

Organized crime and corruption control in Britain: an interview with Alan Wright

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Abstract This email interview with Alan Wright was conducted during 2014 and 2015. It discusses Wright's background, influences, career and current thinking and activities from his early career as a police officer involved in the operations that achieved the prosecutions of two well-known London gangsters, Ronnie and Reggie Kray, through to his later police career and his observations on developments in British policing and his move into academia and resulting publications, including Organised Crime (2006), an introduction to the subject for criminology and criminal justice students by means of a critical review of the literature.

Keywords Organized crime · Organized crime control · Corruption · Corruption control

Michael Woodiwiss: Can you start by explaining a bit about your upbringing and where you were raised?

Alan Wright: I was born in Stanmore in North West London in 1941. My father had a grocer's shop in East London until his first heart attack in 1953. Thereafter, we moved to Surrey and then to Kent. I finished my secondary education in Gillingham in Kent in 1958. After the death of both my parents in 1958, I got a job with a large insurance company in the City of London, studying to be an actuary.

Michael Woodiwiss: What was it that led you into a career in law enforcement?

Alan Wright: In 1959 a colleague and I were looking out of the office window and we saw a police officer walking in the street below. The sun was shining and we thought he was probably having a better time than were we, cooped-up in an office. The next day we both made enquiries about joining the police. My only previous family connection with the police was a distant cousin of my father who had been a Chief Inspector on the London Flying Squad in the 1930's.

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Cameron Telford: You were part of the task force that caught up with the Krays in the 1960s. Was the Kray operation a departure from previous practice/non-practice?

Alan Wright: Quite a lot of water flowed under the bridge before I was put on the Kray enquiry. To put an answer in perspective I should say something about my experience of policing and investigation which preceded my time on the Kray case. After a short time as a cadet, most of which was spent at the training school in Hendon, I was posted to West End Central police station on my 19th birthday. In the early 1960s the work of a constable in the West End of London was predominantly on street patrol, covering Mayfair and Soho beats. Local gangsters, such as Billy Hill, Albert Dimes and Jack 'Jack Spot' Comer were pointed out, with the suggestion that we should not seek to engage with them but leave them to more experienced officers. We were also warned about getting involved with the West End clubs generally.

Generally speaking patrol work was by solo officers. You were expected to work your beat. Discipline was quite strict. You were not allowed into the station or section house without good reason. Because this was a time before personal radios were issued to street officers, backup was not always available. Nevertheless it was a good apprenticeship with many arrests for crime and for petty offences.

In September 1962 I got married and transferred to Acton in West London and went from being relatively experienced street officer to being bottom of the pile. It was a big contrast from the West End but in February 1963 I successfully applied to become an Aid to the Criminal Investigation Department (CID). As such, I worked at Acton, Brentford and Hounslow. The job of an aid to CID was to patrol, assist with enquiries and with administration, mainly, typing-up crime sheets.

During this time I became more aware that some crime was gang-related. A crime squad from West End Central under Detective Sergeant Harry Challenor had arrested many West End villains who were reputed to be aligned with London gangs. However, in July 1963 the visit of Queen Frederica led to arrests by this squad which were shown to be unlawful and many of the earlier Challenor squad cases were subsequently overturned. Although I was working away from the West End, I knew many of the officers who worked with Challenor and one colleague, with whom I had previously worked on plain clothes patrols, was sentenced to four years imprisonment for fabricating evidence. It is worth mentioning that 1963 was also the year of the Great Train Robbery and of a trend toward armed robberies with shotguns. In all this was perhaps the time when I became more aware of the serious and gang-related nature of some crime, although this is not to say that I had any clear idea of what this truly entailed.

In January 1965 I became a Detective Constable at Hammersmith Police Station. In those days, I was carrying a load of over 1000 crimes to investigate per year. These were supposed to be investigated on a one-by-one basis, with very little time or resources to attempt a cohesive clustering or targeting of offenders. In August 1966 I was assigned to the Foxtrot11 Q-car for one week whilst Detective Sergeant Chris Head was on holiday. On 12 August 1966, after I had gone back to normal CID work, Chris Head, DC Dave Wombwell and PC Geoff Fox, the driver, were shot dead near Wormwood Scrubs prison by Harry Roberts and his accomplices. After this traumatic period I also got involved in the investigation of some fraud cases involving gangs, in particular the protection of so-called 'long-firm frauds' from which gangs took large slices of revenue.

In January 1967 I was promoted to Detective Sergeant and transferred to C1 branch at New Scotland Yard. In those days, C1 branch included the murder squad, drugs squad, obscene publications squad and other specialist units. After a few weeks on fill-in cases, in March 1967 I was posted to a special enquiry into the activities of the Kray brothers. The enquiry was led by Detective Chief Superintendent Ferguson Walker (who was by then nearing retirement), supported by Detective Sergeant (1st class) Leslie Emmet (later to become Assistant Chief Constable of Thames Valley Police) and myself (probably the least experienced Detective Sergeant available).

I apologise for this somewhat long-winded answer to your question but it was necessary to provide the background to my involvement. In fact, gang investigations had been carried out in the past by Scotland Yard officers, as I have indicated in my book on organised crime (Wright 2006). In general however, these investigations were usually one-off cases although there had been holistic attempts to deal with a wider range of activities. Wensley, who was a pioneering figure in detective work in London in the 1920s and who set up the Flying Squad to deal with criminal gangs who worked across police boundaries, was a precursor to this approach. By 1967/8, however, the structure of the Flying Squad and pressure on them to deal with armed robberies, probably did not lend itself to such long term gang-related enquiries.

Nevertheless, in 1967 there was a long term case which was being investigated holistically and which was ongoing. This was the investigation into the activities of the Richardson brothers and their associates, covering a large number of violent assaults, frauds and other offences¹. This was carried out by Assistant Chief Constable Gerald McArthur of Hertfordshire Police, who led a combined squad of Home Counties, Regional Crime Squad and Metropolitan Police officers. The rumour circulating at the time was that the small C1 unit to which I had been assigned was put in place for political reasons to prevent Mr McArthur following on from the Richardson enquiry to investigate the Krays, which the Met top brass regarded as a Metropolitan Police prerogative.

Cameron Telford: Given the press characterisation of the Krays as English Al Capones - how did police officers charged with collecting evidence against them view them?

Alan Wright: This probably varied over time and from officer to officer involved in the enquiry. From my point of view, at the outset I was not totally aware of the extent to which the Krays would bear comparison with any other gang, although their gangster reputation was well known. Our focus was upon intelligence, using a variety of human and technical sources. In the early days, my job was record keeping, using the information provided by Mr Walker and Sergeant Emmet. Progress was slow, although the enquiries expanded through 1967. Detective Sergeant Algie Hemmingway replaced Sergeant Emmet and Detective Chief Inspector Henry Mooney replaced Mr Walker. We used a form of peripheral targeting, hoping to get to the Krays through associates such as Alan Bruce Cooper, a crook of Canadian origin then based in London. Cooper's activities included setting up an LSD factory, trading in stolen bearer bonds and fencing the proceeds of a large Hatton Garden Bullion Robbery. We made several arrests which severely dented Cooper's resources and reputation.

¹ Charlie and Eddie Richardson led a South London-based gang with a reputation for violence that matched that of the Krays.

During this time, Detective Chief Superintendent Leonard ‘Nipper’ Read took charge of the investigation. Detective Chief Inspector Frank Cater, who had a leading role in the Richardson enquiry, and other officers from that enquiry and from the Regional Crime Squad, joined the unit. Detective Chief Inspector Frank Holt took charge of the fraud investigations, setting up a small dedicated fraud unit within the squad as a whole. This took it way beyond the stop-gap unit as it was originally set up, and made it into a serious and purposeful investigation unit. Assistant Commissioner John Du Rose gave us a powerbase in the organisation at the very highest level. In general, I think that most officers regarded this investigation as an enquiry into gang activity, without putting any transatlantic comparisons alongside it.

We acquired evidence on many cases of assault and fraud during this period, carried out a large number of observations and gathered a considerable amount of intelligence from a number of sources. Although we believed we would eventually be able successfully to prosecute the Kray brothers and their associates we had few witnesses to the murder cases which we knew it would be essential to prove for the investigation to be fully successful. The murder of George Cornell in the Blind Beggar pub in the East End of London had proved particularly difficult because of lack of witnesses during its initial (Divisional) investigation. The murders of Dartmoor inmate Frank Mitchell (whose escape had been engineered by the Krays) and of Jack ‘the hat’ McVitie had both occurred since the investigation team had been formed and were proving equally intransigent. We were accumulating a large amount of information but many of the key people were simply unwilling to commit to provide firm evidence while the Krays were still free.

In April 1968 a substantial enough case provided the breakthrough. Our target Cooper took a sub-contract from the Krays to kill George Caruana, a Soho club owner. Cooper’s sidekick Paul Elvey was arrested boarding a flight in Glasgow with a briefcase full of gelignite to carry out the killing. Other means of killing, including a crossbow, harpoon and a briefcase with hypodermic needle were found at his home and in his car. Cooper and Elvey elected to give evidence for the Crown and in May 1968 all three Kray brothers and a number of their associates were arrested for conspiracy to murder and other offences after a big operation. Thereafter, the floodgates opened. Witnesses to Blind Beggar shooting, to the McVitie murder and Frank Mitchell killing were secured. Witness and jury protection became a big operation. 240 officers were employed on the case at its height. Throughout the case I had worked on intelligence and some other aspects of the investigation, supporting Mr Read, Mr Mooney and Mr Cater who spearheaded the operation. After the arrests, I moved from the intelligence function to the preparation of cases for court.

In June 1969, the Kray brothers were convicted at the Central Criminal Court. Both Ron and Reg Kray died while serving sentence. Charlie got less imprisonment (10 years) but was further convicted of other offences after his release and has also since died. At the height of their reputation, the Kray brothers were a formidable force in Britain’s Gangland. It is certainly true that they were ostentatious. They were always to be seen with their minders. They were immaculately dressed and their self-conception was clearly that of gangsters on the American model. This was not surprising, since they were in personal contact with organised crime leaders in the US. Like their US counterparts, they were capable of instilling fear in those foolish

enough to cross them and they certainly made my hair stand on end on at least one observation where I thought I had been identified!

That there is a viable comparison between the Krays and Capone is to be found at the level of fear that each generated. Victims and potential witnesses certainly felt highly intimidated. However, that the Kray gang was somewhat less fearsome than some of their transatlantic counterparts is probably borne out by the story that when they were confronted by Americans with machine guns when they tried to assume the protection of a certain London gaming club, the Krays simply turned tail and departed! In this respect also, they may have been somewhat less fearsome than some more recent UK gangs.

The comparison with the American ‘Mr Bigs’ was not one which I heard being made by police officers at the time of the investigation, nor was it the kind of theory which would have influenced the strategy or tactics of investigation, apart from the need to protect witnesses. However, it is perhaps understandable that such comparisons are made *post hoc*, if only to underline the significance of what an investigation has been achieved.

Cameron Telford: You have mentioned the capture of the Krays as a turning point in British policing, was the operation so successful in its execution as to dictate this change in policy?

Alan Wright: I think ‘dictate a change in policy’ for policing as a whole is too deliberate and too inclusive. I think that the effect of both the Richardson and Kray investigations was to promote a shift in the investigative paradigm from largely an offence-by-offence basis to a concerted and more holistic and longitudinal effort to investigate and collate a broader range of associations involving gang-related serious crimes. Some of my former colleagues may know otherwise, but in British policing I cannot recall a time before the Richardson and Kray enquiries when issues of this kind were brought together so intensively.

After the successful conclusion of the Kray investigation, Detective Chief Superintendent Don Adams of the Metropolitan Police (who played a major part in preparing the Kray trials for court and was also involved in the Richardson investigation) proposed the setting up of a standing unit who would use this more holistic methodology to investigate future gang activity similar to the Richardson and Kray cases. This was implemented through a squad led by Detective Chief Superintendent Bert Wicksteed and continued in later formats. It led to the formation in the Metropolitan Police of the Special Intelligence Section (SIS), now located within the Specialist, Organised and Economic Crime Command.

In fact these methods, increasingly integrating the work of criminal intelligence units, have become predominant in the investigation of organised crime. This trend (and pressure for the setting up of a British FBI) eventually led to the formation of the Serious Organised Crime Agency (SOCA) and more recently the National Crime Agency (NCA). These issues are now managed within the 3-level National Intelligence Model (NIM). It remains the case, however, that the setting of high-level strategies and reorganisation must not be regarded as a replacement for down-to-earth investigation which deals with the actuality of offences and brings credible evidence to trial.

Michael Woodiwiss: The Krays were able to flourish partly owing to a corrupt policing environment. Can you elaborate on this and comment on the various anti-corruption measures that have been put in place since?

Alan Wright: We were careful throughout the Kray investigation not to reveal our approach either internally to other police officers, or externally to the media or to the public. We were aware that leakage within the police family might be damaging. We did not, for example, draw criminal record files directly, only through a trusted officer at Criminal Records Office. One must bear in mind that the Kray case took place before computers became available for policing. Today other security protocols would be needed. In fact, during the case I cannot personally recall any case of breach of security. We were aware that the Krays knew that arrests were coming simply from rumours of police activity, although they did not know when or for what.

That the Krays could flourish due to a corrupt policing environment more generally is a more complex question. As far as I know, in contrast to the Richardson case, where evidence relating to specific officers was available, in our witness statements (including those of criminal accomplices who gave evidence for the Crown) we had no evidence of specific officers who had facilitated the Krays activities. However, given the prevalence of police corruption in other spheres, including various elements at New Scotland Yard and in the Regional Crime Squad during the 1960s it would have been surprising if there were not some interconnection. Malpractice in the Obscene Publications Squad and the Drugs Squad and the corruption revealed by the 'Times' enquiry showed that corruption was present even at the highest echelons of the CID, including C1 itself. It is also worth remembering that an earlier case against the Krays, which was also investigated by Mr Read, did not fail because of any suggestion of corruption but because of problems with witnesses.

The fact that neither the Kray nor Richardson enquiries were compromised shows that the CID was something of a 'firm-within-a-firm'. Some officers clearly were corrupt – some were not. Unfortunately, the changes to the CID instituted by Sir Robert Mark in 1972 seem to have had the opposite effect of what was intended. The hard core of trustworthy CID officers (of which I regarded myself as a part and without which the Richardsons, Krays and others could not have been prosecuted) was not developed and supported. In his autobiography, Mark makes no mention of these successful prosecutions by CID units, even though they took place during his time at the Met. The effect of Mark's reforms was that the baby was thrown out with the bathwater.

Although I dispute that the dismemberment of the London CID as a semi-autonomous entity with its own career structure during the 1970s was an essential and effective measure against corruption, the development of better oversight and of proactive internal investigation units and methodologies undoubtedly is. This is not only important for oversight of operational units which are at what Peter Manning calls the 'invitational edge' of policing, such as drugs and vice, but also for deterring corruption at local level. These strategies and tactics have proved successful in unearthing police corruption in London in recent years, although I do not believe that police corruption can entirely be eradicated.

Michael Woodiwiss: Controlling organized crime has been an important part of the rationale given to explain the trend towards centralisation in British policing since the 1960s. In your opinion has this been due to pragmatism or is there another explanation for this process?

Alan Wright: I think that centralisation in policing has been a long term trend although I acknowledge that the perceived need to tackle gangs and other organised

criminal groups and terrorism has been a driving factor. The 1964 Police Act and its aftermath saw a trend towards amalgamation of police forces which has continued to this day. Proposals for regionalisation and for the sharing of investigative and other functions between police forces have consolidated this trend. The creation of overarching ‘national’ investigative, intelligence, training and support functions has accompanied these developments. The creation of the National Crime Agency is probably the most important of these developments.

For the liberally minded, the concentration of powers always raises fears of potential oppression. Is the contemporary centralisation of some institutions the consequence of a deliberate ideology? My suspicion is that this trend towards centralisation in policing is a mixture of pragmatism aimed at ensuring increasing effectiveness and of a wider tendency towards centralised state control in many aspects of government. This is evident in supra-national European institutions (including the European Commission), through to national governments. It is accompanied by a decline of serious democratic influence over many aspects of government at all levels, including Quangos.² The convergence between the British policing model, those of Eastern and Central Europe and those influenced by Napoleonic systems is a slippery slope. This applies to organisational structures, to criminal investigation (including tackling terrorism) and to measures to ensure public order. Whether it will lead eventually to a UK national police force is uncertain. There is, however, a need for balance, even in nationalised systems. It is worth noting that most European countries with national police forces have found it necessary to provide structures which meet both national and more localised, provincial needs.

In policing in England and Wales, at the level below that of the national, it is not yet clear to what extent the politicisation of the management and control of police forces will restore the ethos of localism which characterised policing before the 1960s. The direct election of Police Commissioners was in part intended to redress this imbalance but their mandate is shaky and the long term effects of such politicisation are yet fully to be understood. It is clear, however, that the earlier model of a professional police is perceived to have failed. Policing is now thought too important to be left to the police.

Michael Woodiwiss: In his review of your 2006 book *Organised Crime*, Nicholas Dorn comments on your review (with Alan Waymont) of relations between detectives ‘at the sharp end’ and the National Drug Intelligence Unit (precursor to the National Criminal Intelligence Service, the Serious Organised Crime Agency and the National Crime Agency). He noted that your review was ‘fair but not exactly popular!’ Can you elaborate on this review and its reception?

Alan Wright: This work was funded by The Police Foundation and relates to the position in 1987, when the research was completed. The methodology was based on interviews with officers from every drugs squad in England and Wales and with officers from NDIU, including field officers who were responsible for liaison between the centre and force drugs units. I had worked on the Metropolitan Police Central Drugs Squad for two years in the mid-1970s, mainly on efforts to deal with gangs dealing in Chinese heroin, so I had some insight into the problems of investigating these issues.

² Quango stands for quasi-autonomous non-governmental organisation and describes an ostensibly non-governmental organisation performing governmental functions and often receiving funding or other support from government.

In our research in the 1980s, reported difficulties included problems of information-flow from NDIU to drugs squads; controversy over individuals who were ‘flagged’ on the NDIU database (some of whom were informants); and a sense that NDIU was satisfying its own objectives, rather than those of the force drugs squads which it was intended to support. We were keen to emphasise that many of these difficulties were structural, rather than caused by lack of motivation in either party. There were not enough NDIU field officers and not enough actual analysis to provide intelligence packages for local units. We also identified a degree of friction between police anti-drugs officers and those from HM Customs and Excise, who were engaged on the investigation of drugs importation. I think the review was well received in force drugs squads, although NDIU senior management found it challenging. Because time was needed to digest the findings, the report was not put into the public domain until 1993.

It is worth mentioning that this review was carried out at the time when better computer systems were being developed for intelligence and I think it would be unsafe directly to ‘read across’ our findings to current practice. However, our findings did show that in systems where there is a relationship between central and peripheral units there are endemic problems of communication and perception. These can only be rectified by reflective practitioners both at the centre and the periphery who spend time in developing high levels of trust and empathy between the parties. Despite computerisation, this is likely to be as important to contemporary investigation and intelligence units as it was in the mid-1980s

Cameron Telford: You eventually moved into academia. Which authors would you describe as particularly influential in the development of your thinking on organised crime?

Alan Wright: My last job in the Metropolitan Police was running the Policy Support and Strategic Planning Unit at New Scotland Yard, reporting to the then Commissioner, Sir Kenneth Newman. I left the Force in December 1985. I subsequently worked at Universities at Southampton, Manchester, Staffordshire, Keele, Portsmouth and Birmingham on research and teaching in criminal justice. I also worked for the European Union in Hungary and elsewhere and on programmes for the training of investigators of the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and of the Independent Police Complaint Commission (IPCC). I retired from full time teaching in 2001, although I continued with consultancy and scholarly work.

Although organised crime was a theme which ran through my thinking because I had encountered the phenomenon in various guises during my police career, much of my academic work was related to police organisation and to oversight, ethics and corruption. My academic background, both at first degree level and in my doctoral work, was in political theory, rather than criminology. I was interested in using my background in this discipline to explore the political, ethical and organisational aspects of police work in a number of jurisdictions, of organised crime and the response of police and other agencies.

It is worth emphasising that the intention of my 2006 book was not to provide any new theoretical approach to organised crime but to provide an introduction to the subject for criminology and criminal justice students by means of a critical review of the literature. I tried not to nail my colours to any particular mast and many of the works cited reflect the wide variety of theoretical approaches to the subject. The seminal works of Cressey (1969), of the Iannis (1971 *et al.*) and of subsequent critics such as

Reuter (1983) provide many insights into the subject. Mike Levi (both in his writing and at conferences) has helped to keep me sceptical and prevented a few unwarranted flights of fancy! In particular, he opened my eyes to the malpractice and criminality in the vast financial industry, which puts the activities of the gangs on which many organised crime analysts have concentrated into perspective. Mike Woodiwiss' work on American organised crime and Dick Hobbs insights into the sociological factors influencing both gang culture and the police response have figured significantly in my understanding of the subject.

Cameron Telford: Do you think the operations of gangsters such as the Krays and their contemporaries fit neatly within the concept of organised crime?

Alan Wright: I regard organised crime as an essentially contested concept, with a mix of activities and structures over which we might not reach final agreement. There are a number of definitions of organised crime which depend on the frames of reference of those who proposed them. The idea of 'organisation' itself is also contentious. To some extent, the Krays were 'organised' in the sense that they operated with an identifiable hierarchy. Their objectives were certainly diverse and sometimes confused (possibly with the exception of wanting to live high on the hog and to exercise power and influence). However, I think that they are closer to the kind of 'disorganised' group discussed by Reuter (1983), who identified the diverse and fragmented nature of many gangs. In my book I characterised the Krays as 'organised' in the sense that they were a loosely coupled oligarchy, with charismatic leadership underpinned by sentiment and violence. They certainly did not conform to the paradigm of industrial organisation. Because of the contested nature of the concept, the sense of organisation of each group needs to be understood within its specific social, political and economic contexts. Simplistic or one-dimensional theories simply do not work in this field.

Cameron Telford: The trade in narcotics has become one of the more lucrative criminal enterprises since the 1960s. Do you think the current prohibitory measures of the UK the correct course of action?

Alan Wright: In Wright (2006: 90-1), I argued that the business value chain (Porter 1985), provides a useful insight into how the narcotics trade operates. There is some sign that the relative vulnerabilities of the various parts of the trade are being tackled, although this is not to say that it will ever be possible to eradicate the trade, even if that were the goal. At the supply end for example, despite one of the alleged objectives of the recent military intervention in Afghanistan being to reduce opium production, this has actually increased in recent years. At the level of the consumer, efforts to reduce demand have also been patchy. While large numbers of people with money to spend continue to provide the demand for everything from prohibited drugs to so-called 'legal highs', the trade is unlikely to diminish.

If this question is about legalisation of possession at the level of the consumer, my response is to question whether this alone can ever be an effective strategy to manage demand. However, because drugs misuse often affects more than just the end-user, there may be no option other than to keep the legal disincentives in place. In many cases, the social, psychological and physiological consequences seem to be quite severe. In fact, as things stand at present, severe legal sanctions are hardly ever used for cases of possession alone. Clearly, other forms of remedial action are required in addition to the limited disincentive provided by the law. As regards the involvement of organised criminal gangs in the supply end of the trade, I think the strategy of following

the money is probably the most effective, alongside effective transnational investigation and prosecution.

Cameron Telford: What role do you believe the media has played in informing public opinion on organised crime since Britain's 'Gangland Heyday'? And what role if any has this had in dictating policy?

Alan Wright: This is an interesting question. Undoubtedly the media see providing news and comment on organised crime as something in the public interest. This in turn means that the subject remains on the political agenda, although I am not sure whether it is possible to find direct links between media pressure and specific policies.

Police activity in relation to organised crime remains a staple of the news media, only trumped by media attention to terrorism and (more recently) to child sexual abuse. Mawby (2002) cites Chibnall (1977) and Reiner (2002) in pointing out the effect of success against the gangs in the 1960s in remoulding the image of the police, although counterbalanced by police scandals in other places

I argued in my 2006 book that the public (especially in the US) have long had a fascination with organised crime via a cult of celebrity. This appears in a variety of forms, through films, books and music. Gangsta rap, gangster chic and other phenomena fuel public interest at all levels, including youth culture. This is evident (although perhaps to a lesser extent) in the UK. It is interesting to note that Kray-gang related websites still operate even after nearly 50 years since their conviction. As is evident from checking the number of television programmes depicting crime of all kinds, organised crime, serious crime such as rape and murder and police work in general continue to fascinate the public to the point of obsession. Overall, I think that the effect of media depictions of organised crime on policy is an under-researched area. Clearly, this is an area where more work remains to be done.

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