Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek- en Datacentrum

Organised crime in the Netherlands: cocaine trafficking and contract killings

Sixth report of the Dutch Organised Crime Monitor

Summary

Cahier 2026-1

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ERASMUS UNIVERSITEIT ROTTERDAM

VU VRIJE UNIVERSITEIT AMSTERDAM

Cahier
De reeks Cahier omvat de rapporten van onderzoek dat door en in opdracht van het Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek- en Datacentrum is verricht. Opname in de reeks betekent niet dat de inhoud van de rapporten het standpunt van de Minister van Justitie en Veiligheid weergeeft.

Summary[1]

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Purpose

This report contains the findings of the sixth round of the Dutch Organised Crime Monitor. The purpose of the Organised Crime Monitor is to utilize the insights gained by law enforcement agencies during large scale criminal investigations to gain more knowledge about the nature of organised crime in the Netherlands. The information these investigations contain provides specific knowledge about the phenomenon of organised crime and persons involved in it. This round of the Monitor marks the first time in which criminal investigations were included that provided insight into suspects' communications via PGP-data. Moreover, we focused on two specific types of crime during this sixth round: cocaine trafficking and contract killings.

Research method

The Dutch Organised Crime Monitor is based on in-depth analyses of large-scale criminal investigations. From 1996 until this round of the Monitor, 196 large-scale criminal investigations have been systematically analysed. This has made a large cross-section of criminal investigations, not only across different criminal partnerships and areas of crime but also over time, available for research.

In this study both cocaine trafficking and contract killings were investigated through four key themes: the modus operandi of criminal activities, criminal networks, criminal careers, and the responses of law enforcement and the judiciary to organised crime. For each theme, newly selected criminal investigations from this sixth round, alongside older cases from previous rounds related to cocaine trafficking were analysed. Additionally, we examined five criminal cases involving contract killings: one case that was studied in the fifth round and four cases studied in the current round. Analyses of criminal life histories were conducted at the suspect level rather than at case level. As a result, these analyses include suspects from all previous rounds as well as the current round. Examining this unique dataset – collected over a span of 25 years – on suspects involved in organised crime in the Netherlands, offers the opportunity to trace and compare the criminal trajectories of suspects and their involvement in organised crime during several decades. As such, we studied the criminal life histories of cohorts of suspects who were active in organised crime during different time periods.

[1] In the summary, references to literature have been removed for the sake of readability. These are included in the main report.

Conclusions

Criminal careers of organised crime suspects between 1995 and 2021

This report examined the criminal histories of 386 Dutch-born suspects who, at some point in their lives, were suspected of involvement in a criminal network engaged in organised crime. To analyse changes over time, the suspects were divided into four cohorts based on the period in which they were linked to organised crime: Cohort A with the index offence – referring to the specific criminal case in which the suspect was involved in organised crime – between 1995 and 2000, cohort B with an index offence between 2001 and 2007, cohort C with an index offence between 2008 and 2014, and cohort D with an index offence between 2015 and 2021. Similarities and differences between cohorts can be interpreted in light of broader trends in organised crime during each respective period.

Despite spanning different time frames, the cohorts exhibit a notable number of similarities. The age at which suspects first come into contact with law enforcement, both in terms of their first conviction and their index offence, has remained consistent over time. Likewise, the duration of the criminal career prior to the index offence in organised crime does not differ between cohorts. Across all cohorts, suspects tend to be generalists, committing offences across various categories. Criminal organisations typically consist of a mix of suspects with and without prior convictions, regardless of the period in which the group was active.

However, clear differences also emerge. Suspects from older cohorts generally have more extensive criminal experience, as reflected in the number of convictions prior to the index offence, compared to those in more recent cohorts. In the oldest cohort, only a small proportion of suspects had no prior convictions, whereas in the most recent cohort, the majority had no prior convictions. The overall number of prior convictions is also lower in later cohorts. Nevertheless, the severity of offences has increased over time: in recent years, offences are more frequently classified as serious crimes. This trend appears to be driven primarily by more severe actions committed by suspects, rather than by harsher sentencing.

Cocaine trafficking

Methods of cocaine trafficking to or via the Netherlands
This report provides an overview of the various methods of cocaine trafficking through or to the Netherlands that have been used over time. Since the first report on the Monitor, we have encountered a variety of trafficking methods. The criminal cases collected and analysed in older cases involve trafficking via sea ports, air traffic and road, while the criminal case files collected in the sixth round solely contain trafficking methods via sea (ports). This does not necessarily mean that the studied criminal organisations were not involved in the transportation of cocaine by air transportation; it simply means that these trafficking methods were not identified during these criminal investigations. We encountered eight different methods that can be divided over three different crime scripts[2]: the container script, ship script and cargo script. Within the container script we encountered three scenarios: the rip-off method (in one case), the switch method (in three cases) and cloning (in one case). Within the research material, we found two scenarios that fit the ship script: the drop-off scenario (in one case) and the walking off scenario (in one case). Finally, we distinguished

[2] Crime scripts are the steps taken when committing a crime.

three scenarios within the cargo script: within legitimate goods (in four cases), the rotting method (in one case) and chemical concealment of cocaine (in two cases). The amount of smuggled cocaine varied widely in the studied cases for this report, ranging from 200 to 16,000 kilograms. In the first five rounds of the Monitor, the quantities of cocaine smuggled via water were lower, although in the older reports we also encountered one large shipment. Furthermore, the amount of cocaine smuggled by air was lower than the amount of cocaine that was smuggled by water. We spotted parallels between the criminal cases from the sixth report and the cases from older reports (concerning both air and water transport). In all criminal cases, cargo and/or corrupt contacts play a significant role in the successful trafficking of cocaine.

Similar to findings from previous rounds of the Monitor, it remains difficult for law enforcement agencies, and therefore for us as scientific researchers, to gain a complete overview of earnings and how they are distributed within a criminal organisation.

Criminal organisations involved in the import of cocaine to or via the Netherlands

Although the classic image of organised crime has long been characterised by rigidly hierarchical, pyramid structures, the successive monitoring rounds point to more flexible and dynamic network connections. Within these networks suspects fulfil diverse roles, with varying hierarchical positions and levels of involvement. Additionally, the number of suspects involved in each case also exhibits a certain stability over the years, typically involving multiple individuals with different roles. More recent cases are somewhat of an exception to this, partly due to the influence of PGP communication as evidence. These cases focus on a limited number of suspects, resulting in a fragmented picture of their mutual collaboration and division of roles.

To gain more insight into the nature of this collaboration, a distinction was made between organisational, facilitating and executive roles in a criminal network. This distinction appears to have remained largely consistent over time. In both older and recent cases, the emphasis lies on suspects in leadership and coordinating roles. Suspects in facilitating roles also remain prominent, although the nature of their services has changed. This shift is related to changes in modus operandi and prioritization within criminal networks. While previously, airport personnel played a role in facilitating cocaine trafficking, recent cases primarily show the role of port employees, given the emphasis on trafficking via ports in the studied criminal investigations. What is notable is that all recent cases contain elements of corruption, both within and outside government organisations. This appears to be related to tightened security measures, which have made internal cooperation essential for the successful import of cocaine.

Finally, we examined the social relationships between suspects. In general, information on this topic is limited. Both the previous and more recent monitoring rounds clearly show that collaboration often occurs within existing social networks, such as family and friends. The work context also plays a key role: suspects meet each other through their jobs in the transport sector, at airports, or in ports, regardless of their role within the criminal network.

Criminal careers in cocaine trafficking

This report examined the criminal histories of 108 Dutch-born suspects involved in cocaine trafficking between 1996 and 2021. The analysis focused on individuals who,

at some point in their lives, became involved in a criminal organisation focusing on cocaine trafficking. To explore changes over time, the suspects were divided into three cohorts based on the year of their index offence: cohort A, with an index offence between 1996 and 2003; cohort B, with an index offence between 2008 and 2014; and cohort C with an index offence between 2018 and 2021. The comparison between cohorts reveals a pattern similar to that observed among the entire group of suspects from all forms of organised crime, underscoring the robustness of the findings.

Across cohorts, many similarities emerge. The age at first conviction and the age at which suspects become involved in organised remain consistent over time. Suspects from older cohorts more frequently had a prior criminal history, whereas for those in more recent cohorts, the index offence was often their first prosecution. Notably, suspects in the most recent cohort received their first unconditional prison sentence at a younger age, suggesting an earlier escalation in the severity of their criminal career. In recent cohorts, index offences are more frequently classified as serious crimes and less often as medium-level offences. However, this shift in classification does not appear to be reflected in the severity of the sentences imposed.[3]

In the current round of the Monitor, information about suspects' roles in cocaine trafficking was linked to their criminal histories. Suspects occupied various roles, including as principal/coordinator, executor, transporter and facilitator. Principals/coordinators and executors generally had more extensive criminal experience prior to the index offence than suspects in other roles. On average, executors had the highest number of prior convictions and spent the most time in detention before the index offence. In contrast, transporters and facilitators were typically older at the time of their first conviction and had fewer prior contacts with the criminal justice system.

Combatting cocaine trafficking to or via the Netherlands

The prominent role of PGP data in Dutch criminal investigations in recent years is clearly reflected in the cases studied during this round of the Monitor. Of the twelve files related to cocaine trafficking that were studied, seven investigations were started based on information from PGP data. Only two cases were initiated because of intercepted cocaine shipments at various ports. A great deal of information has been obtained about the modus operandi of cocaine trafficking, mostly through access to PGP data. PGP data also provided insight into network members. This information not only confirmed suspicions about existing criminal contacts but, in some cases, also revealed other contacts. These contacts could be further investigated through additional 'traditional' investigative work, involving observations, placing tracking devices, and interception of confidential communications (OVC), or 'bugging'.

In the cases studied for this report, suspects spoke quite freely in PGP communications. This offered valuable information for law enforcement agencies involved. In a sense, it is fair to say that little has changed in that regard over de last 25 years. Well before the rise of PGP data, gaining insight into criminals' communications, often done through wiretaps, could also contribute significantly to the gathering of information in investigations as well as evidence in criminal cases. Insight

[3] The classification is based on the maximum penalty imposed under the related statutory provision for the most serious offense in each case. For drug-related offenses, these maximum sentences have been stable since 1976. Only recently there have been bills introduced to increase maximum penalties (*Kamerstukken II* 2022/23, 29911). The increased penalties therefore appear to be primarily a result of more serious actions by suspects.

into suspects' communications provides a picture of the criminal organisation, its members, and its methods of operation.

Nowadays, PGP data is often seen as the most important investigative method, however, the combined use of methods often proves to be crucial in a criminal investigation. Moreover, certain investigative methods (such as surveillance or undercover policing) can provide important information for guiding the investigation without leading to concrete evidence. This is also reflected in the studied cases. PGP data often provides a good start, although more is needed to successfully close a case and gain insight into the entire collaborative criminal network.

Finally, international cooperation in criminal investigations on cocaine trafficking was discussed. Both old and new cases demonstrate that when there is a willingness to cooperate between countries and communication is effective, collaboration during specific criminal investigations can be very successful. However, structural international cooperation still faces challenges.

Contract killings

Criminal organisations and contract killings in the Netherlands
Previous reports of the Monitor obtained only limited insight into the nature of the networks involved in contract killings, their internal role distributions, and the social relationships between suspects. To address this gap, five large-scale contract killing cases were examined.

While the investigated cases display clear similarities in terms of collaborative structure, they also show distinct differences. In some cases, suspects in leadership and organisational positions are emphasized by investigative authorities, while in other cases, both these positions and members lower in hierarchy of the network were prosecuted. Organisational roles appear to have a certain degree of stability. Sometimes it involves a suspect who, with a small circle of confidants, directs others; in other situations, someone acts as an intermediary, receiving and relaying orders to the executors. Facilitating roles are fulfilled by suspects who organise logistical and material preconditions: vehicles, weapons, accommodations, storage locations, and communication tools. Compared to the organisational roles, in the executive roles, we see more diverse and sometimes even varying suspects in different roles per contract killing, such as: hitmen, drivers, scouts[4], and suspects who lure victims to specific locations.

Finally, this study attempts to provide a picture of the nature of the social relationships between suspects in the criminal network. Generally, the case files contain limited information about the nature of social relationships between the suspects. This was partly due to the suspects' silence during investigative interviews on this topic, and on their role in the contract killings more generally. It is clear that some of the individuals involved know each other well, whether through family ties, long-standing friendships, or a shared background. Furthermore, the case files highlight the importance of so-called offender convergence settings: social environments such as youth groups, bars and restaurants, or prisons appears to be places were suspects met and developed social ties.

[4] A scout gathers information about the intended victim in preparation for a contract killing.

Methods in the execution of contract killings
A contract killing involves several phases. The 'ordering' of a contract killing is considered the first phase. The executors receive an order by a principal, with or without the interference of a murder broker. In the second phase, preparatory work is carried out, consisting of arranging vehicles and drivers, firearms and ammunition, PGP phones, accommodations for the hitmen, scouts, and suspects who lure victims to specific locations. Criminal groups use stolen cars with false license plates and have access to an arsenal of weapons. These goods can be stored in separate warehouses, often rented under false pretences or through a straw man. The use of straw men is also noticed in arranging accommodations. While in the past, hitmen themselves often performed preliminary surveillance, in recent cases surveillance is often outsourced. For example, victims can be monitored remotely using tracking devices. The third phase is the execution phase. In more recent cases, an execution team almost always consists of two hitmen and a third person who acts as a driver. In older contract killing cases, we see more variation, where sometimes hitmen even drove the getaway car themselves. The fourth phase is the escape phase. In this phase, getaway cars are set on fire and other traces, such as used weapons and clothing, are destroyed. The final phase is called the aftermath, in which executors report back to the principal on how a contract killing went. In the hours or days following the contract killing, payment is made, and we see hitmen seeking relaxation or fleeing. To conclude, PGP communication has come to play a facilitating role in all phases of an execution of a contract killing. Clients can, for instance, issue orders and maintain contact with the hitmen remotely. Another notable development is the division of specialised tasks within a criminal organisation. In recent cases, we have seen a distinction between suspects involved in preparing contract killings, hitmen, and drivers who drive the getaway car.

Criminal careers of suspects involved in contract killings
Similar to the analysis of suspects involved in cocaine trafficking, criminal careers of suspects operating in criminal organisations responsible for contract killings were examined. The analysis focused on five cases from the Monitor, including hitmen as well as principals/coordinators, intermediaries, and other involved parties. In total, 62 suspects associated with criminal organisations engaged in the planning and execution of contract killings were studied. Within this group, the majority had no prior criminal history before the index offence. However, those with a criminal background exhibit a relatively severe criminal trajectory in terms of both the frequency and seriousness of prior convictions, compared to the suspects of cocaine trafficking. This is especially true for hitmen, who were convicted more frequently than suspects in other roles and spent the most time in detention prior to the index offence.

Combatting contract killings in the Netherlands
Criminal investigations into contract killings are generally extensive and long-term. They take several years and involve a large number of suspects. This is fundamentally different from more recent cases involving the trafficking of cocaine, which were deliberately divided into smaller sub-investigations in order to enable swift prosecution. There are several reasons for why the investigations concerning contract killings are lengthy. For example, as numerous facts must be investigated, investigations are labour-intensive while requiring significant resources to gather information. Often, sub-investigations reach a point where the investigation stalls, only to be resumed when new evidence emerges. Furthermore, three of the five contract killing cases studied for this report contained a crown witness arrangement. Setting up and developing such a system is a time-consuming process. Crown witnesses can

make significant contributions to the information and evidentiary position of the police and the Public Prosecution Office. At the same time, they should be approached with some caution. For certain cases, there were differing views as to the motivations of a testifying witness, the conditions under which the statements were made, and/or the veracity of the statements. It is therefore crucial to test the statements and to consolidate the narrative with other evidence, thus ensuring a higher evidentiary value of the statements. Finally, access to PGP data has significantly contributed to solving major contract killing cases as well as gaining insight into the networks behind the murder orders. Murder investigations, previously considered separate cases, were linked through PGP data.

Synthesis of the main research findings

This study shows that, across the various themes examined, there is a certain degree of consistency when it comes to the act of committing offences related to organised crime. For example, the structure of the networks does not appear to change significantly over time, nor does the number of suspects in each case. Furthermore, the criminal life paths of the individual suspects reveal a degree of stability. Contrary to the prevailing perception that organised crime offenders are getting younger and younger, the comparison reveals similarities in the phases of criminal life paths between suspects who committed an index offence during different periods. When looked at investigative practice, this study demonstrates that gaining insight into suspects' communication has always been important for investigative purposes.

This study also highlights several changes. While some cocaine trafficking methods have maintained a certain continuity over time, new versions of several 'classic' modi operandi are emerging. More generally, we see a significantly greater diversity of trafficking methods than in previous reports. Furthermore, trafficking is not limited to the Port of Rotterdam; Dutch criminal organisations are also active in other European ports. Another difference is that the more recent cases all contain examples of 'inside assistance'. The need for this kind of assistance cannot be separated from the changes that were made in the approach used to tackle this type of crime in the Dutch ports: cocaine importation can no longer take place without inside assistance as security and control has been increased.

Differences also emerge when examining criminal careers. In recent years, suspects have had significantly fewer contacts with the criminal justice system prior to their index offence in organised crime compared to suspects from earlier cohorts. However, the time span between the start of their criminal career and the index offence has remained unchanged. This discrepancy is difficult to explain based on the available data from criminal records and case files.

Previously, we mentioned PGP data. Access to this type of communication has significantly contributed to criminal investigations, particularly in solving major contract killing cases. Murder investigations previously considered separate cases can now be linked through PGP data. In older cases without access to PGP data, investigations often stalled at the executive level of the organisation. PGP data has also highlighted individuals in facilitating roles in both cocaine trafficking and contract killings.

Het Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek- en Datacentrum (WODC), Kennisinstituut voor de rechtsstaat, is een onafhankelijk kennisinstituut dat valt onder het ministerie van Justitie en Veiligheid. Het WODC draagt bij aan behoud en verbetering van de rechtsstaat via het (laten) uitvoeren van kwalitatief hoog wetenschappelijk onderzoek. En door het aanbieden van gevraagde en ongevraagde kennis, verbeterpunten en (waar mogelijk) denkrichtingen.

Voor meer informatie, bezoek www.wodc.nl