



Mobile banditry and criminal exploitation: The results of the IMOBEX Organised Crime Field Lab

Report

Work Package 4

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1 INTRODUCTION¹

1.1 BACKGROUND

Article 67(3) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) declares as the European Union's objective ensuring a high level of security within an area of freedom, security and justice. To achieve this objective, enhanced actions at European Union level should be taken to protect people and goods from increasingly transnational threats and to support the work carried out by Member States' competent authorities.

According to recent Europol data on organised crime groups, especially those involved in property crime, tend to be highly mobile. This fact constitutes a challenge for the law enforcement authorities that treat numerous cases as separate incidents. The challenge is to connect those individual incidents in order to reveal the organised nature of the phenomenon and tackle it efficiently. It is equally difficult to establish efficient cooperation between local enforcement agencies, and even more complex cooperate effectively across borders between various Member States. Single cases of property crime may not be considered to be serious criminality, and may be prioritised only when it becomes clear that criminal groups commit high volumes of 'petty' crimes, which add up to cause negative impact on businesses and society.

Mobile banditry is a classic type of organised crime which in Europe increased again after the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989, when groups originating from East and Southeast Europe started to commit crimes such as vehicle theft, burglaries, shoplifting, skimming of debit and credit cards, and fraud across the continent. Criminal groups in other countries rapidly copied their methods and developed their own similar strategies. Itinerant groups may or may not reside temporarily in the area where they commit crimes. If they do, their members often use a support infrastructure of relatives and accomplices who provide housing or help to fence stolen goods, and often operate in countries' border areas to avoid detection.

Law enforcement agencies regularly observe that perpetrators responsible for committing the riskiest handwork are forced to do so. Financial debts often play a role, for instance in the context of human smuggling and gambling, but also to repay a dowry. Exploitation is also relevant when minors are involved, for instance in shoplifting and begging. Not surprisingly, perpetrators who commit the actual property crimes and therefore run the biggest risks, are the first – and often the only ones – who get caught and it is often difficult to assess whether they are rational actors who chose to offend, or instead victims of human trafficking. Finally, many perpetrators stem from closed, badly integrated and often economically deprived communities,

¹ The content of this report represents the views of the authors only and is their sole responsibility. The European Commission does not accept any responsibility for use that may be made of the information it contains.

such as the Roma community. Mobile banditry at the intersection of exploitation poses complex challenges to law enforcement agencies in terms of detection and information exchange with foreign counterparts and relevant agencies at home, and difficulties also arise with regard to how to end criminal exploitation and prevent repeat victimisation.

Organised property crime at the nexus of human trafficking is thus relevant for different EU policy objectives in the context of the European Agenda on Security as well as the Inclusive Growth priority. To begin with, organised property crime is one of the priorities of the EU Policy Cycle on Serious and Organised Crime. For the period 2018-2021 it encourages Member States to focus on particular types of networks. The ISF Police Regulation (EU) No 513/2014 aims at crime prevention, combating cross-border, serious and organised crime including terrorism, and reinforcing coordination and cooperation between law enforcement authorities and other national authorities of Member States, including with Europol or other relevant Union bodies, and with relevant third countries and international organisations.

Second, combating human trafficking and exploitation is a EU-priority. The EU has put in place a comprehensive, gender-specific and victim-centred legal and policy framework, in particular the Directive 2011/36/EU and the EU Strategy towards the eradication of trafficking in human beings for the period 2012-2016, and its successor, the ‘Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council - Reporting on the follow-up to the EU Strategy towards the Eradication of trafficking in human beings and identifying further concrete actions.’

Third, promoting inclusivity of socially and economically deprived groups is an important objective of EU policy. In the context of the proposed project, this is particularly relevant for the Roma community. Over the past ten years the EU has developed a framework of legislative, financial and policy coordination tools to support Roma inclusion, but more can be done to make them work more effectively. Although the matter is highly sensitive, it goes without saying that problems of mobile banditry and exploitation within the Roma community pose a barrier to efforts to promote the community’s inclusion.

1.2 THE IMOBEX-PROJECT

Combating mobile banditry is complicated because of the criminal networks’ specific modi operandi, whereas barriers regarding cross-border investigation makes them difficult to detect. Furthermore, those responsible for organising the illegal activities, who usually benefit the most in financial terms, usually remain in the background. Those who commit the actual criminal act may be victims of criminal exploitation. Specific provisions exist for victims of human trafficking, but it is difficult to apply these to individuals who, as in this case, do not fit the profile of ‘ideal victims.’ The aim of the IMOBEX project is therefore to develop more effective and efficient intervention strategies to reduce mobile banditry at the intersection of exploitation for criminal purposes.

The IMOBEX-project was carried out by a consortium comprising the Southeast European Law Enforcement Centre (SELEC), Utrecht University, Tilburg University and Vilnius University. The project's main body consisted of three intertwined work packages (WP2 – 4).² The objective of work package 2 was to identify countries of origin and destination of itinerant groups involved in organised property crimes as well as existing networks; to map out barriers that confront enforcement agencies in tackling the problem; to identify current *modi operandi*; and existing gaps in the legal and practical infrastructure to combat the problem. This work package provided state of the art knowledge about mobile banditry at the intersection of exploitation for criminal purposes in EU Member States and Southeast European third countries. The results have been reported as 'Mobile banditry and criminal exploitation: mapping the current situation in Europe' (Deliverable 2.2). Deliverable 2.1 comprises a database with information collected during a survey, which is available upon request.

Work package 3 aimed to develop interventions and policies to combat mobile banditry at the intersection of exploitation for criminal purposes, feasible within the existing legal and practical infrastructure, as well as to develop a road map specifying actions at the legislative and policy levels, both national and within the EU. The results have been included in two reports: 'Mobile banditry and criminal exploitation: developing intervention strategies (Deliverable 3.1) and 'Mobile banditry and criminal exploitation: challenges, interventions and policies' (Deliverable 3.2).

The objective of work package 4 was to apply the methodology of an (organised) crime field lab in practice, to allow law enforcement organisations of the Member States and Southeast European third countries to: experiment with novel approaches to mobile banditry at the intersection of human trafficking; to train on the job; and to learn how to further disseminate knowledge gained and good practices within their organisations.

1.3 THE IMOBEX ORGANISED CRIME FIELD LAB

The Organised Crime Field Lab (OCFL) methodology was developed by Tilburg University, the Harvard Kennedy School of Government, and Oxford University as a methodology to approach complex crime problems in a multidisciplinary setting and to provide a learning environment. Tackling complex, also called 'wicked' crime problems almost always requires a broad perspective involving not only criminal law enforcement agencies but also other public and private partners. Learning comprises knowledge and skills, cooperation, leadership and monitoring progress. Solutions comprise of development of problem oriented and innovative interventions, particularly in cooperation with other agencies, but also going beyond these, tailored to the existing working methods and capabilities of the agencies involved. Finally, the

² WP1 focused on project management and organisation. WP5 covered dissemination of the project's results.

field lab approach aims at exchanging relevant practical knowledge about ‘what works’, to allow dissemination of lessons learned to other participants in the lab and their respective organisations. During the IMOBEX-OCFL partners from different countries discussed the problem of mobile banditry and possible interventions. The IMOBEX-OCFL has resulted in a European barrier-model regarding mobile banditry, including the aspect of criminal exploitation. Barrier-models depart from crime-scripts in which the different activities necessary to successfully commit one or more specific crimes are described. The barrier-model identifies the criminal actors and facilitators involved in different steps of the script, which partners may contribute to disrupting the criminal activity, and finally which barriers or interventions they could initiate. In total, 24 experts from six different countries participated in the field lab. Participants included public prosecutors, police officers, representatives of NGOs and members of the IMOBEX consortium. A full list of contributors is included in the appendix to this report.

Preparatory work for the IMOBEX-OCFL was started in July 2022. During the OCFL, the team came together in three 1,5 or 2-day physical meetings, twice in the Netherlands and once in Romania. In addition, we organised two full online meetings. The first meeting was organised at Tilburg University on 8-9 December 2022 and focused on exploring the challenges of tackling mobile organised crime groups (MOCGs) at the nexus of criminal exploitation and how the team could contribute to overcoming these. In other words: what should be the goal of the IMOBEX-OCFL? Given the time available, the team decided that developing a European barrier-model as a tool to tackle mobile banditry at the nexus of criminal exploitation to be a feasible goal. The second meeting was also organised at Tilburg University, on 6-7 February 2023. Based on an in-depth discussion of investigation cases presented by team members and the input of several guests who joined the meeting online to provide information on specific aspects, the IMOBEX-OCFL discussed the contours of the European barrier-model. The aspects to be included in the model were further explored during a two-hour online session on 15 March 2023. During a second two-hour online session on 24 April 2023, the team further discussed the elements of the European barrier-model. Finally, a physical meeting was organised in Bucharest at the office of SELEC on 22 and 23 May 2023. During this meeting, the team thoroughly reviewed the draft European barrier-model and further completed the different elements of the model, and discussed the platforms through which the European barrier-model could be disseminated.

1.4 OUTLINE OF THE REPORT

This report is structured as follows. Chapter 2 provides an overview of the outcomes of the first session that was organised in the IMOBEX-OCFL. This meeting focused primarily on the question what should be the goal and expected outcome of the field lab, and which innovative actions could be taken within the available time-frame. The team decided that developing a



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European barrier-model on mobile banditry at the nexus of criminal exploitation would fit both requirements. Next, chapter 3 addresses the different phases of the barrier-model as it was developed during the four following sessions. Finally, chapter 4 offers some brief final remarks.

2 EXPLORING THE GOALS OF THE IMOBEX-OCFL

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Determining the goals of the field lab is a crucial step in the OCFL methodology. This first required exploring the main challenges confronting the institutions involved in tackling MOCGs and discussing which of these the team may focus on. The goals needed to be sufficiently detailed and at the same time realistic and feasible within the time frame of the IMOBEX-OCFL. Second, the team members addressed which support would be needed in terms of resources and commitment by their parent organisations and whether it would thus be possible to experiment with innovations in real-life situations, for example during an ongoing criminal investigation. The field lab methodology had already been introduced during a workshop organised in the context of an earlier work package, which was attended by several participants in the IMOBEX-OCFL. Participants first discussed the main challenges based on brief descriptions and presentations of six criminal investigation cases conducted in Denmark, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Romania and Serbia. Several external experts joined the discussion online, also to highlight their activities regarding victims of criminal exploitation.

Next, paragraph 2.2 describes the main challenges the IMOBEX-OCFL might be able to work on. Paragraph 2.3 addresses the issue of a lack of awareness and sense of urgency regarding mobile banditry at the nexus of criminal exploitation, which the team considered a main underlying problem. Finally, participants concluded that constructing a European barrier-model would be a feasible goal for the IMOBEX-OCFL (paragraph 2.4).

2.2 CHALLENGES

The team identified several challenges in the context of mobile banditry and criminal exploitation. All investigation cases presented included victims who were exploited either as straw persons or coerced to commit property crimes, the latter including minors. Next, we provide brief descriptions of relevant aspects of four cases. Other cases concerned ongoing criminal investigations and must remain confidential at this point.

Straw persons were identified in several Dutch and Danish cases and these individuals mostly originate from Southeastern Europe and Romania in particular. Prospective victims are promised a job in Western European countries. Upon arrival, the job does not exist and the persons are subsequently forced to pay back the money for travel and housing the MOCG had advanced. In the Netherlands, the straw persons use their ID-card and a false address to register with the municipality. Upon registration as a Dutch resident, the municipality provides a social security number, which gives access to a wide range of services. First, it allows straw persons to exchange their foreign driver's license for a Dutch one. In the Netherlands, a Dutch driver's

license is accepted as an identification document and may be used to open bank accounts, to apply for loans, for the purchase of phone subscriptions, to rent property and vehicles, and to register companies and vehicles in one's name. The straw persons will then be sent back to their country of origin after which MOCG-members use the cars, real estate and mobile phones to facilitate their illegal activities.

In such cases, however, criminal exploitation is difficult to prove. As such, the activities straw persons are involved in, do not qualify as criminal offenses. It is for instance not illegal to register ownership of 50 cars or to rent a number of vehicles in your name. Although the individuals were convinced to travel to the Netherlands under false pretences, and were usually poorly educated, did not speak a foreign language, had no money, and were sometimes threatened with physical violence or retaliation against relatives in their country of origin, such indications were in this case insufficient to prove criminal exploitation. Furthermore, the case became more complex when the Dutch investigators learned that the Romanian police had conducted an investigation upon request from Germany, concerning the same suspect, which involved over 80 straw persons who had opened bank accounts there.

The second case concerned the exploitation of poorly educated young males aged between 19 and 25, stemming from socially vulnerable families. All came from the same region in Serbia and were brought in a situation of dependency through loans they were unable to pay back. Victims were transported to Belgium where they engaged in large-scale metal theft. An MOCG-member seized their passports and the victims were housed in a camper van that was locked from the outside. They were arrested several times in possession of stolen goods, but treated as criminals although they tried to explain their situation to the Belgian police. It was only after the start of a more extensive investigation three persons were given the status of victim. It also proved challenging to find safe accommodations for the victims, because few existed for males. Equally challenging was protection of family members in the country or origin, because MOCG-members or their associates tried to exert pressure, for instance to convince victims to withdraw or change their statements. Lengthy court procedures may also have an impact on victims of criminal exploitation. In this case, the police cooperated with the Centre for Human Trafficking Victims Protection in Serbia. The centre provides assistance to victims, for instance financially or in the shape of basic needs packages, and helps victims to find better jobs. Its aim is also to empower victims to give testimonies.

The third case concerned over a hundred Romanian citizens who were exploited in Denmark to commit a wide range of crimes, including thefts and burglaries, ordering of goods that were never paid, and primarily fraud with social benefits. An interesting aspect of this case was the fact that the main suspect was a permanent resident of Denmark. The prospective victims were promised jobs in Denmark, and upon arrival accommodated in a rural area in poorly maintained houses. They received instructions to wait until the documentation for their employment was

finalized and to avoid contact with locals or authorities. Food and cigarettes were provided by the criminal network to ensure compliance with the MOCG's demands. Victims were then coerced to use their ID to register at the municipality, using falsified employment documentation, which also enabled them to apply for governmental services. After a while the victims were sent back home with a small payment for their services and instructions not to disclose details of their activities in Denmark. The police set up a Joint Investigation Team (JIT) which resulted in the identification of 40 suspects, 8 of whom were arrested in Romania. An important fact was recognition by the Romanian authorities of the status of victim granted in Denmark. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) as well as NGOs specialized in human trafficking and governmental authorities in Romania paid special attention to the victims. They were monitored in the process of their recovery and reintegration. Challenging in this case was that victims of criminal exploitation who had already returned to Romania could not always be located. Some felt to have been deceived but did not accept the status of victim of human trafficking, for instance because they were paid for their services. Also challenging was the protection of the victims and the logistics concerning their repatriation to Romania, when applicable. It also proved difficult to persuade victims to travel to Denmark to appear in court as a witness. Legal complexities regarding the burden of proof in cases of criminal exploitation, especially when victims were used as straw persons, also presented difficulties in this case.

The fourth case discussed concerned Romanian minors who were exploited to commit pickpocketing and shoplifting in France. The MOCG was based on family ties and the members exploited their own children, who were between 10 and 13 years old. The MOCG first operated in Romania itself but moved to France to join another group stemming from the same Romanian region which was already active there. Under the coordination of their parents, each morning the minors left their accommodation in small groups and regrouped at places where they changed clothing and proceeded to the target areas. At certain time intervals the minors were informing the coordinators by phone about the result of their activities and their current locations by using coded language. At the end of the day, the adults collected the proceeds, which were split according to the contribution of each minor. In this case the investigation was also conducted as a JIT. Investigators identified 45 victims, of whom 15 had already returned to Romania. Seven children received further assistance provided by the child protection services and NGOs specialized in human trafficking. Such support included providing shelter and council. Dealing with children in cases of criminal exploitation was challenging. First, it was evidently not easy for children to testify against their parents. Second, these children were raised by parents who viewed stealing as normal and necessary behaviour. Providing adequate support to the victims, also during criminal proceedings was crucial but not easy.

These examples show different types of problems in cases of mobile banditry at the nexus of human trafficking. Overall, however, participants in the IMOBEX-OCFL concluded that the

main challenge for the police and the public prosecution service, apart from the complexities of the legal concept of criminal exploitation, is a lack of awareness and knowledge amongst police officers about mobile banditry in general, and their specific use of straw persons in particular. In one example, a straw person managed to escape his controller and went to a police station, where he was not taken seriously and sent away. A lack of knowledge also implies that the scope and impact of the problem is usually underestimated at the police management level, and does not receive adequate priority and resources. In the Dutch case, for example, it took considerable effort to convince decision makers that thorough criminal investigation was necessary. Still, police investigators who handled the case were overwhelmed by the amount of information. Adding to the problem was a last-minute replacement of the public prosecutor, resulting in insufficient time to prepare the court case. MOCGs who use straw persons to facilitate their illegal activities is a problem in several EU Member States, but it does not attract the attention it should receive. It must also be noted that for instance rental companies and other service providers may also be activated to be more alert regarding indications that someone may be acting as a straw person. Such companies have an interest, because the bills will usually be left unpaid and recovering the money from straw persons will be very difficult or impossible, whereas financial service providers may run the risk of unwillingly facilitating money laundering.

In sum, the IMOBEX-OCFL team concluded that a lack of awareness and sense of urgency with criminal law enforcement, and more broadly with other public and private partners who may be able to raise barriers against the misuse by MOCGs of different infrastructure, is a shared problem. The next question to be addressed is how mobile banditry can be placed higher on the agenda, in particular with law enforcement agencies.

2.3 HOW TO INCREASE AWARENESS AND SENSE OF URGENCY?

Raising awareness and a sense of urgency may involve different partners, for instance policy makers, the media and the public. The question raised is how mobile banditry and criminal exploitation can be framed in such a way that partners feel the necessity to focus more on the problem and commit more resources to addressing it. The team discussed the issue from several perspectives.

First, from a legal perspective, participants pointed out that it should be made clear that several problems exist regarding effective prosecution of MOCG-members who recruit and control straw persons and members who are coerced to commit actual crimes. The current EU legal definition of criminal exploitation poses difficulties, but legal differences also exist in national legislation.

Second, from a social dimension a sense of urgency could be increased by making clear that persons who are exploited by MOCGs are victims in need of protection, rather than criminals

who must be prosecuted. Particularly minors can be considered vulnerable, but the same applies to most adults. Framing the problem from this angle would for instance call for victims telling their stories on different platforms, and the involvement of NGOs who work with victims of criminal exploitation, or who are active in communities where victims originate from. Participants, however, also noted that MOCG-members who are not exploited may abuse the victim frame to avoid a criminal justice response.

Third, while MOCGs mainly commit property crimes outside their countries of origin, it may be difficult to frame mobile banditry also as a problem in the countries their members stem from. The main problem for countries of origin is the fact that MOCG activities damage their reputation. How mobile banditry impacts on their societies is less clear. How does mobile banditry for instance affect initiatives to improve the situation of Roma communities when criminal elements may benefit from social exclusion and poverty, for instance to maintain their status and opportunities to recruit individuals for MOCGs. Exploring such effects would require facts and figures, in other words: more research.

Fourth, from the political and institutional perspective, the lack of awareness and knowledge about criminal exploitation and the *modi operandi* may be framed as a core problem. This would imply that shortcomings in how law enforcement agencies and other partners address mobile banditry, and the lack of resources made available, could be given centre stage. Particularly problems with timely and proactive exchange of information either within countries or across borders, as well as cooperation in cross-border investigations may be part of the frame that law enforcement is currently insufficiently able to tackle MOCGs effectively across Europe.

Agenda setting as such is a complex and interrelated process. For example, the media can contribute to mobilising public opinion, and thereby exert pressure on legislators and policy makers to improve and expand existing legislation, or to allocate more budget to specific problems. For the IMOBEX-OCFL, however, organising external pressure was considered difficult because the participants themselves mostly work for governmental agencies. This would imply that such pressure must be mounted via internal channels. In the past, police cooperation networks such as Roadpol have in the background been quite successful at influencing the agenda of the European Commission regarding road safety and the misuse of road infrastructure for criminal activities.³ In the context of mobile banditry, 19 member states cooperate in the EMPACT network on organised property crime and until recently the TRIVIUM-group conducted concrete actions. In addition, at the national level, for instance in

³ Spapens, T. (2017). Building trust and more: The importance of police cooperation networks in the European Union, in S. Hufnagel & C. McCartney (Eds.) *Trust in International Police and Justice Cooperation* (pp. 149-168). Hart Publishing.

the Netherlands, specialised police officers are also discussing the problem of mobile banditry with the Ministry of Justice and Safety.

2.4 DEVELOPMENT OF A EUROPEAN BARRIER-MODEL

The general conclusion drawn during the first meeting of the IMOBEX-OCFL was that agenda-setting and raising awareness is necessary but also time-consuming, and taking only a few small steps would probably be possible given the existing time frame of the IMOBEX-project. This would also reduce opportunities for mobilising external partners and including them in the field lab. Therefore, participants opted for developing an instrument that could be mostly based on the expertise available within the team, supported by experts who could be consulted on specific aspects. In earlier phases of the IMOBEX-project, attention had been given to the so-called crime script of mobile banditry, in other words dissecting the process and activities necessary to successfully commit organised property crimes. Although the crimes may as such be rather simple, the activities of MOCGs depend on a complex criminal business process. Crime scripting has been developed in the 1990s as a tool to identify the different steps in this process and provide insight in how the process may be disrupted, for instance through repression but also through situational crime prevention measures.⁴ The crime script of mobile banditry includes several phases, which may overlap in time. In the script we identified the following phases: the recruitment of members who need to execute the riskiest tasks, such as committing the actual crimes; preparation of criminal activities for instance through acquiring target information, tools and vehicles; the journey to the country of destination; acquisition of temporary places of residence; the use of infrastructure and facilitators; how crimes are committed including storage, transportation and fencing of stolen goods; the movement of stolen goods or the proceeds of crime back to the countries of origin; and finally, how MOCGs manage their communication and money flows, including the spending or investment of the proceeds of crime.

In the Netherlands, crime scripting has been further developed in so-called barrier-models. Such models assess for each of the steps in the (simplified) crime script which actors are enabling the crime; which opportunities criminals are able to exploit; how, where and by whom indications of criminal activity may be spotted, particularly focusing on the misuse of legitimate infrastructure; which public and private partners may be mobilised as allies to help tackle the problem; and which actual activities may be initiated to increase the barriers for MOCGs. Nowadays, barrier-models are widely used in the Netherlands to promote multi-

⁴ Sieber, U. & Bögel, R. (1993). *Logistik der Organisierte Kriminalität*. Bundeskriminalamt; Clarke, R. (1997). *Situational Crime Prevention. Successful Case Studies* (2nd Ed.). Harrow and Heston; Cornish, D. & Clarke, R. (2002). Analyzing organized crimes. In A. Piquero & S. Tibbetts (Eds.). *Rational Choice and Criminal Behavior. Recent Research and Future Challenges* (pp. 41-64). Routledge.

agency approaches against a range of different crimes. However, within the EU, application of such models can be considered innovative and is promoted for instance by the EU Crime Prevention Network (EUCPN) and the European Network on the Administrative Approach (ENAA).

Participants agreed that developing a European barrier-model on mobile organised property crime at the nexus of criminal exploitation would provide added value, and offered the opportunity to disseminate the result through existing platforms that already promote the instrument. The model would also enable to raise awareness, particularly with public and private actors who may up until now consider tackling MOCG-activities as the responsibility of law enforcement agencies and are unaware of important contributions they are able to make. Finally, a barrier-model on mobile banditry had (in Dutch) been constructed by the Centre for Crime Prevention and Safety (CCV), focusing on MOCG-activities in the Netherlands, or more generally in countries of destination. The IMOBEX-OCFL would be able to 'internationalise' this model to make it better applicable for other EU Member States and Third countries, as well as expand it to include criminal exploitation and MOCG-activities in countries of origin, including follow-up activities with regard to victims of criminal exploitation upon their return home.

The next step in the IMOBEX-OCFL comprised a 2-day session in which the team discussed the elements that should be added to the existing barrier-model. The discussion was structured around practical examples of investigation cases mentioned above. Participants presented the cases, which all included forms of criminal exploitation. In addition, external advisors joined the IMOBEX-OCFL as guests who gave short presentations on specific issues, focusing for instance on victims of criminal exploitation and how to prevent re-victimisation after returning to their countries of origin. These presentations were delivered by the Centre for Human Trafficking Victims Protection in Serbia; the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in Romania; the Anti-Trafficking Unit of the Romanian National Police; and by a public prosecutor and lecturer at Vytautas Magnus University of Lithuania.

The information gathered during the second session, and information included in the 'Dutch' barrier-model that had been developed earlier, was included in a draft European barrier-model suitable for wider application by EU Member States and third countries. The team added new phases to the existing model on activities taking place in MOCGs countries of origin, particularly recruitment, follow-up activities for victims of criminal exploitation, and the spending of the proceeds of crime, as well as aspects of criminal exploitation. These additional phases were discussed during two 2-hour online sessions. To begin with, the team discussed the crime-script, actors and service providers involved, and indicators and signals. During the second online session participants focused on the question which partners could be involved as well as concrete barriers that could be raised.



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During the final 1,5-day session the team thoroughly reviewed the draft European barrier-model in its entirety and added extra aspects where necessary. Finally, participants discussed through which platforms the barrier-model could be disseminated in the EU. The next chapter presents the resulting European barrier-model.

3 THE EUROPEAN BARRIER-MODEL

3.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents the European barrier-model that has been developed during the IMOBEX-OCFL. The model comprises seven phases. Paragraph 3.2 addresses the recruitment phase of members of MOCGs who conduct the tasks of committing property crimes, either voluntarily or coerced. Next, paragraph 3.3 describes the phase of travelling from a country of origin to a country of destination. Paragraph 3.4 addresses the steps necessary to find temporary residence in a country where crimes are to be committed. Paragraph 3.5 analyses how crimes are committed. Criminal exploitation is specifically addressed in paragraph 3.6. Paragraph 3.7 describes activities of MOCGs after the crimes have been committed, particularly the handling of stolen goods and the proceeds of crime.

Each phase of the criminal ‘business process’ is analysed from four different perspectives. First, which actors are involved who either intentionally or unintentionally facilitate criminal activities. Second, which opportunities MOCGs exploit to commit criminal activities, focusing on those that can be disrupted by different public and private partners. Third, how MOCG-activities may be detected by various actors, public, private and civil society. Fourth, which partners can be mobilised to raise barriers to prevent or disrupt the activities of MOCGs. Finally, the question will be addressed which barriers different partners may be able to raise against mobile banditry. It must be noted that the barrier-model presented in this chapter is by no means exhaustive, but predominantly intended to provoke thinking about tackling the complex problem at hand from a wide range of perspectives involving all sorts of public and private partners.

3.2 PHASE 1: RECRUITMENT

The recruitment of members who execute the riskiest tasks of committing the actual property crimes is the first step in the criminal business process of MOCGs. Here, the concept of recruitment is approached from a broad perspective. Perpetrators may for instance not be ‘recruited’ in a strict sense, but also become involved through existing social (criminal) relations or networks, and more organically in family or clan-based MOCGs. Recruitment mainly takes place in the country of origin of the leading members of an MOCG, but may also be organised by members who reside in a country of destination, and as their criminal networks expand, MOCGs may also come into contact with and ‘employ’ people from other countries. Finally, recruitment may refer to people who enter into MOCG-activities voluntarily as well as to victims of criminal exploitation.

Actors who perform the role of ‘**service provider**’, can be distinguished in terms of direct involvement in recruitment and persons who support recruitment more indirectly. The first may include acquaintances or family members, and members of an existing MOCG. Prospective victims of criminal exploitation may also be indirectly approached with job offers via social media and other channels, such as mala fide agencies that offer temporary employment in a Western European country.

Next, **opportunities** for coming into contact with new members or prospective victims may follow from normal local social contacts, for instance because MOCG-members visit the same bars and other recreational venues and other meeting places such as outdoor markets, or may know each other from earlier criminal activities or prison. Families and friends usually meet during birthday parties and other social events. Families involved in MOCG-activities live in the same household or are part of the same extended family or clan. Opportunities for recruitment may occur when people are vulnerable, for instance because of poverty, poor education, cognitive problems, a lack of available jobs, and adversities such as having to provide for family members who are in poor health. Vulnerabilities are often caused by financial debts, including debts that follow from drug, alcohol or gambling addiction. Children are vulnerable when they stem from extended families already involved in MOCG-activities, or when they grow up in dysfunctional families. Finally, cultural aspects may increase opportunities for recruitment, for instance when people are part of closed and socially excluded societal groups with specific customs. An example in Roma communities is the requirement that when getting married, the family of the male partner is required to pay a dowry to the family of the female partner. Females may subsequently be forced to repay their in-laws, even though this is as such considered unacceptable in Roma culture.

Third, the question is how outsiders may be able to spot **signals** of recruitment, depending on the methods MOCGs apply. Overall, recruitment takes place in closed settings and will mostly become visible when prospective MOCG-members or victims of criminal exploitation talk about this with people they trust. They may for instance tell enthusiastic stories about being offered a well-paying job in a Western European country which does not require any specific knowledge or skills, whereas the contact person for instance advances all travel expenses. Their friends may point out that this is all too good to be true, whereas others may for instance know about the criminal background and violent behaviour of their new contact. People who are deliberately brought in a situation of financial dependency may perhaps reach out for help. In some cases, parents ‘train’ their children in for instance begging on the streets in their countries of origin, which may be visible to public and private parties, such as NGOs, who work in these places.

The next element of this phase concerns the question which **partners** can be mobilised to participate in approaches against recruitment. Information on persons who have been

apprehended as perpetrators in countries of destination, as well as victims of criminal exploitation who reported to the police, can be shared via channels such as Interpol, Europol, or directly between national and local police agencies. Preventative action may be taken by the local police and administrative authorities, for instance by closing locations that operate as hotspots for recruitment of MOCG-members and victims. NGOs and specialised governmental organisations may also be involved in follow-up actions, for instance regarding children. Local institutions such as schools, religious organisations and community centres, and also NGOs may contribute to building resilience against criminal exploitation, for instance by providing information on recruitment methods and the risks of accepting offers that are too good to be true.

The final question is how **barriers** against recruitment may be increased. The IMOBEX-OCFL produced some suggestions. However, thinking up concrete barriers much depends on creativity and knowledge of local situations and groups involved, and therefore usually requires tailor-made solutions. The team suggested taking repressive action against people who are involved in recruitment, upon information provided by perpetrators and victims. Prevention may benefit from experimenting with small-scale local partnerships, for instance between the police and local administrative authorities or between public parties and NGOs. These activities may for instance include raising awareness regarding the risks of becoming a victim of criminal exploitation, and how to recognise relevant signals.

3.3 PHASE 2: JOURNEY TO A COUNTRY OF DESTINATION

The second phase in the crime script concerns the journey of MOCG-members from their country of origin to a country of destination where the actual crimes will be committed. Travelling within the EU in most cases only requires an ID-card, but travel documents must be arranged when the country of origin lies outside the EU. Next, transport to a country of destination must be arranged, and because MOCGs often travel from one destination country to another, this also requires transportation. So-called 'hit and run' MOCGs originating from Eastern Europe usually travel to a country of destination and return immediately to their country of origin. MOCGs from Southeastern European countries may however not be able to complete the journey in one stage and may need to stay overnight at a hotel or another place along the way, particularly family-based MOCGs who travel with young children.

Service providers may be distinguished in intentional and unintentional facilitators of journeys of MOCG-members to countries of destination. Regarding travel documents, criminal service providers may offer falsified ID-cards. Travelling to the EU may require visa. Dutch hit and run MOCGs involved in ram raids and blowing up ATMs use stolen vehicles which may be provided by other criminal groups who specialise in stealing (fast) cars. When MOCG-members wish to travel by private car or van, these vehicles must be bought, if these are not

already owned by a member of the group. MOCG-members may also travel with low-cost international bus services or companies that offer specialised transport for Eastern and Southeastern European migrant workers. Transport by unofficial ‘taxi’ companies has also been observed, for instance a person who uses his own private car and acts as a driver. Occasionally, MOCG-members travel with low-cost airlines. Finally, hotels may offer services to MOCG-members who must stay overnight during their journey.

MOCGs have ample **opportunities** to travel unnoticed, for instance because they can easily blend in with flows of regular migrant workers who use the same modes of transport. Groups originating from the EU can easily enter the Schengen Area where fixed border controls have been abolished, and the risk of being stopped and inspected is limited. Access to the EU from third countries requires more effort, but usually a tourist visa can easily be obtained.

The IMOBEX-OCFL identified several **signals** during travel that may indicate that one or more persons may be members of an MOCG, although it was again emphasised that the same indicators often apply to regular migrant workers. Examples are locations in the countries of origin where MOCG-members are picked up for travel; multiple people travelling together in rather obsolete mini vans; people who do not speak a foreign language; people who do not know the address where they are going but only have a telephone number, which they should call upon arrival in a city of destination; and one person, usually the driver, who holds all ID-cards or passports. Family-based MOCGs may stand out because when staying overnight in a hotel, they usually try to save costs by renting only one room for a large number of people. Finally, travelling with a fake ID is a more obvious indication that something is wrong, but may be difficult to detect on the spot during an inspection.

Several **partners** may contribute to raising barriers against MOCG-members travelling to and from destination countries. The customs perform regular checks of people entering the EU and the Schengen Area. Border security agencies and the police may be involved in inspections within the Schengen Area, for instance during (joint) inspection actions which have been mounted until recently in the context of EMPACT-TRIVIUM, but the police may of course also stop a car for inspection when officers spot something suspicious. Agencies such as Interpol, Europol and Frontex may contribute to information exchange. Public institutions specialised in human trafficking as well as NGOs may also be able to provide information, for instance on characteristics and behaviour of victims of criminal exploitation.

Given the fact that many people with similar profiles as MOCG-members travel from Eastern and Southeastern Europe to Western Europe for perfectly legitimate reasons, it is difficult to identify **barriers** to prevent that prospective criminals enter the Schengen Area or specific destination countries, or travel from one destination country to another. One option is to introduce portable technical devices that allow the (border) police and customs to detect

falsifications of IDs and drivers' licences. Barriers suggested focus mostly on rapid exchange of information between countries of destination and of origin once intelligence has become available, for instance on new modes of travel, specific small-scale companies, unofficial taxis or individual drivers who regularly move MOCG-members to and from countries of destination. Europol may play an important role in this respect. Such actors may then for instance be monitored through ANPR-systems or subjected to further inspection or investigation.

3.4 PHASE 3: ARRANGING TEMPORARY RESIDENCE

Whereas hit and run MOCGs do usually not require temporary residence in a country of destination, or limited to only a few days, MOCGs originating from Southeastern Europe stay for longer periods in countries where they commit the crimes. This implies that they must arrange temporary residence. MOCG-members may stay with accomplices or clan members who permanently reside in a Western European country. Another option is to stay at a holiday park, camping or hotel. MOCGs also rent apartments or rooms in cities. Finally, MOCG-members may simply be housed at trailer camps, in obsolete camper vans, parked for instance in industrial areas, or live in squatted houses and commercial property. In several countries, perpetrators from North-African countries have also been observed to apply for asylum and stay at reception facilities.

A range of **service providers** can either intentionally or unintentionally be involved in the provision of temporary residence for MOCG-members. Particularly clan-based MOCGs may force people from their clans or villages who have migrated to a Western European country to provide lodging and other help. Coercion may be based on threats against relatives who live in the country of origin, but social pressure to be loyal to their clan may also play a role. Apartments in cities may be rented out by malicious rental agencies and slumlords who charge disproportionate fees for small rooms. In addition, a house, an apartment or a room may be rented via Airbnb. Operators of degraded holiday parks which no longer attract regular tourists, regularly revert to housing migrant workers and other people who are unable to find or pay for a regular residence. However, MOCGs have also been observed to reside at regular holiday parks. Local authorities may unintentionally promote these activities by not sufficiently enforcing regulations, for instance on the safety of rental apartments and registration of persons who stay there.

MOCGs may exploit several **opportunities** to arrange temporary residence in a country of destination. For example, MOCGs may take advantage of diaspora to seek temporary places to stay. One example is Belgium, which has a relatively large Albanian speaking community and in the early 2000s, criminals regularly forced people who had moved to Belgium to support

their activities.⁵ Renting an apartment or room in a city depends on availability of vacant premises, and the willingness of shady landlords to rent out rooms without asking questions, accepting cash payment, and not properly registering who stays in their property. The same may apply to holiday park operators. Renting premises via Airbnb offers the advantage of relative anonymity, because a booking only requires identity verification of one person who may be a strawman. In some cases, the tenant and landlord only have contact online. Staying at a holiday park offers additional opportunities to MOCGs to hide their activities, particularly when the park allows permanent parking of vehicles at a cottage, and a substantial number of people may be housed there. Perpetrators who operate from reception centres for asylum seekers almost all originate from so-called safe countries and know their request will not be granted. They exploit the fact that it takes time to process such requests and the fact that upon rejection repatriation is usually impossible because the country of origin refuses to facilitate their return. Instead, they usually leave for another country to file another asylum request. Finally, opportunities may arise from a lack of local regulations and enforcement, for instance concerning slum lords, registration of residents, the number of people who are allowed to stay in one room, apartment or cottage at a holiday park, young children who are for instance begging on the street instead of being at school, et cetera.

Several **signals** may indicate the presence of a MOCG. For instance, such groups tend to house a relatively large number of people in a single room, apartment or cottage at a holiday park, for instance ten or more males, women and children. MOCG-members behave differently than most normal tenants. For instance, there is a lot of movement of people going in and out of an apartment or house. At holiday parks MOCG-members also meet with fences who buy and collect stolen goods. Consequently, a signal of MOCG-activity is regular lugging of goods. Members may for instance leave with all sorts of empty bags in the morning, and return in the evening with filled ones. Such movement may also be visible on surveillance cameras. Another indication may be activity at unusual hours, for instance during the night, whereas all curtains are kept closed at all times. At holiday parks, MOCG-members do not behave as tourists or seasonal workers, for instance because they do not appear to go on touristic trips and do not seem to work. Cottages are often rented for longer periods of time, up to several months. The same people may regularly return to the same residence, without giving clear explanations why. The fact that a specific property has previously been used by an MOCG may indicate that this could happen more often, and be a reason for enforcement agencies to be alert and collect more information when another large group of people appears. During their stay, MOCGs will not book the premises for a longer period, but regularly extend their stay. As MOCGs are usually hierarchically structured, the presence of one obvious leader in a group may also represent a signal.

⁵ Farcy, F. (2002). *How is the Albanian Mafia Setting Up; Locally, Nationally and in Europe*. Departement de Recherche sur le Menaces Criminelles Contemporaines.

Public as well as private **partners** and the civil society may contribute to detecting, preventing and disrupting MOCGs access to temporary residence in a country of destination. The public may for instance complain about or report suspicious behaviour. Administrative agencies and the police may perform checks on who is staying at the premises, and inspect compliance with safety regulations and other requirements, such as proper registration of inhabitants who live there. Bona fide operators of holiday parks and owners of premises who rent out their property may set limits to the number of people who are allowed to stay in a cottage or room. Public and private partners may also initiate activities to increase awareness and develop tools which enable unintentional facilitators to detect unusual behaviour that might indicate the presence of a MOCG. Reception centres for asylum seekers may also be able to detect potential involvement in mobile banditry of persons who stay there.

Public and private partners may thus develop **barriers** in several ways. This includes providing information and raising awareness with unintentional facilitators by helping them to detect and report suspicious activities in and around the premises, and helping them to prevent the stay of an MOCG. This may for instance be accomplished by not accepting cash payment, and through proper registration of who is staying in the premises, also by checking the identities of tenants, and by limiting the number of people who are allowed to stay in an apartment, a room or a cottage. In the case of intentional facilitators, administrative enforcements agencies and the police may perform inspections of properties and check the identity of the persons who reside there. Community police officers may give specific attention to premises to look for indications that these may be used by an MOCG.

3.5 PHASE 5: COMMITTING THE CRIME

MOCGs are known to commit different types of property crime, including vehicle theft, burglaries of private homes and commercial properties, and shoplifting. The crime scripts therefore also differ and addressing these in full detail in the barrier-model is therefore impossible. Hence, we focus on general aspects of this particular phase. Committing property crimes involves preparation, for instance reconnaissance of suitable targets, moving to a crime scene, committing the crime and exiting the crime scene with stolen goods without being detected. The handling of stolen goods will be addressed in phase 7 (paragraph 3.7).

Service providers involved in committing the crime include intentional and unintentional facilitators. These may be further distinguished in actors who intentionally provide criminal services to the MOCG, and actors who intentionally or unintentionally provide legitimate services (mis)used by criminal groups. Victims of criminal exploitation also provide services to the MOCG, which will be addressed in phase 6 (paragraph 3.6). Criminal service providers include specialists who offer equipment for instance for stealing cars, such as devices to remotely manipulate contactless keys to open cars. Fences may for instance be in contact with

MOCGs to instruct them which goods are in demand and what to steal, particularly from shops. MOCGs involved in robbing ATMs may require explosives or other materials to blow up the machines. Indications exist that criminal service providers also offer information on for instance the addresses of owners of sought-after vehicles, for example on the dark web. Unintentional service providers for example include social media and telecommunication companies. MOCG-members often communicate via apps such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Telegram, also to maintain contact with people in their countries of origin. Mobile communication is also essential to coordinate criminal activities conducted in countries of destination.

MOCGs have a large number of **opportunities** to commit crimes. The following section is therefore limited to examples and by no means exhaustive. To begin with MOCGs target locations where property crimes are relatively easy to commit. Pickpockets for instance look for crowded places where the public may be less alert, such as tourist hotspots, concerts, festivals, nightlife areas, shopping streets in cities, and airports. They may even buy a cheap airline ticket to a Schengen country which allows them to commit crimes on the airside, including shoplifting, and instead of boarding their flight leave the airport with stolen goods without being checked. One MOCG originating from Serbia for instance focused on abandoned factories in the Belgian town of Charleroi to steal metals. Shoplifters often target relatively expensive products which are relatively small and easy to carry, usually at chain stores where staff may be less alert. Opportunities for burglars may increase when private houses or commercial properties are less protected, although professionals may not be deterred by common prevention methods. Robbers of ATMs can be provided with opportunities when cash machines are less well protected against attacks with explosives. MOCGs involved in vehicle theft may be presented with opportunities because expensive vehicles may still be insufficiently protected against theft. MOCGs may also benefit from easy access to social security. Finally, no thresholds exist for people who apply for asylum, which is perfectly understandable from a humanitarian perspective, but this does offer opportunities to individuals who misuse the system to facilitate crimes.

Signals indicating a particular type of property crime logically differ between types of crime. Pickpockets for instance show typical behaviour in crowds, such as focusing on other people's bags or mobile phones, instead of on products for sale or performers on stage, or hang around at a train station instead of waiting in one place and leaving upon arrival. Pickpockets may also attract attention by regularly approaching people with questions intended as a distraction. Trained police spotters have been very successful at detecting pickpockets because of their behaviour. Shoplifters may stand out because they usually work in small groups who disperse across a store, but signal each other to keep in contact. They usually carry prepared bags, which after being filled with stolen goods may be handed over to another member of the group who leaves the store, after which the procedure is repeated. The bags with stolen goods will usually

be taken to a car or van parked near the store. Shoplifters may also attract attention because they focus on particular goods which are expensive, easy to carry and in high demand, such as certain brands of cosmetics and clothing. Larger stores may have security guards who can be trained to detect specific types of behaviour. Generally, all personnel can be made aware of how MOCGs operate. Groups involved in burglary may attract attention when reconnoitring targets, for instance in rural areas, and may stand out when searching for targets ad hoc, for instance when driving around slowly at night while apparently looking for something. When stopped by the police, officers should be alert at spotting specific equipment, for instance different types of communication devices, such as multiple mobile phones, GPS-jammers, and sometimes old-fashioned devices such as walkie-talkies. Police officers may also check the destination programmed in the navigation system. MOCGs involved in vehicle theft show similar modes of operation. Finally, MOCGs involved in metal theft may attract attention of scrap metal dealers by regularly bringing in substantial quantities of scrap metal, or specific types of metal.

The police play a key role in preventing that crimes be committed and investigating when these have taken place, and the public prosecution service is responsible for bringing cases to court. However, other **partners** can also contribute to detecting and preventing property crimes. Administrative authorities may for instance promote prevention measures to better protect private homes, and increase awareness amongst the public through media campaigns. The latter may also be focused at specific locations, for instance places where pickpockets usually operate. Almost every type of economic activity has its own interest association and those may also help to raise awareness and promote specific prevention measures amongst their members.

Different types of property crime may require specific **barriers**. Pickpockets may for instance be targeted by specially trained police spotters, who can also disseminate knowledge on specific modi operandi and adaptations of methods to other colleagues. Campaigns can be set up to inform the public. Pickpockets increasingly target expensive smartphones and owners may be mobilised to take prevention measures, such as installing a safety code that prevents the device from working when the SIM-card is replaced. Tracking apps installed on smartphones often allow the owner and the police to quickly retrieve the devices. Retailers can take a wide range of prevention measures, for instance by setting up their stores in such a way that thefts are less easy to commit, by installing CCTV-cameras which may also be monitored directly when a group of potential shoplifters appears, and by training personnel in recognising the typical behaviour of organised shoplifters, and how to approach in a friendly way people who act suspicious. Experiences show that MOCGs tend to avoid shops where the staff appears to be alert. For instance, in the Netherlands a provision has been established where shopkeepers can upload CCTV-recordings, which are also shared with the police. Law enforcement agencies continuously analyse the images and the intelligence helps to quickly spot MOCG-activity and to take appropriate measures. It is also important that shopkeepers who have been

confronted with theft inform their colleagues, for instance in a WhatsApp group, because MOCGs at the same day usually target several similar stores in the same city or small towns within the same area. Tackling MOCGs involved in burglary and vehicle theft involves raising awareness, and promoting prevention measures as well as the reporting of suspicious behaviour, but it also depends to a large extent on traditional police work. Quick response when victims report a crime is of crucial importance, but the police should also be aware that burglars sometimes leave stolen goods in a car or van parked near the crime scene, and collect these during the day. Particularly in rural villages where MOCGs often commit burglaries, residents may be able to point out vehicles they have not seen before in their street. Cameras fitted out with Automatic Number Plate Recognition (ANPR) may be used to detect vehicles observed at a crime scene, but also to prevent crimes. MOCG-members who look for targets may for instance patrol an area at night and be spotted by ANPR several times. Experiments with search strings based on typical behaviour of MOCGs have proven to be successful. Known license plates of vehicles used by MOCGs can also be programmed into the system. Raising barriers for metal thieves may involve public private partnerships, for instance with scrap dealers and companies that are often confronted with theft, such as railway companies. An example is the Pol-PRIMETT project which has been running since 2010 in the United Kingdom and now also includes partners from EU member states. Finally, cross-border police cooperation and swift information exchange, also of DNA-profiles found at crime scenes, is important for detecting and catching perpetrators, as has been discussed in more detail in other IMOBEX-reports.

3.6 PHASE 6: CRIMINAL EXPLOITATION

Criminal exploitation requires a number of activities, which to a large extent overlap with other phases identified in the barrier-model. Recruitment by creating situations of financial dependency has been described under phase 1. Victims of criminal exploitation of course also need to travel to a country of destination and temporarily housed there. They may be used as straw persons, but may also be coerced to commit crimes or be involved in follow-up activities regarding stolen goods, such as selling stolen metal to scrap dealers. In this paragraph we focus on specific aspects, in particular the activities of straw persons and minors, and more in general, follow-up activities to prevent re-victimisation upon return to the countries of origin.

Activities of straw persons can be unintentionally facilitated by several **service providers**. To begin with, municipalities are usually responsible for registering new citizens and provision of driver's licenses, ID-cards and social security numbers, as well as for the handling of requests for social benefits. Straw persons may use the false ID for a wide range of purposes, which may include services provided by for instance: rental companies; banks and other financial service providers; telecom operators and internet service providers; landlords and real estate agencies that rent out properties; and self-storage facilities. Depending on the country, the

Chamber of Commerce may for instance be responsible for the registration of legal persons. When a vehicle is bought, this is to be reported to the vehicle registration office. Vehicles must be insured, which requires the services of insurance companies.

MOCGs take advantage of a number of **opportunities**. In general, the crime groups abuse EU-regulations aimed at easing the movement of people within the Union, and to live, study or work in another member state. The fact that most service providers, including public authorities, primarily aim at being customer friendly, is sometimes conflicting with performing thorough checks to prevent misuse of services. Authorities usually aim to promote economic activity, which may however conflict with the aim of preventing crime. For example, during the IMOBEX-OCFL it was noted that in several countries persons may register an unlimited number of vehicles in their names, which may be logical when one is for instance a car dealer or collector, but for a private person ownership of tens of cars is quite unusual. Theoretically, flagging a person who ‘owns’ a large number of vehicles and checking whether a straw person may be involved is relatively easy when the information is compared with for instance tax information, but information exchange may be difficult or even impossible because of privacy legislation. Entrepreneurs also need to balance between their activities being as profitable as possible, and the risk that bills will be left unpaid. Furthermore, public and private partners not involved in criminal or administrative law enforcement may reason that detecting or preventing crimes is not their primary responsibility and staff may not always be aware that they are potentially dealing with a straw person. With regard to criminal exploitation of minors, this usually concerns family-based MOCGs stemming from socially excluded and economically deprived Roma communities. Children are sometimes not registered and therefore do not exist administratively, which makes it easier to exploit them. However, criminal elements within such communities can also exploit specific cultural customs. Finally, as has been noted in chapter 1, it is for several reasons complicated to successfully prosecute criminal exploitation, which reduces the risks for perpetrators. For the police, detecting and responding to victims of criminal exploitation is also problematic, for instance because of a lack of knowledge and the fact that the persons may also have committed crimes.

Participants agreed that picking up **signals** that a person is criminally exploited is not easy. Straw persons and people who have been coerced to commit crimes may be able to escape their controllers and seek assistance from the police. Victims of criminal exploitation may however be unable to make clear what happened to them because they do not speak any foreign language, and their appearance and behaviour may cause scepticism with police officers who take their statements. The same applies when a victim of criminal exploitation is caught when having committed a crime. When it concerns minors, it may not always be clear that they have been involved in organised property crime, although when this concerns minors from a Southeastern European country who do not speak a foreign language and for instance cannot identify where they are staying and where their parents are, this strongly indicates that they are

not tourists who have committed a petty crime. Similar questions can of course be asked to adult suspects, although it may be more difficult to assess whether they are victims, because ‘regular’ members of MOCGs may also not know their place of residence. One option is for the police to cooperate with trained social workers, who can interview the victim and ask in-depth questions to establish possible victimisation. It is not easy for victims to reach out directly to the police, for example because of mistrust and fear. Service providers mentioned above may also be able to pick-up signals of exploitation, for instance operators of holiday parks who observe that people are always accompanied by someone and are not allowed to leave a cottage. Shopkeepers may for instance notice a minor carrying a bag lined with foil. When children are involved in more visible activities, such as begging, it may be easier to observe signals, such as minors who are dropped off and picked-up in groups at specific locations and then disperse to different places. Finally, exchange of information with countries of origin can be of great added value. The police may for instance be able to talk with relatives, who may provide information on how the potential victim ended up in a Western European country. Victims may also have been able to contact relatives and told them about their situation, although the MOCG will usually try to prevent such contacts.

Because straw persons come into contact with a wide range of service providers who unintentionally facilitate their activities, the number of potential **partners** is extensive. These include both public and private partners, as mentioned above. In addition, several partners can be involved in follow-up activities, once criminal exploitation has been established. This for example may include the Child Protection Service when the case concerns minor, which may place the children in the custody of a juvenile protection centre or in foster care. NGOs may for instance assist with repatriating victims to their country of origin and be involved in efforts to prevent reoccurrence, whereas public partners may help to protect a victim who has cooperated with the authorities against retaliation. Apart from partners operating at the national or local levels in countries of origin and destination, international organisations such as the IOM may also be a partner, with the advantage that these operate across countries.

Raising **barriers** against criminal exploitation starts with traditional policing, and law enforcement cooperation between countries of destination and countries of origin. Local police and administrative enforcement should be alert at indications of criminal exploitation of children in public places. Raising awareness about mobile banditry at the nexus of criminal exploitation is important: staff of different public agencies should be aware of the problem, and how it may manifest itself in behaviour. Municipalities should raise awareness about the use of straw persons amongst staff who handle applications for identity documents, driver’s licenses and social benefits. Other entry points to identify victims have been described above. An important aspect is follow-up activities for victims of criminal exploitation in which for instance NGOs can be involved. This could include assisting victims with repatriation to their countries of origin, but also monitoring of their situation upon return and providing help with

reintegration in their communities, for instance by assisting with finding a job. This may also include providing psychological support and legal assistance when the victim is a witness in a court case against the MOCG.

3.7 PHASE 7: FOLLOW-UP ACTIVITIES

In this final phase of the barrier-model, we address several follow-up activities after the crimes have been committed. This first includes the handling of the stolen goods, for instance by temporary storing the loot and selling the goods to criminal buyers who are able to resell the goods through legitimate channels, as well as the moving of stolen goods, for instance vehicles or car parts to the country of origin and other destinations. Second, this refers to the handling of the proceeds of crime, to begin with by transferring money or other valuables to the MOCGs countries of origin, after which it can be spent or invested.

The main actors involved in follow-up activities are the MOCGs themselves, but several **service providers** can be identified. Criminal facilitators include fences who buy different types of stolen goods and resell these at for instance open air markets. MOCGs have been observed to have contacts with for instance dealers in leftover batches, phone shops and operators in the automotive branch. Stolen metal is sold to scrap dealers in countries of destination. MOCGs may rent self-storage units to temporarily store stolen goods, but may also keep these where they reside. MOCG-members may take home small stolen items when they return to their country of origin by car or shuttle bus. Delivery and courier services may be used to ship small stolen goods in postal packages, but these may also be sent with truck drivers who drive regular routes to and from the MOCGs countries of origin. Legitimate service providers thereby facilitate such shipments, albeit unwillingly or without their knowledge. Items may also be offered online, for instance on Facebook or Ebay. Especially jewellery, clothing, shoes and electronics and sometimes bicycles and garden tools are transported to and eventually resold in Eastern and Central Europe on local markets or in shops. Roma groups in particular, often use money-transfer organizations such as MoneyGram and Western Union to send criminal money to their countries of origin. When a bank account has been opened by a straw person, money may also be transferred normally, although this first requires deposition of cash money to the account. It has also been observed that cash money is exchanged for gold which MOCG-members take back on their return journeys, which requires involvement of gold traders or other providers who sell gold. Little is known about how the proceeds of crime are spent in the countries of origin. It is assumed that leading MOCG-members who stem from Roma-communities, spend most of the proceeds of crime on luxury goods, including expensive cars. These MOCG-members openly advertise their wealth on social media. They also spend money at casinos and brothels. Only occasionally the proceeds of crime appear to be invested legitimately, for instance in real estate such as land or houses, which would imply the need to acquire building permits, and the involvement of architects and construction companies.

MOCGs exploit several **opportunities** to handle stolen goods. Renting a temporary storage unit is relatively easy because these are amply available in most Western European countries. MOCGs target valuable goods which are in demand with customers and easy to sell to fences or scrap dealers, particularly when offered at reduced prices. Unintentional facilitators, such as scrap metal dealers may lower the thresholds by paying in cash and not checking identities of customers. Furthermore, it is often difficult to trace back stolen goods to a crime scene, implying a low risk when these are offered for sale at open air markets or online. Anyone can easily offer and sell stolen goods online. In addition, few regulations may exist for informal traders to register purchases and check who offered these for sale. In addition, the ‘informal economy’ is overall cash-based and leaves few paper trails. Moving stolen goods back to MOCGs countries of origin is largely unproblematic for the same reasons as were described in paragraph 3.3. Within the EU, properties carried by travellers on buses, airplanes as well as on ships and trains are very rarely checked, and even then, it will not be evident that proof can be delivered that the goods have been stolen. In addition, shipments of legitimate and stolen goods may be combined, which further complicates detection. Over the past decades, online trade in goods which are mostly shipped by postal package has rapidly increased, making it difficult to draw up indicators to select shipments for inspection. MOCGs may use straw persons to open bank accounts to transfer money and their identities may also be misused to transfer money via money-transfer providers.

Several **signals** may indicate that MOCGs use a property or storage unit for temporary storage of stolen goods, such as different people who regularly deliver or collect goods at the premises, also at irregular times at night. Complaints about nuisance may also be an indication that a property is used for illegal activities. MOCGs usually rent storage units for only a short period, during which the unit is often visited by different people who may carry items that are usually not stored in these units, such as shopping bags and small rolling suitcases. Those who sell stolen goods at open air markets may stand out because of the varying flow of goods they offer. At one moment they offer relatively expensive goods which are usually not sold at such markets, interspersed with periods when they sell ordinary goods obtained from batches of left-over goods. Sometimes they forget to remove stickers or other information which indicates that the goods came from a specific store. Small shipments of stolen goods to a country of origin may be spotted because packages are sent with low-cost bus services without the owner of the package travelling. The goods will be picked-up at the destination, for instance by family-members. When stolen goods are sent in postal packages, personnel working at service points may notice that the same persons send large numbers of packages to an unusual destination, for example a small village in a Southeastern European country. Gold traders may spot and report unusual transactions, for instance when the same person regularly buys gold and pays in cash. In countries of origin, MOCG-members may show off a luxurious lifestyle, which may

also be advertised on social media. They may also own real estate which stands out in relatively poor villages.

MOCGs in several ways make use of legitimate service providers who can be **partners** in disrupting their activities. Public actors first include law enforcement and administrative enforcement agencies. The latter may for instance be responsible for monitoring open air markets, but local police officers can also pay regular visits to check for goods that may have been stolen. The police may for instance be able to monitor social media for known persons of interest. Financial intelligence units can monitor suspicious transactions, for instance the buying of gold with cash money. Money transfer services can monitor and report regular transactions from countries where MOCGs operate to specific receivers in countries of origin. Retailers who sell gold can report suspicious transactions to the FIU when being paid in cash. Providers of temporary storage units can perform identity checks and refuse cash payments, and may also report suspicious or uncommon behaviour. Courier services have much information on goods sent in postal packages. Europol, and when third countries are involved Interpol, can play an important role in exchanging information between countries where the crimes are committed and countries of origin of MOCGs.

Participants in the IMOBEX-OCFL suggested a number of potential **barriers** that could be mounted. Again, raising awareness with public and private partners is important. This for instance includes operators of self-storage units, money-transfer service points, gold traders, postal package services, and administrative authorities who monitor open air markets. Swift information exchange between law enforcement agencies about suspicious transaction and potential stolen goods that are sent to countries of origin is crucial. Countries of origin may be able to create barriers regarding the spending of crime money, for instance by cooperating with countries of destination on confiscation of criminal assets and transfer of proceedings in investigations which aim at asset recovery. Finally, legislation could be introduced to enable screening of applicants for building permits.

4 FINAL REMARKS

MOCGs who commit property crimes commit relatively simple crimes, with the exception of MOCGs specialised in theft of expensive vehicles, GPS-equipment from agricultural vehicles, and ATM-raids. Yet, the criminal business process is quite complex and involves a wide range of intentional and unintentional service providers, of which the latter can be mobilised to help raise specific barriers. The European barrier-model underlines that tackling mobile banditry at the nexus of criminal exploitation not only requires a criminal law enforcement approach, but also addressing the structures that enable and facilitate these types of crimes.

Although crime scripting has already been applied since the 1990s, barrier-models remain an instrument that is not widely used within the EU. Therefore, the IMOBEX-OCFL considered developing a barrier-model as an innovative tool that could help raise awareness regarding MOCG-activities, and about the options to tackle the problem from a multi-agency perspective, although the role of criminal law enforcement remains essential. Barrier-models focus on what is possible based on existing legislation. However, the IMOBEX-project has also resulted in several recommendations to improve legal frameworks, which have been included in other reports delivered as outcomes of the project.

A barrier-model is always a compromise between the level of detail provided on the one hand and simplicity to promote practical applicability on the other. No barrier-model is therefore in any way exhaustive and should foremost be viewed as a source of inspiration. Developing and experimenting with innovative barriers is a creative process, which must be tailored to national and sometimes even local possibilities to intervene. Furthermore, a barrier-model is a dynamic rather than a static tool. Criminals may change their *modi operandi* to respond to barriers or for other reasons, and this implies that regular updating is necessary. Finally, it must be noted that although all barriers that can be mounted will contribute to tackle a crime these will not result in making it impossible. Participants in the IMOBEX-OCFL for instance noted several times that mobile banditry will continue as long as root causes such as large economic differences between EU member states remain.

One of the important goals of a field lab is to provide a learning environment. In this case, participants were enabled to learn to look at a complex crime problem in a structured way. In addition, the team learned ‘on the job’ how to construct a barrier-model. Both methods can also be applied to other crime problems.

During the final discussion of the IMOBEX-OCFL, participants addressed dissemination of the European barrier-model. Two main platforms were identified. The first is the European Crime Prevention Network (EUCPN) and the European Network on the Administrative Approach (ENAA), which have cooperated earlier with the Dutch Centre for Crime Prevention

and Safety (CCV) on the barrier-model as a tool, and has shown great interest in the instrument as such. The second main platform is the EMPACT working group on organised property crime. Members of the EMPACT-OPC have participated in the IMOBEX-OCFL and offered to disseminate the model via this network. Apart from this, the European barrier-model developed by the IMOBEX-OCFL can also be disseminated via national channels to which participants have access. The model and the results of the IMOBEX-project will also be presented in regular fora, at criminology conferences and in academic journals, as well as in popular journals aimed at informing police officers and other practitioners.

APPENDIX

A large number of people have contributed to the IMOBEX-OCFL and the development of the European barrier-model. We hereby express our gratitude to all contributors for making their time available. We specifically thank Martijn Groenleer and Joeri Vig for moderating the physical meetings of the IMOBEX-OCFL. In this appendix participants in the field lab are listed in alphabetical order.

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