

Tilburg University

25 years of tackling large-scale drug crime in the Netherlands

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Introduction

Dina Siegel (CIROC/Utrecht University)

This CIROC Newsletter is dedicated to the most significant developments in the Netherlands with regard to research on organized crime activities in the country in the last year. As a result of the revelations emerging from the EncroChat service provider (used by organized crime, but infiltrated by police), Dutch law enforcement were able to dismantle a significant number of illegal drug laboratories and facilities, including a torture chamber set up in a container, to arrest the leaders of several criminal groups, to prevent contract killings and disrupt other criminal activities. For criminologists these developments provided important information on trends in transnational organized crime and new illicit markets in Europe in general and the Netherlands in particular. Especially important are the new data on the facilitating role of Rotterdam seaport in regard to cocaine trafficking. Richard Staring's contribution to this Newsletter provides a detailed explanation on how the Rotterdam port acquired its leading position as a cocaine-hub in Europe.

Staring's analysis, which includes a comparison with Antwerp's seaport, is followed by Toine Spapens, Manja Abraham, Bram van Dijk and Daniel Hofstra's overview of Dutch policies on drugs over the last 25 years, including their persistent problems and dilemmas.

This Newsletter also focuses on a dramatic event that took place in July 2021, namely the murder of the well-known journalist Peter R. de Vries, an event which ignited international debate on the reputation of the Netherlands as a 'narco-state' and the difficulty of controlling organized crime groups in the country. Hans Nelen addresses the question as to what a 'narco-state' actually is and whether the Netherlands could be labelled as such.

In 2020, CIROC was co-organizer of the first 24 hour online Organized Crime Conference, which provided an opportunity for more than 3000 participants from 45 countries around the world to attend sessions on particular topics and aspects of global organized crime. The organizers of the conference, Jay Albanese, Dina Siegel, Felia Allum and Tuesday Reitano, reflect here on the ideas and results of the conference.

Last but not least, new publications on organized crime by Dutch researchers are listed here.

Analysis

Antwerp and Rotterdam: A comparative analysis of the import and distribution of cocaine in two European port cities ¹

Richard Staring, CIROC/Erasmus University Rotterdam

The ports of Rotterdam and Antwerp are among the main European ports and known for their high-quality facilities and efficiency. However, they also attract organised crime groups who use the transatlantic legal trade flows to traffic cocaine. Earlier research highlights the interchangeability of these ports for criminal networks trafficking cocaine into Europe. For the Dutch criminological journal *Tijdschrift voor Criminologie*,

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we questioned this interchangeability. Based on different empirical research in Belgium (Colman et al., 2018; Colman, Janssens & Brusselmanns, 2020) and the Netherlands (Staring, Bisschop, Roks, Van de Bunt & Brein, 2019), and applying the routine activity approach, the Port of Rotterdam and the Port of Antwerp are compared with respect to their physical characteristics, their potential for attracting motivated offenders, and their existing public and private security measures.

Physical characteristics

Both studies show that these two international sea ports have similar physical characteristics. Rotterdam as well as Antwerp are characterized by hyper modern ports far outside of the city, as well as older ports, closely situated to the inner cities. Both ports have deep fairways that can facilitate the biggest container ships from South America, which serve as a popular piggyback for cocaine trafficking. They are alike in terms of acreage and have an equally well-developed infrastructure of roads, railways, and rivers connecting the ports with Europe's hinterland. For the moment, the Port of Rotterdam has a higher container transshipment, whereas the Port of Antwerp is growing in this respect. Additionally, the port of Rotterdam counts a higher number of companies and employees compared to the Port of Antwerp.

Motivated offenders

Regarding the potential for motivated offenders within the routine activity approach, we found that employees with the appropriate knowledge, information, and access to the relevant places within the ports are crucial for criminal networks trafficking cocaine into Europe. This implies that the potential number of motivated offenders is high, given the 180.000 workers in the Port of Rotterdam and the 140.000 employees in the Port of Antwerp. Within Europe, the demand for cocaine remains high, and in Belgium as well as in the Netherlands the street value of cocaine is equally high. Therefore, the import and further distribution of cocaine is a highly lucrative business for criminal networks and those who would like to make some 'easy money'. Both ports are extremely important in the formal economy of both cities and far beyond. The studies conducted in Rotterdam and Antwerp also underline the strain between securing and improving the ports' economic interests on the one hand,

and their efforts to control and fight the import of drugs and drug-related crimes on the other.

Capable guardians

Finally, is there a difference between the presence or absence of capable guardians in both port cities? In our study, we operationalized the concept of 'guardians' broadly: from physical measures and preventive interventions within the labour market, to the mentalities of law enforcement agencies and private actors who jointly work together in controlling the criminal drug import and further distribution. The conclusion with respect to capable guardians is similar to the other two central elements of routine activity theory. As with the motivated offenders and the physical characteristics, we see small differences between the two ports, but by and large control on drugs in its broadest sense looks very much alike in both international ports. Both ports have more or less comparable controlling institutions as well as newly created public-private partnerships and partnerships between different public organizations. Antwerp as well as Rotterdam are confronted with similar legislative frameworks that restrict them in their possible actions, and both have increased criminal prosecution intended to deter potential offenders. Even with respect to integral cooperation and the deployment of high-tech resources, such as cameras and scanners, both international ports are confronted with similar budgetary constraints and privacy-related restrictions.

Existing close cooperation

Given the existing close cooperation between public authorities, as well as the logical linkages between the private companies in both cities, it is perhaps no surprise that there are close similarities between the two international ports in terms of the import of drugs and drug-related crimes. At best, it may be concluded that Rotterdam is slightly ahead in terms of its security and cooperation arrangements with respect to the control and supervision of drug-related crimes when compared to Antwerp. However, in general our comparison shows that the ports of Antwerp and Rotterdam not only have a lot in common in terms of their physical characteristics, but also in terms of the presence of motivated offenders, suitable targets and capable guardians.

Control and changing modus operandi

This comparative study, guided by the routine activity approach, has taught us that offenders in their daily labour routines search for locations with less control and less capable supervision. In the case of the import and distribution of cocaine, this implies that offenders look for smaller domestic (sea)ports with less (sophisticated) control where they could safely pick up the drugs from the containers. At the same time, if we look at the high number of cocaine seizures in the ports of Rotterdam and Antwerp, it is obvious that criminal networks do not avoid these international ports. Instead, they try to neutralize and surpass control through corruption, allowing the criminal network to gain access to the relevant knowledge and necessary access to the port. Our focus on available control (rather than absent control) allows us to carefully conclude that changes in control—such as automation, the use of risk profiles, integral cooperation, and changing mentalities of public and private companies regarding their responsibilities in controlling drug-related crime—not only leads to displacement, but also to an adaptation of the offenders' modus operandi. Future research on the consequences of drug-related control within seaports may find it worthwhile to more systematically investigate the role of both of these findings—displacement, as well as a changing modus operandi—in their study.

¹ This contribution is based on an article translated from Dutch by Staring, Bisschop, Colman, Janssens en Roks (2021).

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25 years of tackling large-scale drug crime in the Netherlands

Toine Spapens (CIROC/Tilburg University), Manja Abraham, Bram van Dijk and Daniel Hofstra (Tilburg University)

Introduction

Since the 1970s Dutch governments have pursued a pragmatic policy towards illicit drugs and drug crimes. Its starting point is the assumption that illicit drug use and henceforth drug production and trade cannot be eradicated. Instead, the problem should be kept within controllable limits. In other words: preventing negative effects on society as much as possible through combining measures aimed at prevention and public health with repression of drug related crime problems. In a recent study commissioned by the Ministry of Safety and Justice, we tried to answer which national level policies against drug related crimes subsequent governments have initiated in the past 25 years; how these policies have been executed; and what impact these have had. The report was sent to Parliament in July 2021. In this contribution, I highlight some of the study's main outcomes.

'Take them down, strip their assets and prevent recruitment'

Although our study covered the period of 1995-2020, the origin of policies to tackle large-scale drug trafficking and production trace back to the 1980s. In the first half of the decade it had become clear that drug trade, and towards the end of the 1980s also production of cannabis and synthetic drugs, had greatly increased in scale, international orientation and levels of organisation. In response, the government established new Interregional police investigation teams – later integrated in a national criminal investigative branch; introduced new legislation, for instance on money laundering and asset forfeiture; and developed an administrative approach by which public actors responsible for enforcing regulatory laws and maintaining public order, particularly municipalities, aimed at preventing that criminals misuse the legitimate infrastructure in the illegal business processes. In the following decades, these policies remained leading and further expanded by subsequent governments. Gradually, separate policies developed to repress drug crime on the one hand, and policies aimed at prevention and maintaining public health on the other. Reasons were an increasing shift from addiction problems, for example of heroin, to recreational use of for instance ecstasy; the fact that illicit drugs which are imported into Netherlands or domestically produced, are for a very large part exported abroad; and shifting attention from specific drug markets to organised 'subversive' crime in general, which required a broad-spectrum approach.

The Dutch approach is characterised by multi-agency cooperation in which interventions based on criminal law, administrative law and fiscal law are combined or applied in a coordinated fashion. In 2008, the

government established ten Regional Information and Expertise Centres (RIECs) in which the police, the public prosecution service, the Tax authorities and administrative enforcement, mostly at the municipal level, cooperate. At the local level, social services and schools are increasingly involved specifically to prevent recruitment of youngsters into organised crime networks as well as prevention of intergenerational transmission of criminal behaviour at the family level. Consequently, multi-agency cooperation has become increasingly complicated and to ensure coordination the Minister of Safety and Justice recently established a special Directorate-General on subversive crime.

A brief overview of policies

In the past 25 years, subsequent Dutch governments have prioritised large-scale illicit drug crimes. From the mid-1990s to the mid-2000s the authorities focused, pressured by for instance the United States, synthetic drug production and of ecstasy in particular, and exports abroad. In addition, curbing small-scale cocaine trafficking via Schiphol airport and large-scale shipments via the seaports received attention. At the national level, organised cannabis cultivation was however largely ignored. This changed in 2004 when the government published a multifaceted policy paper aimed at repressing and disturbing cannabis cultivation. Around 2010, the southern provinces of the Netherlands, and North-Brabant in particular was increasingly confronted with subversive crime, particularly large-scale cannabis cultivation; synthetic drug production and the dumping of waste from laboratories in the countryside; and outlaw motorcycle gangs. The Ministry of Justice and Safety co-financed a Taskforce tasked with promoting multi-agency cooperation amongst different public actors. For the Netherlands as a whole, the government aimed at doubling the number of criminal cooperatives subjected to criminal investigation and other interventions to disrupt their activities. This policy was also deemed necessary because increasing underworld violence and contract killings carried out in broad daylight with military grade automatic weapons. In 2019, the authorities unleashed a broad offensive against organised subversive crime, focusing on illicit drugs, and mounted a special Multidisciplinary Intervention Team (MIT) which is to comprise some 400 personnel of different agencies. Although regulation of the supply of cannabis to the coffee shops had been debated since the 1990s as a means to rein in the 'cannabis industry' the government had been reluctant until 2019, when parliament adopted an experiment with a 'closed chain of supply' of cannabis to the coffee shops. The aim of the experiment is to study whether this will indeed produce the positive effects that advocates of regulation expect.

Although since the mid-1990s organised subversive crime and large-scale drug production and trafficking in particular had been a policy priority, subsequent governments freed relatively limited additional budgets. This changed in the period 2017-2020, when the government allocated some €200 million, of which the MIT initially received €90 million. The remainder was invested in expanding criminal investigation and asset forfeiture, as well as to finance local and regional initiatives. Apart from this, municipalities also invested substantially in administrative approaches to prevent and tackle crime, for example by establishing specialised safety departments.

Results and effects

Our study shows that it is extremely difficult to assess results and effects. To begin with, governments have defined the aims of policies in vague terms, to allow room for political manoeuvring and therefore the question whether set goals had been achieved largely remains a question of definition. Formulation of goals in terms of exact figures primarily concerned the aim set in 2012 to double the number of criminal cooperatives 'tackled' by 2014, however without defining how 'tackling' should be understood. We could not qualify increasing or decreasing numbers regarding for instance the annual amount of confiscated or reclaimed crime money as well as cannabis nurseries and synthetic drug laboratories detected. It was for instance mostly impossible to separate efforts by enforcement agencies from changes in *modi operandi* in the drug underworld. Intensification of investigation and disruption, may lead to increase as well as decrease in numbers. One exception is the

reduction of synthetic drug production between 2005 and 2009, which is explained by an agreement concluded with China on blocking export of precursor chemicals PMK and BMK. Criminals, however, circumvented the barrier by reverting to other chemicals. Another example is the fact that interception of large-scale shipments of ecstasy, quite common in the early 2000s, has become rare, which may be explained by the fact that criminals now choose to send drugs in postal packages. The Dutch police in cooperation with foreign counterparts recently achieved success with cracking several crypto communication services, which rendered some 100 million text messages, which are now being used in investigation and court cases.

Our evaluation shows that since 1995, that several problems have been persistent. We were unable to assess whether this is explained by developments in criminal behaviour on the one hand or the complexity of the issues at hand on the other, or both. The first issue concerns the effectiveness of a criminal justice approach, and the quality and quantity of criminal law enforcement and prosecution. Second, financial investigation and recovery of criminal profits remains problematic because investigation services for instance experience difficulties in keeping highly qualified personnel on board in competition with the private sector, but also in collecting the money. Third, multi-agency cooperation requires exchange of information between different public actors, whereas applicable legislation is highly complex and leading to continuous debate about what is legally allowed. Finally, Parliament over the years has questioned the quality of cross-border law enforcement cooperation. Dutch enforcement agencies focus mainly on large-scale incoming shipments of cocaine and on domestic drug production, and far less on usually much smaller shipments which leave the country. In a rural district in Germany or France, interception of two kilos of cocaine may be considered a big case, whereas trifle for Dutch investigation services, which does not promote swift responses to requests for mutual legal assistance, for example.

Over the past 25 years, the Netherlands have attempted to pursue policies to keep organised drug crime controllable. These, however, have not succeeded in substantially reducing large-scale drug trafficking and production. The authorities have achieved some notable successes but these have been temporary at best in the face of criminals adapting their *modi operandi*. Future criminological research may further contribute by exploring what 'makes criminals tick' and thereby help to better anticipate future developments in criminal decision making.

The report '*Aanpak georganiseerde drugscriminaliteit. Een terugblik op 25 jaar beleid en uitvoering*' by DSP-groep and Tilburg University is available in Dutch via <https://research.tilburguniversity.edu/en/publications/aanpak-georganiseerde-drugscriminaliteit-een-terugblik-op-25-jaar>.

The report includes a summary in English.

Has the Netherlands become a Narco-state? Some reflections after the shooting of Peter R. de Vries

Hans Nelen (CIROC/Maastricht University)

Domestic and foreign journalists have posed this question ‘Has the Netherlands become a Narco-state?’ frequently to Dutch criminologists specialized in organized crime, since journalist and national celebrity Peter R. de Vries was assassinated on 6 July 2021, in broad daylight in the middle of Amsterdam after leaving a television-studio. However, this question is difficult to answer for a number of reasons. First, the implicit assumption behind this question is that one of the drug lords operating in the Netherlands ordered the hit on De Vries. Although this assumption is plausible, the information available about the assassination is too limited to substantiate this claim at this point in time. What we do know is that De Vries had become the confidant of a crown witness, who was testifying in the so-called Marengo-trial, which is a major court case against the alleged leaders of a drug network. The suspects, which included Ridouan T., the most wanted criminal in the Netherlands during the last decade who was arrested in December 2019 in Dubai, are allegedly the organizers of large-scale drug trafficking operations and the assassination of several people. The brother of the crown witness was killed in 2018, followed by his lawyer, Derk Wiersum, in 2019. These circumstances indicate that the killing of De Vries was another fierce reaction by the organized crime network to the use of a crown witness in a Dutch criminal procedure, rather than being a response to the work of De Vries as a journalist. Although it is less likely, there may be other explanations for this cruel act of violence. Peter R. de Vries was famous in the Netherlands for his dedication to reporting on unsolved crimes and supporting the families of crime victims. He investigated more than 500 murder cases and played a pivotal role in solving several cold cases and revealing miscarriages of justice. He received much appraisal for his efforts, but he also received criticism for his work.

The second reason it is difficult to answer the question ‘Has the Netherlands become a Narco-state?’ with a straightforward ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answer is related to the concept “Narco-state.” What do we mean by that? We immediately think about the situations in Mexico, Colombia or Italy. In these countries, organized crime groups managed to infiltrate the regular economic and political system and acquired positions of power to sideline the authorities. These developments point to strategic corruption in politics, relevant economic institutions, and the judiciary and law enforcement agencies. So far, the evidence for similar forms of endemic strategic corruption in the Netherlands is lacking. However, that does not mean that there is no reason for concern. Various studies on the nature of organized crime have shed light on the magnitude of the drug industry in the Netherlands and contextualized the Netherlands plays such a pivotal role in various drug markets and money laundering internationally. Due to its geographical location, logistics, history, migration flows, policy, and business mentality – the Dutch have always been traders, constantly looking for business opportunities, regardless of whether they are legitimate or not – the Netherlands has become one of the main European centres for the production (mainly homegrown hemp and synthetic drugs) and trafficking of drugs. In that respect, the Netherlands can be considered a “Narco-state” indeed, but if we add to the definition of ‘Narco-state’ that organized crime has succeeded in monopolizing lines of business and acquiring power positions in the political arena, the picture in the Netherlands is more nuanced. It is clear that an extreme amount of money is being earned in the drug industry, but most criminals are not interested in generating economic and political power in the Netherlands. At the same time, it has to be acknowledged that we only have a limited view on where the illicit earnings from the drug industry end up.

What the killing of Peter R. de Vries does indicate is that the current generation of drug traffickers is even more ruthless than previous generations. Of course, violence and intimidation have always been part of doing business in the illicit drug industry. During the last decades, we have witnessed different “waves” of assassinations, but what seems to

have changed is that criminals increasingly use violence not only as a means to resolve conflicts with their rivals, but now violence is also used to confront and intimidate members of public institutions.

After the killing of lawyer Derk Wiersum in 2019, the Dutch government launched a new strategy to fight and contain organized crime. Next to the prospect of establishing a new multidisciplinary intervention team (MIT), the government allocated 100 million euros to address the threats that organized crime may pose for the legitimate society in terms of economic and political infiltration. In the Netherlands, a special term – ‘undermining’, which is difficult to translate but comes close to corruption and criminal infiltration – has been introduced to emphasize this threat. A research group from Maastricht University and Erasmus University Rotterdam is currently monitoring several initiatives that are financed by this extra money. The research group published an interim report with their preliminary findings in June 2021, one week before the assassination of Peter R. de Vries. Strikingly, one of the main conclusions in the report was that the sense of urgency at a political level to prevent ‘undermining’ activities was slowly fading away. Without doubt, this sense of urgency is back after the tragic events on 6 July 2021.

The final report of the Maastricht/Rotterdam research team is expected in 2022. It will be interesting to observe how policy makers and practitioners receive the other conclusions and recommendations in the interim report and, even more importantly, to what extent they are inclined to adapt their strategy and working methods according to the suggestions of the researchers. This would imply, among other things, that more attention should be paid to the international aspects of drug-related activities. Moreover, it can imply that less time should be spent on discussing several issues in a variety of meetings and platforms. According to the researchers, the integrated approach should become more efficient and action oriented. The killing of De Vries has made clear that the Dutch have to take the integrated approach to a next level. They will have to improve and fine-tune their strategy to foster more joint action (with engagement) by the police, special law enforcement agencies, judicial authorities, administrative authorities, and other public and private partners, both nationally and internationally.

Reflection

Organizing a Theme-Based Conference Online How a Zoom Chat Resulted in a Meeting with 3,000 Participants from 45 Countries²

Jay Albanese, Virginia Commonwealth University, US

Dina Siegel, CIROC/Utrecht University, The Netherlands

Felia Allum, University of Bath, UK

Tuesday Reitano, Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime, Switzerland

Here's how it happened.

Jay and Dina got together on a Zoom call in March 2020 to discuss an upcoming meeting in The Netherlands, but moved online, and how much we missed our colleagues, travel, and face-to-face conversations in general—both on and off the record. We then began to spitball ideas about what was missing from the current wave of on-line webinars, and how better to capture some of the in-person experience on line. Dina is a principal in CIROC (Center for Information and Research on Organized Crime) and Jay is with the International Association for the Study of Organized Crime. We were drawn to organizing a meeting around our mutual substantive interest: organized crime (which includes corruption, transnational crime, various forms of white-collar crime, political crime, cybercrime, and the rest). Jay was concerned that we might get only four panels worth of participants. Dina was more optimistic.

Then we hit on a killer idea: *Let's do a conference over a continuous 24-hour period.* That would add to the excitement about the conference, challenge people to stay online for an extended period, make it very different from the many one-off webinars, and permit participants from many different time zones around the world to present during a “reasonable” time of day. (Jay reminded Dina that 8:00AM panels at in-person meetings had become quite common despite their unreasonableness.)



We invited Felia Allum from the UK to join in the organizing, given her affiliation with the European Consortium on Political Research's Standing Group on Organized Crime. We also invited Tuesday Reitano, deputy director of the NGO, Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime (GITOC). Together, we liked to think we knew most of the people doing work in the field. We began regular Zoom chats.

A 24-hour meeting of 75-minute sessions (with 15-minute breaks between) results in 16 sessions over a 24-hour period. That was our original plan. We spent a great deal of time thinking about content: regular panel sessions, and sessions discussing recent books were traditional, but we wanted to include more innovative content as well. One idea was to include emerging ideas around which papers had not yet been written (or at least completed). This resulted in establishing “catwalk” sessions, discussing research ideas, research-in-progress, and thoughts about organized crime in general. We also added another session format to show and then discuss *recent documentaries* about organized crime-related topics from locations around the world. The catwalk and video documentary sessions were new formats for everyone, adding to the anticipation of how they might turn out.

We discussed the traditional idea of “original” papers for inclusion in regular panels. Unrelated work that Jay was doing found that there were

58 published papers on organized crime during the previous year, plus many NGO reports, and other work in the grey literature. Most were unknown (unread) by many, so we decided to include recently published research, as well as unpublished but completed work at the conference. This turned out to be a wonderful way to expand interest in participation in the meeting. There are lots of folks are looking to be updated on what's going on in the field, and we did not want to miss this group in the research, practitioner, and student worlds. Deciding that registration would be free to all added to the anticipation.

A second feature was to *promote discussion*, rather than online lectures, which bore everyone (including the speaker, we suspect). We thought that too many in-person conference presentations are lectures, which *always* leave too little time for discussion (which is the purpose for attending a meeting in the first place)! We took great effort to limit presentations to 10 minutes, so that the audience (empowered by the Zoom chat) could comment, ask questions, and push the discussion in directions *they* wished. It worked better than we had hoped.

Logistics has a way of overwhelming you, when organizing anything online. We sent out a call for papers through social media, and the response was overwhelming. The ultimate result was 60 sessions, running in four parallel streams, over 24 hours. Time zones were an issue, as Europeans were the largest group of participants, which worked fine for Africa, but 6-9 hour time differences with the Americas, and 10-12 hour differences from Asia made scheduling a challenge, but the dynamic of the 24-hour timeframe for the entire conference encouraged people to be flexible.



The result was unforeseen: we had arranged the largest gathering ever of those interested in organized crime (3,000), the widest participation ever (45 countries), and female representation on every panel. Many people registered just to listen to various sessions, others participated on panels, and all could ask questions and comment via the Zoom chat. Yes, we considered multiple technology platforms, but decided on Zoom, given our experiences with competing platforms and the common experience of most participants. The GITOC had the largest bandwidth available, enabling us to broadcast four parallel streams “seamlessly” (which means a ‘small army’ of staff and volunteers at GITOC and many student volunteers from around the world to help during the 24 hours and beyond). WhatsApp groups were established *before* the conference for every conference session, permitting communication and logistics to be discussed in advance. Special thanks to Thi Hoang for her tireless work in helping organize sessions and monitoring all four streams at once during the conference. Jay, Dina, Felia, Tuesday, and Thi were able to communicate during the conference via WhatsApp to troubleshoot and exchange thoughts, while we monitored streams and participated in sessions.

It was an exhilarating experience that included short videos between panel sessions, and included a final video roll of conference credits at the end of the 24-hour meeting, which listed *every conference participant both in sessions and behind the scenes*, as a wonderful way to acknowledge everyone who contributed ---something we've never seen at an in-person meeting. Even the credit roll had 2,700 views! https://twitter.com/GI_TOC/status/1326536468437688321

The primary advantages of a theme-based conference was permitting interaction and discussion among those interested in similar topics over an extended period. It was lovely to see and “chat” with people you had not seen in a while, and to make some new acquaintances and comment of the thoughts of others. In addition, all sessions were recorded,

allowing for subsequent viewing, and book publishers had the chance to promote some new titles.



Of course, the virtual world is not the physical world, and the inability to have side conversations over coffee or drinks, and for early career folks to meet others, is a major shortcoming. No one will be trashing their passports any time soon, and when the pandemic passes, travel to in-person conferences should be as popular as ever.

But we're still thinking about the fact that we were able to hold the largest meeting ever held on a single substantive theme, and it was attended globally by people who could have never attended the same conference in person (something that will not change after the pandemic). The conference permitted online exchange of ideas and comments in real time, and did it all at no charge to participants. (Although there was lots of contributed effort in the organizing!). We appreciate and value our Internet connections more than we did before, and look forward to doing it again in 2021 on 1-2 December³.

² This article was previously published in *The Criminologist*, vol. 46, (May/June), pp. 37-38.

³ OC24 – 2021 will take place on 1-2 December 2021: <https://oc24.globalinitiative.net/>. Please subscribe to the OC24 mailing list to receive the conference's updates <http://eepurl.com/hbpiWr>.

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