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Kleemans, E.R.; van de Bunt, H.G.

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The Social Organisation of Human Trafficking

E.R. Kleemans & H.G. van de Bunt¹

1. Introduction

The public perception of human trafficking in Western Europe is heavily influenced by shocking events such as the Dover incident in 2000, when 58 Chinese immigrants suffocated in a lorry while trying to reach the United Kingdom. Tragic incidents like this attract a lot of media attention and human trafficking is often associated with ruthless criminals and helpless victims. The media and the scientific literature frequently refer to Chinese ‘snakehead-organisations’, which are often depicted as strictly organised transnational criminal organisations. During the police investigation and the criminal trial much more information about the ‘Dover drama’ came to light. The unfortunate Chinese were undoubtedly victims. During their journey through many countries, they had endured protracted hardships. However, the social organisation of the smuggling ring turned out to be much more complex than first assumed. Although there was definitely a Chinese connection, the lorry driver was a Dutch national and several Turkish offenders were closely involved as well. The Dover incident made it clear that there is very little systematic insight into the social organisation of human trafficking in Western Europe.

As in other Western European countries, human smuggling has only recently been criminalized in the Netherlands (i.e. in 1993). It is important to note that according to Dutch penal law ‘smuggling illegal immigrants’ and ‘human trafficking for sexual exploitation’ are two different offences. Although the women who are forced to prostitute themselves often have been smuggled to the Netherlands, the emphasis in the latter offence is on sexual exploitation. The main focus of this chapter, however, is on smuggling illegal immigrants.

With its large airport (Amsterdam Schiphol), its multi-ethnic society and its asylum policy, (which, until recently, made it relatively easy to get a temporal stay in an asylum facility), the Netherlands is important as a transit country for smuggling illegal immigrants to the United Kingdom, the Scandinavian countries, Canada, and the USA (see also: IAM 2001: 26-27). However, building up a new life and making a living without being noticed by the authorities is difficult in this small and densely populated country. Everybody has to be registered for housing, work, and taxes, and these records are increasingly interconnected (see also: Engbersen et al. 2002). Hence, the Netherlands is more important as a transit country than as a country of destination, although about 15% of the illegal immigrants residing in the Netherlands have been smuggled by international smuggling rings (Staring 1999).

The data used in this chapter are part of a continuing research project, the so-called ‘organised crime monitor’. The main sources of this research project are files of closed police investigations of criminal groups (see for more information: Kleemans & van de Bunt 1999; Van de Bunt & Kleemans 2001; Kleemans et al. 2002). Using telephone bugs, observation techniques, interrogations of perpetrators and witnesses, and several special investigation methods, these extensive police investigations paint a detailed picture of the doings and dealings of the criminal groups involved and their social environment. Up to this moment, 80 cases that were investigated during the period 1996-1999 have been analysed.² Ten cases involve human trafficking, i.e. the smuggling of illegal immigrants (the *appendix* provides a brief description of these cases). In view of the lack of empirical knowledge about human trafficking we think it worthwhile to present the major findings derived from these ten cases. The case studies can only serve as a basis for *qualitative* statements about the smuggling of illegal immigrants. What mechanisms lie behind the smuggling of illegal immigrants? What forms of co-operation can be discerned? Should traditional representations be modified as a

result of our findings? Given the depth of the qualitative analysis and the empirical richness of the case studies, we should be able to answer these questions. However, our cases are not necessarily representative of the full spectrum of human trafficking. Hence, all *quantitative* statements in this chapter such as ‘many’ or ‘often’ must be read within the context of the ten cases we analysed.

2. The dynamics of criminal associations

The debate on organised crime is often influenced by comparisons with formal organisations. Although the ‘bureaucracy-model’ of organised crime has been challenged by scholars such as Albin (1971), Ianni and Reus-Ianni (1972) and Smith (1975), the idea keeps coming up in the media and the public debate. It is, for instance, frequently suggested that the smuggling of Chinese migrants is controlled by Chinese Triads or similar ‘snakehead-organisations’ with a pyramidal structure. However, this is not the case according to Zhang (1997), who points to the role of criminal networks in the smuggling of Chinese to the United States:

‘... a network of social contacts contributing their resources to a profit-seeking activity. The organizational and behavioral features of these smuggling rings can be best understood as task forces with specific goals and involving individuals with specific functions. The alliances are fluid and temporary’ (Zhang 1997: 328).

We found the same fluid and temporary alliances in our cases. The most distinctive characteristic of the criminal associations we analysed was their *dynamic* nature. Long-running police investigations can be especially useful for bringing out the fact that criminal associations are fluid and subject to change. This can be illustrated by elaborating upon one of our cases (case 2):

‘Illegal immigrants from Iran were smuggled by aeroplane via Europe to Canada. The perpetrators involved were A. and B., who lived in the Netherlands, as well as several compatriots in Iran and Canada (among others ex-clients and family members). They probably smuggled on average 240 to 300 persons per year. A. had a good reputation as a counterfeiter of passports, which stimulated his supply of clients as well as his supply of passports. So many suppliers and buyers of passports frequented his premises, that a fellow smuggler of immigrants called his house literally ‘a passport market’. At a certain moment A. had a stock of as many as 400 passports at his disposal, enabling him to find a ‘plausible’ passport for any client, travel route and destination, which was subsequently adapted by a relatively simple ‘photo change’. B., an asylum seeker who had been refused admittance to Germany, established contact with A. in order to travel to Canada. As the attempted exit failed, B. returned to A.’s premises and became acquainted with the daily practice of smuggling illegal immigrants. Soon after B. had taken the initiative to assist A., he received a salary for his activities. After some time B.’s family ties resulted in contacts with D. and E. in Iran, increasing B.’s role in establishing contacts with potential clients, maintaining his liaisons with Iran, and managing the financial aspects of the smuggling activities. A. devoted almost all his time to his ‘specialisation’ (the forgery of documents), to buying tickets and passports, and to accompanying his clients to various airports. The illegal activities increased so much that they called on C., a client who had a good command of the English language. Furthermore, they were supported by A. and B.’s girl friends and by clients waiting to get out of the country. After a certain period of time A. and B. clashed; B. was more interested in an exuberant lifestyle than in learning A.’s tips and tricks. Yet A. tried to teach his trade to three

new companions of B. Subsequently, A. and B. went their separate ways, each with their own associates.’

This case illustrates a mechanism that we found many other cases. Successful criminal associations disperse and generate new forms of associations. People in the direct social environment are drawn more and more into the illegal activities. Sometimes they merely facilitate the smuggling activities, but sometimes they rise to vital positions, such as B. and C. This process is generally referred to as ‘recruitment’. Such a term, however, suggests a far more passive role of the recruited persons than we come across in our case studies. In several cases people gradually but knowingly became involved in illegal activities. In some cases it is rather the ‘recruited’ person who takes the initiative than the criminal association. The transfer of knowledge and contacts creates a ‘snowball effect’: people get in touch with criminal associations through their social relations, and - as they go along - their dependency on the resources of other people (such as money, knowledge and contacts) gradually declines. Subsequently they go their own way: they generate new criminal associations, attracting people from their own social environment, and the story begins all over again. In our view, this snowball effect is more characteristic of the development of criminal associations than the traditional view on ‘recruitment’: criminal associations recruiting ‘outsiders’, who start with doing the ‘dirty jobs’ and who are able to climb the hierarchic ladder by proving their capabilities.³ The traditional view grossly underestimates the dynamics we have discerned in the analysed cases.

Human trafficking is a consensual crime. Essential to the nature and size of the activities is the manner in which smugglers manage to mobilise and recruit customers. Equally important is the ability of the smugglers to deal with the logistic problems they face when trying to transport their customers to the country of destination. In our cases the supply of customers increases via social relations. Satisfied customers or their family members introduce new customers. In the above-mentioned case, the introduction of acquaintances by acquaintances forced A. to increase his output of forged documents. It should be noted that the communication concerning these illegal activities seems to be relatively ‘open’, a pattern which is also demonstrated by other cases: customers are recruited through word-of-mouth advertising and the handing out of business cards (e.g. cases 1 and 4).

The quality of the forgeries is essential to the way the smuggling operation is conducted. When their passports and travel documents are skilfully forged, the customers are able to use normal means of transport such as aeroplanes. They can travel with all the comforts of ordinary passengers and reach their country of destination without having to hide in lorries behind orange crates. Quality forgeries can serve as an impetus to the dynamics of smuggling associations. Success fosters success. We found in our cases that the presence of an accomplished forger not only resulted in the expansion of the smuggling activities within his own circle, but also in the dispersal of these activities. He stimulated fellow smugglers in his direct social environment. Passports were being traded to match the right customer or to fit a certain route. Sometimes customers changed hands between organisations on certain stretches of their journey.

3. Structures in the social organisation of human trafficking

The fact that the organisations we studied are often fluid and impermanent does not mean that their composition and division of labour are brought about by coincidence. There are definite patterns in the organisation of the activities and in the alliances that are formed. First of all, it should be stressed that the structure of criminal alliances is influenced by the logistics of the illegal enterprise (Sieber en Bögel 1993). This is particularly true for human trafficking, since

its core activity is the transport from source country to country of destination. The easiest way for the smugglers to solve logistic problems is to obtain forged travel documents and identification papers or – when children are involved – find an adult travel companion so the children can travel with the passport holder. In these cases an aeroplane ticket is all that is needed for the smuggling operation and the core of the organisation can be limited to a small number of people in the source country, the country of destination and possibly a transit country (e.g. cases 2 and 3).

‘In case 2 links in Iran, the Netherlands and Canada are sufficient, while in case 1 there are links in India, Russia, Poland, Germany, the Netherlands and the UK. Every member of the chain is responsible for part of the route and will transfer the customers to the next link. In case 1 it takes much more time and effort to co-ordinate and to settle the payments between all the participants than in case 2.’

In other cases, when the journey is made overland, the many stages in the trip and the obstacles that have to be overcome, complicate the logistic process. Local expertise and contacts in various transit countries must be deployed. What we find in human trafficking is a chain of interdependent links along the smuggling route. Every link is possibly connected to other chains: passports and forged documents are traded, while customers are sometimes taken care of by other groups on parts of the route. The world of human trafficking can be described as a network, within which the organisers of certain routes (or parts of routes) occupy key positions. Apart from the larger players, many smaller operators are also active in the field, such as individual ‘travel guides’ who are responsible for the transport of five to six persons per month on one particular route, or people who arrange for the reunion with family members, friends or acquaintances themselves. Some police investigations give us a picture of the entire chain (e.g. cases 1, 2 and 3), while others highlight only parts of the smuggling route (e.g. cases 7, 9 and 10). Given the logistic importance of properly forged documents, expert forgers hold central positions in these networks (see also: IAM 2001). The forgers in our cases not only provide a vital service to other smugglers, but are often the key figure in the smuggling associations (e.g. cases 2, 5 and 9).

Secondly, smuggling networks may often be fluid, but they are not the result of mere chance: their structure is influenced by social relations. The perpetrators co-operate when there are social ties between them (see also Kleemans & Van de Bunt 1999). The closer offenders live together, the more daily activities they have in common, and the smaller the social distance between them, the more probable it is that ties emerge between them. This results in a certain kind of clustering, based on factors such as geographical distance, ethnicity, education, and age. These social ties enable the smugglers to run a world-wide operation; through their social ties, the associations in our cases are able to bridge the gaps between the source countries, the European continent and countries of destination such as the UK, Canada and the USA. The central figures in smuggling networks often derive their position from crucial contacts. (Van de Bunt & Kleemans 2003) Without these contacts, smugglers are forced to appeal to others. For instance, the ‘joint venture’ described in case 8 was able to organise the passage to the Scandinavian countries, but had to rely on another group to get their customers to the UK, because they did not have the necessary contacts in Britain.

Thirdly, we discovered that the main suspects in our cases have very little in common with the image of the ‘distant mastermind’. On the contrary, they were often very active in forging documents and/or maintaining relations with their contacts abroad. This seems to make sense, because they owe their central position to these contacts. They cannot always conduct their

business over the telephone. In case 1 we encountered a businessman constantly on the move, while in other cases people commuted between the Netherlands and source countries (such as Iraq in case 8), transit countries (such as Italy in case 9) or countries of destination (such as the UK in case 10). Sometimes physical distances have to be bridged in order to take care of business.

The main suspects in the cases we analysed did not limit themselves to forging documents or maintaining contacts with their accomplices abroad. They were also involved in ordinary activities such as buying tickets, picking up or accompanying customers and finding them temporary accommodation. Sometimes the main suspects contract out certain activities, such as forging passports or transporting customers, but at other times they take care of these matters themselves (e.g. case 9). To draw a distinction between the 'distant mastermind' and the staff carrying out the work, would not only be artificial, but also misleading. Rather, the key players owe their position to their involvement in the day-to-day business.

4. Ruthless offenders and helpless victims?

Most human traffickers in our cases do not match the stereotype of the unscrupulous criminal who is out to make big money by exploiting helpless victims. We certainly do not mean to underplay cases of exploitation and tragic incidents, but the cases we analysed, are mostly about mutual consent and mutual benefit. In only one case ruthless offenders with no regard for their victims were involved. In this case of Chinese human smugglers (case 5) we found threats of violence, and (sexual) abuse. When the customers failed to pay the cost of their trip on time, hostages were taken (see also Soudijn 2001). In all our other cases, abuse or threats of violence were practically absent, even when the smuggling operation ended in disaster or payments could not be met. Some human traffickers even give a 'smuggling guarantee' (e.g. cases 2, 3 and 7). If the customers do not reach their country of destination, they can try again. In some cases the price is negotiable and flexible terms of payment are offered. It is often possible to make a down payment at the start of the trip and pay off the remainder of the debt in the country of destination. Sometimes the traffickers are prepared to wait for their customers to earn the money after their arrival.

In some cases it is certainly justified to paint human traffickers as ruthless criminals, but we should not lose sight of the fact that many offenders supply a valued service, be it for their own financial benefit or out of humane considerations. It should be noted that almost all members of the organisations that we investigated, were smuggled into the Netherlands themselves at some point in the past. Former customers sometimes lend a helping hand to the network that brought them to the Netherlands or even become members of the organisation. In all cases financial gain is a driving factor to enter into the smuggling business, but in only two cases the perpetrators seemed to act solely for profit. Usually there are other motives involved as well: the desire to help fellow-countrymen, a sense of duty towards them, or social obligations.

In our cases of human trafficking we seem to be dealing with clients rather than with helpless victims. In some cases the parents of smuggled children, as well as others who came to the Netherlands with the aid of a smuggling ring, stated explicitly that they were not willing to assist in any criminal investigation. They regarded the traffickers not as criminals, but as people who gave them the opportunity to have a better future in another country. In contrast to the cases of human trafficking that make the front pages of the newspapers, our cases very rarely revealed degrading travelling conditions. Relatively comfortable means of transport were used, such as aeroplanes, trains, buses and private cars. The smugglers have an obvious interest in satisfying their customers, because word-of-mouth advertising will bring in new

business. In some ethnic communities the smugglers are well known and people know who to appeal to:

‘A fellow suspect stated that everyone in their ethnic community knew that A. was a human trafficker and that he was the one to go to. Because people in every asylum facility knew his name, he received calls from the Netherlands and from Germany, from people who wanted to know about the possibilities to travel to the UK or to the Scandinavian countries (case 10).’

Judging by the cases we investigated, human trafficking is not considered to be a ‘crime’ by those involved, but rather a ‘service’. People speak relatively openly about human smuggling and family members, friends and acquaintances often lend assistance by buying tickets, transporting people or giving them shelter. Centres for asylum seekers emerge from our cases as convenient places for temporary accommodation (e.g. cases 2, 9 and 10) and as all-round facilities for smugglers. In case 9 a human trafficker even refused the offer of a place to live on his own, because the centre allowed him so many opportunities for his smuggling business. Hence, the traditional image of the merciless offender and the helpless victim may be appropriate in some cases, but it ignores the impetus behind many other cases of human trafficking: the fact that the smugglers, their clients and their social environment have a clear, common interest in the success of what they regard as a customer-related service.

5. Conclusion

Smuggling rings provide a much sought after connection between poor and/or dangerous countries (such as Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, India, China, and several African countries) and rich, democratic countries (such as the member states of the European Union, Canada, the USA, and Japan). The main suspects of the analysed cases very often have social ties with both the countries of origin and the countries of destination. Traffickers and clients often share the same ethnic background and many traffickers were smuggled to the Netherlands themselves before they started their smuggling operation.

The Netherlands functions primarily as a transit country for the United Kingdom, the Scandinavian countries, Canada, and the USA. People often enter the Netherlands by air (through Amsterdam-Schiphol airport, but also through nearby Belgian or German airports) or by land, taking a mainly ‘Eastern’ route (Eastern Europe, Austria and/or Germany) or ‘Southern’ route (Italy and/or France, and Belgium). The analysed cases show the importance of the so-called ‘blue borders’ (e.g. the Mediterranean, the Channel, and the Atlantic), and the borders between EU member states and non-EU countries. For smuggling illegal immigrants, the European Union is virtually ‘borderless’, apart from some physically isolated countries such as Greece, the United Kingdom, and Ireland.

The analysed cases reveal smuggling networks, in which the organisers of (sub)routes are the major players. The main suspects often connect the countries of origin to the countries of destination by their social ties. The analysed cases also illuminate the crucial role of forged documents. Forged documents make the logistics of smuggling much less complicated, as smuggled immigrants can simply travel by aeroplane. The core of these smuggling rings can be quite small, consisting of some people in the country of origin, (possibly) a transit country, and the country of destination. Many main suspects are also closely involved in forging documents.

Finally, the analysis shows that this illegal market is mainly based upon a *symbiosis* between offenders, smuggled illegal immigrants, and their families. Although we would not want to trivialise dramatic incidents and tragic cases of exploitation and violence, most cases are fostered by mutual consent and mutual benefit. In contrast to cases concerning trafficking

women for sexual exploitation, smuggled people are very often better characterised as clients than as victims. Although these clients are highly dependent and, thus, potentially highly vulnerable, smugglers have a clear interest in keeping their customers satisfied.

Appendix: selected cases

Case 1

Human trafficking from India. An estimated 200 persons per year were smuggled, with the Netherlands serving as a transit country. The journey went via Russia and Poland to Germany and/or the Netherlands and from there on mostly to the UK, Canada or the USA. Cars, ships and aeroplanes were used as means of transport.

Case 2

Human trafficking and passport forgery. An average of 240-300 persons per year were brought from Iran via the Netherlands to Canada. The customers were given the following options: 1) to travel directly to the Netherlands on their own passport with an authentic visa; 2) to travel on their own passport to Asia or the United Arab Emirates (no visa required) and from there on with forged documents to the Netherlands and on to Canada; 3) to travel directly to their chosen country of destination with forged papers. The organisation also used forged invitations by companies and registered airport personnel, enabling the migrants to enter the country without problems.

Case 3

Trafficking in children. Young boys, most of them aged 8 to 15, were smuggled from India to Europe in the company of fake parents. The real parents were charged almost 12,000 Euros per child. The trip was organised by the owner of a travel agency in India. The fake parents took the children to Europe, travelling with their regular passports, on which their own children were included. They travelled by air to Germany, France or Switzerland and from there on by train to the Netherlands, where the children were put up at a temporary address. The next pair of fake parents would then take them to the USA.

Case 4

Human trafficking from Turkey. The customers were transported from Turkey to the Netherlands on Russian and Polish ships, in containers on lorries via Belgium, France and Germany, or directly by air. At first, the migrants were moved to the UK in lorries, on the ferry from France. Increased surveillance on the British side of the Channel forced the organisation to change its modus operandi and put the migrants as stowaways on board of ships in Dutch and Belgian ports. Mediated by an illegal fellow suspect, this was done with the aid of crewmembers, sometimes with the captain's knowledge. Occasionally visas were applied for via Germany. The English branch of the organisation helped the migrants disembark and, when necessary, arranged jobs or a source of income for them.

Case 5

Human trafficking from China and passport forgery. The route was usually the same: the customers were transported, mostly by air, from China via Moscow or the Ukraine to Prague. From here - sometimes via Austria - the customers were smuggled to their country of destination (e.g. the Netherlands and Germany).

Case 6

The group was involved in arranging marriages of convenience, in particular 'relationships of convenience'. The main suspect and his daughter paired people off, with the purpose of obtaining a residence permit for the person in an illegal status. In addition, forged naturalisation papers were produced through a foundation.

Case 7

Human trafficking from Iraq. The organisation was connected to accomplices in Iraq, who were took care of the departures. Some of the customers were brought from Yemen. This group was also part of a network of smuggling organisations that made use of the overland route via Turkey, Greece, Albania and Italy to Northern Europe.

Case 8

Human trafficking and passport forgery. This group was mainly involved in transporting Iraqi men from the Netherlands to Sweden. The journey went from Schiphol Airport via Paris to Norway or Sweden. The group arranged the trip for one or two persons at a time and supplied the necessary forged documents.

Case 9

Human trafficking and trading forged passports. The first group bought and adapted stolen passports and was involved in human trafficking from Iran and Iraq to the Netherlands and the UK. The second group used smuggling routes from Italy to Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands, and from the Netherlands to Scandinavia. The third group acted as a buyer of forged passports and exploited illegal window prostitutes from Eastern Europe.

Case 10

Human trafficking, receiving stolen goods and passport forgery. The group smuggled Iraqi nationals from the Netherlands to the UK. The customers were transported through Belgium and France to Calais and then taken to the UK on the ferry to Dover.

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Information about the authors:

Dr Edward R. Kleemans (1967) is a senior research fellow at the Research and Documentation Centre (WODC) of the Ministry of Justice, the Netherlands. After his PhD thesis on strategic crime analysis and urban crime patterns (1996) he started working on the so-called ‘organised crime monitor’, an ongoing systematic analysis of police files on organised crime in the Netherlands. The major reports of this monitor were published in 1999 and 2002 (*Organised Crime in the Netherlands*; Kleemans et al., 1998; 2002) and are currently being translated into English. He also published articles on strategic crime analysis, residential burglary, repeat victimisation, the rational choice approach and organised crime. Since 2000 he is also an editor of the Dutch Criminological Journal (*Tijdschrift voor Criminologie*).

Prof. Henk van de Bunt is professor of criminology at the Vrije University Amsterdam and the Erasmus University in Rotterdam. He was director of the Research and Documentation Centre (WODC) of the Ministry of Justice from 1994 to 2000. His fields of interest are organised crime, corporate crime and the administration of criminal justice. He is one of the founders of the Center for Information and Research on Organized Crime in The Netherlands (CIROC).

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² The case studies start with interviewing the police officers and public prosecutors involved, with regard to the following questions: 1. What kind of criminal groups engage in organized crime in the Netherlands?; 2. What forms of illegal activities do these groups engage in and how do they operate?; 3. How do these groups interact with the opportunities and risks of their environment?; 4. What are the proceeds of the criminal activities and how do criminal groups spend these proceeds? These questions in elaborated form are included in an extensive checklist, which is used during the interviews (see for more information: Kleemans et al. 1998; Kleemans et al. 2002). After the interviews one of the six researchers of the team checks all the relevant police data, resulting in a completed checklist.

³ Cressey (1969: 236). The frequently cited ‘initiation rituals’ also fit into this traditional view. For an overview of the literature about ‘initiation rituals’ see Paoli (1997: 97-154).