

An integral methodology to develop an informative-led and community-orientated policy to tackle domestic burglary
(A methodology to tackle burglary)
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Focus Group Report:

Mobile criminal groups as seen from an integral perspective

New technologies regarding domestic burglary

Brussels, 28 March 2014



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1. Agenda

9:00 - 9:30	Arrival & Registration
9:30 - 10:00	Welcome & Introduction to the focus groups by Pierre Thomas, Director of the Directorate Local Integral Security
10:00 - 12:00	Focus group 1
12:00 - 12:30	Lunch break
12:30 - 14:30	Focus group 2
14:30 - 15:30	Roundup + conclusions

During the focus group, the participants were divided into two groups. The following report will list the different discussions that were held based on the guiding statements. Whenever there was a difference between the two groups, this will be mentioned.

2. Mobile criminal groups as seen from an integral perspective

Moderated by Paul Ponsaers

Paul Ponsaers first explained the project and the purpose of the focus group:

"We would like to ask you to share all your ideas, views and personal experiences. What do you deem important, what are your ideas, considerations and especially your suggestions? There aren't any right or wrong answers today. It is about what you think and why you think what you do. What we are especially looking for is diversity and possibly also opposite points of view. It is precisely this diversity we are trying to harness on the occasion of these focus groups."

He also verified if everybody knew and approved of the fact that they were being filmed and recorded. An introduction round was done to facilitate the discussion. Everybody explained who they were, where they came from and what they did.

Statement 1: The phenomenon of mobile criminal groups varies in severity according to the Member State.

Group 1: 9 green cards, 1 red card, 0 double

Group 2: 7 green cards, 0 red cards, 2 double

This phenomenon is not viewed the same way in every country. However, the conclusion was that it is indeed a European problem. Some countries are the victims of the burglaries, others of the illegal economy.

The East European countries (Romania and Bulgaria) are not often the victims of the mobile groups. The majority of their burglaries is executed by local thieves. Nevertheless, they see it as a problem because a lot of the mobile crime groups come from their countries.

Group 1

A representative of the Dublin National Crime Prevention Unit agreed with the statement but he had to add that it is not particularly a problem in Ireland since they are an island. There are mobile groups but they consist mainly of Irish people. The improvements of the roads have made it easier for the Irish mobile groups to strike and run very fast.

The Head of Department "Organised Thefts & ART" from Belgium stated that 40% of the burglaries are done by itinerant groups. However, we are all victims, not only the civilians who are confronted with the burglary, but every country because of the illegal economy of stolen goods that festers in the countries of origin. We have to invest not only in fighting against the thieves themselves but also in dealing with the organizers who stay in the country of origin. For that, we need to work together with all the countries.

A representative of the Bruges Federal Police Judicial Directorate and a delegate of the Local Police zone Klein-Brabant point out that there are two kinds of itinerant groups: groups that come to a Western country for a couple of months and who do not have an address. And other groups that are based in the country but have a foreign origin. They also state that to tackle these groups, there is a big need of information. Civilians have to call sooner.

Group 2

A representative of the State Criminal Police Office Nordrhein-Westphalia Deutschland makes overviews of organized crime. She states that there is growing evidence that mobile criminal groups are evolving from regional operating gangs to OC groups. There is a big information problem concerning their complex structures, their home-based decision level, and their travel routes. She declares that some of these groups come from one country, strike in another and then go on a "holiday" to yet another country.

In Lithuania this is not a big problem. However, they are having problems with the circulation of stolen goods. A delegate of the Federal Police's "DBJ" (Belgium) believes that there needs to be European agreements concerning this problem. Not all countries perceive it as a problem now, but they may be victimized in the future. He also adds that Romania takes it very seriously since there is already an agreement between Belgium and Romania.

A representative of the Crime Research and Prevention Institute – General Inspectorate of the Romanian Police – declared that the analysis of the Romanian Police have shown that Romanian perpetrators have started organizing themselves in criminal groups which, although mostly created ad-hoc (unplanned), give the impression/image of transnational organized crime networks. Destination countries for such mobile criminals are Italy, Spain, France, Germany, Austria, Belgium and Great Britain. However Danish investigators from the national taskforce has established that groups of organized burglars from Lithuania and Romania are organized by criminal gangs in their countries of origin.

Statement 2: At European level, the phenomenon of mobile criminal groups is not prioritised with enough emphasis.

Group 1: 6 green cards, 1 red card, 3 double

It is already a priority but there is still a lot of work to do. The police are already heavily intensifying their actions. However, there is not enough cooperation at a political level to do something about it. The politicians do not understand that it is not only a material loss but also emotional distress. There is already scientific proof in this regard, but nothing is changing. There needs to be more emphasis on prevention. It would be beneficial if some of this were to be organized at EU level. The example is given of a simultaneous prevention campaign in all the Member States. People still think too often that it will not happen to them.

There is too little information exchange between the Member States. There needs to be more exchange about the movements of groups and about the good practices at the various levels of the states. Nevertheless, communication is bad because of legal matters. There are indeed different data protection laws in the different states, and countries also all use different PC systems which hampers the exchange as well.

Group 1

A theft prevention officer from police zone Rupel (Belgium), a representative of the Bruges Federal Police Judicial Directorate, and a delegate of the Local Police zone Klein-Brabant explain that the lack of information exchange and time are the reasons why so few burglaries are being solved. When a burglar is caught for a certain crime, there is often not enough time to investigate whether that person has committed other crimes as well. Because of this, a lot of burglaries remain unsolved. Moreover, this makes it difficult to get a total grasp on the problem.

A theft prevention officer from police zone Rupel declares that things need to change at two levels. On the one hand, there needs to be target protection. The Netherlands have implemented that in construction projects. It only costs about €400 per house. However, Belgium does not do this yet. On the other hand, there needs to be better traceability of goods.

Danish National Police – National Centre for Crime Prevention: Denmark is looking towards the Netherlands, trying to get the politicians to understand that it is important to convince the citizens that they carry a great deal of responsibility for their own safety and property. At the moment we discuss whether we shall use legislation or insurance benefits to persuade them to secure their homes better.

Danish Police, The Security industry and the Insurance Companies are cooperating to create three "Security Levels" according to which some minimum requirements for private property insurance can be established.

Group 2

There is a big issue around identity theft. There needs to be a database of convicted and suspected criminals to be able to simplify the identification of people. Some criminals are using different aliases in different countries. This makes it very difficult to identify them and to convict them for multiple crimes.

Statement 3: Too much time and effort are invested in the phenomenon of mobile criminal groups whereas a great deal of domestic burglaries is also committed by occasional thieves.

Group 1: 1 green card, 4 red cards, 5 double

Both problems need to be tackled. General prevention concerning domestic burglary will deal with both problems. However, it remains important to investigate mobile groups and to exchange information because there is still too little known about them.

Group 1

A delegate of the Bruges Federal Police Judicial Directorate declares that international groups are more active than occasional thieves

Group 2

The Federal Police Coordination and Support Directorate, District of Ghent, states that it is important to invest in both phenomena. There needs to be investments in the prevention of domestic burglaries as a whole.

A representative from the Danish National Police, National Centre for Crime Prevention, states that it often happens that detectives convict a burglar for a given crime although they know he/she has committed many other ones as well. There just is no time to investigate the latter.

Two years ago the Danish National Police established two taskforces in order to tackle and combat organized burglaries committed by national- and foreign criminal groups. The two taskforces have had great success with the possibility of investigating this closely and specialized. The most important outcome of their work is the connection with the authorities in the countries from where the burglars originate.

A liaison officer from the Romanian Police has occasionally been related to the taskforces.

This cooperation opens up for "early warnings" on an intelligence level.

An assignee of the State Criminal Police Office Nordrhein-Westphalia Deutschland declares that not only do mobile groups operate in the field of domestic burglary, they commit other crimes as well. The EU really has to start intervening in this matter.

A delegate of the Criminological Research Department, Law Institute of Lithuania, states that there is little trust in the police because there are so many burglaries.

Statement 4: An overall European police service – competent to deal with cross-border crime – has to be created. Thus it will be possible to pursue the fight against the phenomenon of mobile criminal groups

There is no need for an overall European police service. There are already sufficient structures, for example Europol and Eurojust. However, the current structures need to be improved and structural changes need to be made. The police are being restrained by borders but thieves are not. Information exchanges need to be facilitated. Some general regulations would also benefit crime prevention.

Group 1

A representative of the Dublin National Crime Prevention Unit states that it is a problem that the punishment is the same for 1 or for multiple burglaries. People tend to forget the consequences for the victims. There need to be more research but there is rarely ever any time to do it.

A theft prevention officer from police zone Rupel (Belgium) points out that the international groups are creating a secondary economy that is very hard to tackle because of the internet. A delegate of the National Police Chief Directorate of Bulgaria agrees with this and states that even if they can retrieve some stolen items, it is very difficult to return them to the correct person because people do not take photos of their valuables and they do not write the serial number down. The Head of Department "Organised Thefts & ART" agrees and says that more effort has to go into targeting trade markets.

A delegate of the Dublin National Crime Prevention Unit suggests that insurance companies should urge their clients to photograph their items or let them be engraved. He also declares that manufacturers should participate in the prevention of theft. It is now possible to block your phone in your own country but not in other countries. This is stupid since it cannot be that much of a hazard for the manufacturers. GPS tracking devices would also be a solution. An assignee of the State Criminal Police Office Nordrhein-Westphalia Deutschland declares that data protection laws would be a problem here. However, a theft prevention officer from police zone Rupel states that it is already possible in the Netherlands where they are putting chips in bicycles. A system in which sellers of goods should prove that an item is theirs could also be implemented to tackle the illegal economy.

In group 2 this statement was skipped.

Statement 5: Too little is invested in feeding the international data banks.

Group 1: 8 green cards, 1 red card, 1 double

Group 2: 7 green cards, 1 red card, 1 double

Most participants agree that the communication flow is not as good as it should be. The systems are there but not everybody is using them and the information does not get to the places that need it. Reasons for the low acceptance in Germany are the hesitant participation of other countries which results in an insufficient quantity and quality of data and the fact that only a limited number of people are authorized to directly access the European data base. On top of that soft facts are missing which are a prerequisite for intelligence work. There is a big need for evolution and updates. Belgium has an integrated system in which information is automatically sent from the local to the federal level.

Both Romania and Bulgaria find that there has already been a big improvement in the exchange of information. Denmark feels that there is a lot of information available, but it is not put together. The hardware is present; people just have to put the information in it.

Statement 6: As regards mobile criminal groups, the present legislation has shortcomings. At national and at international level.

There are a lot of shortcomings. The biggest problem is that there are many differences between countries. There should be some general laws. It is very remarkable that there are that many differences within the European Union. Even for the more basic questions like "who lives where", not all countries have an ID-card with the address on it. For example, in Ireland and the UK people make no use of an ID-card.

Better and more general databases would also help a lot. It would make it easier to link illegal trade with burglaries. Mobile groups are better organized than us. The police lose a lot of time because legislation is incredibly slow.

Mainly discussed in group 1

Identity theft is a very big problem. Organized crime groups use multiple aliases between different countries. It is often difficult to find out who the person really is. There is a need for DNA databases or fingerprint databases. Although there is also a need to go back to the basics, a description of the person, pictures and fingerprints could be very helpful too. The European Union should be more proactive in this regard since most current actions are local.

There are also certain preventive tools that could be designed to tackle the problem of identity and who lives where. When an international group arrives in a country, its members need lodging, so they often stay with friends and family. Local administration in big agglomerations should be on the lookout for newcomers. Their information about this could be very valuable for the police.

The mobility of the groups is also a big problem. They are using stolen licence plates but it takes around one to two months before all European databases are up-to-date with information on stolen licence plates.

Statement 7: The actual enforcement of sentences should preferably be carried out in the country of origin.

Mainly discussed in group 2

Sending convicted people back to their country of origin does not work because of legislation. Diplomatically, this is a very sensitive measure. For social matters, it could be beneficial since it would be easier to reintegrate convicted people into the society of their own country rather than abroad. However, this would put the countries of origin under tremendous pressure. They cannot handle it; they need help from Europe for this. The countries of origin are often poorer and their prisons are not as good.

Statement 8: At local level, there ought to be the creation of a reinforced administration.

Summary of groups 1 and 2

The police cannot do it alone, better contact with the administration is needed. There are often bad information flows between the two. Social contacts cannot be controlled by administration alone.

Both groups then came back to the discussion "who lives where". Administration is very important here but it is the police that need to carry out the control. However, the biggest problem is that every country has its own system. It is very easy for the criminals to stay under the radar.

Statement 9: In order to provide a better follow-up, the harmonization between victim relief and police services should be designed differently.

Group 1: 10 green cards, 0 red cards, 0 double

The police are the first at the scene. They have to interact with the victims in a certain way. Giving information is very important. It is also important that the police bring them in contact with care systems. The human aspect should not be forgotten, especially since so few burglaries are being solved. The sentence for 1 crime being the same as for multiple crimes, this ensures that not much effort goes into resolving past crimes.

Group 2

In Denmark, cooperation exists between the police and insurance companies. The purpose of this is to be on the same page. The most important outcome of this cooperation is that we have agreed in using the same platform for advising the public in crime prevention measures, either you represent the police, an insurance company or you expect to sell security products or services. However, it is not easy to give all-around advice. Every aspect of the chain needs to work together in this. It is important to try and make the interests of the police the same as the interests of the victim. Victims who have suffered more than one burglary within one year, will be offered a security check of their premises. The security check is carried out by a specially trained police officer, and is free of charge for the citizens.

Statement 10: If we are to tackle this phenomenon from an integral perspective, it should be noticed that there is sufficient investment per link in the security chain, the problem is located in the interactions between the links in the chain.

Summary of groups 1 and 2

It is important to empower citizens and to sensitize them to being more alert. The private sector also plays an important role in the recovery of stolen goods.

It rarely happens that stolen goods are retrieved and given back to the owners. This is partly the owners' fault for not taking pictures. However, we could also work together with insurance companies for prevention advice. And there could be a law that compels the manufacturers to participate in designing preventive tools to tackle theft. There is also no control over the second-hand market on the internet.

Denmark has established a cooperation between some internet based auction houses. The aim is to make it difficult for the burglars to sell the stolen goods via auctions on the Internet, and on the other hand, to prevent that ordinary people feel safer, when they buy. The cooperation "Letter of intent" gives the police rights to get information about the sellers ID, when they have a strong suspicion!

Conclusions

- The most remarkable conclusion is that everybody perceives mobile groups as a European problem. This is very important as it means there are common gains. Because of this, we need to create awareness at international level:
 - o Statistical research: more facts and figures
 - o Social importance of the victims
- Every country has strategies to tackle the phenomenon. However, we have to remember not to forget the basics, as without these it is difficult to do something about the matter involved:
 - o Identity theft is a big issue, how do we solve it?
 - o Who lives where?
- There is still a lot of room for improvement.
 - o Information exchange is time-consuming and it poses a lot of technical problems.
 - o International legislation is slow and constitutes a hindrance. Most participants were not optimistic about this, especially because there is a lot of social change (rich vs. poor-gap is growing, social cohesion is dying off). And this will not change in the near future, due to the crisis.
- There is a large willingness to keep on progressing with tackling the itinerant group phenomenon. It will not be easy but – together – scientists, police, politicians and civilians can do something about it.

3. New technologies involving domestic burglary

Moderated by Sofie De Kimpe

Statement 1: What are the advantages and drawbacks you have experienced with which techniques?

The phenomenon is not viewed in the same way in every country. Even though, the overall conclusion concerning the question is that the police is always one step behind the criminals. They don't have the money or the means to counteract the professional thieves.

Group 1

Using cameras in the streets to reduce the number of crimes committed at a specific location might lead to a change of location of the crime. It's not possible to reduce the crime totally.

A new security system invented by the private security industry makes it possible to 'attach' the doorbell to the mobile phone of the owner of the house. Even though the owner isn't at home at the moment the doorbell rings, he's able to answer through his phone.

The person who stands at the door thus thinks the owner is answering through the house intercom. At the same time, the system takes pictures of the person standing in front of the door, as well as inside the house.

However, there are two disadvantages experienced with this system:

- The pictures taken by the system belong to the private security company and the owner of the house doesn't have any access to them. The police, on the other hand, do have access but they have to act quickly since the pictures are erased after a certain amount of time. It is also an expensive system so only people with money are able to install the system in their house.

An important drawback of the 'ordinary' alarm systems is that most of the time, they are fitted on the ground floor. Even though, the burglars are capable to find a way to get into the house through a higher floor. Nevertheless it is possible to secure the upper floors as well but once more this is an investment only possible to those who have money.

As a home owner, you must always weigh up if the investment is proportional to the value that's in the house.

Europe has developed a standard rule because there was some discussion about the use of pictures. A picture has to suffice on certain rules to be valid in court. But contrary to Denmark, Belgium has no rules concerning manipulated pictures.

The use of camera systems may increase the false sense of security. For example a camera does not register everything that happens on the streets. The burglar often knows the location of cameras very well, and works his way around them.

Social media might be used for investigation (e.g. burglars who take pictures of themselves with stolen goods) as well as to warn citizens in a specific neighbourhood that there's an escalation of the number of burglaries being committed.

Some studies must be done about the effect of social media concerning its use by burglars (think about the use of Google maps, Facebook... in the preparation of the burglary). This is important because other studies indicate the importance of the opportunity. Poor people (who seem to be the profile of 'the burglar') don't always have access to the internet. So there is still doubt about the importance of social media concerning domestic burglary.

Another point concerning social media is that it has replaced the real social control. The use of social media differs depending on the generation.

Group 2

The impact of social media in the modus operandi of the burglars is getting bigger. For example WhatsApp and Viber are used to make appointments for certain matters such as the exchange of stolen goods.

The police don't have the technical needs, money, or means to cope with this problem.

Nevertheless, the impact of social media is countered by a study done in the Netherlands. The study shows that burglars do not use social media (Facebook, twitter) because the average burglar originates from the more lower class that do not always have access to social media. But in Bruges, there is an increasing trend in burglaries committed via the use of social media.

Apart from the existence of electronic security systems, there are still other new technologies. The electronic system can't match up to the physical security (the protection of hardware, programs, and networks of an agency or institution).

In Belgium, there's an important role for the *techno-preventive advisors* in the prevention of domestic burglary. They offer social technical advice but they are also concerned with the technical security 'attached' to the house. Therefore it is important to alert the people who are building a house, to 'build in' the security, rather than to 'attach' it later on.

Concerning the use of cameras on the streets, there's a difference between countries.

In the Netherlands, just as Germany, the cameras used in a specific area disappear once the objective (the reduction of crime) is reached.

In Ireland on the other hand, the CCTV system cameras may be placed on initiative of either the police or the local authorities.

Statement 2: The police are not able to cope with new technological revolutions as they do not know which position to take up on privacy-control in crime dilemma.

Both groups believe that policy-makers as well as citizens should have more faith in the police. They also both agree that, to gain this faith, a control- and accountability system should be implemented.

Group 1

It is important to distinguish between evidence and intelligence. Information can come to the police which cannot be used by the police as evidence due to the law on privacy. However, the information received (intelligence) can be a basis to continue the investigation looking for information which can be used as evidence according to privacy law. In many countries the public prosecutor's office has an important role in the criminal justice chain and ensures that the rules concerning privacy legislation are taken in account by the police.

Due to this answer, there is a second important question to ask: is the privacy-control in crime issues only affecting their job if it leads to judicial consequences? Do the police care about the (respect of) privacy and such?

The vision of the police on privacy control is that the balance between tackling crime, crime control and privacy has to be made by the politicians. The police only execute what they say. Even though sometimes they ask themselves "who do the politicians think are the bad guys, the police or the criminals?".

They do think the politicians must have more trust in the police as crime fighters and give them more means to realize their job. With the technologies the police can use, they are always one step behind the criminals. Sometimes they even have to collect the money on their own to provide for better systems.

The problem that confronts them, is that the politics should react into the own dynamic of new technologies. Currently, they decide after the evolution. Instead, they should be more proactive and anticipate more.

At this moment, it all comes down to this:

Either the politicians have more trust in the police and therefore give them the necessary tools and money to do their jobs properly. They have to be controlled by some kind of control system and by the accountability they have to give towards the politicians (e.g. every time a Belgian policeman searches something in the national databank, the system saves who searched for it, when he did this, how often..).

Meanwhile the police try starting up investigations based on information it receives and be creative in finding the evidence to support it.

About the control system: since the Salduz-legislation, there is always the lawyer who observes the investigation.

In Romania, camera footage is admissible in court as part of evidence. Images taken by CCTV will be used to identify the perpetrator corroborated with other evidence.

The discussion about privacy-legislation does not take place in Germany. The reason is that they never use the fruit of the poisoned tree. Information gained from new technology is illegal. Because of that this is never allowed to be used as evidence.

Another point of discussion is that the smartphones, laptops,... of the delinquents may be checked by the police. The interpretation of what they find on it is often linked to the criminal facts that have taken place. This might be dangerous because it is not neutral anymore. But, this proposition has been nuanced because the police has to gather all the evidence. This means, à charge and à décharge. It is the judge that later on decides about the value of the evidence.

A 'failure tolerance culture' has to be introduced. Policemen do make mistakes but we may not reverse the roles. The police are still at service of the citizen. They are the 'good ones'.

In group 2 this statement was skipped.

Statement 3: To what extent does technology contribute to solving a problem and does impact factors have to take sociological effects in account?

Group 1

This might be important for the politicians but the police on the other hand like to have results quickly. Because of that, a quick reaction is more important than to take the long-term effects of certain technologies into account.

Fact is that citizens are unaware of the fact that they give away lots of information about themselves. So, if it is somewhere 'out there', why wouldn't the police use it? Nowadays, the police may only use the information 'if necessary'. But, once again, they do not think it's their job to decide about the necessity, this is the monopoly of the judge. Even though, there's a discussion about what happens before it gets to the judge.

Group 2

A policemen's answer was that this is the task of those who create the different laws. They have the opportunity to take the effects into account.

Instead of contributing to solving a problem, technology rather creates the problem concerning the fact that the crime fighters are always a step behind the criminals. The example given is the various social media a burglar may use (think of Facebook, WhatsApp, Viber,...). It just isn't possible for the police to check all the different media. Instead, they have to 'zoom in' on one social media canal in particular.

In the Netherlands, external people create the software and tools for the police. But they do it in consideration with all the important players who are involved in (the use of) those software and tools.

Conclusion

The same technologies are used throughout the different countries. However there are differences concerning the balance between the privacy legislation and crime control between the countries and the (amount of the) implications.

We may not neglect the importance of basic security and the importance of victims (contact them, inform them about the investigation...).

There are a few problems:

1. The industry of prevention is for the majority private: This has as an indirect consequence that people who try to protect themselves must have money. However the police try to control this when they make a partnership with private companies. This is important because the poorer people may be more victimized if they cannot afford the means to protect their homes.
2. We must be aware that the implementation of new technologies may lead to a false sense of safety. There is a contradiction between the crime control and the expectations.
3. There is the problem of displacement. The amount of crime is not reduced, the crime just displaces from zone to zone, from city to city.
4. A balance must be found between privacy legislation, crime control and how the police use new technologies. Therefore a control system must be implemented and we must have trust in the police (e.g. as a result of/due to the accountability and good awareness of using databanks).
5. People are often to slack about the security of their own house. It would be beneficial if certain basic security measures were complied with.

There is still a great need for more research into the subject of new technologies. There is no proof of their effectiveness.



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