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Out of step? Mobility of 'itinerant crime groups'

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Introduction

Criminologists have studied crime and mobility from two different theoretical angles. First, empirical analysis was done to discover patterns in crime mobility. One of the findings of the type of analysis was that the majority of the offences is committed near the residence of the offender. This is called the distance decay pattern and has been observed on both aggregate and individual level (Besson, 2004, pp. 188-192; Canter & Hammond, 2006; Kent, Leitner, & Curtis, 2006; Rattner & Portnov, 2007; Rengert, Piquero, & Jones, 1999; Rhodes & Conly, 1981; Rossmo, 1995; Van Koppen & De Keijser, 1997), although individual variations exist (Smith, Bond, & Townsley, 2009). The second type of criminological research focuses on the explanations of crime patterns and mobility like target features (Bernasco & Nieuwebeerta, 2005; Patricia Brantingham & Brantingham, 1995; Cornish & Clarke, 1986; Lattimore & Witte, 1986; Palmer, Holmes, & Hollin, 2002), offender characteristics (Alison, Smith, & Morgan, 2003; Canter & Alison, 2000; Gabor & Gottheil, 1984) and knowledge about the area (Patricia Brantingham & Brantingham, 1981, pp. 57-60; Rengert & Wasilchick, 1985).

This paper addresses crime and mobility from these two angles related to the so-called 'itinerant crime groups' in Belgium. Law enforcement authorities in Belgium take special interest in such groups which they describe as criminal gangs, mainly from Eastern European origin, specialized in systematically committing all sorts of property crimes, ranging from burglaries and robberies to ram raids and metal thefts. These groups have been given the name 'itinerant' because of their high degree of criminal mobility – i.e. mobility to, from and during criminal activity. 'Itinerant crime groups' is the term used, but there is more than just mobility ascribed to these groups, making it interesting to see whether mobility is indeed linked to the other attributed features.

First, the mobility patterns of these groups are analysed to find out if these so-called 'itinerant crime groups' indeed travel over greater distances than other offenders. It will be stated that these groups are indeed more mobile and, thus, can be called 'itinerant' with reason.

Second, some explanations are offered for the special mobility patterns of these groups related to target features and offender characteristics.

The framework

Organised property crime and, in particular, so-called itinerant crime groups have received considerable attention in Belgium since the start of the twenty first century. The phenomenon was first observed in the late 1990s by the Belgian police (De Ruyver, 2006a). On the basis of a limited number of case files (Dupuis, 2004), the authorities believed they had discovered a new phenomenon. After half a decade of fine-tuning, the phenomenon was defined and adopted in Belgian criminal policy, in the so-called *Kadernota Integrale Veiligheid (Belgian Ministerial College, 2004)*. Policies concerning these crime groups, and how to define their members, were updated by the government in a revised action plan (22/03/2007), when ‘itinerant crime groups’ were identified as having the following characteristics:

- an association of criminals;
- systematically committing residential burglaries or burglaries of commercial properties, including ram raids, cargo thefts, metal thefts or thefts of construction vehicles and materials;
- originating mainly from the former Eastern Bloc;
- operating or directed from abroad or from large conurbations in Belgium;
- committing a significant number of crimes over a large area; and
- possibly using minors to commit crimes.

Between 60 and 80 such groups have been identified each year in Belgium since 2004 (De Raedt, 2006). The size of these groups changes, indicating that their structure is flexible, and the organisations have become smaller (De Raedt, 2006, p. 41). An overview of the case files reveals a large variety of groups. Some only comprise around five offenders, while others have more than 70 members. The number of offences committed range from a couple of dozens to, exceptionally, more than 1.000 crimes.

Of course, the prevalence of property crime is not new. What is, however, new is the growing involvement of criminal gangs and the particular features of these groups (Eastern European origin, high mobility,...) Organised property crime by these groups is raising concerns not only in Belgium, but also in some of its neighbouring countries, under a variety of names. In the Netherlands, France and Germany they are labelled, respectively, ‘mobile banditism’ (Huisman & Van der Laan, 2005; Van der Laan & Weenink, 2005) ‘itinerant crime’ (Marro, 2002) and ‘Eastern European criminal groups’ (Dortans, 2007). In each of these countries a defining element of these groups is that they systematically commit property offences. Engagement in property crimes, however, does not make them completely different from other criminal gangs or organisations. Spapens and Fijnaut (2005, p. 82) distinguish four offender types in their study on organised burglary. Next to itinerant crime groups –or mobile gangs– as they call them, ‘professional thieves’ may also operate in groups and/or work in organised structures. The same concerns car theft and smuggling of stolen vehicles, another example of property crimes executed by criminal groups (Bruinsma & Bernasco, 2004, p. 86; Spapens & Fijnaut, 2005, p. 98). Then what is it that makes these so-called ‘itinerant crime groups’ this special?

Although the choice of words varies to describe these groups, mobility is a recurrent issue. We will therefore first look into mobility patterns of these groups, in order to answer the question: do offender mobility patterns of 'itinerant crime groups' differ from other offenders, and to what extent? Second, if such differences emerge, we will try to find some explanations for these differences. Do they choose different targets or should the differences rather be attributed to offender related issues?

The method

Two data sources have been used. As such, triangulation of quantitative and qualitative approaches take place (see for example Kleemans, Korf, & Staring, 2008, pp. 328-329; Silverman, 2001, p. 233; Tarrow, 2004, p. 178)

For general information, the general database of the Belgian federal police was used. We obtained information of all serious property crimes (these are all property crimes with aggravating circumstances) with known offenders for the period 2002-2006. This resulted in information on more than 64.000 offenders, committing more than 87.000 offences. 'Itinerant crime groups' are defined as having the following four key features: they commit property crime, offences are committed systematically, the criminals act as a group or 'association', and they are more mobile than other offenders. These four features are adopted from the definition. The first condition, property crimes, is met by the nature of our data. The second, systematic commitment of offences, was put into operation by using multiple offending. The conditions for 'multiple offences' are either a limited number of offences for which the criminal was convicted, or a more substantial number of registered contacts with the police authorities, without the requirement of conviction. In terms of a limited number of offences resulting in a conviction, the number needed to achieve such categorisation can be five (Wartna & Tollenaar, 2004, p. 34) or even two (Lovegrove, 2000, p. 454). In the case of offences that do not result in conviction, ten registered contacts is a recurrent condition (Elffers, 2003; Ferwerda, Versteegh, & Beke, 1995). Given the nature of our data, the second approach fits best. In relation to the third factor, that of criminals acting as a group, co-offending (Weerman, 2001, 2003) was considered, because the data allowed no interpretation of group structure. The advantage of this approach is that the assumption of fixed structures, which do not necessarily comply with reality (Ruggiero, 1996, pp. 5-6; Shelley, 1999; Von Lampe, 2005, p. 231), can be put aside.

In order to establish mobility patterns, mobility was herewith not assumed as necessary condition. Despite the seeming contradiction this embodies, this is done in order to avoid tautology. After all, the first part of the paper aims at finding out whether these groups are indeed more mobile than other criminals. If we would only include mobile offenders in our analysis, we would obviously find them to be more mobile than others. Moreover, mobility can vary for individual offenders: an offender may commit most of his crimes near home, but this does not mean he may also commit offences far away or the other way around. Although one can of course calculate mean travelled distances for each offender, mobility is related to each individual offence. It is neither related to offenders themselves nor to fixed patterns, unlike other features as Eastern European origin, multiple offending and group operations.

The second additional data source consists of criminal case files of which we studied 27 cases of so-called itinerant crime groups. Contacts were made with judicial police forces in five districts with

various features: geographic location, size, degrees of urbanisation and whether the district mainly functions as target area or more as a starting point. We explained the focus of our research and asked for maximum heterogeneity in the case files. The persons involved supplied us with a number of case files, which they considered as interesting for our research. This means that the set of cases do not represent a random sample.

This approach is far from perfect, as it left our respondents with the possibility to choose which cases they could provide and which not. However, we believe this method has several advantages as well. Within most districts, several people were involved, each one having their own perception of which case being worth studying and which not. As we asked for heterogeneity in the cases, we believe no one better than those people involved in the investigation could evaluate this. They had done the criminal investigation –or knew the one who had– and often knew by heart what formed the particular features of each group. As a direct consequence, we could also obtain some additional background information useful to understand the files to their full extent. Thus, the potential bias of the people involved could be compensated for by the number and variety of districts, the number of persons contacted and the variation asked for.

The result is a data set of 27 case files of so-called ‘itinerant crime groups’. These cases provided information on 49 offenders fulfilling the conditions we used to distinguish ‘itinerant crime groups’ in the database. Two cases were eliminated from the analysis, one dealing with criminal fencing and therefore providing only indirect information on serious property crimes, the other concerning a case, first believed to be an ‘itinerant crime group’ but later turned out to be no group or network at all. Because the focus in case selection was put on heterogeneity and not on representativeness, only qualitative conclusions can be drawn and we will not make quantitative statements. However, even without the possibility to quantify the results, relevant information can be provided. One should not forget that the phenomenon is quite new and, except for a couple of valuable police studies (see for example De Cock, 2007; De Ruyver, 2006b; Dupuis, 2004; Huisman & Van der Laan, 2005; Paulussen, 2007; Stichting Maatschappij Veiligheid en Politie, 2006; Van der Laan & Weenink, 2005) academic interest for the phenomenon is new and rather limited (see Ponsaers, 2004; Van Daele, 2008; Van Daele, Vander Beken, & De Ruyver, 2008 for some existing papers).

Offender mobility

Mean distance and decay

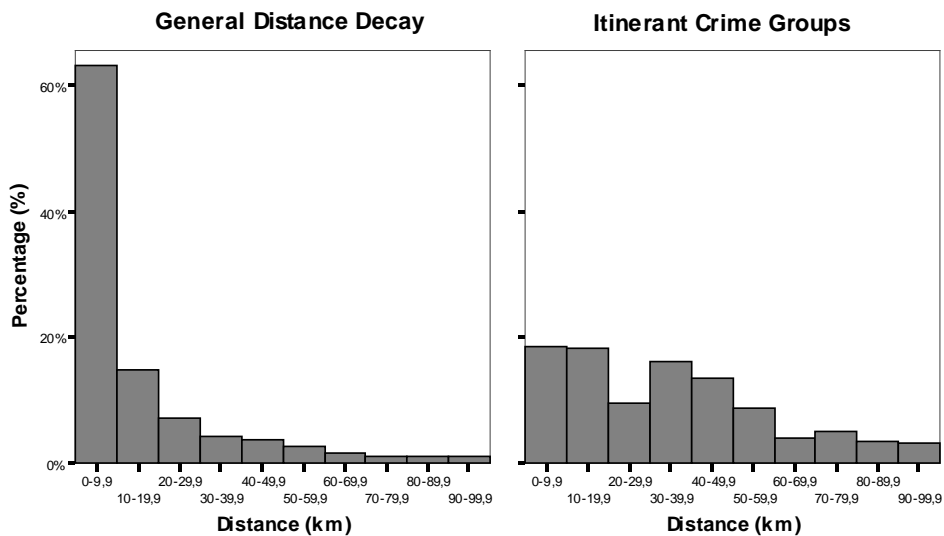
A first thing we want to find out is whether these groups are mobile indeed. The easiest option to describe travelling behaviour is to discuss and compare distances travelled by offenders. In order to do so, we use the data from our general police database. Although not always correct (Wiles & Costello, 2000, p. 48), distance between residence and place of offence is mostly used to calculate crime travelling behaviour. Looking at travelled distances, we observe a mean distance of 40,18 km. However, this also reflects distances of offenders living abroad, which do increase to over 11.000km in our sample (for offenders residing in Chili). It is obvious that these offenders need an anchor point closer to Belgium. Moreover, we do not have any detailed information on residences abroad. For

offenders living in one of Belgium's neighbouring countries, this possibly creates a high error margin. Therefore, it seems more appropriate to calculate distances of offenders living within Belgium. The average distance of all crime trips by these offenders living in Belgium is 17,2 km which is still considerably more than the figures found in literature (see for example Edwards & Grace, 2006, pp. 223-224; Phillips, 1980, p. 157; Repetto, 1974; White, 1932, p. 507). Distances travelled by the itinerant crime groups are higher and rise to a distance of 40 km. A t-test indicates that this differs significantly from the average crime trips travelled by other offenders, being 16,2 km ($t=35,70$; $df=3034,43$; $p<0,001$).

Because this approach might be biased, two variations might as well be useful. Weighing all crimes equal, criminal behaviour of mobile multiple offenders influences the results. We therefore take a brief look at the mean travelled distance for each offender. Taking the mean of all *personal* average travelled distances implies some loss of information. It weighs each offender instead of each crime/case and provides a better view on the offender population, not the offence population. Still, we notice a total mean distance of 14,6 km. Again, the average distance of the itinerant crime groups (37,4 km) differs significantly from the other offenders (14,5 km) ($t=9,28$; $df=124,91$; $p<0,001$). We also noticed that our observed distances in this approach are slightly lower than in the first one. An offender-based calculation of distances provides slightly lower averages than an offence-based assessment. Overweighing multiple offenders by counting the number of crimes as well augments the average distance travelled. Thus, multiple offenders tend to travel further, which conforms with the findings from previous research by Barker (2000).

A second variation takes into account offences committed by multiple offenders. In our first approach, a crime committed by two offenders is considered twice, and so is the distance. This would not bias the results if it would be committed somewhere in the middle between both residences. However, according to Bernasco (2006, p. 147), co-offenders have the tendency to commit their crimes not in between their residences, but closer to one of the offender's residence. Thus, if one offender resides in town A and the other in B, the crime will more likely be committed close to town A or B, than somewhere in between. Thus, it might be worthwhile to aggregate our data on offence level and consider minimum distances. This results in an average minimum distance of 15,2 km. In this perspective, we considered crimes to be committed by itinerant crime groups as soon as at least one of the offenders meets all three features. For the so-called 'itinerant crime groups', this average minimum distance is 37,1 km. This is slightly lower than the initial 40 km, but still significantly different from the 14,4 km observed with other offenders ($t=26,91$; $df=1937,71$; $p<0,001$). Thus, co-offending and an eventual spread of offenders throughout the country cannot explain the observed differences.

The majority of crimes is mostly committed close to home, declining as distance increases (see for example Rengert et al., 1999; Van Koppen & De Keijser, 1997). This can be presented by a graph, after which a so-called distance decay curve appears. For our total data set (left figure), we observe this curve clearly: 61% of the crimes are committed within 10km from home, gradually declining afterwards.



For ‘itinerant crime groups’, however, this is less straightforward: only 17% of their crimes are committed within 10 km from home and between 30 km and 40km, still 15% of the crimes takes place. Although they do not exclusively operate far from their residence, the percentage crimes which is committed near home is considerably lower than it is for other offenders. Although we observe some degrees of ‘distance decay’, this is less obvious for the so-called itinerant crime groups than it is for other offenders.

Range as a possible alternative

Mean travelled distances demonstrate that itinerant crime groups are more mobile than other offenders. However, one should avoid rash conclusions, as these distances contain some difficulties for interpretations. Three main problems can be mentioned. First, in order to calculate the residence-crime distance, both locations have to be known. For the crime site, this is quite easy, at least for these types of crimes. One should not forget that we are mainly dealing with burglaries, robberies and car thefts, crimes for which the geographic location can rather easily be defined. For the residence, this is less obvious. Only half of the offenders (48,2%) have a registered residence in our database and this is even less for non-Belgian (41,2%) and particularly Eastern European offenders (35,8%). Thus, calculating travelled distances in a traditional way only provides information on about half of the offenders.

Second, residence is not always the starting point for the criminal trip. As already mentioned, co-offenders will tend to start from the residence of one of them, biasing the travelled distance for the other (Bernasco, 2006, p. 147). Additionally, there is even more to discuss. Wiles and Costello (2000, p. 40) found in their Sheffield study that other locations may function as anchor points as well, for example work or a friend’s home. In that case, measuring the distance between home and the place of offence may provide incorrect information on the actual crime trip. It is therefore important to know and take into account the true geographical starting point of the crime trip.

Third, Ponsaers (2004) pointed out that anchor points for itinerant crime groups are difficult to assess. These groups travel around and have no fixed residence, it is assumed. Thus, the distance between residence and place of offence offers no solution, not because it neglects other anchor points, but simply because 'the' residence does not exist.

A question we should therefore raise is: do we actually need to know the residence in order to calculate crime travelling? Although it turns out to be the most widespread way to calculate crime travelling, it is not the only solution. Morselli and Royer (2008) used ranges to discuss criminal mobility and Barker (2000) included the geographical relationship between a burglar's crimes in her analysis of crime travelling. In geographical profiling (see for example Canter, 2008; Kocsis, Cooksey, Irwin, & Allen, 2002; Rossmo, 1999; Rossmo, Thurman, Jamieson, & Egan, 2008; Van der Kemp & Van Koppen, 2007), the residence is derived from their criminal behaviour. As residence is the end product here, analysis is performed and trends and patterns being described before knowing the residence. This approach indicates that it is possible to study crime patterns even without knowledge of the residence.

Given the examples of offender mobility research without reference to the residence and taking into account the difficulties concerning traditional distance measures, we calculated the range of operation of each offender. We therefore took the distance between the two crimes that were the most remote from each other. Of course, this implies that this range can only be calculated when two or more crimes occurred. Hence, offenders committing only one crime were excluded from this analysis. The mean range for the remaining offenders in our sample is 20,36 km, while this increases to 93,8 km for the itinerant crime groups. Thus, it is fair to say that itinerant crime groups are actually more mobile than are other offenders.

Moving towards explanations

Theory

Both traditional distance measures and range calculation shows that itinerant crime groups are more mobile than other offenders. A next step, however, is to establish which features may explain this behaviour. 'Explaining' should hereby not be considered in a direct way. Although some authors use distance as a dependent variable (see for example Paul Brantingham & Tita, 2008; Capone & Nichols, 1975; Meaney, 2004, p. 123; Van der Kemp & Van Koppen, 2007, p. 354), other authors argue that it is an independent variable (see Bernasco & Luykx, 2003, pp. 982-983; Elffers, Reynald, Averdijk, Bernasco, & Block, 2008; Kleemans, 1996, pp. 94-95). Notwithstanding this discussion, distance is one of the factors that are of interest when studying crime travelling. Therefore, as distance increases, other aspects should compensate for that and in this way, these other measures can 'explain' changing distances.

Rengert (2004) distinguishes three basic elements that determine the journey to crime: the anchor point or reference point of the offender, the directional bias and the distance. We believe this reveals three main domains. Anchor point is one of the features referring to the offender. Other offender characteristics can be considered as well, for example age, ethnicity and sex (Gabor & Gottheil, 1984).

Direction seems to reveal something about the crime trip itself, but when we look deeper into Rengert's conception of 'direction', we notice that he discusses not the trip, but more the chosen target area, large cities for example (Rengert, 2004, pp. 171-172). Thus, target related issues can be considered the second explanatory domain. The third and final issue refers to distance.

The target oriented approach is first studied. Offenders will only travel far when their earnings will make the trip worthwhile. Bernasco and Luykx (2003) broke the target oriented approach down into three issues: attractiveness, opportunity and accessibility. Attractiveness hereby refers to the expected gains, opportunity to the expected chances of success and with accessibility, the ease with which a target area can be reached is meant (Bernasco & Luykx, 2003, pp. 986-987). In this last perspective, attention is paid to certain barriers (Elffers, 2004) and the structure of street networks (Beavon, Brantingham, & Brantingham, 1994) which may influence the crime trip as well.

As already mentioned, the anchor point plays an important role in offender related explanations. However, there is more to it. Gabor and Gottheil (1984) found that the least mobile offenders were young, inexperienced and part of a visible ethnic minority. Following their observations, we look into the personal characteristics of the offenders involved. Another important issue refers to the awareness space of offenders. Brantingham and Brantingham(1981) use the term awareness space to describe those parts of the environment offenders have some knowledge of. As such, an action space is developed, based on both criminal and innocent activities, the latter mainly being at home, shopping, work and entertainment areas (Patricia Brantingham & Brantingham, 1981, p. 35).

Target oriented results

Attractiveness

We first looked deeper into the target related explanations. Attractiveness of targets aimed at by itinerant crime groups is split into two aspects. On the level of target choice, itinerant crime groups tend to go less for commercial targets (45% of the targets are dwellings) than other offenders (only 13,6% dwellings). As commercial targets are expected to be more profitable and high gains are correlated to high mobility (Morselli & Royer, 2008), itinerant crime groups do not compensate for their crime travelling by earning more profits.

On a higher geographical level, however, attractiveness does affect target choice. Each Belgian communality has been attributed a welfare-index, based on the average income. In general, property crimes are mostly committed in relatively poor towns and cities (average welfare-index 96,8), while itinerant crime groups tend to commit their crimes in richer areas (welfare-index 104,8). However, these itinerant crime groups mainly live in poorer areas (welfare-index 88,4) than other offenders do (welfare-index 94,5).¹ Thus, although the crimes committed by itinerant crime groups are not the most profitable ones, they do target rich areas. In his study on burglary, Mawby (2001, p. 72) describes this phenomenon as 'rich pickings': rich areas attract more offenders from outside, while poor areas are targeted mainly by near-by offenders. Moreover, itinerant crime groups appear to select a target area and only later on choose their particular targets (Bernasco & Nieuwbeerta, 2005, p. 297).

¹ All differences here were significant at the .001 level.

Opportunity

In order to measure opportunity, we divided the number of crimes in our sample (these are the crimes for which the offender is known) by the total number of serious property crimes for each communality. In this way, opportunity is measured in a pure sense, by calculating the chances of walking away after the crime. Strange enough, itinerant crime groups do not commit their crimes in successful areas: their mean success rate is 0,89 while it is 0,91 for other offenders. What is observed, however, is that these groups commit more crimes in rural areas, the average population density being 705,0 persons per square kilometre, versus 2029,7 for other offenders. Although the success rate in these areas is lower, offenders may perceive otherwise, because there are less people around. In order to confirm this, however, more information on motivational aspects of offenders is needed.

Accessibility

A final issue in target related explanations refers to accessibility. It is argued that offenders aim mostly for those targets which are easily accessible. If this is the case on a local level, why would it not be so on national level? Fink (1969) found that external offenders commit most of their crimes near major highways, in this way keeping the risk of accessing an unknown region within certain boundaries. Elffers (2004) discusses the barriers on the journey to crime. He pays attention to rivers and landmarks, but on larger scale, this will only play a minor role. Next to inhibiting barriers, there might as well be facilitating factors, compensating for these barriers. The most visual are arterial roads, particularly motorways. In a number of cases, the use of motorways has been observed: offenders driving over 100 km, committing a couple of burglaries and returning afterwards, proven by tracing the extensive cell phone traffic. Remarkable is the fact that this is not confirmed in our database as an explanatory issue. Yes, itinerant crime groups commit their crimes near motorways (68,7%), but this is even more the case for other offenders (75,4%).

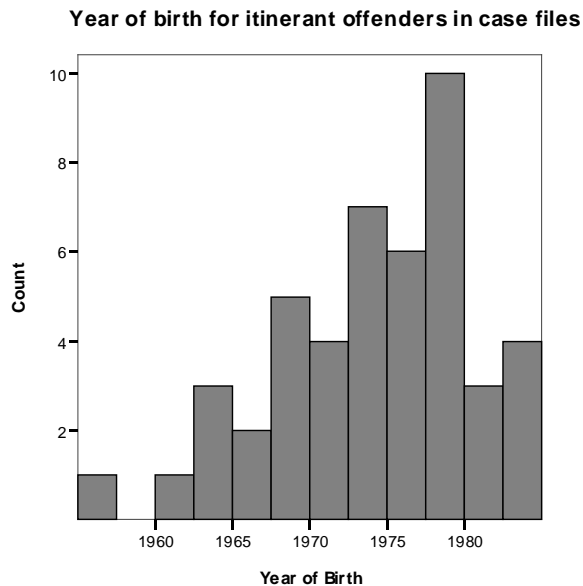
Some target oriented observations seem to explain the mobile behaviour of itinerant crime groups: they target rich areas, rural areas and case file analysis shows the use of motorways. However, these types of explanations is insufficient for several reasons. First, it is unclear why rural areas would be targeted, because they are not characterised by higher success rates. Second, highways appear to be used by other offenders as well. Although this is able to explain mobility, it does not explain the differences between mobility of itinerant crime groups and other offenders. And third, this can be said for all target oriented features: they are not different for other offenders. Why would other offenders engage less in 'rich pickings' and stay more within their own neighbourhood? Therefore, explanations from another perspective are investigated as well: from the point of the offender.

Offender oriented results

Offender characteristics

Not only target features may influence the criminal trip. Offender related issues play a role as well. In this perspective, three main issues are dealt with: offender features, anchor point and awareness space. Members of 'itinerant crime groups' are slightly older than other offenders, but the difference is fractional and not significant. Case files show that most offenders are rather young or middle-aged.

Several groups contain older offenders born in the 1950s or even the 1940s. A slightly larger proportion is born in the 1960s. The vast majority of nearly all itinerant crime groups are perpetrators born in the 1970s and the first half of the 1980s. Most offenders are in their twenties or thirties. Several groups contain older offenders as well.



Most offenders are experienced too. As a minimum of ten crimes has been set as a condition, all offenders are experienced. But there is more. They often already have a criminal record, either in their home country, in Belgium or even a third country. The crimes they have been known for mostly include property crimes, but also violence –whether or not while committing property crimes–, fraud, forgery and sometimes even drug crimes. While most offenders are adults and often experienced, this is not always the case. Two groups in our sample use minors for criminal purposes.

Itinerant crime groups are from Eastern European origin. As such, they can be considered as part of an ethnic minority. However, this forms no visible minority and, thus, constitutes no barrier for mobility. Several groups have no homogenous composition. Participating people have nationalities ranging from all sorts of Eastern European nationalities (those already mentioned above, but also offenders originating from Ukraine, Bulgaria, Slovenia, Russia, Czech Republic, Belarus) to Western European offenders (French, Dutch, Belgian and naturalized Belgian) and even Southern European (Italian) and Northern African (Moroccan) offenders.

Perhaps with the exception of age for some of them, itinerant crime groups are experienced, not part of a truly visible ethnic minority and thus conform what Gabor and Gottheil (1984) found as features of mobile offenders. Yet, there should be more, because personal characteristics can be attributed to offender mobility, but cannot really explain it.

Anchor point

As one of the composing features of the crime, the starting point can play a vital role. Our case file analysis showed that many such offenders stay in Belgium illegally and only for rather short periods.

This seems to confirm the travelling lifestyle hypothesis, stating that these groups have no fixed anchor points. However, looking at the individual offenders is a too limited perspective and group offending cannot be explained by making the sum of all perpetrators individually (Tillyer & Kennedy, 2008, p. 81). From a group point of view, itinerant lifestyles account for only a part of these groups. In studying journey-to-crime patterns, residence is often used as starting point. Because this may be incorrect (Wiles & Costello, 2000), Rengert (2004, pp. 169-170) suggests to distinguish anchor point from residence, in which 'anchor point' constitutes the starting point for the criminal trip. Four types of anchor points have been observed in the case files of itinerant crime groups, three of them being fixed at least to some extent.

The majority of groups have at least one offender who is embedded in the local society and lives in Belgium. He offers the other offenders a place to stay. This can be done by providing his own residence or another premise he owns/rents. If they do not have such a house or apartment, these locally embedded persons have connections with people who do. Thus, the offenders mostly live together, nearby or even with the embedded offender, making the residence of the latter appropriate to start studying crime-travelling behaviour.

A second typology, closely related to the one described above, consists of groups with several offenders, mostly residing in separate premises and starting their crime trips from a particular central point which functions as meeting point. Although anchor points in this type are conceptualised differently than in the previous one, crime travelling can be assessed without further difficulties. Once the location of the starting point is known, the journey-to-crime can be studied, particularly because the group members tend to reside nearby this anchor point.

A third type creates more problems at first sight. These groups have no fixed residence and can be considered 'itinerant criminals' in the way Macdonald (1993) describes them. These groups have an itinerant lifestyle and their mobility should not be necessarily attributed to criminal activity. However, giving these groups a closer look, their mobility becomes less obvious. They mostly stay within the same trailer camp or at least the same area for some time, making it possible to assess this as their present anchor point. This does not mean that this anchor point will not change at all. However, it will mostly stay the same within the time span of the police investigation. Two subtypes of this group are observed. One is the Eastern European gypsy group, with a clan-like structure and involving women and children in criminal activities as well. The other is what we call the 'border region crime group', consisting of family members too, not infrequently involved in ram raids and operating at both sides of national borders.

The fourth and final group type uses multiple temporary bases. This type has only been encountered once in our sample. The group members have no clear relationship with their residence and it is not possible to track when they stayed where. This does not mean, however, that mobility is part of their general lifestyle. They do not have a fixed residence here, but only come over to grasp what they can get and return home after their operations. In that perspective, mobility is built in their criminal way of life.

Journey-to-crime of offender groups may cause problems, because distance should be measured from two points and mostly, operations will be located nearby the anchor point of one of the offenders (Bernasco, 2006, p. 147). For our subject groups, this is mostly no problem, as the anchor point for one offender is the same or very nearby as for the others.

Study of the anchor points of itinerant crime groups informs us about two things. From a theoretical perspective, larger travelled distances cannot be attributed to wrong registration of the anchor points. These offenders are mobile after all, particularly in their criminal behaviour. Therefore, there is a need for further analysis to explain this high degrees of mobility. From a practical perspective, anchor points can be assessed. This is quite important, as the anchor points create opportunities to investigate and capture the totality of a group, not only the people committing the crimes, but other actors being involved as well. By targeting those individuals providing housing opportunities and support, the fight against these groups can be raised to a more structural level. These anchor points were often localised in similar, so-called vulnerable, neighbourhoods and sometimes even the same anchor points returned. Although this has only been observed once in our analysis, one of the contacted police officers mentioned this as being quite common, particularly in cases where third parties provide temporary residences.

Awareness space

Brantingham and Brantingham (1981) defined the awareness space as the area of which offenders have knowledge. The gaining of this knowledge is based on both criminal and neutral activities (Patricia Brantingham & Brantingham, 1981, p. 35). Neutral activities can include work, school, shopping and leisure. In our analysis, this has been observed rarely. Yet, this does not imply that an awareness space is completely absent.

Our case file analysis reveals that, after the decision to commit housebreaking has been taken, there is often little or no further preparation. Bennett and Wright (1984, pp. 45-46) called this typology ‘the search’. In their sample, nearly half of the offenders belong to this type. Other authors observed this typology as well, also in Belgium (see Verwee, Ponsaers, & Enhus, 2007, pp. 104-106). Repeat victimization occurs regularly. Six groups hit the same targets during their operations. Another group does not really target the same premises, but always targets the same type of holiday homes, with exactly the same layout. For burglaries, repeat victimization is not an exclusive operation method of these groups. On the contrary, re-victimization is quite common (Nee & Meenaghan, 2006, p. 946). Itinerant crime groups follow no totally different preparation scheme than other burglars either. What is rather typical, however, is that they often operate serially.

One possible explanation for this serial behaviour is that they do not fear police action (De Cock, 2007). They do fear imprisonment, however, particularly if it were in their home country (De Cock, 2006). As a consequence, various risk reducing measures have been observed. One often encountered strategy is reconnaissance activity, noticed in 18 out of 27 case files. Most reconnaissance activities were performed shortly –one or a couple of days– before the criminal operations. Concerning housebreakings, reconnaissance was often limited to a rather short exploration of the area, not infrequently by other accomplices than those doing the burglary later on. For commercial burglaries, this was more systematic: more information was obtained and targets were picked more carefully. One group had inside information on their targets and another had a map with all companies of their target type in Belgium and France.

Using strategies such as repeat victimization, planning, reconnaissance and mapping, these offender groups become familiar with their target areas and become aware of the features of their region of operation. Despite some exceptions, no information on ‘innocent creation of awareness

space' is known for these groups. Repeat victimization by the same groups may be an explanation for further criminal activity, but it does not explain the initial criminal behaviour within a certain region. In general, crime trips into unknown territories are relatively rare (Palmer et al., 2002, p. 12; Van der Kemp & Van Koppen, 2007, p. 353). For the itinerant crime groups, reconnaissance activities and maps can function as awareness space generators. Nevertheless, as there is already some criminal intent involved, the composition of this awareness space emerges mostly not in an innocent way. Awareness space is therefore less straightforward as it is for other offenders.

International orientation and distance perception

We briefly discussed some target and offender oriented features to explain the high degrees of mobility of itinerant crime groups. Although some of these did provide some useful information, there is more. A number of features carries information on the broader framework in which these groups operate. One of them is group structure. The Belgian annual report on organised crime (Dienst voor het Strafrechtelijk Beleid, 2005, pp. 32-34, 2007, pp. 62-64) distinguishes four levels of organisation, ranging from highly structured and internationally active to opportunistic, temporary active groups. The highly organised groups can be dealt with as criminal organisations, but for the small groups, this is less likely. Our analysis found both highly structured as well as hardly structured groups, including those in between.

At one extreme, we studied a highly structured organisation of Georgian origin. The group was known mainly for the organisation of vehicle thefts and contained various organisational levels. There was a leader, residing in Belgium and living in great luxury. He had some people he trusted and worked closely together with. Other people were situated a bit lower in the hierarchy: couriers, a forger and several people involved in the maintenance of the obchak –a word used to describe the system of social and financial security within Russian-like criminal organisations (see for example Lyman & Potter, 1997). At the lowest level were the executioners of the crimes. They had a much less luxurious lifestyle and were sometimes 'transferred' from this gang to other gangs abroad. This group was oriented in an international way: part of the members of these groups live in Belgium, they have contact with groups in other EU countries (for example France, Spain, Germany, Italy) and operate in various countries.

At the other extreme, we found a group, coming over to Belgium for a short period. Offenders stayed with a Belgian couple and operated in small groups. There was no real structure or leadership and the offenders lived in poor circumstances. Groups of this type are oriented in what we call a 'bilateral international' way: they have contacts with people in their home country, but not in other countries. Structural features of most groups are situated somewhere between the two cases described above.

The same international focus is found in fencing activities as well. These are not always investigation priorities and may therefore remain unclear in some cases. Nevertheless, some relevant information could be obtained. Lu (2003), in a study on vehicle theft, found that mobility patterns after crimes may as well reflect distance decay and be rather similar to traditional journey-to-crime patterns. The criminal fence can be an important factor in crime, because the relationship between the criminal

receiver and the thief is essential for both parties. Nevertheless, attention for the criminal fence is rather limited. Sutton (1998) distinguishes five types of fencing markets, ranging from commercial sales to hawking i.e. directly selling to consumers in clubs and pubs.

Studies showed criminal receivers not always being professional receivers/criminals (Kruize, 2007, pp. 53-56) and fencing often occurring through informal ways (Kleemans, 1996, p. 71). Concerning the itinerant crime groups, some professional receivers were described in the files. One case involved a fence dealing with expensive jewellery. In some other cases the fencing took place in one or more pawnshops and for metal thefts, stolen goods are often sold to scrap dealers. This does not mean that these receivers are always aware of the criminal nature of the goods. Yet, while some cases involve professional receivers, most fencing activities take place through informal networks. These can be situated on a local level or abroad. Local fencing takes place via locally embedded persons or within the informal networks of the group (for example gypsy communities). In general, these groups steal easily disposable goods like jewellery, money and small electronics. One case involves a group being active in thefts of working tools. Buyers were then sought through a number of phone calls. In other cases, goods and vehicles were sold on second hand markets.

Most groups find easy ways to sell their stolen goods. Nevertheless, alternatives exist. First, some groups steal goods they do not have to sell, because they need not be sold. This can be the case for money, but also for small amounts of jewellery and small electronics. Typical for some of these groups, however, is that they steal consumables: food, drinks and cigarettes. This is often the case for small, loosely structured groups and traveller clans. A second alternative is international fencing. A majority of the groups in our sample let the people in their home country benefit from their criminal behaviour. This includes transporting stolen goods (mostly by car) and stolen vehicles (mostly driven, rarely by boat), but also sending money home, often through money transfer companies or by car. Fencing activities for itinerant crime groups vary from own use and local activities through international fencing and letting the family benefit from the earnings. This variation offers opportunities to find out to what extent groups and group members still have connections with their home country or even third countries and their degree of embedment in local society.

It is not inconceivable that levels of organisation and international orientation are also reflected in criminal behaviour: if one travels for example to Spain to meet the leader(s) of another group or if goods are often transported to the other side of Europe, then why would not travel to the other side of Belgium to commit a number of burglaries? In this way, even without truly being itinerant i.e. travelling criminals (see Macdonald, 1993), offenders can develop high degrees of mobility as routine activities (Cohen & Felson, 1979) and, therefore, perceive distances less inhibiting than other offenders do. This is also found in individual offender mobility. Although most groups have anchor points in Western Europe, the group members change, the individual offenders travelling more than a group approach reveals. The family and sometimes even the centre of their own life, may still be situated in their home country, changing their perceptions of near and far.

Conclusion

Itinerant crime groups receive much attention from Belgian law enforcement agencies. These groups, mainly consisting of Eastern European offenders are specialised in all sorts of property crimes. This phenomenon has been observed in other countries as well. Although choice of words varies to describe these groups, mobility is herewith a recurrent issue. We first analysed the mobility patterns of these groups. Members of these groups are highly mobile indeed: not only do they travel on average over longer distances, they also show different distance decay patterns. Because traditional distance measures rely on a correct interpretation of residence, operational ranges were calculated as well. The results reveal what was already suspected before: members of itinerant crime groups have operational ranges that are much larger than those of other offenders.

Observing a phenomenon is one thing, explaining it is another. We first looked into some possible target oriented explanations and, although they did reveal useful information, it is not sufficient to explain the differences between itinerant crime groups and other property offenders. True, these groups tend to target prosperous regions. Yet, their focus is not on those regions with the highest chances of success, unless they perceive rural areas as more successful. They probably bridge distances by using motorways, but so do other offenders. In any case, looking exclusively at target oriented measure does not answer the question as to why these offenders would consider the distance worthwhile travelling and others would not.

Offender related explanations provide an additional explanatory value, but not exclusively. A more in-depth interpretation of the anchor point shows that these are less flexible than often assumed for these groups. Also awareness space is considered. Although it is not always straightforward and mostly created in a criminal context already, itinerant crime groups tend to commit their crimes in areas/targets they know. Particularly reconnaissance activities, repeat victimisation, target type familiarity and even the use of maps help to develop their geographical knowledge.

Some information could not be exclusively attributed to either target or offender related issues. Group structures and fencing networks show that various groups operate on an international level. They have links with their home country and/or third countries. Moreover, groups have fixed anchor points but are often of a flexible nature, and offenders tend to travel quite often. As a consequence, the individual perceptions of near and far may shift, distances becoming less unbridgeable and action ranges developing accordingly.

Criminal mobility is influenced by a number of issues. Some crime types, such as drug smuggling and trafficking in human beings require large mobility in order to take place. For property crimes like burglary, this is in itself not the case. Yet, when these crimes are committed by criminal networks, we see mobility increasing as well. This could indicate that networks are not only the result of particular cross-border offences, but may as well facilitate criminal mobility for 'local' crime.

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