

The prevention of organized crime

Sofia 23 June 06

Dr. Paul Larsson

Ass. Professor Police University College of Oslo

Former head of analysis and crime prevention department at the Norwegian National Police Directorate.

As former head of the department of analysis and crime prevention at the National Police Directorate in Oslo one of my tasks was to lead the work on the National Threat Assessment for the Norwegian Police in 2003. With a past as a “pure” researcher and scientist at the rather radical institute of criminology in Oslo I found this task rather painful. Painful, not because I did lack resources or experts to lean on in this work, no this were no problem, it was painful because we had to make statements on the dangers and threats of crime to society. These statements we knew would in turn be used by the media, by politicians and by the police themselves to claim a stake in the war against organized crime, money laundering, white-collar crime and so on. The political pressure to come up with the *right* villains and the *suitable* threats were hard to ignore even for a thick-skinned man like me.

The most painful experience was simply that there was so much we simply did not know – especially about organized crime. And the quality of what we thought we knew was at times rather lousy – this we knew.

The problem with organized crime of course is that *everybody knows* that it is very dangerous, and violent, and corruptive to society, rational, widespread, that there is big amounts of money and that these gets laundered in advanced and mysterious ways. So there must be placed lots of resources in the fight against it and rules must be bent to make the fight of evil effective. But wait a minute there is something wrong here. What do we really know of these things we had to ask ourselves.

There was little relief in turning abroad to other intelligence units and their work with international threat assessments. To our dread we found that the quality of their work was also lacking. They had the same problems as we had in getting information of quality and relevance especially in the field of organized crime. We also soon found out that there was a tendency to produce “truths” in the good old fashion that some more or less lose fact or piece

of information got re-circulated so many times that it got established as something “everybody knows”.

To cut this story short, we did manage to write a threat assessment, but we also knew that what we put down in print often was rather shaky stuff – but we also stated this in the report, and we also put up all the question marks, asked for more research and more knowledge in depth about all the things we just don’t know.

In short there is no way we will get close to work effectively in preventing organized crime and reducing its costs and damage to society before we know what organized crime is and what its costs and damage are. What we are doing in Norway and in most other countries in the world is fighting a myth and a symbol – in many cases we are not dealing with the right thing. How can the measures taken and all the work and resources put down hit the target if it does not know how the target looks like and where it is?

In Norway, as in many other countries, it often looks like the resources goes into fighting the same old suspects and villains. For a criminologist there is often something disturbingly familiar with the crooks hunted down under the heading organized criminals. Why do so few ask and point out the similarities with the common known property or drug criminals – at least in Norway there are few cases where they have white-collars.

What do we know?

Who are they? In Norway the following groups are the one pointed out.

What is their damage?

Type of Org. Crime	Loss of lives	Damage to health	Money loses	Loss of trust in central institutions	Loss of taxes
Network of robbers	Yes – killings NOKAS	Violent culture. Psychic	Big robberies of money transports,	Yes. Threats to police and justice	?

		problems in connection.	banks and post. High cost of policework.	personnel	
Smugglers of alcohol. Moonshiners	Customers and in-group killings.	Poisons and bad alcohol, excessive drinking. Youths	Yes – loss of customers to the legal monopoly and breweries	Police and Customs officers.	Yes!
Biker groups – Hells A, Bandidos	Killings, mainly in-group	Culture of violence. Money “collectors” – torpedoes. Hash and amphetamine importing and pushing	?	Threats to police and justice personnel. Outlaws questions central institutions.	Some
Drug smugglers	No	Yes – drug use, bad drugs	Legal drug industry?	Ineffective regulation questions the authority	?
A and B gang	Yes – mainly between gangs	Yes – pushing of drugs. Violence	Theft, petty crimes etc.	Gang war – police trust	?
Lithuanian gangs	No	Yes – drugs – amphetamine	Petty Theft, outboard motors etc.	?	?

The direct corruption of police and customs seems to be a small problem, but our knowledge of this is very scarce.

Money laundering – lacking knowledge, but reason to believe the size is moderate or small.

The numbers of active criminals that can be called organized criminals are low – around 100 are so far the best estimate – by the police themselves (Politidirektoratet 2005)

Is it worse than other social evils – like traditional crimes? In the mind of most people – does not seem so. Hard to say, very hard to compare.

One of the most remarkable things about “the war on organized crime” in general and in Norway is the nearly universal lack of interest in criminal preventive initiatives. The war on organized crime has come to be totally dominated by traditional law and order schemes – it is more call for police resources, wider power and new measures in the fight not to talk about longer sentences and more secure prisons to lock these hardened criminals in. When the idea of general prevention and the general failure of prisons as solutions to crime problems is well known and more or less officially accepted in Norwegian officialdom this does not seem to be the case for organized and white-collar crime. These criminals are more rational and cynical than normal criminals – so there are no other solutions – but is it so? Do we really know?

When Problem oriented policing and more proactive ways of policing are seen as ideal for the working of the Norwegian Police force. This knowledge based proactive ideas has had little impact on the working of the units specialised on organized crime – even if organized and white-collar crime seems to be well suited for this way of policing. At least much better than the traditional way of working. Again the fight of organized crime seems to represent a stronghold of traditional reactive ways of police work (intelligence led policing is the key word internationally – but what does this mean? It mainly means more use of informers, surveillance of suspects, untraditional police methods and tactical and operative analysis).

What we don't know?

In Norway we are usually blind for the white-collar crime connection. We don't see it because of ways we have organized the police. White-Collar Crime is Økokrim – and organized crime is NCIS and the Oslo Police dept. These two worlds don't meet.

Example the *catalogue fraud* cases in Oslo 2002 - 2004. I would say this represents classic organized fraud, but it was conceived as white-collar crime by the police.

What do we need to know before we try to make preventive efforts against organized crime?

Better knowledge of the scope and size of the problem.

Better knowledge of the reasons for joining organized crime groups and how they originate.

Better knowledge of the harms and dangers.

Better knowledge of the dynamics and inner workings of organized criminal networks.

Better knowledge of what they actually do and how they do it (corruption, money laundering etc)!

Better knowledge about *what* works, when and for whom when it comes to prevent organized crime. There are no simple solutions – prevention must be tailor-made.

And so on.

Alternatives to the traditional re-active way of regulating organized crime

- Fighting the crime or the criminal groups?

First of all we must decide what we want to prevent. Is the problems the organized groups themselves or the things they do? It is not automatically such that a fighting of the networks and groups will reduce the level of crimes.

My suggestion – go after the crimes – their law breaking behaviour, not the groups. Example the prevention of biker related crimes in Norway. Make it hard for them to operate.

- Reducing the harms.

The war on organized crime is un-winnable and we must ask ourselves the central question of what price we are willing to pay to reduce the level of crime. What if the price tag is the civil society?

We must balance the harms of regulation against the positive effects and always ask if there are better solutions.

The rather strict regulation of alcohol and narcotics in Norway is based on the belief that this system will gain the health of the population. Low levels of drinking and drug using is positive both for the individuals health, but also for society at large. The damaging effects of alcohol, tobacco and drugs like amphetamine and heroin are well documented.

The question – of course – is if this use of a “penal regulatory solution” is working and compared to what. Maybe other ways of regulation can work better than the use of police and harsh sentencing.

Norway has 10 – 15 000 (?) heroin users.

The smuggling of hash goes up in tens of tons a year.

Amphetamine is also a popular drug – police and customs confiscated 100 – 200 kilo each year earlier in this decade.

There is immense alcohol smuggling – today it is mainly in beer and wine. It is often assumed that 1/3 of all alcohol consumed in Norway is smuggled or homemade.

- Re-regulating the field.

- Reducing the demand for illegal goods.

Easier said than done (Reuter).