Localised transnational crime: the case of the itinerant crime groups in Belgium

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Overview

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1. Background: a special study on offender mobility

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 more mobile than other offenders? (offender mobility of property crimes committed by ICG, BOF-project Ghent University, 2007-2011).
2. The research project and this paper

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 mobility (with a special focus on the residence or anchor points) of ICG (17 major case files analysed)?

3. 2009-: What do the offenders tell us about their mobility?
3. Distance decay theory

- 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)
4. ICG and distance decay

- **ICG**: multiple, 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)
4. ICG and distance decay

- No straightforward 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)
5. First option: case files

- Case file (17) analysis reveals four types of ICG anchor points:
  1) Group residence as anchor point (9)
  2) Spread residences, 1 anchor point (3)
  3) Semi-sedentary (4)
  4) Temporary operating bases and return to home country (1)

- Local embedment in 1 and 2, less in 3 and not in 4

=> ICG have local connections...
5. Second option: 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: shortest distance between \( \text{min}(x,y) \) and \( \text{max}(x,y) \)
    - All offenders, who committed 2 or more offences
- Offender ranges in Belgium:
  - General: 21,0km (20156 offenders)
  - ICG: 101,0km (305 offenders)
5. Second option: range

... but operate above local level
6. Conclusion & reflection

- Distance decay: ‘crime is local matter’
  - Cost-benefit analysis
- ICG: less local than usual offending
  - Larger distances/ranges
  - Less decay
- Transnational elements, but local embedment
  - Contacts with home country
  - Semi-residential or partly residential offenders

➡ Local approach may be too limited