes

A similar trend was noticed in the flagging of offences of violence. These offences were regularly flagged as business crimes in the data set but, much like sexual offences, this seemed to have been solely driven by the offence having happened on a business premise. Across the health, education, leisure and food sectors the research team found that place dominated the tagging of recorded offences as business crimes. This raises a wider issue of the purpose and logic of flagging offences as being a business crime. As discussed earlier in the paper, the flag "business crime" is meant to help a constabulary identify those offences which directly victimise or are caused by a business so that resources can be adequately dedicated to dealing with them. Yet, arguably, that is not the way that this flag is being applied to records in Staffordshire. Instead, this flag is being applied to any crime which happens within a business setting even if neither the victim or the offender are directly linked to the business. Clearly, there is the potential for reputational damage that comes to businesses if they are sites that come to be associated serious violence or sexual offending, just as there is a purpose and utility in flagging hotspots for such serious offences, but there seemed to be little logic of consistency in how or why some offences were flagged by officers and others were not.

While it is claimed by some that 'Thefts from businesses make up almost 90% of business crime but account for approximately half of the total estimated costs of crime against businesses (£4.2bn) and that 'each crime has a low impact on society' (Weeks et al, 2018: 6) the flagging of business crime in the force area by officers certainly seemed to challenge and confound such claims about low seriousness. Almost

40% of the forces total violent crime (admittedly only 1.24% of it the most serious violent crime) was being flagged as 'business crime', and yet the recording of this seemed to happen with no logical or coherent consideration of how this evidence might be useful in policing violence or disorder. It is likely that a great deal of violence was occurring for example in NTE venues, but there seemed to be little co-ordinated effort to consider hotspots or business settings where violence ran high.

Looking across the run of offences there was everything from a low-level theft of goods from shops to serious organised criminality involving theft of agricultural machinery and organised high end commercial robbery involving weapons recorded in force data. Equipped with the knowledge that the police recording of business crime has led to poor quality data the research team decided to reach out to business owners across the count in order to see if a victim perspective would lead to a clearer understanding of what constitutes a business crime.

Small business perceptions of their crime victimisation.

Force data clearly omitted and limited some forms of business crime victimization, and hence supplementary to the initial analysis, members of the research team reached out to Regional SME businesses registered in the force area with requests to undertake semi structured interviews. Initially it was planned to run several community focus groups, but it quickly became apparent that direct semi structured interviews with businesses was more effective after numbers attending focus groups were low. Of course, disproportionately those we contacted had something to say on matters of crime and victimization, and hence may have been the more frustrated business owners, but we attempted to supplement this with small businesses contacted randomly.

Community Concerns rather than Business Crime

Those we spoke too gave accounts of the impact of crime on them and their businesses that were much broader than is often commonly recognized in the literature, perhaps reflecting our semi structured approach and willingness to allow participants to dictate the focus and concerns. Participants expressed a great deal of dissatisfaction with community policing and its decline generally, and talked of rarely seeing officers, the erosion of feelings of safety and security, and rising experiences of victimization that ranged from some incivility to sometimes sustained victimization that went little challenged. Not all concern featured crime against business in general, there was a great deal of lament about erosion of trust and authority as indicative and symptomatic of wider cultural decline. Interviews with businesses linked to transport talked of the policing of roads, declining driving standards and uninsured drivers, and how these impacted on them. Retailers bemoaning the impact of counterfeit and non-duty paid tobacco, counterfeit and stolen fashion products, and illegitimate businesses and actors who threatened their own businesses interests, as did the cost of crime generally. There were frustrations expressed not simply directed at police, but at local authorities, trading standards and central government. As small business enterprises, many described how they felt unprepared and unsupported when it came to crime, and that crime was much more varied and broader than was often recognized or understood by statutory authorities and the police. They described fridges and rubbish illegally dumped at the back of their property as ‘business crime’ that harmed them, and many had much more considered definitions than might be expected, as one small trader suggested:

> “Are you calling Amazon a business crime? They do not pay the rates I pay. They do not have to deal with payments

> to (named the local business crime partnership) that I have to. You know the high street is dying, yes, I tell you why, in this country we always f**k the little man".

This was not an uncommon take, and frequently participants expressed a wide range of frustrations and grievances at the marginalization of smaller businesses that they suggested contributed to a general feeling that small business was unsupported and undervalued, and hence commonly and easily 'victimized'.

Small Business Victimization

Interviewees talked about an array of things that they perceived as signs of decline in support for small independent business and prioritization and concern with supporting and pandering to larger and more vocal corporate giants. Moreover, there were widespread concerns about wider symbols and symptoms of social decline, such as a perceived rise in anti-social behavior, fly tipping and littering that seemed to be little tackled and which they saw as creating areas which are not conducive to trading whether that be retail or service based. Participants also talked of the spiraling cost of business rates which big companies and illegitimate businesses avoided, and the number of local businesses that they perceived as little more than fronts for money laundering and organized crime that increasingly invaded places and space around them. They talked of rival businesses that failed to follow laws and cut corners that they did not, and the way that generally, some forms of crime had been actively tolerated, these were wider narratives of decline and frustration that were extremely common.

We were undertaking our research a decade after Grimsey et al. (2013) had found that some 46.6% of retailers in England and Wales are classified as being in serious risk of failure, the problem of identifying obsolete retail locations, or those in danger of becoming obsolete, is an important one for the key stakeholders in town centres. Around half of the businesses, we contacted were retail based still, or had some form of premises as a basis, however these were placed in locations that were described as under policed:

> "we used to have a police station up in [place name removed], you had the police in their uniform and undercover, they would come down to the town Centre, no more, not now, that has gone. You never see the police really. The odd Police Community Support Officer on a bike maybe, but we see more parking wardens now. The police are not here anymore in the community, and that has changed things a lot"

> "The police don't come here do they? We used to have locals that know the patch, now we would be lucky if we got a car here in half an hour, and even then, they don't know the area, they don't know the businesses. It's not like we are a retail park, they seem to know the big businesses who shout the loudest and have the most voice and clout, not us. But those big businesses they can deal with it, me a sole little trader, everything that happens hits me worse. Do they [the police] care?"

In all, a continual and recurrent theme was the feeling that legitimate businesspeople and those trying hard to earn a living honestly and in accordance with the law were at an ever-growing commercial disadvantage, and that few people with power and authority in public office seemed to care about such a plight. Several of the conversations outside of the retail sector talked of unregulated, unscrupulous individuals impacting not only on the individual interviewee's industry or trade, but more broadly on public perceptions. For example, a taxi driver captured something of this sentiment perfectly:

> "We get problems with drivers, some are from other areas and that, but some it is people who don't even got a taxi license, they come in and take business, and people do not realise what they are, when they have been drinking, and these people offer to pick them up. That is wrong, but if the police cannot deal with kids with knives, why would they deal with that?"

It is fair to suggest that satisfaction with police was seemingly somewhat tied to geographical location, with businesses in more urban areas with more business presence suggesting better levels of satisfaction. There was some knowledge about local Business Crime Reduction Partnerships amongst some of the smaller retail focused businesses in locations we undertook participant observation fieldwork and interviews in, but often there was a general frustration the authorities and particularly the police 'danced to the tune of big business, not the independent business'. Business Crime Reduction Partnerships (BCRPs) and Shop and Pub Watch schemes were mentioned favorably by some small business stakeholders as a way of doing localism that was protective and could be useful. However, it is worth noting again here that interviewees were critical of how business crime tends to fix concern with urban retail and nocturnal leisure activity, and other interviewees were keen to present definitions or examples of business crime that were very different for small traders and business people who felt they existed ‘off the radar’ because, as another interviewee put it ‘ The police only care about business crime where they are happening in the city’. Others suggested that being in less busy commercial settings tended to mean that they were somewhat protected from crimes, and yet as they gave additional details, it became clear that they shared concerns with some more outspoken interviewees, for example, one a Café owner in a main street in a large Staffordshire town lamented:

> “we don’t have a lot of problems, a counterfeit [bank] note very rarely. We had some thefts from our customer’s bags, but that was a long time back, but that’s the thing, it is not even really a crime against us, it’s the person, it is individual against individual, but if it happens on our premises, well it damages our reputation, and then I suppose it is a business crime isn’t it, in a way. But that is not the problem, the real problem is that now, a lot of people feel unsafe in the town, especially the older folk, so they stay away. You often smell drugs beings smoked now, the stink of whacky backy [Cannabis], and young people being loud, spitting in the streets, and you never see the police [round here anymore] now”

Echoing sentiments expressed to Girling (2000) and others now nearly two decades ago, there were narratives of decline and a communal feeling in many areas of the county that there had been the onset of a significant social decline. During the period the research was conducted, several businesses faced difficulties and challenges brought about by the Covid -19 pandemic and described the challenges that that created. In some places this was like the sense of loss brought by deindustrialisation and people felt they had been denied a voice in society and politics. Discontent was manifested strongly in some deprived post-industrial areas, often branded as communities that have been left behind under neoliberal globalisation (Telford, 2022), which were the primary locations of some of the business owned by our interviewees. Yet other interviewees businesses were more affluent, more rural, sparsely populated, and demographically contained older and less ethnically diverse populations. These were often places where the impact of immigration on wages, services and working conditions were negligible, and yet there was still a feeling of abandonment and decline, and a frustration with the tolerance of crime expressed by interviewees:

> "In this area, it is not the crime that hurts us, it is a nice area, lots of older people, good people, but the problem we have is that we see a lot of drug dealing on the street, anti-social behavior and the like, from the younger ones, but we are in a bad place, if we report it, they know it comes from us, they target our premises, they will break windows and things. If we do not report it, it gets worse and then people do not want to leave their homes and come here. I would say that anti-social behavior, that is a business crime, it is a crime against business."

> "we know the town center is not policed at night now, everyone does, and you look at some of the break ins, they show it, a few stores have been robbed by people on push bikes, they

are not even coming in and clearing stuff out into a car, its just very opportune and brazen, but then they can be, because even if anyone sees and calls the police, they [the offenders] know that the police are too few, often they are spread all over the county, they are not going to be coming quick".

"This is a good place, a good area, lots of longstanding traders, small family businesses, [market square] good independents [businesses], nice things, but that makes us a target, criminals come from out of the area, we are on a train line, they come from the city because they know it's quiet here, less secure, they see us as easy prey. It's not people here, this is a good area, but we are not shielded from wider social problems."

Interviewees seemed aware that the post-war period once characterised by a continued expansion in demand for retail property had reversed and increased consumer spending and leisure activity was at risk. However, more generally, many expressed concerns with how business was harmed by a plethora of incivilities, crimes and problematic behaviours that were not policed at all.

"We get fly tipping round here a lot, people bring stuff and dump it, then its our problem. We can contact the authorities, but in truth, we are often left to basically sort it out

> ourselves. It's clear who is doing it, it's clear its people making money from it, but its low priority it seems."

> "I have lost count of the number of times I have had to have damage to my place paid out for. I don't even report, what can you do. Nobody cares about a broken window now, it is on you, but it isn't just that. The number of days that start with me having to wash some arseholes piss out of my doorway is just a joke. I have to do it, but why should it be on me"?

Concerningly traditional evaluations have suggested that effective preventative interventions such as contact with a Crime Prevention Officer can significantly reduce levels of crime against small businesses, where for example advice and guidance offered by official experts was more effective than the isolated installation of target-hardening measures (Bowers, 2001). However, frequently interviewees suggested they had little support, despite the fact, simply put that, 'the smallest businesses are common victims' (Gill, 2000: 17). Yet a finding from our empirical fieldwork is that current definitional problems are contributing to perceptions across a range of business sectors that what constitutes "business crime" were and are. Not dissimilarly to other academic work that has engaged with victims and stakeholders (FSB, 2019) we found some concern about crime in almost all business sectors, for example in the building trades, it was not merely theft that caused concern:

> "People think it is shoplifting and fights in night clubs, but what about the bagheads and monkey dust addicts that cause no end

> of hassle nicking scaffold polls and stuff off sites to sell and make a quick fix. They should not be able to sell it on easy as scrap, like weigh it in and sell it on, but they do mind you. They do it loads. You see that is another thing, some businesses are not legitimate, are they? Folk who will cut corners, there are criminals too. You get criminal businesses."

It was clearly felt by interviewees that what was considered to constitute business crime was too narrowly conceived by those in authority, and that official responses tended to be drawn too narrowly and to favor the big multinational and more powerful corporations, which in turn had more voice and influence, more privileged positioning as well as far more resource to absorb the costs of any loss through crime, and which monopolized police time. Even with traditional independent retail businesses the rural/urban dimension was extremely significant, as several businesses we engaged with were rural. The businesspeople running these felt particularly anxious that the crimes that they suffered were recognized as "business impacting crimes" so as to be afforded the priority, attention or concern that they should be, for example,

> "I have had 6 quads [bikes] nicked and never found…The police take days to get back to you and sometimes you don't even get a visit, just a crime reference number."

> "A lot of the emphasis is on what we should do to keep our businesses safe, and that's fine, to a degree, but then what are you doing to keep my business safe? I employ people and

pay wages, I pay my rates and taxes, why should protecting my business be on me? Why should it be a confusing minefield to try and report something that costs me time and effort? Why should it not be saying to the local officer, ‘look, this is what happened today’? That’s the bit that annoys me to be fair, the fact that now everything seems to be pushed onto the businesses.”

Perceptions of Business crime Reduction Partnerships, and schemes such as Townsafe, Storewatch and Pubwatch schemes were varied, but a recurrent complaint encountered was the perception that such initiatives were unreasonable in unduly burdening victims and potential victims, especially smaller traders.

> “I will be honest, to me a lot of this is just a new way of getting the businesses to pay the cost of what should be a public service, and that I do not like. It’s a bit of a catch-22, in that you feel compelled to buy in, you cannot really refuse in a way, but what do we get from all of that? Nothing very much really.”

> “I am quite positive. I think all in all we have it better than a lot of other places. I think there is reasonable communication and things are generally good. You hear a fair bit of grumbling, but isn’t that always the way, when you ask what more they would want done, nothing very much comes back. I would have to say, overall, I think we have a decent handle on things. I like that

> there is a policy for exclusion within retail, and on the whole, I am reasonably happy."

Conclusions

Clearly a recurrent theme arising out of the interviews that we had highlighted to us from participants was a frustration with the rather narrow way in which police conceived of business crime, or more specifically their experience of victimization which they perceived as a 'business crime' seemed to be poorly recognized and understood. This coupled with the relatively low sympathy and priority it received clearly merged with a wider range of concerns and made for business victims that felt that there was little sympathy or concern for their plight This was largely not framed as a criticism of individual police officers, who largely (though by no means universally) were regarded by interviewees as having 'tried their best' or 'done a decent job'. Rather, we encountered recurrent frustrations that policing, and the response to business crime saw as its priority both the urban and the large business. In short, how the police response seemed narrowly restricted to the most privileged businesses and commercial groups (focused in on large retail and service businesses and slanted to larger urban settings) and how small businesses felt unheard, under recognized and under supported when it came to the core police presence in the communities.

Adopting a semi-structured approach to interviewing small business stakeholders in the police force region, it was quickly clear that many stakeholders conceived of the impact of business crime in a manner that was far broader than the academic literature, or current policing practice seemed to. Their frustrations and anxieties did not focus solely, or even primarily on theft, robbery, fraud or violence of crime, but on perceptions of police abandonment, concerns about a lack of value and voice, and a lack of recognition or respect from the police who had withdrawn entirely from anything but a form of responsive and reactive firefighting. Many of those we spoke too gave accounts of the impact of crime on them and their businesses that were much broader than is commonly recognized. They talked about anti-social behavior impacted on footfall to the rising tide of fly tipping, the spiraling cost of business rated while big companies and illegitimate businesses practice tax avoidance and tax evasion, and the lack of concern with small business and the domination of the entire business crime arena by a narrow group of corporations and big businesses, many of whom did little to contribute to the social fabric much more generally and were far better placed to protect themselves and their interests.

There are several limitations to this research which should be acknowledged. First, the research did not engage with police officers and, as such, it cannot offer any commentary on how police officers conceive of business crime. Second, the research is exploratory in nature as the area of business crime is understudied. As such, the paper does not draw clear implications for policing beyond that more care should be taken with the recording of crimes as business crime. Following from this the authors would strongly recommend further research into the area especially that which considers how we can bridge stakeholder-police perceptions of business crime.

This further research is essential as this paper discovered a continual and recurrent note amongst participants of a rather pessimistic feeling that legitimate businesspeople struggling while trying to earn a living honestly, and in accordance with the law, who were at an ever-growing disadvantage, where few with power and authority seemed to recognize or understand.

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