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Authors	Windle, James
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Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

A left realist approach to rural crime: The case of agricultural theft in Ireland

James Windle, University College Cork

Abstract

Left realism originated as an applied theory to support communities to tackle crime in British working-class urban areas. While there are challenges to transferring theory from one context (British urban) to another (Irish rural), this chapter argues for the value of a left realist approach to agricultural theft, using Ireland as a case study. The objective of this chapter is to take a small step towards rectifying the hidden nature of agricultural theft, and fear of theft by ironing out some conceptual, theoretical and methodological issues. The chapter begins with a review of Irish and international farm victimisation surveys. The core concepts of left realism are then summarised and its lessons are applied to agricultural theft. The final section draws lessons for Ireland from the international literature and proposes a left realist research agenda.

Introduction

Left realism originated as an applied theory to support communities to tackle crime in British working-class urban areas. While there are challenges to transferring theory from one context (British urban) to another (Irish rural), this chapter argues for the utility of a left realist approach to agricultural theft, using Ireland as a case study.

Globally, criminologists and crime scientists have paid scant attention to agricultural theft (Barclay & Donnermeyer 2011; Windle 2016). While some work has been conducted in Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom, there have been just two studies of farm crime in Ireland (Bowden & Pytlarz 2020; Walsh & Walsh 2017). While criminological research is relatively new in Ireland (Lynch et al 2020), this lack of academic attention remains surprising: in 2016, around ten percent of the working population was employed in the agri-food sector and there were 137,500 farms in Ireland (Teagasc 2020). Furthermore, the media,

including specialist farming publications, commonly report that theft is increasing and becoming more violent.

Agricultural theft should be taken seriously by researchers for three key reasons. First, it is expensive. Gallagher (2018a) reported in the *Irish Times* that in 2017, €1.4 million (USD\$1.7 million) worth of goods had been stolen in 1,100 incidents of farm theft reported to the Gardaí (the civil police force in Ireland):¹ the average value of stolen property was €300 (USD\$365) per incident. Theft increases insurance premiums for farmers who can afford to insure their property² while those without insurance cover can suffer significant economic costs. These costs are passed down to consumers which inflates the price of agricultural produce. Second, fear of crime can affect farmers' quality of life: increasing stress levels; preventing families from taking vacations; and ultimately forcing some away from farming (Mears et al 2007; Smith 2020). Indeed, one Irish victim of theft reported sleeping with a shotgun next to his bed and that theft had reduced community cohesion: 'Everyone is suspicious of people. You'd be nervous in your own bed at night' (Hamilton 2019). Another elderly farmer, living alone in an isolated farm-house, reported suffering from depression after being the victim of repeat burglary and theft (Danaher 2019; see Dáil Éireann 2017). Third, agricultural theft can have significant environmental impacts. For example, livestock theft can result in illegal slaughter and distribution, which may contaminate the food chain (Jones 2012), and stolen chemicals may be incorrectly used or disposed of.

Evidence-bases must be established before effective preventive policies and interventions can be formulated. This requires both empirical data as well as conceptual and theoretical frameworks. The objective of this chapter is, therefore, to take a small step towards rectifying the hidden nature of agricultural theft, and fear of theft, in Ireland by ironing out some conceptual and theoretical issues by applying a left realist perspective. The chapter begins by

¹ While 1,100 incidents of farm theft may not seem significant internationally, these are simply those reported to the Gardaí and needs to take into account that the population of the Republic of Ireland is less than five million.

² 91 of 710 respondents to Walsh and Walsh (2017) reported not insuring some assets because it was too expensive or they were unable to secure insurance.

reviewing the results of Irish and international victimisation surveys. Left realism is then reviewed and its lessons are applied to agricultural theft. The final section draws lessons for Ireland from the international literature and proposes a left realist research agenda. Whilst most chapters in this volume will have deliberately sought to avoid jurisdictional specificity, this would have run counter to left realism, which argues for local specificity as far as possible. The lessons from Ireland can, however, hopefully be of use to those in other regions.

Review of farm victimisations studies

The literature on farm crime is relatively small. There have only been a small number of farm victimisation surveys. This section will review the results of these surveys, focusing on the level and scope of agricultural theft, and reported crime prevention measures.

An Australian study found that of 393 farmers surveyed, 87 percent had been victimised in the previous two years. The theft of fuel, livestock, tools and equipment were the most frequently reported crimes (Barclay et al 2001; Barclay & Donnermeyer 2002). An American study surveyed 823 farmers in 2004 and 818 farmers in 2005: 62 percent of farmers had been victimised in 2004 and 50 percent in 2005. The theft of small tools were the most common offences; followed by chemical/fuel theft, breaking and entering and large equipment theft. The theft of large plant was rare but had significant economic consequences. The offences that most concerned farmers were: machinery theft, illegal dumping, burglary of farm buildings and vandalism (Mears et al 2007).

In a British study, which surveyed 40 farms in the late-1990s, 82.5 percent had been the victim of theft in the previous two years. While theft of, or from, vehicles was the most commonly reported crime, 42.5 percent had their farm buildings or workshops broken into, often resulting in the theft of tools. The main residence was burgled in 17.5 percent of cases but livestock theft was relatively rare, and there were seldom sizable livestock losses (Sugden 1999). These results are very different from Australian studies which tend to indicate high-levels of livestock theft (McCall & Homel 2003) and such theft appears to have increased in Britain during the 2010s (Farmers Weekly 2020). Of 1,022 Scottish farmers' survey by George Street Research (1999), 32 percent had experienced a crime in the previous five years, most commonly: vandalism, petty theft, and illegal dumping, with a smaller number of farmers being victims of burglary. The greatest financial loss was reported to come from livestock theft. More recently, an online

survey of 126 British farmers found that 62 percent had been victimised: just under half had been victimised once, 23 percent twice, 29 percent three times or more (Smith & Byrne 2017) and approximately 50% of farmers who responded to a survey in Wales had been victimised, with farm machinery and livestock being the most commonly reported crimes (Morris et al 2020).

There has been just one farm victimisation survey in Ireland, by Walsh and Walsh (2017, p. 4). The survey, administered in 2016, recruited 861 participants from ‘across all sectors and counties’. It asked participants about their experiences between January 2014 and May 2016. While the report lacks critical analysis or theoretical underpinning it does present some useful, if somewhat basic, data on national averages: 34 percent of participants had experienced no crime, 25 percent had experienced one agricultural crime and 41 percent had experienced more than one incident. Of the 75 percent who had been victimised: 43 percent had been a victim of theft, 47 percent of vandalism / criminal damage / trespass, five percent of assault and five percent of fraud. While just over half of participants experienced only one incident of theft, 28 percent experienced two incidents and 16 percent three or more incidents. Fuels and oil were the most commonly stolen items, experienced by 22 percent of participants, followed by tools (21%), machinery and equipment (17%),³ livestock (10%), vehicles (9%), building materials (7%), crops (6%), fodder (4%), chemicals (2%) and others (including weapons) (2%). Robberies occurred in only three percent of thefts with just eight reported incidents of threat of violence and six of actual violence.

Why are farms victimised?

Farms can make attractive targets. They are ‘notoriously difficult to protect’ (Sugden 1998, p. 83), often consisting of large expanses of land spread across remote locations, and frequently shielded from would-be guardians by natural barriers. The goods found within farms are attractive to potential offenders. There are portable and profitable goods (such as fuel, power-

³ Machinery included trailers, parts for machinery and equipment, computer and other information technology – all of which can be profitable. It is relatively quick to steal (often very expensive) machinery parts or computers, and trailers are commonly stolen. There is also a large market for quad-bikes, chainsaws and hand-tools: 119 quad bikes were stolen from Irish farms in 2019 (The Independent 2020a).

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tools) and less portable but much more profitable goods (such as plant) (Donnermeyer & Barclay 2005).

Barclay and colleagues (2001) investigated how the farm environment can influence victimisation. They found, in their sample of 393 farmers, that the further away a farm was from an urban area and the hillier the terrain the more likely it was to have experienced livestock theft. Farms and farm buildings visible from houses were associated with lower levels of breaking and entering, trespassing and theft. Farms surrounded by dense cover (i.e. trees, bushes) were more likely to report higher levels of stock theft and illegal trespassing (also Barclay & Donnermeyer 2011). This is summarised by Barclay and Donnermeyer (2002, p. 58) as ‘the ease of accessibility makes a farm a more suitable target, as does the lack of sufficient guardianship’ and, in a later paper: as ‘visibility decreased, crime increased’ (Barclay & Donnermeyer 2011, p. 14).

Several studies have found that farms situated near urban areas and main roads are most at risk of victimisation (George Street Research 1999; Mears et al 2007; McCall & Homel 2003). Smith and Byrne (2017) found that ‘farms with less than 250 hectares in size were significantly more likely to be a victim of crime’ and repeat victimisation was more likely to occur in isolated farms, although they found no evidence of a link between proximity to urban areas. Mears and colleagues (2007) similarly found that the utility of target hardening efforts are largely dependent upon the physical environment and the existence of capable guardians. That is, locking and/or hiding property reduced theft when there was light land cover, however, the likelihood of theft increased when cover was dense, regardless of target hardening. Furthermore, potential for theft increased when farmers left machinery in isolated fields for long periods (also Sugden 1999).

These conclusions conform to findings about business crime more generally. Burrows and colleagues (1999, cited in Burrows & Hopkins 2005), for example, found that businesses where there was minimal customer contact (which would include farming) were at greater risk of victimisation, especially if capable guardians were absent for long periods and if premises were surrounded by yard areas with multiple entry points (as is the case on most farms).

Jobes and colleagues (2000) found that rural Australian communities that had greater ‘residential instability’ experienced higher rates of breaking and entering. That is, the less a farmer’s social capital in an area the more susceptible they are to burglary and theft, a conclusion which also supports the guardianship findings of other surveys. Indeed, another Australian study, by Harkness (2017), concluded that having neighbours who monitored for unusual activity was a most effective crime prevention measure. Interestingly, the study found the presence of non-residential farm workers could increase opportunities for theft

Changes in farming and transport infrastructures appear to have increased opportunities for crime. McCall and Homel (2003) have argued that, in Australia, access to rural areas is easier and quicker than it was in the past, and many farms now possess more profitable and portable items (also Sugden 1998). Many farmers, Gardaí and politicians believe that agricultural theft increased as Ireland improved its motorway infrastructure, which allowed urban gangs to travel further into the countryside (see Carswell 2017; Dáil Éireann 2017). Indeed, a review of official data from 562 Gardaí districts found that, on average, there was a 10 percent ‘rise in the burglary rate (or equivalently, five burglaries) in the same year a motorway is placed within 30km’: although burglary rates plateaued after the first year (Agnew 2020). Indeed, several farmers have informally shared with the author the common belief that most machinery thefts are from within a ten mile radius of cities. The existence of capable guardians has also declined. In Ireland, for example, increasing numbers of farmers are forced to take off-farm employment to supplement incomes. This has reduced the number of people patrolling farmland and reduced time for routine maintenance of basic security measures (see Barclay et al 2001): essentially target softening areas.

Farmers’ responses to crime

There is some consistency across surveys that farmers tend to be complacent about security and preventive measures are seldom at ‘the forefront of the minds of farmers, well, not at least until something happened’ (Jones 2008, p. 13; also Harkness 2017). Studies have found that farmers often leave expensive machinery unlocked in remote fields and fail to routinely check stocks (Jobes et al 2000; Sugden 1998). Indeed, the Irish Gardaí recently reported that one in four tractors are stolen with the keys in them (Gallagher 2018a). Furthermore, when farmers do employ security measures, they often opt for more traditional options: locks and dogs (Smith & Byrne 2017; George Street Research 1999; Harkness 2017; Harkness & Larkins 2020; Jones

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2008; Sugden 1998; Walsh & Walsh 2017). This situation is not limited to agricultural theft: Hopkins and Tilley (1998) suggest that small businesses (which includes most Irish farms) are often lax about crime prevention because they simply lack time and resources, and are often more concerned with short-term economic survival.

Several studies have suggested that farmers are reticent about reporting theft to the police (McCall & Homel 2003): two surveys found that 51 percent (Donnermeyer & Barclay 2005) and 88 percent (Mears et al 2007) failed to report farm crime. Although an Irish survey found that 41 percent of all theft cases were reported. Machinery and vehicles thefts were the most likely to be reported and all incidents of robbery were reported (Walsh & Walsh 2017). This said, more recently, the Irish Farmers Association responded to claims that rural crime was falling by suggesting that farmers had simply stopped reporting - partly because they felt abandoned by the state's closure of rural Gardaí stations (Gallagher 2018b).

There is much consistency between studies as to why farmers fail to report crimes, including beliefs that:

- a certain amount of theft is inevitable (George Street Research, 1999; Jobes et al 2000);
- the theft would be too difficult to prove and/or uncertainty that anything had been stolen (i.e. livestock may have been killed by predators) (Barclay & Donnermeyer 2002; Harkness 2017; Harkness & Larkins 2020; Mears et al 2007; Walsh & Walsh 2017);
- too much time had elapsed since the theft because, in large farms, theft may take some time to notice (Barclay & Donnermeyer 2002; Harkness & Larkins 2020; Jobes et al 2000);
- the police can do little and/or do not understand farming (Barclay & Donnermeyer 2002; Harkness & Larkins 2020; Jobes et al 2000; Morris et al 2020; Walsh & Walsh 2017);
- the farmer would be penalised for breaking regulatory standards (i.e. theft of chemicals which were not properly secured) (Harkness 2017; Jones 2008);

- the local community would be angered by a farmer informing a neighbour to the police, or the farmer may not want to harm the offender's family (Barclay & Donnermeyer 2002; Harkness 2017; Jobes et al 2000; Walsh & Walsh 2017);
- there could be retribution from the thief (Harkness 2017; Harkness & Larkins 2020; Walsh & Walsh 2017).

Literature review summary

The available international literature suggests that farms are attractive targets for crime and many farms will be victimised at some point. Farmers are, however, slow to report crimes to the police or spend time and resources on crime prevention. Opportunities for theft from farms can be inflated by a lack of capable guardians, their remoteness and physical terrain, ease of access, relaxed attitudes to security and failure to report theft.

While these studies are important, Irish farms tend to be different from American, Australian and British farms in terms of size, management structure and terrain. The relevance of these studies to the Irish context is, therefore, useful but limited. Furthermore, the studies cited above have almost all been influenced by routine activity theory (Cohen & Felson 1979). The insights from which are important and likely accurate – a lack of capable guardians almost certainly factors in the victimisation of farms, as does proximity to urban areas. A key limitation of all of these studies is, however, the narrow focus on the victim. Looking at agricultural theft from a left realist lens demands a more nuanced and comprehensive contextual assessment and highlights the need for longer-term social prevention.

Left realism

In the 1980s, Young (1986, p. 473) provided a scathing critique of criminology which formed the foundation of what became left realism, defined as:

Radical in its criminology and realistic in its appraisal of crime and its causes. Radical, in that crime is seen as an endemic product of the class and patriarchal nature of advanced industrial society... realistic in that it attempts to be faithful to the reality of crime.

This section summarises the key arguments of left realism, paying close attention to its two key concepts - the square of crime and relative deprivation. For Young (1992) left realism is composed of a number of principles which are summarised here.

First, and most importantly, left realism calls for researchers, policy makers and practitioners to be ‘faithful to the nature of crime’ (Lea 2015, p. 172). That is, all research, theory and practice must acknowledge the precise form that agricultural theft takes and where it takes place; grounded within political and economic context. This must involve all four dimensions of the ‘square of crime’ (Lea 2015; Young 1992; see DeKeseredy & Schwartz 2018) which, as one of left realisms core concepts, is summarised and applied to agricultural theft in Table 6.1. It is argued that all research, policy and practice must engage all four dimensions.

Table 6.1: Left realist research, policy and practice agenda

Dimension	Actors	Role in agricultural theft
State	any state agencies, including criminal justice, health, social welfare, education and housing	- define crime / create laws and regulations - enforce regulations on chemicals - gather data on theft - prioritise theft prevention - disruption of theft networks - arrests may deter theft - prevent through target hardening advise – fund target hardening - pressure machinery companies to improve their security - facilitate organisations which strengthen rural communities - job creation - reduce inequality (i.e. improve social welfare, social housing, education etc.)
Public	- communities - the media - NGOs - companies	- improved social efficacy - capable guardians – including community watch but also through looking for sale of stolen goods (i.e. <i>veterinary</i>, online marketplaces, farmers unions) - reduced fear of crime (i.e. responsible media reporting) - victim support - support would be thieves to transition away from theft – community members acting as mentors / role models etc.

		• companies design products to prevent theft
Offender	• individuals • organisations	• alter structural factors influencing the decision to steal (i.e. reduce relative deprivation) • support desistence from offending
Victim	• individuals • organisations	• alter the situational factors influencing the decision to steal (i.e. alter built environment, target hardening) • supported to reduce fear of crime • supported to prevent repeat victimisation • compensation to victims

Second, much criminological theory focuses on one cause (i.e. strain, social disorganisation) often attentive to just one dimension of the square of crime at the expense of others. Left realists argued that there are often multiple causes at different levels and applied to different dimension of the square of crime. As such, the integration of theories can be advantageous (Young 1992). This said, while left realists claimed to be open to all applicable theories, anomie-based subcultural theories were given precedence. Drawing from anomie, they identified relative deprivation ‘as a major cause of criminal behaviour’ (Young 1992, p. 33). They argued that absolute poverty is an insufficient explanation for crime. Instead, the motivation for much offending is the inability to achieve the cultural goals dictated by consumer society: that ‘experienced injustice in certain limited political situations, is at the root cause of crime’ (Young 1992, p. 34). In a later article, Young (2003, p. 389) integrated Mertonian theories of relative deprivation with Katz’s seduction of crime thesis to argue that globalisation and neo-liberalism have intensified relative deprivation whilst creating a ‘crises of identity’ in working class communities. This ‘combination is experienced as unfair, humiliating and threatening’ and can result in both instrumental and expressive offending (see Windle 2021).

Third, not only do different offences have different causes, but different areas experience crime differently (Young 1992). As such, blindly adopting theories developed in one context to explain phenomena in another context is unlikely to be successful. As crime is experienced differently within different areas and by different people, researchers should assess how different groups are impacted by crime and preventive measures. This calls for narrower geographical enquiries: once we understand the lived realities of specific groups we can tailor preventive measures for that community.

Gauging lived realities requires that those most impacted by agricultural theft be consulted about all policy and practice (see Lynch et al 2021). Here, local victimisation surveys can be used to measure both local community opinions and the realities of agricultural theft. Once the reality of agricultural theft is understood, the state can allocate resources to where they are most needed (Lea 2015). In short, farming communities know what has happened and what they want done about it, so ask them.

Fourth, left realists proposed greater emphasis on structural change than policing. They argued that investing in social goods (health, housing, employment etc.) can promote social control, which has a more significant and longer-term impact than criminal justice approaches (Matthews 1992; Young 1992). Police and prisons are, however, seen as ‘inevitably necessary’ but should be minimally used and democratic. That is, police priorities should follow community priorities (Young 1992, p. 41). The nuance of left realism is apparent here: preventing agricultural theft in the short-term may involve educating potential victims about how theft occurs, target hardening properties and disrupting theft networks, however, longer-term policies will involve altering the structural factors filling the pool of would-be thieves. Effective agricultural theft prevention will involve multiple agencies within and outside of the criminal justice system, depending on local context. Just as farmers do not use one machine for all jobs (a combine makes a rough job of bailing) policy-makers and practitioners should be open to all available preventive tools.

The last two points can conflict, however. Many farmers the author has spoken with over the years have called for stricter law enforcement-based approaches which punish thieves and deter theft. While left realists have been especially critical of zero tolerance and underclass theories (see Matthews 1992; also Windle 2021) many farmers would favour such ‘common sense’ conservative policies over longer-term structural approaches. The Irish Natura and Hill Farmers Association (2020), for example, have lobbied to remove suspended sentences for violent theft, and remove free legal aid and bail for offender with previous convictions. While left realism demands we listen to communities, what happens when the community rejects the left element of left realism?

Left realism and agricultural theft

While generalising about crime from studies conducted or theories developed in other countries is almost antithesis to the left realist tenant of specificity (Young 1992), this section proposes that left realism can be a useful approach to reducing agricultural theft. This chapter is not the first to highlight the utility of left realism in a rural setting, DeKeseredy, Schwartz and Donnermeyer have long lobbied for its relevance to a range of issues affecting rural communities (see DeKeseredy & Schwartz 2018).

If agricultural theft is conducted by people travelling from urban areas, then the subcultural and relative deprivation approaches prioritised by left realists remain important. A number of Irish studies have, for example, shown how decades of neo-liberal economic policies, including deindustrialisation and government austerity measures, have widened the gap between the most and least affluent (Bowden 2014; Cambridge 2019; Hourigan 2011). It has been previously argued that increased inequality has been met, in some areas, with subcultural adaptations which have facilitated problematic drug use (Leonard & Windle 2020) and violence (Windle 2019; Windle 2021).

Smith and McElwee (2013, p. 115) have, however, warned against such ‘alien conspiracy theories’. They suggest that many ‘crimes, such as livestock rustling or theft of farm machinery often require the offender to possess insider knowledge and/or rural social capital to exploit the situation’ and that farms are more often victimised by ‘rural criminal entrepreneurs’ than urban peoples. While this may be so in parts of the United Kingdom, in Ireland many people living in urban areas are familiar with rural life. Many have families living in the countryside (the ‘country cousins’) and many urban areas are situated close to farmland.

The involvement of organised crime groups in agricultural theft has been identified in other countries, notably in livestock and machinery theft to order (Europol 2019; Farmers Weekly 2020; Morris et al 2020; Smith & Byrne 2019). In Ireland, a Gardaí crime prevention officer reported that smaller items are commonly stolen by locals while organised crime groups are involved in machinery theft (Gallagher 2018a; see also Hourigan et al 2018). Examples include reports of gangs using drones to identify machinery and livestock (O’Brien 2020), increased incidents of ‘steal-to-order’ chemical theft (The Independent 2020b) and ‘a criminal gang with links to paramilitaries’ which transported stolen tractors across Ireland to a mechanic who used the parts in his ‘chop shop’ tractor sales business (Roche 2019). More organised offenders may,

however, exploit local knowledge. For example, in 2019, a young man living in an economically deprived area on the outskirts of Cork City was imprisoned for burglary, and for stealing tractors and quadbikes. At the trial, Gardaí reported that the defendant was ‘was being used for his local knowledge of the area’ (Heylin 2019).

More importantly, subcultural responses to relative deprivation are not uniquely urban phenomena (see DeKeseredy & Schwartz 2010). Many farms are situated close to small or medium sized towns which suffer many of the economic hardships and social exclusions of urban areas. Some perpetrators of agricultural theft likely come from large urban areas or smaller towns suffering relative deprivation, and agricultural theft likely involves an assortment of amateur opportunists and organised crime groups. The problem is that, in Ireland, there is not a research-base of who steals from farms or why, or on the mechanics of theft, to comment with any confidence.

A number of studies have suggested that opportunity theories may be particularly appropriate for the prevention of agricultural theft (Barclay & Donnermeyer 2002; Donnermeyer & Barclay, 2005; Harkness & Larkins 2020; Mears et al 2007) including a study on opium theft (Windle 2016). The left realists, while critical of opportunity theories ignorance of structural causes, did acknowledge that some situational measures may be useful as part of a holistic approach. Mears and colleagues (2007, p. 136), Harkness and Larkins (2020, p. 235) and Crick (2020) have recommended measures farmers can take to target harden and improve guardianship. These have included, but are not limited to:

- locking chemicals and equipment in secure buildings (preferably close to the main residence) or, hiding or disabling the equipment;
- securely locking gates;
- marking equipment and livestock with identification numbers or using technologies such as ultraviolet etching, microdots or forensic water;
- avoiding overstocking chemicals;
- employing security personal;
- storing machinery, and placing animal pens, away from roads;
- maintaining perimeter fencing and warning signs;

- ensure the farm is permanently occupied, or looks occupied;
- installing CCTV, security lights, intruder alarms.⁴

While these sound useful, it can be impractical to carry large amounts of chemicals or tools home with you every night and few farmers can afford to buy good locks let alone employ private security or buy expensive technology. For some, the time and financial cost of employing these measures may outweigh the potential cost of theft. Even when farmers can target harden, few thieves will be dissuaded by basic padlocks. Indeed, when Barclay and colleagues (2001) cross-tabulated reported victimisation with 22 common security measures, the only statistically significant measure found to reduce victimisation was a dog – a most capable of guardians – although they acknowledged that the ineffectiveness of security measures may be partly owing to a lack of motivation farmers have to use preventive measures.

Much of the literature has focused on how the potential victim can dissuade the potential offender – two of four dimensions of the square of crime. The third and fourth dimensions have, however, largely been ignored. The government and manufacturers of agricultural goods could make prevention easier for farmers who are often too overworked, and under too much financial stress, to undertake more than basic prevention themselves.

Farrell and Tilley (2020, p. 1) have recently argued that, as security measure affect quality of life, they should ‘preferably be ethical and unobtrusive, aesthetically neutral or pleasing, and the easy-to-use or default option... inelegant security can fall into disuse even if it prevents crime’. Tractors and mobile agricultural machinery are seldom fitted with immobilisers as standard, let alone alarms. Most do not even provide individually cut keys with one key fitting all tractors of that make. Research has shown that cars fitted with a combination of central locking, electronic immobiliser and alarm are ‘up to 25 times less likely to be stolen than those

⁴ Bowden and Pytlarz (2020) and Smith (2016, p.81) highlights the potential for text alert schemes and social media apps as preventive devices to widen guardianship, alert communities, provide crime prevention information and also ‘help establish a more responsive style of policing that is awake to community concerns before they become systematic issues’. A sentiment in-line with left realisms focus on democratic policing. Bowden and Pytlarz (2020) do, however, caution that such technologies can heighten anxiety and fear of crime.

without security’, while tracking devices are ‘particularly effective’ (Farrell et al 2011, p. 21). As such, a simple means of reducing machinery theft is to fit security devices as standard. A similar argument may apply to the computers within most machines – they are easy to steal with minimal security. While this is, in many ways, a victim-focused intervention, it requires farmers, farmers unions and the state to pressure machinery companies; who may be unwilling to pass manufacturing costs to customers or risk reduced profit margins.

Opportunity approaches can only go so far. Reducing agricultural theft requires a response which places the activity within its social and economic context and engages all four corners of the square of crime. Longer-term policies would focus on altering the structural conditions facilitating agricultural theft. The problem is we do not have sufficient evidence of who steals from farms and what motivates them – we can follow the left realist chain and focus on relative deprivation, but this is a hypothesis which needs to be tested. The final section sets out a left realist agricultural theft research agenda.

A left realist research agenda

Young (1986, p. 62) recommended left realists be ‘fiercely sceptical’ of official statistics while avoiding a ‘blanket rejection of all figures’. He suggested that ‘realism necessitates an accurate victimology’, which involves mapping ‘who is at risk and what precise effect crime has on their lives’. He also proposed avoiding unfocused crime surveys that provide national averages. The limitations of official statistics are well known (in Ireland, see Windle 2018) while unfocused national victimisation surveys often overlook the most vulnerable and marginalised. Many farmers fail to report agricultural theft to the police, and those made vulnerable by age or income are even less likely to report to the police. Furthermore, the Irish government does not collect national estimates of agricultural theft but classifies simply as theft.

Localised victimisation surveys were proposed by left realists as the most effective means of measuring victimisation within an area, especially surveys which can gather the opinions of those who may not report crimes to the police (Lea 2015): farmers in this case. There are, however, challenges to conducting such research with farmers. This section will explore those challenges.

First, as farmers are notoriously reticent about talking to researchers, being known to the local community can be helpful (Sugden 1999). The author has spoken to farmers over the years about whether they would participate in research and many felt that they would be slow to discuss their experiences of victimisation with strangers. Any large-scale victimisation survey would, therefore, need to be supported by a trusted politician, trade union or agricultural co-op, and/or be conducted by an insider-researcher.

Second, farmers work unpredictable schedules dictated by the unpredictability of livestock, machinery and weather. As such, door-to-door surveys may prove difficult, as might face-to-face interviews for, unless the researcher lives close-by, they could find themselves racking up many miles driving across the country to find farmers cancelling at the last minute. This is why several studies have interviewed farmers over the telephone (Barclay et al 2001). Involving a local agricultural co-op, where the researcher could meet farmers when they came to buy supplies or sell goods, would speak to both the first and second limitation.

Third, the lack of an agricultural research base may limit the development of a survey instrument. A smaller pilot, employing semi-structured interviews and using a ground theory approach, would give farmers an opportunity to discuss victimisation in their own words. This would allow for the development of questionnaires based upon these interviews at a later stage. Alternatively, the left realist surveys of the 1980s begun with focus groups whereby local communities, including police and politicians, were asked what they wanted included in the survey (Lea 2015).

Fourth, and credit for this goes to my mother-in-law: the research must balance the perspective of men and women, young and old. If we focus predominantly on male farmers then we omit the view of their female partners. Not only are many women equal partners in the running of farms, but they are often in precarious situations. They may be home alone for long periods or driving out to isolated fields and farms to deliver machine parts and/or dinners. The partners will provide important alternative perspectives.

Finally, while the left realists argued that all research must involve all four dimensions of the square of crime, they then proposed victimisations surveys which focus on just one dimension. To fully understand agricultural theft in Ireland, and how to counter it from all dimensions of

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the square of crime, we need knowledge of offender motivation and decision making. That is, a holistic research project will survey local communities about their experience and interview active or former offenders about why and how they stole.

Conclusion

It is time to rejuvenate left realism as much of the context within which the theory emerged is apparent today in many countries. Considering Ireland specifically, there is a move within Irish critical criminology to return to the left idealist cornerstone of abolitionism (O’Keeffe & Swirak 2020) and Ireland has fully embraced neoliberalism, reducing positive state intervention and the safety-net of welfare to a minimum. This has ensured a widening of the gap between the richest and poorest. All issues which motivated the original left realists to action (see Young & Matthews 1992).

There is a tendency amongst some to either downplay farm theft (a moral panic) or exaggerate (we’re all doomed!). Fear of agricultural theft is not irrational. But the perceived threat of violent crime is heightened by media reporting. Young’s (1986) advice that being ‘realistic about crime as a problem is not an easy task’ applies today. The Irish media distort the reality of crime and crime control (see Black 2016; Windle 2019; Windle & Murphy 2021). A left realist approach demands we listen to farming communities, and take their concerns and experiences seriously. This does not mean we uncritically accept common perceptions, which can represent media-driven distortions. Rather, researchers can appraise rural people’s fears and experiences of crime through victimisation surveys. Not only does this give affected communities a voice but may quell some anxieties about the true extent of crime while directing resources to where they are most needed. Indeed, left realists proposed that all data be made available to the local community so that they could develop proposals, hold local government and police to account, and lobby for policies and strategies the community need (Lea 2015): armed with evidence, farming communities are a formidable force.

A solid evidence base is the foundation to effective preventive policy and intervention. This chapter has attempted to take a first step towards establishing an evidence-base by exploring some conceptual, theoretical and methodological issues, through a left realist lens. The next step will be to conduct local victimisation surveys. Many of the recommendations reviewed in the first half of this chapter can sensibly be assumed to have some effectiveness, but there is

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little evidence of success in rural settings globally (Barclay & Donnermeyer 2011) let alone in Ireland.

Research also needs to prioritise who the offenders are, where they come from, what motivates them to steal from farms, and why they target particular farms. Speaking to thieves will provide insight into which theories can best explain farm theft at different levels. Can routine activity theory explain increased theft because new motorways, alongside profitable global markets for machinery, produced new opportunities to steal machinery? Or did decades of neoliberalism inflate inequality across Ireland, a situation exaggerated by the Great Recession and prolonged austerity? It is possible that both are true, but the scarcity of systematic research evidence means that any attempt at causal explanation will quickly become speculation. Once we get a sense of causes then we can develop longer-term policies – which may involve reducing opportunities through targeting hardening and developing guardianship in the short-term while tackling inequalities in the longer-term.

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