



Organized Crime Research Brief no. 4

Mobility of Criminal Groups

BUILDING A SAFE AND RESILIENT CANADA

Criminal groups are more self-organizing and emergent than strategic when setting up in new locations. Preventing criminal opportunities can stifle the migration of organized crime.

The idea that criminal groups and organizations migrate to extend their powers across geographical locations has been a recurrent theme in organized crime and criminological research for over a half century. The main objective of this report was to identify the push and pull factors that help us understand how and why criminal groups, organizations, or general organized crime patterns are present across “settings,” such as geographical locations, criminal markets, and legitimate industries. Push factors refer to forces that drive criminal groups from a setting, while pull factors refer to forces that draw criminal groups to a setting.

This report examined the findings from past research that posited themes and theories regarding the shifts and patterns in the mobility of criminal groups. Due to the lack of Canadian-specific research on this issue, this review was primarily based on what was learned from European countries and the United States.

This research shows that, more often than not, social and economic circumstances in a particular geographic location, criminal market, or vulnerable legitimate industry results in the emergence of organized crime. Thus, the authors suggested that preventing the criminal opportunities in an area could be an effective approach to addressing the problem of organized crime, than repressing one particular organized criminal group at a time.

There is a lack of empirical evidence to support the claim that criminal organizations are intentionally or strategically mobilizing themselves to seize opportunities in various foreign geographical locations across the world. Instead, the authors of this report

concluded that criminal groups are, for the most part, the product of offenders’ adaptations to the constraints of, and illicit opportunities in, their surrounding environments. Such groups tend to be self-organizing and emergent in settings where there are considerable vulnerabilities to exploit across a variety of cross-border, cross-market, or cross-industry contexts.

Moreover, criminal groups that successfully mobilize outside of their area of origin are likely already specialized in a given market and should be treated as such. The necessary combination of both strategic (expansionistic) and emergent (having a specialized illicit niche) elements in successful moves confirms that significant challenges face any criminal group that intends to expand its activities over a wider geographical range. Achieving such an expansion is much more difficult than often believed, largely because no single criminal group can realistically do everything and be everywhere all the time.

Important factors that push members of an organized crime group into new markets or geographic locations include: increased law-enforcement; increased competition from other criminal groups; increased socioeconomic status; decreasing cultural marginalization; and a raise in criminal group legitimacy. Pull factors that draw members of an organized crime group to a market or location include: mass demand for an illicit good or service; access to supply; lax law enforcement; high impunity/corruption; proximity to trafficking routes; porous borders; the presence of brokers and facilitators; the reputation of local criminal groups; local ties and kinship networks; poorly regulated economic sectors; overlap between upper and underworld actors; low technology and professionalization in an economic sector; high number of unemployed, disenfranchised workers; and lack of conventional products and services.

This report indicates the potential value of the knowledge of the identified push and pulls factors for assisting investigators and policy-makers in their efforts to prevent organized crime from moving into new settings, and possibly help them identify settings at risk. This exercise is a first step in helping to facilitate the regular gathering and use of intelligence information on these push and pull factors. Currently, the explicit identification and analysis of such push and pull factors are not among the principle foci of criminal intelligence gathering or law enforcement operations against organized crime. Information on how and why criminal groups establish themselves in new areas could potentially make a direct contribution to the development of the overall strategy to prevent and suppress organized crime.

Note: The framework presented in this paper was reviewed by three European experts in the migration of criminal groups. Their examination of the framework against real-world examples and suggestions for elaborations of the framework can be found in Research Briefs 15, 16, and 17.

Morselli, Carlo, and Mathilde Turcotte, with Valentina Tenti. (2010) *The Mobility of Criminal Groups*. Ottawa, ON: Public Safety Canada.

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