What/where about "itinerant crime groups" ?

Stijn Van Daele & Tom Vander Beken

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Overview

1. An offender mobility study
2. The research project
3. Distance decay theory
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6. Range
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8. Conclusions

1. An offender mobility study

In the late '90 Belgian law enforcement authorities 'discover' a new group of perpetrators of property crime: the *itinerant crime groups* (ICG) (mobile banditism (NL), *Délinquance itinérante* (F), *Osteuropäische Tätergruppe* (DE)) which they assign the following features:

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.

Are ICG really special in the way they are more mobile than other offenders? (offender mobility of property crimes committed by ICG, BOF-project Ghent University, 2007-2011).

2. The research project

1. **2007-2008**: What do we know about offender mobility (theories) and what does the *police database* tell us about offender mobility in Belgium in general and ICG in particular (64,000 offenders & 87,000 crimes in 2002-2006)?

2. **2008**: What do *case files* tell us about offender mobility (residence or anchor points, offender profile, targets) of ICG (27 major case files analysed)?

3. **2009-**: What do the *offenders* tell us about their mobility?

3. Distance decay

- Travelling (for crime) takes time, costs and efforts and increases risk.

- It is argued that most crimes are committed close to home, while the chance of criminal operations declines when the distance increases (distance decay).

- Supported by empirical research both on aggregate and individual level.
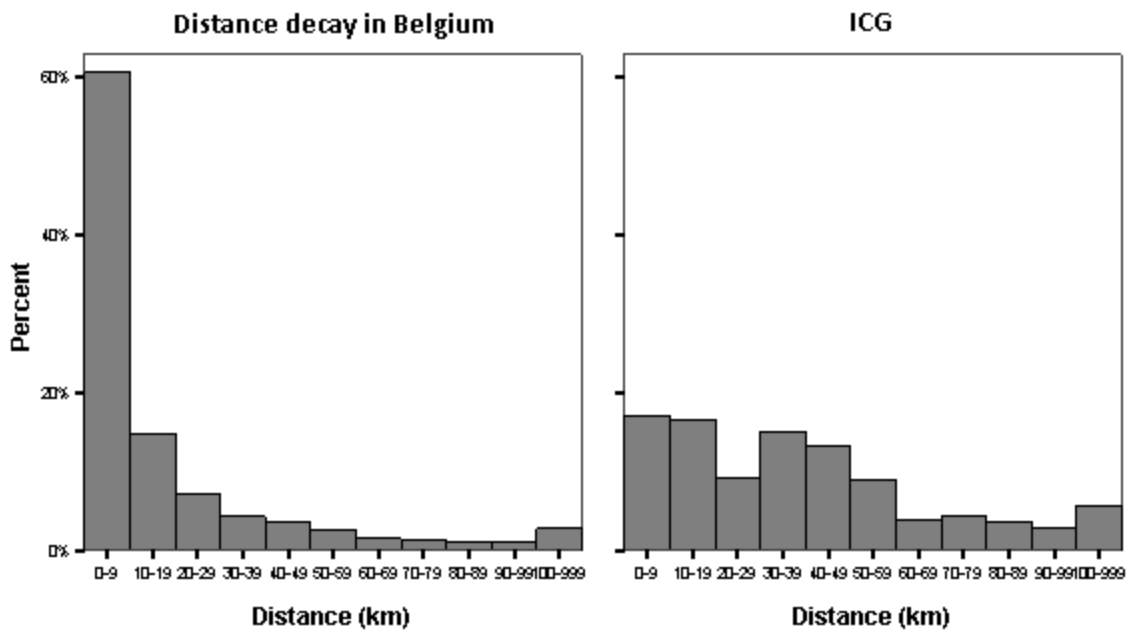
➔ Crime is local business (cost-benefit)

4a. ICG and distance decay

- ICG: multiple (10+), co-offending, Eastern European property crime offenders
  - → 'Core' ICG

- Mean travelled distances for offenders living in Belgium:
  - General : 17,2km (68264 trips)
            or 14,6km (28901 offenders)
  - ICG: 40,0km (2872 trips)
       or 37,4km (125 offenders)

4b. ICG and distance decay

5. Distance decay problems

- Residence has to be known
  - 48,2% in database, less on non-Belgian (41,2%) and Eastern European (35,8%) offenders.

- Residence is not always starting point (Wiles & Costello, 2000)

- Residences of ICG are difficult to assess (Ponsaers, 2004)

6a. Range

- Do we need to know anchor points to calculate crime travelling?

- Offender ranges can be calculated (Morselli & Royer, 2008; but also: geographical profiling)
  - Here: maximum distance between 2 offences
    - All offenders, who committed 2 or more offences

- Offender ranges in Belgium:
  - General: 20,36km (20156 offenders)
  - ICG: 93,8km (305 offenders)

6b. range
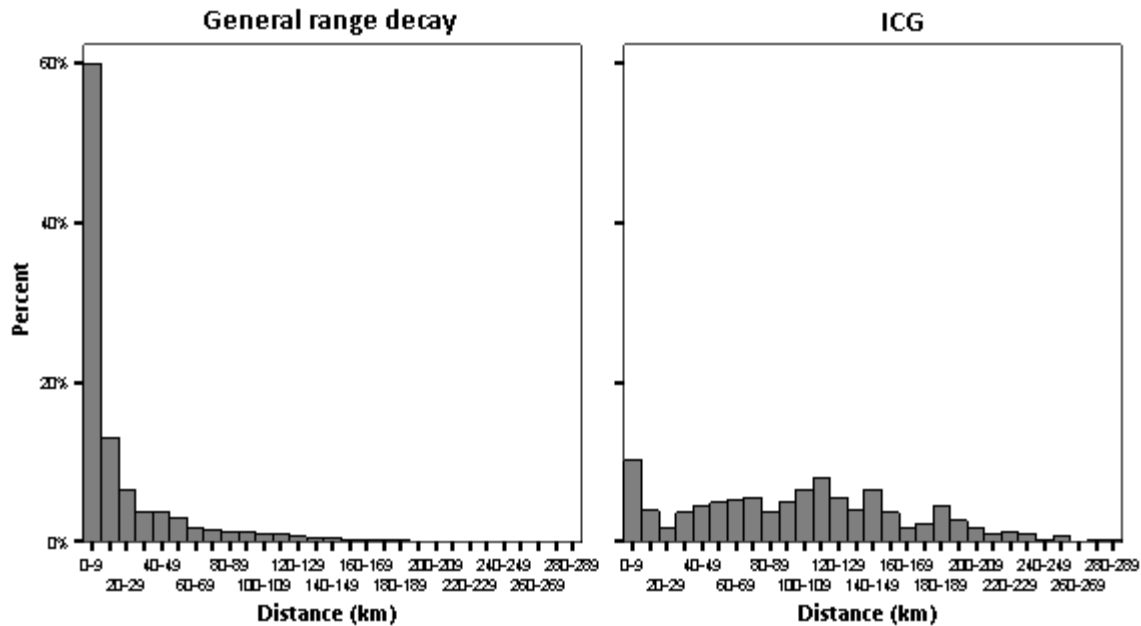
7. Looking for explanations

- **a. Possible explanations (theory)**
  - Target related
  - Offender related

- **b. First results found**
  - Police database
  - Case files

a. Possible explanations (theory)

- Target related explanations:
  - Attractiveness (expected profits)
  - Opportunity (expected risk/success)
  - Accessibility (barriers, use of highways, …)

- Offender related explanations:
  - Anchor points
  - Mobility as routine activities
  - Awareness space (cfr. Brantingham & Brantingham)

b. First results found (targets)

- Target related:
  - Richer districts (welfare-index 104,8 vs 96,8)
  - Rural areas (population density 705 vs 2029)
  - Highways (observed in particular cases, proven by cell phone tracing)

➔ Cannot be a sufficient explanation because targets are the same for other offenders!

c. First results found (offenders)

- Cases show:
  - Group anchor points are mostly fixed
    ➔ no explanation
  - Awareness space
    - Normal: been there in non-criminal setting
    - Alternative: reconnaissance, repeat victimisation, target type familiarity, maps
    ➔ Awareness space may function as explanation, but is not straightforward

d. First results found (beyond)

- Other mobile features:
  - Groups have international links
    - Multilateral: international organisations
    - Bilateral: relations with home country
  - Fencing: local, home country and international
  - Individual offenders often stay temporary in WE and/or are used to travel
    (mobile as routine activity)

  ➔ Perceptions of "near" and "far" may vary
     Do they influence behavioral patterns accordingly?

8. Conclusions

- ICG:
  - are more mobile than other offenders (mean travelled distance and range)
  - appear to be rational in mobility (attractive target districts, use of highways), but this cannot account for all the difference with other offenders
  - Commit crimes in their awareness space