Why rural crime remains one step ahead

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DR KRESEDA SMITH

New powers to recover stolen machinery and falling insurance claims may suggest progress is being made against rural crime, but behind the headlines lies a more complex picture. *CPM* explores how organised criminal networks, fragmented policing structures and under-reported offences continue to shape the reality of crime in the countryside.

By Charlotte Cunningham

When the Crime and Policing Bill received Royal Assent earlier this year, it was welcomed as a significant step forward in the fight against rural crime.

Among the measures introduced were new powers allowing police to enter premises without a warrant to recover electronically tracked stolen agricultural equipment – a move many hoped would improve recovery rates and disrupt criminal activity targeting farming businesses.

The legislation arrived against a backdrop of persistently high losses and according to the most recent NFU Mutual figures, agricultural vehicle thefts reported in 2024 cost £7M, while rural crime overall was estimated to have cost the UK £44.1M.

More recently, fuel theft has emerged as another growing concern for both

Looking beyond the theft
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urban and rural communities. According to DeterTech Crime Intelligence, at least 50,000 litres of fuel were stolen between March and April this year, with criminals increasingly targeting businesses such as farms where large volumes can be stored on site.

Yet despite growing awareness of the issue, dedicated rural crime teams and increasingly sophisticated security measures, rural crime continues to cast a long shadow over the countryside.

According to Dr Kreseda Smith, associate professor in rural criminology and social science at Harper Adams University, understanding why means looking beyond the theft itself. From GPS receivers and quad bikes, to tractors and livestock, the assets targeted by criminals may have changed over time, but for many, the underlying concern remains the same. "Crime is more than just property," she says.

And perhaps that's where the conversation around rural crime should begin...

ORGANISED CRIME

For many years, rural crime was often viewed as relatively low-level offending, with thefts typically characterised as opportunistic crimes committed by individuals taking advantage of isolated locations and easy opportunities.

While those offences still occur, Kreseda believes the nature of offending has shifted significantly during the past decade and a half. "We're very much now in a position where we're facing a huge amount of organised criminality targeting our rural spaces."

During that period, she's witnessed what she describes as a 'criminal revolution' in the countryside, with increasingly sophisticated networks identifying and targeting valuable rural assets.

That shift matters because it fundamentally changes how rural crime should be viewed. The image of a lone thief spotting an unlocked quad bike and acting on impulse no longer reflects the reality. Instead, thefts are often targeted, intelligence-led and driven by wider criminal markets operating well beyond the farm gate. "There are a range of drivers that influence what's being targeted," explains Kreseda. "That fluctuates over time and is driven by local, regional, national and international interests from the criminal perspective."

Recent years have provided several examples, she continues. For one, the rise in thefts of GPS equipment has highlighted the growing value of precision farming technology and replacement parts, while quad bikes continue to be heavily targeted because of their portability and resale value.

Meanwhile, Kreseda says livestock theft tends to rise and fall alongside market conditions, while tractors remain a perennial target. "What's important to note is that the destination for these assets is rarely another farm," she points out. "Quite often it's the parts or spares markets that might be the primary driver for what's being targeted."

Machinery can be dismantled quickly via professionally run 'chop shops' – parts mixed with components from multiple machines and exported through complex supply chains that make tracing stolen property extremely difficult.

Of course, the implication of this business-like approach means by the time a theft has been discovered, reported and investigated, the equipment may already have been dismantled, moved across borders or shipped overseas – with Kreseda noting countries like Dubai as a popular destination for stolen farm machinery.

Despite the scale of the issue, one of the greatest challenges surrounding

Crime in the community

Working together to prevent crime in Northamptonshire

For Northamptonshire farmer Milly Fyfe MBE, rural crime became impossible to ignore when a series of organised thefts hit her village in August 2024.

The incidents involved telehandlers and quad bikes being stolen during the early hours before being hidden locally for 24 hours, allowing thieves to check whether trackers had been activated before moving machinery on. "The first we knew about it was actually the milkman," recalls Milly. "He saw somebody driving a quad bike through the village at four o'clock in the morning."

The quad bike had been stolen from another farm in the village and was later discovered hidden in a remote barn on the Fyfe family's farm. At the same time, a stolen telehandler was eventually traced to a lock-up yard in Cambridgeshire after its tracker was activated. While machinery was recovered, nobody was prosecuted and she says the experience highlighted just how organised modern rural crime has become.

In response, farmers and residents strengthened communication through a local WhatsApp group, sharing information about suspicious vehicles and activity in real time. "We're all on high alert," she says. "As soon as somebody sees something dodgy, it goes on the group."

The village also hosted a rural crime forum involving local farmers, police and politicians to discuss solutions and raise awareness. Videos featuring affected farms were shared across the community, and with Northamptonshire Police.

On farm, the family has invested in electronic security gates, CCTV and vehicle trackers. Machinery storage has also been adapted, with larger equipment used to physically block access to high-risk items such as quad bikes overnight. "Northamptonshire Rural Crime Team have also been very proactive," she adds. "They hold forums, on-farm events and are visible within the community."

Alongside investments in security, the village's WhatsApp network has become an important source of intelligence, helping residents quickly share concerns about suspicious vehicles or activity. "It's farms as a community looking out for each other," she says. "WhatsApp groups are something really simple, but they make a huge difference."

Northamptonshire farmer, Milly Fyfe MBE *(credit Olivia Brabbs).*

rural crime is establishing its true extent. NFU Mutual's estimate of £44.1M represented a 16.5% reduction compared with the previous year, suggesting some progress is being made.

Yet Kreseda cautions against treating any single dataset as a definitive measure of rural crime. "It's the tip of the iceberg – many incidents never make it into official statistics. Some losses fall below insurance excess thresholds, while others aren't reported because victims have little intention of making a claim. In some cases, farmers simply lack confidence that reporting an incident will result in meaningful action.

"All of these aspects create a cumulative negative effect on our broader understanding of what crime looks like in the rural space."

Kreseda stresses that the problem with this is that the cycle becomes increasingly difficult to break. "If crimes aren't reported, they don't appear in official figures. If official figures suggest crime levels are relatively low, resources may be directed elsewhere. Reduced resources can further erode confidence in reporting, reinforcing the problem."

Similar concerns have been raised by Shadow Farming Minister Robbie Moore, who recently argued on the *Close the Farm Gate* podcast that headline figures should be treated with caution because insurer data only captures incidents which result in claims, and reporting practices vary considerably between police forces.

As such, Robbie urges that reporting every incident matters, as the resulting intelligence helps create a more accurate picture of rural crime and supports the case for directing resources to the areas most affected.

If understanding the scale of rural crime presents one challenge, responding to it presents another. Unlike urban crime, which is often concentrated within relatively small areas, rural offending takes place across vast geographic regions, often with fewer officers available and significantly longer travel times between incidents.

Those challenges become even more pronounced when offenders operate across county boundaries, often moving far more freely than the systems designed to catch them. Specifically, Kreseda points to examples where victims living close to force borders can struggle to obtain a response. "There are pockets of good practice, but too often people can find themselves caught between different jurisdictions."

Funding also remains a key concern. Earlier this year, the NFU brought together Police and Crime Commissioners, the National Rural Crime Network, the National Rural Crime Unit, NFU Mutual and other stakeholders to discuss how funding could better reflect the realities of rural policing.

The group argued that current funding mechanisms fail to adequately account for the demands associated with policing large rural areas, where officers may have to travel significant distances to attend incidents yet organised criminal groups can operate across multiple jurisdictions.

One of the strongest points Kreseda makes is that rural crime shouldn't be viewed in isolation. "It's tempting to categorise machinery theft, hare coursing or livestock theft as distinct rural offences. However, doing so risks overlooking the wider criminal activity often sitting behind them.

"The people involved aren't only involved in rural crime," she warns. "Organised criminal groups targeting farms may also be involved in drug trafficking, county lines activity, firearms offences and human exploitation. The person stealing tractors isn't necessarily just stealing tractors every day."

BROADER IMPACT

That broader perspective matters because it changes how rural crime is viewed at both strategic and operational levels, she says. Rather than being a niche issue affecting a relatively small section of society, it becomes part of a much larger organised crime picture.

While machinery thefts and insurance claims generate figures and headlines, perhaps the most significant consequences of rural crime are those which never appear on a balance sheet. Speaking at a recent rural crime roundtable, NFU vice-president Robyn Munt pointed out that farmers who find themselves becoming victims of crime are left feeling terrified, isolated and vulnerable.

For Kreseda, this distinction is an important one – unlike many other businesses, farming families often live where they work. The same yard targeted by thieves may sit just metres from the family home, creating pressures that are often underestimated. "When you add crime, insurance claims, financial losses and disruption to already demanding businesses, and the consequences can quickly accumulate."

The impacts aren't solely psychological either. Poor mental wellbeing is closely linked with poorer physical health, while fatigue, stress and sleep deprivation can affect concentration, decision-making and safety. "The second and third-order impacts of crime are often overlooked," warns Kreseda. "Yet they may ultimately prove more damaging than the initial theft itself."

So what do farmers and the rural community do next? While legislation, policing and enforcement all have an important role to play, Kreseda is firm that lasting progress also depends on better intelligence, improved reporting and stronger collaboration between the organisations tasked with tackling rural crime.

One of the assets traditionally associated with rural communities has been strong social networks and informal support structures. While those communities have changed over time, she believes there remains significant value in collective action. "It's that community cohesion and informal social control that really has a place in our rural communities," she says.

Importantly, she believes that this doesn't mean farmers policing themselves. Rather, it highlights that protecting rural communities requires collaborative co-operation. "I think collectively, if we keep banging the drum about rural crime, farm crime, the implications and the impacts, at some point it has to be taken seriously at the highest level," she concludes. "The government has to take seriously its pledge to rural-proof policy, which feels like something that's fallen by the wayside in recent times." ●

Rural policing challenges
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