

# Crime on Farms 2001-2014



**This study of crime on farms was conducted as part of Project Gateway, an initiative of Queensland Police, established out of concern about increasing trespassing and unauthorised hunting and other crimes on farms. In 2014, a mail survey of 3160 farmers across a range of agricultural industries in Queensland and New South Wales examined the nature, extent and impact of rural crime, security practices on farms, and farmers' attitudes to rural crime. The overall response rate to the survey was 33%, providing a sample of 1251 farmers for analysis (69% from NSW/ 31% from Qld). The findings were compared with those of a previous study conducted in 2001 to assess trends in rural crime.**

## The findings

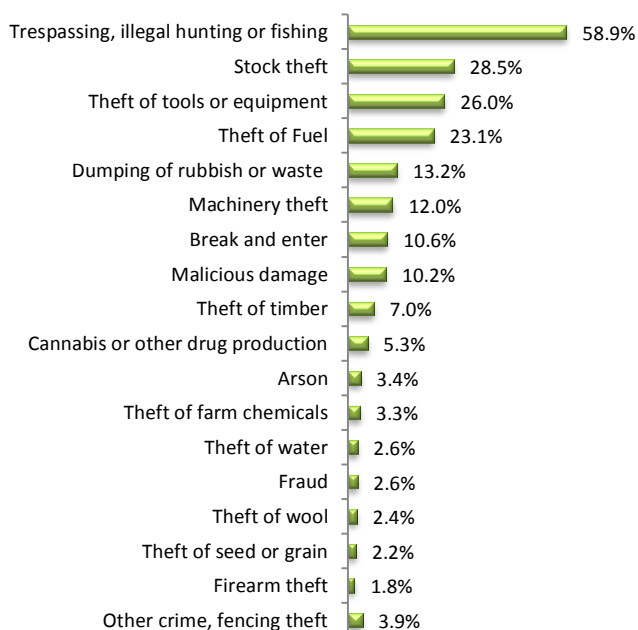
While crime rates generally have fallen across Australia, and in much of the western world, this is not the case for rural crime. Of the farmers surveyed, 74% had experienced some type of rural crime over the past 12 years. Farmers agreed rural crime had increased but overall it was not considered to be a *serious* problem; although victims of crime were significantly more likely to rate rural crime as serious.

Of concern, incidents of trespassing and unauthorised hunting have doubled. The current 'pig hunting craze' has produced offenders who are well equipped with off-road vehicles, GPS systems, and high-powered rifles. They are responsible for gates left open, damage to fences, crops and vegetation, vandalism, arson, littering, disturbing, stealing or shooting stock, having dogs that attack livestock, and the thefts of fuel, tools and equipment, tyres, lights or GPS equipment from farm machinery. Consequently, many farmers have closed their properties. This means there are few opportunities for legitimate access to rural properties for recreation.

Most landholders have strict requirements for access to their properties. Some are happy for people to enter as long as abide by these requirements. Some can quietly turn people away without any repercussions. However,

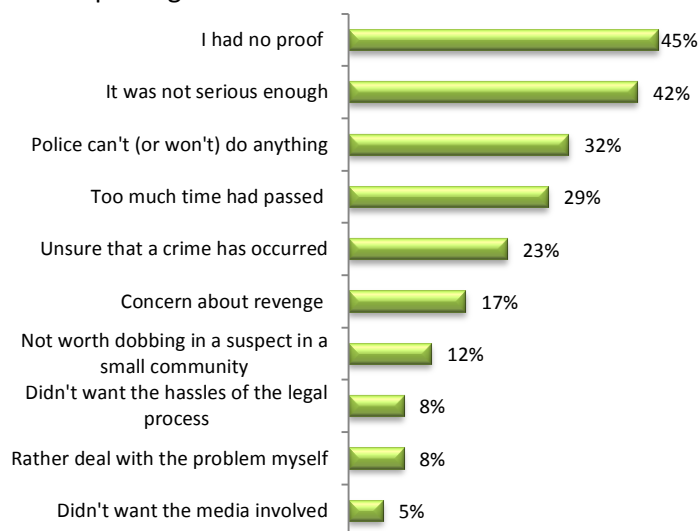
others experience persistent problems, and are concerned as offenders are armed, own savage dogs and ignore their requests to leave. The activities of Animal Rights groups cause particular stress for intensive livestock producers. There is a need for an overhaul of current legislation regarding trespass and illegal hunting to enable police to address these problems. There is a need for public education regarding trespass laws.

Thefts of fuel, machinery, timber and rubbish dumping have increased since 2001. Stock theft has increased to a lesser extent, but this age-old crime continues to have a significant impact on victims; financially, psychologically and socially. The theft of one or two animals for food remains a common problem. Neighbourhood thefts cause rifts in the community and can isolate victims of crime. Some large thefts are committed by organised crime networks. Some producers have lost valuable breeding stock, with ongoing financial consequences. Thefts have caused some producers to sell up or trade out of stock.



**Rates of reported crime on farms 2014**

There has been an increase in farmers reporting crimes to police for incidents of trespass and illegal hunting and theft of fuel and stock. Yet, overall, only half of all rural crimes are reported to police. Farmers fail to report crimes because they are too difficult to prove, or they are not considered serious. Often too much time elapses before a theft is discovered, or there is uncertainty that a crime has actually occurred. Many farmers think it is a waste of time reporting crimes because there is little the police can or will do. The lack of feedback to victims on the status of the police investigation when they do report crimes was a common complaint. The failure of the courts to prosecute offenders discourages victims from reporting crime.



### Reasons for not reporting crime

Farmers need to report crimes. Police need the information to establish patterns of crime across a district. While police need training in rural crime and the agricultural industries, farmers when reporting crimes, should ensure officers fully understand all information.

Farmers prefer to report crime or suspicious behaviour in their district to local police rather than use police hotlines. Farmers are frustrated when calls to local police are redirected to regional centres where staff have little knowledge of the district or rural crime. Police in both states have Facebook sites and Blogs to disseminate and receive information on crime; even a phone App for farmers to email photos to report crime. Farmers will increasingly use these options, although many rural areas still have limited internet access. Police should disseminate information on rural crime in a district to local farmers. Farmers prefer information via radio or television, farm journals or newspapers.

Most crime prevention practices by farmers are reactions to criminal events rather than proactive crime prevention. Many have been forced to change farm management practices to prevent further victimisation, at great inconvenience, for example, no longer storing bulk fuel on farm or moving stock out of paddocks that are subject to repeated thefts. Apart from livestock identification and record management, securing

firearms, and locking homes when unattended, few farmers bothered with property security. However, security cameras for monitoring access to properties and for providing proof of crimes in court are very popular.

Compared with the 2001 findings, fewer farmers could rely on their neighbours to call the police or let them know if there was something suspicious occurring on their property. There is little involvement in community crime prevention programs, and informal crime prevention groups lack community support. Ideally police could have a role in facilitating community crime prevention. Alternatively, industry groups, farmer organisations, rural fire services or other groups may assist. For example, *Eye Watch* might work if it is incorporated as part of an existing organisation.

There has been much social change in rural Australia with many farmers leaving the land due to drought and economic decline, a rise in the numbers of absentee landowners, and an increase in city dwellers seeking cheaper housing moving into rural communities. The mining boom has also caused much upheaval. Farmers noted that they no longer know everyone in their area. Social divisions can lessen community ability to maintain social control to prevent crime. When asked who or what they blamed for rural crime in their district, farmers identified trespassers and illegal hunters, seasonal workers or transients, or miners, and lower socio-economic groups, unemployment and drug abuse.

Farmers agreed that the police were doing a good job despite limited resources, but few believe that police have rural crime under control. Stock and rural crime investigators are highly valued, but there needs to be more of them. Farmers would like to see more police at sale yards, clearing sales, public meetings and patrolling rural roads, and visit local farmers to get to know them, and share and gather information about crime.

### Conclusions

Overall farmers in both states shared similar views on rural crime. Crime poses a threat to food safety, food security, biosecurity and international trade. Crime is costly for farmers in terms of lost production, replacement costs, lost work time and higher insurance premiums, which impacts on local economies. There is a need to raise awareness about rural crime. We need tighter legislation around trespass and hunting and more resources for policing rural crime and crime prevention.

**THANKYOU to the farmers who gave their time to participate in this study and to Queensland and NSW Police for their support. For more information contact:**

**Associate Professor Elaine Barclay**  
**University of New England**  
**Armidale, NSW 2351**  
**ph: (02) 6773 2014**  
**Email: ebarclay@une.edu.au**

**une**  
 University of  
 New England