Talking about... crime in the ‘new world’

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COVID-19: A distinct criminal opportunity

In early 2020 it became apparent we were entering uncertain times as we faced the outbreak of a global pandemic, COVID-19. This began a period of intense rapid social change. Whilst many adapted to the first ‘lockdown’ with the novelty of working from home, baking banana bread, and joining Britain's newest PE teacher Joe Wickes in morning exercise routines in their living rooms, others experienced the lockdown in a different way.

- For organised criminals, COVID-19 became a distinct criminal opportunity.
- For those in prison it meant 23 hours locked in the same cell, no visits from family and an inability to social distance from staff.
Lived Experience

What is so important about lived experience?

In qualitative phenomenological research, lived experience (LE) refers to a representation of the experiences and choices of a given person, and the knowledge that they gain from these experiences and choices.

The focus of this research was to identify the way in which those with lived experience of crime, deviance and social control were able to adapt to the current crisis and identify areas within Criminal Justice and the security sector where innovation was being shown by LE actors.

The research study

I interviewed 18 people with lived experience of crime, deviance and social control who also identified themselves as working within the CJS or security sector. I also performed ethnographic research (online), examining online events, social media accounts and blog posts organised or written by LE actors in these areas. From these interviews and digital ethnography, I identified two case studies to examine in closer detail. Including interviews with others within the organisation, further ethnography and co-production of academic writing.
Background: Innovation & Adaptation

We Fight Fraud Live
WFF created an 8-hour live webinar detailing the criminal opportunity of Covid-19 from the perspective of ex-criminals, ethical hackers, and fraud and financial crime experts.

Our Empty Chair
OEC ran, and continues to run, a social media campaign to highlight the experiences, concerns, worries and fears of the families waiting for prisoners outside the prison gates.
The Criminal Opportunity: 
Fraud & Financial Crime

£11,000,000
Lost between 16th March – 8th June 2020.
2,866 victims of Covid related scams.

Simplified case study (from June 2020):
“Covid-19 lock downs mean that thousands of my staff are now working from home to answer calls, manage accounts, and take payments. What is the threat to my company?”

Cyber threat analysis shows that hacking home networks easier.

Social engineering analysis shows workers not following KYC processes due to new ‘work from home’ working practices.

Underworld intel shows focus on opening fraudulent accounts while it is easier due to lack of in person checks.

We recommended:
VPN use for staff to access company systems.
Raising staff awareness through training about work from home threats & importance of following procedure.
Auditing identity check processes to ensure robust processes in place to counter fraudulent identity documents.
We Fight Fraud Live

FRAUD, LOSS AND CRIME DURING A CRISIS
COVID-19 SEEN THROUGH THE EYES OF CRIMINALS

GLOBAL ONLINE CONFERENCE AND NETWORKING EVENT

28 APRIL 2020
The Criminal Opportunity: Covid-19 in Prison

77,942
Prisoners currently in prison (England & Wales)

498 prisoners testing positive (week ending 11th Jan)
4800 since start of pandemic

4000 pledged to release, but only released 316 before scheme closed in August

71 prisoners have died due to COVID-19, 24 in December 2020 alone

54,000 unheard cases, it will take some cases until 2022 to be heard
15% of the prison population are on remand awaiting trial

Between 310,000 - 500,000 children have a parent in prison
"He is not a prisoner in our eyes, he’s a Dad and a Husband and that’s what we wanted him to feel like for at least 1 day of the year and we couldn’t do it."

"I don’t know when my kids will be able to see their Daddy again and it breaks my heart knowing they are longing to cuddle the hero in their lives."
Mobilising Lived Experience

Both case studies showed that additional work needs to be done by those with expertise and knowledge that stems from lived experience before this knowledge can be heard. Once heard, further work needs to be done to prove the LE actor and the knowledge that they have to offer is legitimate. The basis of this is the stigma attached to LE of crime, deviance and social control.

Moving forward

Beck, J & Harding, N (Forthcoming) ‘The aesthetic labour of undoing stigma’

ESRC IAA funded collaboration between Lancaster university Law School and WFF  
“Rapid Response to Fraud and Economic crime”
Any questions?

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