

Summary

Facilitating itinerant crime groups

Research synthesis

In recent years, the Minister of Security and Justice has repeatedly expressed his concerns over the broad range of property offences committed by mobile itinerant crime groups and the resulting damage suffered by citizens and businesses. For the term 'itinerant crime groups', the following shared definition has been drawn up at the European level: *'A mobile (itinerant) criminal group is an association of offenders, who systematically acquire wealth through theft of property or fraud (e.g. theft, residential and non-residential burglaries, organised shoplifting, pick-pocketing, cargo thefts, metal thefts, thefts on construction sites and skimming) having a wide ranging area of operations and are internationally active.'* This definition has been adopted by the Dutch government. According to this definition, mobile banditry implies these four characteristics: (1) The systematic committing of (2) property crime, in which (3) offenders collaborate who (4) operate internationally. Several projects have now been set up in the Netherlands to counter mobile banditry. The Dutch policy focuses emphatically on *preventing* mobile banditry, in addition to intensifying the investigation efforts. Gathering information about the different 'steps' in the criminal operation of an itinerant crime group will help clarify how itinerant crime groups are facilitated and which legal actors and opportunities they exploit. The government can use that knowledge to stop or disrupt the criminal operation.

The goal of this research synthesis is to bring together knowledge on how mobile banditry is facilitated. Facilitation refers to all actors and circumstances that – consciously or not – enable mobile banditry and create opportunities for this form of crime. The key questions of this study are answered by drawing on existing scientific literature, and are phrased as follows:

- In what way are itinerant crime groups facilitated?
- Which actors and circumstances can be identified?

To find empirical scientific studies, search terms were used to systematically search for publications in various databases. Literature was also found through the snowball method. After an initial broad selection of literature, 118 publications were downloaded or requested. Based on an item checklist, these publications were reviewed and assessed for their relevance to the current research. On this basis, studies were then selected or rejected for this research synthesis. Of the initial 118 publications, eventually 41 were selected for this study. These include scientific articles, books, chapters in books, reports and dissertations. The majority of the selected publications derive from the Netherlands and Belgium. Virtually all found and selected publications focus on itinerant crime groups from Central and Eastern Europe, although the origin of itinerant crime groups was not a selection criterion. In this report, the findings are described according to three phases, adopted from Spapens (2005). These three phases are: 1) preparation; 2) planning and execution of the crime, and 3) the processing of the stolen goods .

Preparation

The selected studies indicate that many different *means of transportation* are used for the journey to the Netherlands. First, there are offenders who travel to the Netherlands by private car. Second, offenders travel by privately owned shuttle buses from the origin country. In third place, offenders travel by regular public transport; this mainly involves scheduled services by international bus companies. Finally, the publications indicate that members of itinerant crime groups sometimes travel by air as well.

Various publications contain information on how itinerant crime groups *recruit 'new' gang members*. New members are largely recruited in the home country. Additionally, new members are recruited in Western Europe. In these cases, people of the same nationality meet each other in cafés, apartment buildings or at other venues where fellow nationals convene and the native language is spoken. This concerns the recruitment of people who have resided for a longer time in Western Europe, for example because they came here to work and earn money, whether legally or not. It emerges from some studies that itinerant crime groups sometimes apply coercion to force people to cooperate with criminal activities.

The nature of the *night accommodation* of itinerant crime group members varies immensely. Some of the members have a (temporary) basis in one of the large cities, where they temporarily stay in an apartment. Often, several gang members share a dwelling. There are different ways for gang members to find a (temporary) place to live: some of them stay with family members or acquaintances who have been living legally in the Netherlands for longer, with or without municipal registration. These people are usually from the same country or region and are embedded more firmly in the local community here. The person providing accommodation can be an active member of the itinerant crime group, or may act only as a facilitator. Some itinerant crime groups rent their own dwelling.

In addition, itinerant crime group members may use hotels, motels, hostels, campsites and holiday parks. These are gang members who remain in the Netherlands only briefly. In these cases, the itinerant crime groups rely much less or not at all on connections with locally established compatriots. There are also gang members who spend the night in their car. These, too, are gang members who remain in the country only briefly, and who use the car as a cheap form of accommodation.

Planning and execution of the theft

The examined literature reveals that itinerant crime groups generally engage in the (serial) breaking and entering of dwellings, cars, shops and businesses. Some itinerant crime groups focus primarily on car theft or pickpocketing, and others concentrate on ATM skimming or ram raids. The literature furthermore reports a number of cases involving cargo theft, metal theft, introducing counterfeit money and armed robberies, but these are exceptions.

The choice of locations is determined partly by the specialty of the itinerant crime groups. Pickpockets mainly operate in shopping districts and on markets, in tourist areas, catering establishments and public transport. Itinerant crime groups that specialise in shop theft tend to operate mainly in medium-sized and smaller cities, rather than in the large cities in the west of the Netherlands. Where breaking and entering into dwellings and cars is concerned, itinerant crime groups often choose targets in rural areas, and located at some distance from their own temporary

abode. These targets are often detached houses found in the more affluent neighbourhoods, where there is not much traffic.

A number of publications explicitly mention that itinerant crime groups identify specific targets in advance. This emerges from the lists that the police sometimes find among the offenders' possessions, containing addresses, shops, products and/or specific brands. Other studies show that offenders do not always know exactly where they will strike, but that they will simply drive around at random until they chance upon a suitable target.

Once itinerant crime groups are inside the Netherlands or Belgium, the *journey to the crime scene* is usually made by car. One aspect mentioned by several publications in this respect is that the required car is sometimes stolen first. Studies indicate that this usually happens by breaking and entering a house, with the theft of the car keys along with other items. The stolen car is then used for several (serial) breaking and entering of homes and cars. Some publications report that cars are sometimes rented from a car hire company, partly in order to be less noticeable by having Dutch license plates, and partly to make it more difficult for the police to trace them.

To reduce the chance of getting caught and to stay out of sight of the police, itinerant crime groups use various *protective measures*. Using false identity papers is one such method, as are the use of aliases and various nicknames and code names. Additionally, various communication tools are used to avoid police wire taps (Skype, portophones, GSM jammers, walkie-talkies, continually changing telephones and SIM cards). Another protective measure described in several publications is to remain silent under police questioning, if caught. It also seems that pressure is applied within the group not to talk to the police, which can sometimes include violence. In contrast to the use of *internal* violence, the itinerant crime groups do not or hardly apply *external* violence. By not using violence, itinerant crime groups seek to avoid drawing the police's attention and hence to minimise the risk of detection. Another method to avoid drawing attention is to use children. A few publications offer information on this. Finally, itinerant crime groups protect themselves by deliberately exploiting national and regional borders. By crossing borders and by spreading their activities across multiple countries, the chance of getting caught is reduced. One reason for this is that each country has its own organisations with its own legislation and procedures and competences with respect to investigation and prosecution. As a result, information about crime is not automatically shared between the countries, so that information about itinerant crime groups remains fragmentary and scattered across various organisations.

Processing of stolen goods

There are basically four places where itinerant crime groups temporarily store their loot. In some cases, stolen goods are stored in the vicinity of the crime scene. Especially after home and car burglaries, the stolen goods are temporarily buried in nearby woods or bushes, to be collected the next day. A second place temporary storage place for stolen goods is in their own car. Cars are sometimes furnished with specially prepared spaces in which to hide the goods. Additionally, some itinerant crime groups take the stolen goods to their temporary accommodation. Finally, in some cases the loot is stored in warehouses. This generally concerns the storage of larger items. Warehouses and garages are also used to store and modify (parts of) stolen cars. Modifying and selling stolen cars is often done by other groups than

those who steal the cars, and legal local automotive businesses may play a facilitating role here.

The publications reveal a variety of ways in which the stolen goods reach their new end user. First of all, goods are sometimes retained for own use (for instance electronic appliances, smartphones, tools and cars). Stolen goods are sometimes traded or sold between itinerant crime group members. The literature further shows that some of the itinerant crime group members send goods and cash to family and friends in the home country in Eastern Europe. Nevertheless, stolen goods are mostly sold on: they are both transported to the home country and sold in Western Europe. If itinerant crime groups choose to sell their stolen goods in Western Europe, then this is usually associated with some measure of local integration. After all, one must have local contacts to sell the goods to and one needs to know one's way around. Several studies indicate that gang members maintain relations here with small entrepreneurs in the legal business sector for the sale of loot, for instance with café owners, market merchants, construction workers and/or shopkeepers. Receivers of stolen goods are sometimes café owners who offer their establishment as a place to meet and to sell goods.

If stolen goods are transported to the home country, then these eventually wind up on local markets in the gang members' home towns or in shops. Goods are also offered on the internet in the home country. Family members of itinerant crime group members sometimes appear to play an active role in selling the goods, particularly if the gang members do not immediately return to the home country but ship stolen goods home to be sold, and notifying family members thereof.

If loot is transported to the home country, then the stolen goods are sometimes shipped to family members as parcels in the mail. Also, normal cars (stolen or not) and privately owned shuttle buses are frequently used means of transporting loot to the home country. Goods are also given to lorry drivers to take back. Further, buses belonging to international bus companies can serve as a means of transporting stolen goods back home. Some studies show that stolen goods are sometimes sent with buses as unaccompanied luggage, and received by gang member of family member at the place of arrival.

The scientific literature contains hardly any information on how the actual earnings are subsequently invested by the gang members.

Final remarks

The findings of this research synthesis can be summarised briefly in terms of the three dimensions that offer itinerant crime groups the opportunity to operate, namely: the facilitating professions and professional groups; social ties and ethnic communities; and places to meet. These dimensions, in their mutual combination, offer insight into the actors and the circumstances that play a facilitating role in the (continued) existence of itinerant crime groups.

The legal professional group that emerges most clearly as a facilitator is the transport sector, and its wake the automotive sector. Freight companies and lorry drivers but also bus companies, small transportation companies and car dealers appear to play a supporting role during several phases of the criminal operation. The landlords of warehouses and garages also play a facilitating role by enabling the temporary storage of (large) stolen goods. It furthermore emerged that some of the itinerant crime groups make use of people from their origin country who have resided in Western Europe for a substantial time and have integrated locally. The locally embedded individuals sometimes cooperate deliberately, so that they can also con-

sidered crime suspects, but sometimes it is not clear to what extent they are aware of the illegal activities. These ethnic communities are especially important with a view to accommodation, but they also prove useful in other phases of the criminal operation. Additionally, new gang members are sometimes recruited from among these ethnic communities.

Finally, it appears that cafés function as a meeting place and play a facilitating role in various phases of the criminal operation. This applies especially to crime groups that remain for a longer period in Western Europe, and not so much for groups that stay here only briefly. Hotels, holiday parks and campsites can also serve as accommodation and as a meeting place.

This research synthesis shows that facilitating actors and opportunities – professional groups, social ties and ethnic communities and meeting places – are often not tied to any single phase in the criminal operation of itinerant crime groups. They are shown to be dynamic, recurrent dimensions that can play a facilitating role for itinerant crime groups in various phases of the criminal operation. With a view to (preventively) combat itinerant crime groups, it is advisable to focus attention on these dimensions.