



IRCP

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Itinerant crime groups: the international dimension

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Studying itinerant crime groups

- Itinerant crime groups make up a challenging criminal phenomenon for 4 main reasons
 - 1) Tremendous economic impact
 - €7.6 billion suffered by commercial business for crimes by these groups in the EU (figures from research by Detailhandel Nederland)
 - €500 million suffered by Dutch business due to cargo theft (expectations for 2010, according to insurance company TVM)
 - €2 million direct damage for Belgian railway industry due to copper theft, during 18 months in 2008-2009 (source: Infrabel, the Belgian railway infrastructure manager)



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- 2) Impact on feelings of insecurity: property crimes often are an intrusion in the victim's private life
- Burglaries: everybody can become a victim. Crime series (several targets in a short period): even stronger feeling that everybody can be victimized
 - Besides that: more and more crimes with use of violence: car and home jackings, home invasions, ram raids.
 - ➔ Use of violence makes it harder for potential victims to defend themselves through prevention
 - Theft with deception: target vulnerable people in society, for example elderly people who are already defenceless



Studying itinerant crime groups

3) Groups are internationally active

- Requires international approach from law enforcement agencies
- Mostly case-driven, not yet structural
- Almost all countries in the EU have to deal with these types of criminals
 - Countries of origin
 - Transit countries
 - Target countries
- ➔ Because of the flexibility of these groups, the role of countries can change from transit to target and even origin

Studying itinerant crime groups

4) Scientific

- Most offenders commit crimes near their homes and in regions they know (criminological theories on distance decay, pattern theory, awareness space)
 - This is not the case for these itinerant criminals
 - They often do not have a single home. Instead they have lived in various countries
 - Even within these countries they travel twice as far to commit crimes (BE: 15km on average, 40km for itinerant criminals)
 - They also operate in regions they do not know or have not been before
- ➔ Difficult to determine their crime patterns + they cross common criminological theories

Challenging, but not new

- Phenomenon of “rich pickings”
 - Observed in UK studies (Mawby, 2001)
 - Burglars who often operate in small groups and choose to burgle houses in wealthy, residential areas
 - Because of their target choice, they travel larger distances and have a greater operation area than other offenders
 - As a result of this pattern, they have been convicted in several districts
 - Authorities are often not aware if these districts are not located in the same country



Challenging, but not entirely new

- Other 'historic' example: 'Kappa-gangs'
 - Observed in Belgium and Nord-Pas-de-Calais in the 1980s and 1990s
 - Professional groups who mainly target shops and systematically use violence (e.g. ram raids, shooting at police when pursued)
 - Their method of operation reduces their risk of getting caught
 - They are only at the crime site for a short time as they use highways and operate quickly
 - Deliberately operate on both sides of the border as this hampers the operation of LEA
- Further back in time: bokkenrijders / goat riders



Methods for crime analysis of ICG

- Analysis of crime statistics
 - Allows a general overview and observation of (quantifiable) trends
- Case file analysis
 - Allows to gain more depth in the analysis: how groups are structured & which methods they use
- Offender interviews
 - Contains broader information too: motivational aspects and general background
- Other methods can be developed in the future
 - E.g. network analysis to identify key persons



Elements that have already been studied

- Mobility patterns
 - Where these groups operate and how they arrange transport
 - How they choose their targets
- Fencing networks
 - How and when goods are sold and who is involved in selling these goods
- Anchor points
 - Where the members of these groups temporarily stay and what type of residence or temporary basis they use to operate from



ICG = collective term = an umbrella

- One can distinguish diverse types of offender groups
- 3 main types:
 - **Professional criminals** that operate in small groups and commit all sorts of property crimes. They often are part of larger criminal networks with branches all over Europe (e.g. Estonian robbers of jewellers, using a hit-and-run technique)
 - **Fortune-hunters** that move between the European countries. They often try to find a job, but experience that it is easier to earn money through criminal activity.



ICG = collective term

- **Criminal gypsy gangs and sedentary offenders** that form closed communities and commit particular crimes (organised pickpocketing, theft with deception, metal thefts)
 - Traditional criminal gypsies have a travelling lifestyle (see below)
 - Sedentary offenders who have settled in vulnerable neighbourhoods within cities

➔ Combinations of various types are possible and new types may emerge. It is a criminal phenomenon in constant evolution



Results: reasons for travelling (1)

- 3 typologies (see above)
- 1st type: professional criminals
 - They Travel to various countries with criminal intentions
 - They have decided to commit crimes already in their home country
 - They Either use their own car or paid transport (bus lines or small vans) to get here
 - They only temporary stay in other countries
 - Ranging from a couple of days to a few months
 - Often make several trips to the same country



Results: reasons for travelling (1)

- These offenders used to work in very large groups in the past
 - See for example +-10 years ago: operation Tirana in Antwerp
 - This has changed and a certain level of scaling down has taken place.
 - This is not only the case for Itinerant Crime Groups, but can be observed in nearly all organised crime activities: a shift from vertical structures (pyramids) to horizontally operating 'cells'



Results: reasons for travelling (1)

- Now these Offenders form small groups in their home country
 - Mostly 2-5 persons
 - Stay together with this group, but the group composition may change once they return to their home country or travel to another one
 - When coming over, they are isolated from other criminals. They do not search any contacts because of the temporary nature of their stay
 - However, in their home country they form a part of larger criminal organisations with links to several countries



Results: reasons for travelling (1)

- Experienced offenders are recruited
- They have little luxury here
 - Often live together in small and cheap apartments (matrasses on the floor, only 1 bedroom,...)
- Their main purpose is to earn a lot of quick money for the organisation through committing property crimes. After a short period they return to the country of origin to come back afterwards
- Their home country retains an important position as the centre of their lives and of their criminal network. For the fencing network, the illicit economy functions as a main push factor



Results: reasons for travelling (2)

- 2nd type: fortune-hunters
 - They leave their home country without criminal intentions
 - They travel alone or with others, but do not form a fixed group. Contacts with their co-travellers is not always maintained after their arrival. The groups have a flexible nature
 - They use various transport methods
 - They use their own car or public transport, but sometimes hidden in trucks as well. People from outside the EU also pay human smugglers

Results: reasons for travelling (2)

- They stay in each country for a longer period: they build up their lives and therefore stay permanently or at least a couple of months in the same country
- They search for jobs, but these jobs are badly paid and mostly in the grey circuit (for example illegal employment in the construction sector)
- They meet new people with whom they engage in criminal activity
 - Particularly in so-called 'convergence settings': public places where everyone can meet
 - E.g. bars, market places



Results: reasons for travelling (2)

- Their family is often with them
- They move to other countries
 - After being caught,
 - When they are told there are working opportunities in that new country
 - Or when they are persuaded by others to move
- As their main aim is to build up and develop their life, the centre of of their life moves with them and in each country they develop new contacts

Results: reasons for travelling (3)

- 3rd type:
 - **Criminal gypsy gangs** show correspondence with the 2nd type (fortune-hunters), but also with the 1st type (professional criminals)
 - They do not travel with criminal intentions, but because they believe to have more living opportunities in other countries (~2nd type)
 - The family stays together when travelling to another country (~2nd type)
 - Groups that are criminally active may commit much crimes in a short period (~1st type)
 - **Sedentary offenders** have settled in vulnerable neighbourhoods from where they commit crimes



Results: reasons for travelling (3)

- They form a closed community. It is difficult for outsiders to gain entrance in their community
- Travelling gangs have links with other gangs in several countries, making it possible to always have somewhere to go in these countries. Settled gangs use networks for their logistic activities
- The centre of their life is geographically located in the country where they stay, but is socially isolated from the community in that country (less strict for sedentary gangs than for criminal gypsy gangs)



Results: fencing networks (1)

- Less organised groups (fortune-hunters) mostly steal money, jewellery and small electronics
- For these goods, deals need not be made in advance, as these goods can be sold easily
 - Potential clients are contacted by phone
 - Potential clients are met in bars or public places
 - The bar manager or personnel may be aware or even actively involved
 - Goods can be sent to family in their home country
 - Family plays active role in selling the goods



Results: fencing networks (2)

- Professional criminals steal these goods as well
 - Because they operate in isolated groups, they have few options to sell these goods in the country where they operate
 - They send the goods to their home country or store them temporarily with them. They then take them with them when they travel back home
 - Their family is often actively involved in selling these goods on the local black market



Results: fencing networks (2)

- Professional criminals are also involved in thefts of other goods: construction vehicles and tools, large amounts of brass wire, cars, airbags, other car parts, ...
 - These goods require more professional fencing methods
 - These goods are mostly sold via professional contacts in the country of origin who are experienced in finding customers for these goods
 - For these goods, the networks/organisations behind these groups play a crucial role



Criminal fencing networks (3)

- Criminal gypsy gangs and sedentary offenders are mostly interested in jewellery and metal, but also small electronics, money and cars are stolen
 - Jewellery (and cars) is often used by themselves or sold to other criminals in their own community
 - Small electronics are mostly sold to people they know, but who are not a part of their own community.
- ➔ Quickly selling the goods seems crucial for succes, particularly for those goods that are difficult to trace



Evolution

- Sedentary groups have only officially gained attention in Belgium since 2007,
 - Their share within the ICG increases quickly
- There is an increasing involvement of minors
 - Law enforcement agencies have difficulties to deal with these criminals
- New or increasing opportunities are exploited
 - E.g. the amount of metal thefts is very much in line with the international metal prices
- Criminals adapt to changes in investigation and prosecution



Evolution

- A further diversity can be expected, both with regards to the group composition as with respect to the targets. E.g. they increasingly use violence.
 - This may result in increasing involvement in violent crimes such as home invasions (6 home invasions each week, resulting in injured victims in over 1/3 of the cases).
 - More violence in the traditional crimes (e.g. robbery)
 - Increased use of heavy weapons (e.g. kalasnikov's)
 - Threatening of members of police / justice



Is this organised crime?

- Part of these groups are loose, opportunistic criminal networks and cooperations (not necessarily 'organised')
 - Others belong to well-structured long-term criminal organisations who send offenders to commit many property crimes
 - "Seriousness" by amount of crime/damage, but also by use of violence
- ➔ Various evolutions point in the direction of an increasing professionalism!



Measures: in general

- There is a growing awareness in most EU countries about this crime phenomenon
 - Yet, a common approach does not yet exist
 - As a result, the international cooperation is mostly case-driven at this time
- Certain regions are particularly vulnerable from this perspective
 - Border regions, for example Nord-Pas-de-Calais and Meuse-Rhine Euroregion
 - National organisation of LEA gives criminals in these regions an enormous advantage



Measures: in general

- The free movement of persons within the EU makes it interesting for criminals to enter the EU
 - This puts pressure on the (new) borders of the EU, for example the borders with Moldova and former Yugoslavia
 - As a result, all EU countries are involved, either as country of origin, but increasingly as target or transit countries. This role may shift over time



Measures: in general

- One should not underestimate the importance of economic factors
 - Metal thefts evolve with the market price
 - Increasing construction activity in Eastern Europe has caused a growth in theft of construction vehicles
 - BE: abolished the duty to identify sellers of metal scrap. This makes it more difficult to tackle metal thefts
 - Some countries have limited legislation on criminal fencing and money laundering. This hampers financial investigations



Measures: in particular

- Fortune-hunters and sedentary offenders are mainly opportunity-driven
 - Technical prevention can contribute to reduce their criminal activity
 - It is important to increase the chances of arrest and sentencing. This involves:
 - Further cooperation between LEA in border regions
 - Problems with reintegration when sentence is executed in the destination country, because offenders will not stay there afterwards



Measures: in particular

- Professional criminals mainly take advantage of the economic factors in their home country
 - Tackling the black and grey economy in the country of origin takes away much of their profit margins, making it less interesting to engage in crime
 - Not only challenge for the member states, but for the EU as a whole
 - Stolen goods find their way to the legal market (e.g. regularly leasing stolen cars in Latvia)



Measures: in particular

- The execution of sentences in the country of origin brings the problem and its impact in the picture, also outside the destination countries. In doing so, the criminal activity of these offenders can no longer be kept secret
- It is important to have the commitment of the countries of origin, members states but also candidate member states of the EU



Conclusion

- ICG: A crime problem has become internationalised and organised
 - Property crimes committed by criminal groups and networks affect nearly all countries in the EU, be it as a country of origin, target or transit
 - Certain typical crime types occur in many countries and are bound to economic push factors
 - Metal thefts, bound to international copper price
 - Stolen construction vehicles are transported to developing regions



Conclusion

- International character of this crime phenomenon requires a global international approach
 - At this time, international cooperation is mainly case-driven, but not structural
 - The lack of a unified approach hampers the prevention and also the investigation, prosecution and sentencing of these offenders
 - The influence of the economic crime drivers plays in the whole EU and has an impact on law enforcement, administrative bodies and the private sector



Conclusion

- The EU needs to take the lead in developing an integral and integrated approach, for example with regard to third countries that have become countries of origin too
- Without such an approach, the EU undermines the legitimacy of the European project with respect to crime