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Abstract | This paper examines the nature of serious and organised crime group (SOCG) involvement in public sector corruption, associated risk factors and best-practice responses and prevention strategies.

The paper draws on an environmental scan of international literature on the corruption of public sector officials by SOCGs to determine how corruption occurs and how it can best be prevented. The approaches of other countries were analysed to identify which initiatives can most effectively be applied to problems within Australia. Although the scale of the threat is less in Australia than in other countries, we can learn from overseas experiences how best to minimise this threat in future.

Understanding and responding to serious and organised crime involvement in public sector corruption

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According to Transparency International, Australia is perceived to be one of the least corrupt countries in the world, although Australia's ranking in the latest Corruption Perceptions Index (Transparency International 2015) has recently declined. Public servants are particularly at risk of being invited to act corruptly because of their access to confidential and personal information and because they can provide benefits to, or discount the liabilities of, members of the public. Corruption affecting the public sector is a covert and pernicious criminal activity that has been defined as:

...[a] public official...acting for personal gain, [violating] the norms of public office and [harming] the interests of the public to benefit a third party who rewards [the public official] for access to goods or services which [they] would not otherwise obtain (Philip 2006: 45).

Because corruption is a much smaller problem in Australia than in many other countries, fewer resources have been devoted to detecting so-called 'hard-to-find' corruption, such as where serious and organised crime groups (SOCG) target public officials.

Conclusions

Although evidence of corruption of public officials by SOCGs in Australia is largely anecdotal, overseas research clearly indicates various kinds of risk. These include:

- risks related to procurement, particularly in defence, construction, planning and development and in the gaming and liquor industries;
- risks to frontline agencies such as police, customs and border protection and other regulatory bodies (notably local councils that administer high-value development or procurement approvals), with extensive personal data holdings and decision-making functions of value to SOCGs;
- risks to those agencies that manage Australia's domestic and international border security (in connection with illegal migration and the movement of illicit substances across borders); and
- risks to new or boutique agencies that have yet to establish, implement or monitor anti-corruption policies and practices.

Public sector corruption by SOCGs is driven by individual demographic and lifestyle factors, as well as by the organisational environment. Particular risks arise from:

- financial strain caused by excessive lifestyle expenses or addictive behaviours like drug abuse or gambling;
- the failure to differentiate between workplace and private activities, particularly through blended recreational activities and the use of social media in both environments;
- individual characteristics including youth and naivety, older age and disenchantment with the workplace, social isolation, and lifestyle interests that coincide with SOCG interests like motorcycles, personal fitness, tattooing, and excessive alcohol and drug use;
- a personal relationship with individuals associated with SOCGs; and
- fiscal demands on the public sector and the economic pressure to reduce government staff numbers, which can give rise to stress, dissatisfaction, disillusionment or resentment among workers that may make them vulnerable to corrupt approaches from SOCGs.

As the boundaries between legitimate and illegitimate business blur with the involvement of SOCGs in laundering the proceeds of crime and the use of legitimate enterprises to influence public sector decision-making (Savona & Berlusconi 2015), so the need arises to understand more how corruption can be used as a vehicle for serious criminality. To date, research and intelligence-gathering has focused mainly on overt forms of infiltration and abuse that have resulted in well-publicised investigations and prosecutions. More covert activities, which may reach the highest levels of the public sector, are yet to be uncovered in Australia. Much can be learnt from overseas approaches that have been shown to be effective in successfully detecting and responding to risks of a similar nature.