EXPLORING SERIOUS AND ORGANISED CRIME
ACROSS IRELAND AND THE UK

TOWARDS A SHARED UNDERSTANDING
OF A SHARED THREAT

British Embassy
Dublin

THE AZURE FORUM
FOR CONTEMPORARY SECURITY STRATEGY

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS & ACRONYMS

AGS	An Garda Síochána
AI	Artificial Intelligence
AML	Anti-Money Laundering
BEC	Business Email Compromise
CAB	Criminal Assets Bureau
CDSC	Criminally Dedicated Secure Communications
CTA	Common Travel Area
CPI	Corruption Perceptions Index
DoJ	Department of Justice
EU	European Union
Eurojust	European Union Agency for Criminal Justice Cooperation
Europol	European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation
E2EE	End-to-End Encryption
FinTech	Financial Technology
FOG	Fraudulently Obtained but Genuine
GB	Great Britain
GITOC	Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime
ICT	Information Communications Technology
Interpol	International Criminal Police Organization
IoT	Internet of Things
MDMA	Methylenedioxymethamphetamine [ecstasy]
MSHT	Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking
NCA	National Crime Agency
NI	Northern Ireland
NPS	New Psychoactive Substances
NRM	National Referral Mechanism
OCG/N	Organised Crime Group/Network
OCTF	Organised Crime Task Force
PCTF	Paramilitary Crime Task Force
PGP	'Pretty Good Privacy'
PSNI	Police Service of Northern Ireland
ROI	Republic of Ireland
SOC	Serious Organised Crime
(S)OCTA	(Serious) Organised Crime Threat Assessment
TCA	Trade and Cooperation Agreement
THC	Tetrahydrocannabinol
UK	United Kingdom
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
UNTOC	United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime
VOIP	Voice Over Internet Protocol

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Ireland and the UK have a shared interest in tackling serious and organised crime that operates within and between the two countries, and which negatively impacts their citizens, communities and economies in myriad different ways, often causing particular harm to the most vulnerable within society. Just as legitimate businesses take full advantage of the neighbouring jurisdictions' geographic proximity, shared land border, close familial and cultural ties, and highly integrated economies, supply chains and transport systems, so also do organised crime groups and networks involved in a wide range of serious criminality. Yet despite extensive operational cooperation between Irish and British law enforcement agencies in recent years, there has not to date been a systematic attempt to map and assess the existing, publicly available knowledge base on these shared threats across the two islands.

This report seeks to address that gap by **providing a strategic-level, qualitative assessment of serious and organised crime as it operates within and between Ireland and the UK**. In doing so, the report focuses on three key criminal activities that impact individuals, communities and wider society in both countries: modern slavery and human trafficking, drug trafficking, and economic crime. The report also examines the cross-cutting 'enablers' that facilitate most contemporary forms of serious and organised crime.

The research for the report involved the collation and review of 300 pieces of publicly available literature, including articles from academic journals, book chapters, expert blogs, media articles, official reports from state agencies, multilateral institutions and international organisations, and reports by various non-governmental organisations and universities. This extensive literature review was then complemented by conducting interviews with senior detectives from ten specialist law enforcement units across the island of Ireland. Throughout each stage of the research, the project focussed on understanding the criminal markets in illicit goods and services across Ireland and the UK,

the interaction between the various criminal actors that service those markets, and the methods they use to do so. The research also sought to situate the dynamics of serious and organised crime in Ireland and the UK within broader regional and global trends; emphasising the highly integrated and transnational nature of modern criminality.

In terms of the **geography of criminal markets** across the two countries, the report finds that many organised crime groups and networks treat the island of Ireland as, in effect, a single market – in particular for drug trafficking and certain forms of human trafficking. Such groups ignore the border for the purposes of the transportation and sale of illicit narcotics and the exploitation and 'marketing' of victims of human trafficking, whilst at the same time using the different legal and policing jurisdictions to their advantage.

The East–West dynamics of serious and organised crime have changed quite markedly in recent years, in particular for drug trafficking, as major Irish organised crime groups have established strong links with key drug distribution hubs in the European continent and, in some cases, further upstream along cocaine and heroin supply chains. As a result, although links between organised crime in Great Britain and the island of Ireland remain important – especially for drugs supply to Northern Ireland – Britain increasingly represents a 'waypoint' for drug consignments en route to Ireland from the Netherlands and Belgium. Whilst there are proven links between the two islands for human trafficking for sexual exploitation, the nature and scale of those connections represents a knowledge gap. There are also gaps in the understanding of human trafficking for labour exploitation on the island of Ireland due to differing jurisdictional approaches to forced labour and labour conditions more generally.

The report highlights the central **role of technology** in contemporary serious and organised crime, transforming criminal communications and providing new opportunities for how organised crime groups are

able to conceal and transfer their assets. Despite recent multinational successes against criminally dedicated secure communications platforms, encryption presents a serious, ongoing challenge for law enforcement in the UK, Ireland and beyond – including through the use of publicly available encrypted messaging applications. Though Irish organised crime groups appear to remain largely wedded to cash-based money laundering, crypto-assets are increasingly used as a means to launder the assets of offline criminal activities in the UK, and may become more commonplace in criminal circles in Ireland if crypto-currency use extends within wider society. In both jurisdictions, the use of crypto-based investment schemes is growing as an attack vector for cyber-enabled frauds.

Throughout the report, **corrupted transport workers** are found to be central to several forms of serious and organised crime in and between Ireland and the UK. Complicit hauliers are identified as indispensable to drug trafficking and people smuggling into both countries, with corrupt airport and port workers also representing highly valuable assets for organised crime groups involved in the importation of illicit commodities. In particular, the report warns that any change to legitimate maritime trade flows to the UK is likely to have a knock-on effect on drugs flows to and between the UK and Ireland, with organised crime groups seeking to off-load a greater proportion of large-scale drugs consignments directly into UK ports, and/or indirectly into Irish ports for onward transportation to Britain. Such a scenario is likely to see greater use of corrupted port workers in both countries being used to retrieve drugs from maritime containers, with a risk that drug-related crime and violence may then extend into surrounding cities – as it has in some continental European port cities.

The report demonstrates that organised crime groups in Ireland and the UK are not immune from the **external events and shocks** that impact upon wider society, but are typically quick to respond and use crises, conflicts or significant political or economic changes to their own advantage. It is highly likely, for example, that serious and organised crime in both countries will adapt to shifts in trade following the UK's exit from the EU; not least through exploiting the additional direct roll-on/roll-off ferry routes between Ireland and continental Europe. Similarly, criminals rapidly adopted new methods in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, some of which – such as the move towards greater online drugs sales – are likely to become permanent features of the criminal landscape in the UK and Ireland alike. Even seemingly far-off events, such as the Taliban's

> **The unique nature of the relationship between Ireland and the UK – not least their shared, open land border and Common Travel Area – demands a collaborative approach to building a shared knowledge base.**

assumption of power in Afghanistan, hold the potential to impact organised crime in the domestic UK and Irish contexts, with any constraint on heroin supply posing a risk that synthetic opioid use might accelerate amongst vulnerable dependent consumer groups. The war in Ukraine is likely to create even more profound effects for criminality in Ireland, the UK and broader region, including through the trafficking and exploitation of vulnerable refugees, attempts to use the humanitarian crisis as an opportunity for cyber-enabled fraud, and – over the longer term – a significantly increased pool of weapons entering the European criminal marketplace for firearms.

The report argues that a sound understanding of serious and organised crime is an essential prerequisite for crafting effective state and societal responses to the threats that it poses. The unique nature of the relationship between Ireland and the UK – not least their shared, open land border and Common Travel Area – demands a collaborative approach to **building a shared knowledge base** of those threats as they manifest within and across the two jurisdictions. In order to work towards this goal, the report concludes by recommending the compilation of a regular strategic threat assessment of serious and organised crime in Ireland, and suggests that this could be coordinated not only with existing cross-border (North–South) analysis but also with a periodic East–West threat assessment, produced on a bilateral basis between UK and Irish authorities. Finally, the report urges a more sober and constructive public conversation on this topic, with independent, all-island research on serious and organised crime proposed as a means to help inform a coherent 'whole of society' response that enhances and complements efforts across government.

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This report seeks to address that gap by providing a strategic-level, qualitative assessment of serious and organised crime as it operates within and between Ireland and the UK

1
INTRODUCTION

On 23 October 2019, news emerged of a horrific discovery: 39 people had been found dead in a sealed, refrigerated container on the back of an articulated lorry which had been parked in an industrial estate in Grays, Essex.[1] The ensuing investigation – which became the largest in the history of Essex Police – determined that the deceased were all Vietnamese men and women ranging in age from 15 to 44, and had been transported to England via a web of people smuggling networks stretching from South East Asia to the European continent and on to Great Britain.[2] The investigation also identified extensive links to Ireland and Northern Ireland: of the eight defendants convicted at the Old Bailey in London for their part in the victims' final, fateful journey from France, through Belgium and across the Channel, four were Irish; two of whom – including the ringleader and one of the drivers – were arrested in Ireland and contested extradition to face trial.[3]

Another of those individuals arrested in the course of the investigation was originally from Co Offaly but living in Cheshire, where he ran a haulage firm. The tractor unit of the truck that brought the victims to Essex had previously been owned by this individual and was still registered in his wife's name, even though it had since been sold.[4] He was not charged in relation to the Essex deaths, however investigators suspected that he was involved in other serious criminality, and the UK's National Crime Agency (NCA) therefore began a joint operation with An Garda Síochána to target his activities. Their combined efforts – which were assisted by a parallel multinational operation to penetrate an encrypted criminal communications platform known as 'Encrochat' (see 3.2) – eventually resulted in a conviction for conspiracies to import cocaine from the Netherlands to Ireland via the UK, and for cash to be transported back to the Netherlands.[5] The investigation revealed this individual's role as a well-established criminal logistics specialist, moving drugs and money for

a number of organised crime groups across Ireland, the UK and Europe and playing 'a key role in an important criminal infrastructure'.[6]

These two interrelated cases provide a snapshot of the myriad ways in which criminal actors, markets and methodologies intersect across the UK and Ireland, and how they connect to illicit supply chains further afield. Indeed, just as legitimate businesses take full advantage of the two jurisdictions' geographic proximity, shared land border and Common Travel Area (CTA), highly integrated economies, transport links and close familial ties, so also do organised crime groups and networks involved in a wide range of criminality – such as the drugs trafficking, money laundering and human smuggling described above. In response, recent years have seen extensive operational cooperation between UK and Irish law enforcement agencies, yielding arrests, seizures, convictions and other disruptions – such as asset recovery – in both countries. Yet despite this cooperation, there have been few systematic attempts to assess the existing knowledge base on these criminal activities across Ireland and the UK, identifying the connections and shared characteristics of organised crime as it manifests in British and Irish contexts, as well as its nuances and differences.

This research represents an initial attempt to address that gap. ***The primary aim of the report is to assess the current, publicly available knowledge base on serious and organised crime in Ireland and the UK in order to provide a strategic-level, qualitative assessment of such criminality as it operates across the two jurisdictions.*** Achieving this aim necessarily involves consideration of the actors, methods and activities that constitute 'serious and organised crime' (see 2.1 for further discussion of definitions), as well as the wider criminal markets within which such criminality takes place and their interaction across and between the

The report suggests that building a shared understanding of serious and organised crime as it operates across Ireland and the UK represents an important step towards crafting an effective response to this shared threat.

UK and Ireland. The report examines these issues in relation to three key forms of organised crime; namely human trafficking, drug trafficking and economic crime, as well as cross-cutting 'enablers' that facilitate these and other forms of serious crime.

The report is organised into eight chapters. Chapter 2 provides the conceptual and methodological framework for the study, examining different definitions of organised crime, explaining the use of literature and interviews in the research, clarifying the assumptions that underpin the project and outlining its limitations. Chapter 3 then explores cross-cutting criminal enablers that facilitate a number of different forms of serious and organised crime. In particular, the chapter discusses the use of new technologies by organised crime groups, the exploitation of borders (including the Common Travel Area and the use of fraudulently obtained passports), professional and public sector corruption, and the criminal use of firearms. Chapters 4, 5 and 6 examine modern slavery and human trafficking, drug trafficking and economic crime respectively. Each of the different sections of these chapters begins by situating the particular crime type within their global and/or regional context, before focusing on how they manifest in the UK and Irish contexts. Chapter 7 draws from

the research as a whole to present the project's main findings, including the identification of key knowledge gaps and emerging challenges that might impact Ireland and the UK. Where appropriate, this chapter also provides specific recommendations for how to build understanding of serious and organised crime within both the state and civil society, with a view to catalysing more sophisticated 'whole-of-government' and 'whole-of-society' responses. Finally, Chapter 8 offers brief concluding remarks on the report, re-emphasising the disproportionate impact of serious and organised crime on the most vulnerable within our societies, and urging a collaborative approach to building knowledge on these challenges.

Indeed, the longer-term aspiration of this project is that the report will act as a first step and catalyst towards closer collaboration amongst different sectors – state and non-state – in Ireland and the UK to better understand the nature of serious and organised crime within and between both jurisdictions. Just as the criminals described at the start of this chapter operated fluidly across these two islands, and beyond, so the report will consider how government bodies, civil society and the wider public might improve their understanding of these distinct but integrated criminal markets and the criminal actors that service them. As such, the report suggests that building a shared understanding of serious and organised crime as it operates across Ireland and the UK represents an important step towards crafting an effective response to this shared threat.

2

CONCEPTS AND METHODOLOGY

2.1 Definitions

'Organised crime' is a highly contested concept. Definitional debates have swirled around the phrase for over a hundred years and continue to this day within legal, academic and policy circles.[1] One leading criminologist specialising in the study of organised crime keeps a running tally of definitions in common use globally, which in January 2022 numbered 211 entries.[2] Such was the level of disagreement over the term that those drafting the **UN Convention Against Transnational Organised Crime (UNTOC)** – known as 'the Palermo Convention' after the Sicilian city in which it was signed in 2000 – could not settle on a definition for organised crime *per se.* Instead, UNTOC defined an organised crime *group* as 'a structured group of three or more persons, existing for a period of time and acting in concert with the aim of committing one or more serious crimes or offences … in order to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefit'.[3] In other words, the Convention defined the *actors* involved in organised crime but not the activities themselves.

Although the 'seriousness' of a given crime under UNTOC requires an offence that carries a sentence of at least four years' imprisonment, in most jurisdictions this widely-drawn definition allows for the inclusion of a wide range of criminality; from a local street gang selling drugs, for example, to a sophisticated international money laundering network. This provides the latitude to include several different typologies and layers of illicit activity, whether at the provincial, national or transnational levels – a conceptual breadth that has attracted ongoing criticism from criminologists and researchers for facilitating overly aggressive criminal justice responses to lower-level criminals in certain contexts, and lackadaisical approaches to organised crime in others.[4] From a different perspective, however, the very breadth of the UNTOC definition allows its application to the diverse structures, methods and memberships of criminal networks in different settings, and it has been signed by 147 countries – the UK ratified UNTOC in 2006, whilst Ireland ratified the Convention in 2010.[5] Indeed, most subsequent attempts to define organised crime have settled on remarkably similar attributes to those identified in the Convention, notably:

- The illegality of a given activity or set of activities, their scale and/or seriousness;
- The cohesion and relative permanence of those involved; and
- The pursuit of profit, influence or other advantage (noting that financial gain is not always the sole or even primary objective for every organised crime group).[6]

In addition, some other credible or widely used definitions specify the use of threats, coercion, violence and/or corruption as essential features of organised crime.[7]

Within the **European Union**, the EU Council's Framework Decision 2008/841/JHA on The Fight Against Organised Crime defined a 'criminal organisation' upon a similar basis to that enshrined in the Palermo Convention, with the difference that such a group can be comprised of just two, rather than three, persons.[8] This UNTOC-based definition has, however, attracted ongoing criticism from several EU member states, the European Parliament and the

European Commission for being too rigid 'to adequately describe the complex and flexible nature of modern organised crime networks',[9] and for failing to keep pace with 'globalisation and digitisation'.[10] Notwithstanding such criticism, the definition remains extant and the EU's 2021 organised crime strategy focuses on practical matters rather than circuitous debates around definitions.[11] As with the UK (see below), EU agencies – including Europol – often use the term 'serious and organised crime' to include serious criminal activities that fall outside the UNTOC-based EU Council definition of organised crime.[12]

In **Ireland**, 'organised crime' has a statutory definition, provided by the Criminal Justice Act 2006 (Part 7) and the Criminal Justice (Amendment) Act 2009 (with the 2009 Act incorporating changes as a result of Ireland's then impending ratification of UNTOC). Somewhat akin to the UN Convention, the provisions of the Criminal Justice Acts relating to organised crime 'centre on the concept of a criminal organisation',[13] defining it as 'a structured group, however organised, that has as its main purpose of activity the commission or facilitation of a serious offence', with the 'structured group' defined as 'a group of 3 or more persons, which is not randomly formed for the immediate commission of a single offence', and a serious offence defined as 'an offence carrying a prison term of at least four years'.[14] In addition to the Criminal Justice Acts, there are various other pieces of legislation that either relate directly to, or contain provisions relating to, criminal acts that might commonly be understood as 'organised crime'. The concept also forms a regular part of both formal and informal policy dialogues by State entities,[15] though in Ireland the term 'serious and organised crime' is less common than in the UK (see below), with a differentiation often drawn between 'organised' and 'serious' crimes, such as murder or rape.[16]

The **UK** has a similar legislative framework around its definitions of organised crime, though there are important distinctions between its different legal jurisdictions. Within **England**, **Wales** and **Northern Ireland**, the Serious Crime Act 2015 defines an organised crime group as 'three or more persons who act, or agree to act, together' for 'the carrying on of criminal activities', which are defined as offences that are punishable for at least seven years and are aimed towards 'gain or benefit', whether 'directly or indirectly'.[17] In addition, there are various other statutes that define and proscribe different organised criminal activities, such as money laundering in the Proceeds

> **Organised crime exists to make profits from supplying illegal goods and/or services to meet certain demands; demands that, in most cases, emanate from within 'conventional' society.**

of Crime Act 2002,[18] as well as certain Common Law provisions, such as the Common Law offence of conspiracy to defraud.[19] For policy or strategy purposes, the UK government tends to use the umbrella term 'serious and organised crime', which it defines as 'individuals planning, coordinating and committing serious offences, whether individually, in groups and/ or as part of transnational networks'.[20] This formulation allows for the targeting of serious offending, such as child sexual abuse, which might not meet the legal threshold for involvement in organised crime groups.

In **Scotland**, the concept of 'serious organised crime' was enshrined in law in the Criminal Justice and Licensing (Scotland) Act 2010 as 'two or more persons acting together for the principal purpose of committing or conspiring to commit a serious offence or a series of serious offences'.[21] In this Act – the first attempt within the UK to define the concept in law[22] – a 'serious offence' must be indictable and 'committed with the intention of obtaining a material benefit', or which is 'an act of violence or a threat made with the intention

of obtaining such a benefit'.[23] The legal definition of organised crime is therefore considerably broader both in scope and application in Scotland than in the rest of the UK,[24] and is further differentiated from the other jurisdictions by focussing on the concept of organised crime itself, rather than an organised crime *group*. Moreover, in both law and policy, Scotland consistently uses 'serious organised crime' rather than 'serious *and* organised crime', as preferred by Westminster. The Scottish government has previously explained that its preference for this term is to emphasise the seriousness of the harms caused by such activities, and 'the centrality of organisation', thus differentiating serious organised crime from other criminal groupings, such as street-level gangs.[25]

Whilst cognisant of the long-running debates around the terminology of organised crime, this report will use the core components of the UNTOC definition as the basis for its approach to the concept. In other words, 'organised crime' in this report will refer to: (i) a structured group of three or more persons; (ii) acting in concert over a period of time; (iii) to commit a serious offence (or offences); (iv) for financial gain or other material benefit, directly or indirectly; (v) where the seriousness of the offence(s) concerned carries a penalty of at least four years' imprisonment. Use of this definition in no way dismisses the legitimacy of criticism of UNTOC, however since both the UK and Irish legislative and policy frameworks are based around the Palermo Convention, it makes sense to adopt a similar definition for the purposes of this assessment. Moreover, this report will use the term 'serious and organised crime' (SOC) to include both organised crime – as defined in UNTOC and national legislation – as well as related serious crimes that do not meet that threshold, whilst drawing a clear differentiation between the two categories as and when required.

2.2 Assumptions

This assessment is also predicated upon three important assumptions about the nature of serious and organised crime. The first – now widely recognised within the wider security community[26] – is that a credible response to any threat is only likely to be effective if it is based upon a sound understanding of the nature and extent of that threat, including the broader conditions that enable it.[27] Within the law enforcement community in the UK and parts of the European Union, recognition of this principle has led to the regular formulation of organised crime threat assessments, whether at national,[28] bilateral[29] or regional[30] levels, or focussed upon a

particular crime type.[31] In the Irish context, An Garda Síochána has contributed to the regular Cross-Border Organised Crime Threat Assessments (the most recent of which is referenced throughout this report), but there has been no similar, publicly available assessment of the threat from organised crime in the Republic of Ireland. Although critiqued within some criminological circles,[32] these threat assessments do nevertheless provide an empirical basis upon which districts, cities, states or supra-national bodies can devise integrated strategies and action plans to counter the challenge posed by organised crime, or particular facets of organised crime. In the absence of accurate threat assessments, law enforcement activity threatens to be swayed by the vagaries of media coverage and corresponding political pressures, or by the temptation to focus on those crime types or criminal groups that are the quickest and/ or cheapest to investigate – the so-called 'low hanging fruit'. In all such scenarios, those criminal groups and/ or activities that cause most harm in the long-term can remain untroubled by responses that may create the illusion of frenetic state activity but which, in reality, fail to cause any significant damage to the most embedded criminal actors, or to seriously disrupt the wider criminal marketplaces in which they operate.

The second assumption, drawing on studies of organised crime by strategists such as Cockayne, is that serious and organised crime does not take place within a vacuum.[33] Though popular media and even court judgments and government narratives may often portray organised crime as an underworld 'other', distinct from normal society, the reality is much more complex and nuanced. Organised crime exists to make profits from supplying illegal goods and/or services to meet certain demands; demands that, in most cases, emanate from within 'conventional' society, rather than from within the criminal community. Whether that demand is for illegal drugs, sex-for-payment, cheap labour, obscuring the origin of funds or myriad other goods and services proscribed by the law, criminal networks will seek to provide them in a way that maximises their profit margin (and, typically, their market dominance) whilst simultaneously reducing their exposure to risk – either from other competitors or from the state, in the form of arrest, imprisonment, confiscation of assets or other disruption. In this respect, organised crime groups operate similarly to legitimate businesses, except for the serious harms caused to individuals and society as a result of their activities, and the violence and corruption they use to carry them out.

> **Just as effective local community policing depends upon meaningful engagement with the local community, so the broader state response against organised crime requires a mutually reinforcing effort from across society**

Moreover, just as licit economic activity is influenced and impacted by external factors and events, so also the illicit economy is shaped – sometimes significantly so – by a disparate range of political, economic, social, technological and environmental forces. In the recent global and regional context, examples might include the Covid-19 pandemic, the (related) surge in commodity prices, the UK's departure from the European Union, increasing political urgency around climate change and biodiversity loss, the Taliban's assumption of power in Afghanistan, ongoing conflicts in Syria, Yemen, Mali, Mozambique and elsewhere, and – most recently – the invasion of Ukraine.[34] In each of these examples, though, organised crime groups have not remained mere passive bystanders; geopolitics or other external forces may have caused rapid or profound impacts to their business models, but organised crime has repeatedly shown extraordinary resilience, agility and entrepreneurialism in the face of such shocks. In some cases, the vulnerabilities – whether of states, communities or individuals – created by seismic change or sudden, catastrophic events, such as natural disasters, have been transformed by criminal groups into opportunities to create revenue and expand their influence.[35]

The third assumption, closely related to the preceding points, is that organised crime is unlikely to be seriously denuded through state repression alone. Given that the majority of such criminality exists to meet demands created within society, it seems reasonable to infer that the influence, expertise and experience held across the diverse spectrum of society could play an important role in helping to address these illicit activities. This is not to diminish the vital importance of a well resourced and directed law enforcement response, robust sentencing and an effective policy framework; indeed, the security and confidence provided by an effective state response are essential prerequisites for civil society to be emboldened to play a part in tackling issues related to organised crime. Nevertheless, just as effective local community policing depends upon meaningful engagement with the local community,[36] so the broader state response against organised crime requires a mutually reinforcing effort from across society. Examples might include investigative journalists who expose gangland crime and corruption,[37] businesses that develop tools or platforms to tackle cybercrime,[38] or not-for-profit organisations that support victims of human trafficking and prevent their reincorporation back into cycles of exploitation.[39] Through such activities, these individuals, networks and organisations are often able to provide valuable insights into organised crime that might not be readily available to law enforcement or even to other parts of the state apparatus. As such, the report suggests that non-state entities can make an important contribution to assessments of organised crime; indeed, a broad range of perspectives are represented in this assessment of serious and organised crime as it operates across the UK and Ireland.

2.3 Methodology

In seeking to achieve the primary aim of this assessment (see Chapter 1, above), this report is based primarily upon an extensive review of publicly available literature on serious and organised crime in the UK and Ireland.

Since the British and Irish criminal markets are also integrated into regional and global illicit supply chains, and are influenced by transnational trends in criminality, the report also draws on European and international literature on serious and organised crime. The research team identified and then reviewed over 300 relevant documents from a wide variety of sources, including: academic reports and journal articles; newspaper and other media articles; book chapters; speeches, presentations and blogs by experts and researchers; reports by civil society bodies, such as charities, non-governmental organisations and think-tanks; reports by international organisations; and reports by government departments, law enforcement agencies and advisory bodies. Each of these documents was categorised on the basis of its thematic and geographical focus, which demonstrated that only a handful of studies had examined organised crime – or particular crime types – from a pan-Irish/UK perspective.[40] Of the few that had used a dual Irish–British lens,[41] nearly all concentrated primarily on the efficacy, synergies and divergences of the two countries' legislative and policy frameworks, and/or their respective law enforcement responses, rather than on the criminality itself.[42] Whilst these studies are extremely valuable in themselves, the paucity of literature that focussed on organised crime across the two jurisdictions – rather than state responses to it – confirmed the glaring research gap in this area. Moreover, there was also found to be a disparity in the volume of official reporting on serious and organised crime in Ireland as against the UK, whose large law enforcement and security apparatus produces regular outputs on serious criminality, including the UK's annual strategic threat assessment and related thematic reports.

In addition to the literature review, ten semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 law enforcement practitioners from An Garda Síochána and the Police Service of Northern Ireland. The interviewees were experienced, management-level officers from specialist units dealing with particular facets of serious and organised crime, who were able to provide unique insights into the characteristics of criminal groups and networks operating in – and beyond – the two jurisdictions on the island of Ireland. Whilst relying solely or predominantly upon law enforcement or other official data sources is viewed with understandable caution by many criminologists,[43] the rationale for these interviews was to complement the literature by providing up-to-date, ground level perspectives on recent and emerging trends that might not be available within

the relatively sparse official reporting on serious and organised crime in an all-Ireland context. In addition, it was felt that current insights from practitioners would be especially important in the wake of the profound societal and economic changes prompted by the Covid-19 pandemic, with its significant impacts on criminal actors and within criminal markets.[44]

2.4 Limitations

Despite the extent and breadth of the literature review, and the additional perspectives provided by law enforcement interviewees, there remain a number of limitations to this research. The first – and perhaps most obvious – is that it relies on publicly available data, and therefore lacks access either to the sensitive intelligence from which official organised crime threat assessments are typically compiled (albeit in a sanitised version for open publication), or to the valuable insights gathered by network analyses or interview-based studies involving criminals themselves. It is suggested that such approaches may be worthwhile for future research of pan-UK/Ireland organised crime, but that this report marks an important initial attempt to accumulate and assess the existing knowledge base on this topic within the public realm, identifying research gaps upon which further research can be undertaken.

A further limitation is the thematic scope of the report, in that not every form of organised crime could be included in the research. Time constraints meant that certain topics had to be prioritised over others, with the result that the study focuses on key cross-cutting criminal 'enablers', modern slavery and human trafficking, drug trafficking and economic crime. These themes were selected because they are representative of the harms caused by organised crime to vulnerable people, communities and the economy. Serious and organised criminality that is not included in the report includes online child sexual abuse, cyber-dependent crime, corporate bribery and fraud, fiscal crime (including VAT fraud and smuggling), organised acquisitive crime (including cross-border ATM and metal theft) and organised environmental crime. These – and other – criminal activities constitute important components of the illicit economy in both jurisdictions, and would merit research in the future using a similar pan-Irish/British approach.

Similarly, the report's broad geographic scope – covering all of the UK and Ireland – means that it lacks specificity in relation to particular cities and regions. In seeking to assess organised crime as it operates across and

> **Whilst attention is paid to the role of Northern Irish organised crime in relation to other parts of the two islands, the research does not explore the dynamics of how specifically Scottish, Welsh or English organised crime groups might differ from one another, including in their relationships with criminal interlocutors in Ireland.**

between the two countries, a certain level of detail is inevitably lost at the regional and local level. Moreover, whilst attention is paid to the role of Northern Irish organised crime in relation to other parts of the two islands, the research does not explore the dynamics of how specifically Scottish, Welsh or English organised crime groups might differ from one another, including in their relationships with criminal interlocutors in Ireland.[45] It is important to note that the report's focus on the operation of criminal markets and actors across the UK and Ireland is in no way intended to diminish the importance of their impact upon, nor integration within, specific communities.[46]

Finally, it should be emphasised that this is a *qualitative* rather than a quantitative assessment. Although the report draws upon a small number of statistical data sets – for example in relation to the profiles of human trafficking victims in Chapter 4 – and cites other reports that themselves utilise quantitative approaches, this report does not pretend nor intend to offer a numerically-rich analysis of serious and organised crime in the UK and Ireland. It was felt at the report's inception that the qualitative approach would provide a more rounded initial picture of serious and organised crime across the two countries than a statistically-driven report – especially given the challenge of weighting and comparing different data collection and reporting protocols. Drawing firm conclusions on activities that are, by their very nature, clandestine is a notoriously challenging endeavour, and the limited available statistics on serious forms of crime are no exception; in certain contexts they can be more reflective of law enforcement activity than of criminality itself.[47]

As such, this report approaches its task with a good measure of humility, cautioning that – despite the extensive literature base – it will provide only a partial snapshot of organised crime across Ireland and the UK. Notwithstanding this caveat, the assessment provides a valuable first attempt to build understanding of a pernicious threat that affects, however imperceptibly, every resident of these two islands.

3

CROSS-CUTTING CRIMINAL ENABLERS

3.1 Introduction

The landscape within which serious and organised crime operates in the UK and Ireland has transformed markedly over recent years; not only because of the changes brought about by the UK's exit from the EU or the Covid-19 pandemic and its associated restrictions, but also due to wider and/or pre-existing political, economic, social, technological and environmental trends. Ireland, for example, continues to undergo quite significant demographic and social changes, matched by expanding communications and transport infrastructure.[1] Some of these trends and changes have acted as constraints on certain forms of criminality (for instance in shifting the risk/benefit calculation for bank or cash-in-transit robberies), whereas many others have acted as 'enablers' that improve the ability of those involved in serious and organised crime to carry out their activities, for example through facilitating criminal communication or travel, or helping to evade detection.

Whilst subsequent chapters touch upon enablers that are specific to particular crime types, this chapter identifies and explores four 'cross-cutting' enablers – so called as they facilitate several different forms of serious and organised crime – namely the **use of technology, the exploitation of national borders (including the Common Travel Area between Ireland and the UK), professional and public sector corruption, and the criminal use of firearms**.[2] Whilst these enablers are relevant to serious and organised crime in most settings around the world, the chapter will seek – wherever possible – to highlight their relevance within the UK and Irish contexts. It should, however, be noted that the concept of criminal enablers is more commonplace in official reporting in the

UK than in Ireland, and the chapter should therefore be read with that caveat in mind.

3.2 Criminal use of technology

Just as technological innovations have revolutionised how people interact, shop and conduct legitimate business, so these very same developments have created multiple opportunities for criminals to communicate with one another, market their goods and services to potential buyers, and carry out their criminal activities. Indeed, multiple analyses indicate that technological change has become arguably the most significant enabler of serious and organised crime internationally in recent years – alongside globalisation, conflict[3] and related economic and geopolitical forces.[4] Within Europe, technological advancements have been described as a 'key enabler for change in the serious and organised crime landscape',[5] with the European Commission stating that 80 per cent of all crimes have some digital component.[6] In the UK, 'the pace and scale of technological change' have been identified as resulting in serious and organised crime 'evolving faster than ever before'.[7] Similarly, in Ireland, the ability of Irish law enforcement to identify, understand and respond to technological enablers of serious and organised crime is regarded as a central determinant of its effectiveness in tacking transnational criminality.[8] As new technologies emerge – whether in terms of artificial intelligence (AI), the Internet of Things (IoT), drone technology, 5G broadband or 4D printing (also known as 'additive manufacturing') – so organised criminals are likely to use such developments both to expand their own capabilities and to exploit vulnerabilities for income generation.

One of the most important ways in which such technological advances have facilitated criminality has been through enabling **secure communications**. This takes place through a number of different platforms, all of which hold potential advantages and disadvantages for criminals and law enforcement alike. In many cases, criminals utilise communications platforms which are in widespread use throughout society – such as WhatsApp, Telegram and Kik Messenger[9] – some of which protect users' privacy through measures such as end-to-end encryption (E2EE), assured anonymity, automatic disappearing messaging, decentralised messaging and/or minimal user (meta)data storage.[10] However, other criminals have sought communications platforms that are said to provide far higher levels of encryption and privacy, and which 'are believed to directly and intentionally cater for the communication needs of criminals'.[11] Such platforms – known as 'cryptophones' or criminally dedicated secure communications (CDSC) – utilise apparently standard mobile devices which have a dual operating system that hides the encrypted interface and masks any link between the user and the device or SIM card.[12] CDSC devices usually have many normal functions disabled – such as the camera, GPS and microphone[13] – but specialist functions added, such as a 'kill switch' to instantly delete all data, VOIP functionality and secure instant messaging.[14] These devices are sold via criminal networks, either online (including via the dark web) or by word of mouth, with some requiring a personal referral from an existing user to get access. One such alleged system, Phantom Secure, was operated by a Canadian firm with an Irish subsidiary based on Dublin's Ormond Quay, and was the first encrypted platform to be targeted by US authorities for its role in facilitating drug trafficking, leading to the seizure of its assets in Ireland.[15]

In more recent years, international law enforcement agencies have been able to compromise some of the key CDSC systems, leading to large-scale operations against organised crime groups across Europe and yielding multiple arrests and convictions, the seizures of large quantities of drugs, firearms, cash and assets, the prevention of several killings, and the accumulation of valuable intelligence.[16] Perhaps the most well known of such efforts was the judicially-authorised interception, between 2017 and 2020, of the **'EncroChat'** system by the French Gendarmerie, which led to joint and spin-off investigations in the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and the UK.[17] Indeed, the massive scale of CDSC use by organised crime groups in the UK can be seen by the impact of Operation Venetic; the UK's

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NCA-led multi-agency response to the EncroChat penetration, which constituted the largest ever law enforcement operation in the UK.[18] It led to 1,550 arrests and the seizure of 115 firearms, 2,800 rounds of ammunition, £56 million in cash and 5.8 tonnes of drugs, as well as mitigating over 200 threats to people's lives. Such was the reliance on these devices that, after the demise of the EncroChat platform in 2020 and the penetration of the 'Sky ECC' network in 2021,[19] organised criminals rushed to find alternative CDSC systems – many of whom were swiftly taken in by a new platform, known as '**Anom**', that was in fact operated by an FBI-led 16-nation law enforcement coalition.[20] Interestingly, this operation turned criminal networking against itself by putting devices into the hands of 'key influencers' within the organised crime community and using them to vouch for the platform's integrity within their criminal networks.[21] Although it appears that the penetration of these platforms has not yet led to any overt policing interventions in Ireland itself, it is considered likely that Irish organised crime groups were

nevertheless disrupted by law enforcement activity in other jurisdictions.[22] The cumulative success of such operations has thus led not only to some of the largest-scale global interventions ever taken against organised crime, but has also introduced volatility and mistrust into the market for dedicated encrypted communications, even as criminals' demand for such platforms remains high.[23]

Yet the role of technological innovation in serious and organised criminality extends well beyond facilitating and securing their communications; emerging technologies are also increasingly used to provide platforms for marketing and providing illegal goods and services. Whilst some of these developments are specific to certain forms of criminality – and are explored in the following chapters – there is a general trend towards using online platforms to anonymously advertise criminal products and services online, whether via the 'surface' or 'open' web or the 'dark web'.[24] Though it is perhaps best known as a marketplace

for illegal drugs and cybercrime tools (see Chapters 5 and 6 respectively), the **dark web** has also been shown to act as a marketplace for, *inter alia*, child sexual abuse images, firearms (see 3.5), substandard and falsified medicines, kidnapping and assassination 'services', counterfeit currency, human trafficking and human smuggling (see Chapter 4).[25] Indeed, across the island of Ireland, the dark net has been identified by law enforcement on both sides of the border as a distribution channel for drugs, human trafficking and firearms.[26]

As with encrypted communications platforms, so law enforcement agencies in the UK and internationally have had increasing success in identifying and taking down dark websites hosting serious and organised crime, causing some volatility and mistrust amongst users – which may account for a decline in the number of dark web marketplaces in 2020.[27] Notwithstanding this, media investigations into the dark web depict a resilient environment that is able to respond and

regroup swiftly following law enforcement takedowns, even if such interventions might temporarily disrupt or displace their activities.[28] Moreover, there are indications that takedowns are driving innovation and competition amongst dark web administrators and 'increasingly sophisticated operational security' by users, for example through the enforcement of manual PGP ('Pretty Good Privacy') protocols in the wake of authorities' successful interception of automated PGP messages.[29]

In addition to CDSC and dark web marketplaces, other technological trends have created a relatively benign operating environment for serious and organised crime online. A wider '**grey infrastructure**' facilitates criminality (and obstructs attempts to investigate it), including via '**bulletproof hosting**' services that permit almost any content and/or fail to collect meaningful client information, **unregulated crypto-currency exchanges** with inadequate (or non-existent) anti-money laundering (AML) measures (see also 6.2) and encrypted **Virtual Private Networks** (VPNs) that market themselves primarily to criminal users[30] – including those with servers hosted in the UK and European countries.[31] In many other cases, though, such services – and/or their servers – are based in overseas jurisdictions with permissive political or legal frameworks that do not typically cooperate with international law enforcement.[32]

3.3 Exploitation of borders and the Common Travel Area

Despite the increasingly online nature of criminality, the exploitation of national borders remains vital for almost all forms of serious and organised crime – whether for moving drugs, human beings, firearms or cash, travelling internationally in order to evade domestic law enforcement attention or to hold meetings, or taking advantage of different legal frameworks to launder or spend the proceeds of crime. Indeed, it has become a largely accepted truism that 'serious and organised crime knows no borders', with some criminal networks spanning several countries[33] and states – including the UK and Ireland – keen to stress the cross-border character of the threat they pose.[34] Notwithstanding such widespread acknowledgement, the role of borders in enabling organised criminality is more complex than it can appear: whilst porous borders, for example, clearly allow for easier transportation of illicit goods between different jurisdictions, stricter border controls can also lead to higher profits for those crime groups who are able to successfully evade detection. Moreover, changes to government policies in seemingly unrelated

fields – such as duties on certain products – can have huge implications for illicit economies that operate across borders, boosting the profitability of smuggling that takes advantage of even modest price differentials. Similarly, changes to immigration policies – for example by narrowing legal avenues for migration – can provide opportunities for those groups offering clandestine routes across a country's borders (see Chapter 4).

Within the Irish and UK contexts, the question of how organised criminal groups exploit border vulnerabilities often centres around their use of the approximately 360 kilometre (244 mile) long **land border** between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. There are several layers and facets to the role of the Irish border in facilitating criminal activity, and this report is unable to explore them all in detail, nor to situate them within the complex historical and political context they deserve. Notwithstanding this, there are two particularly important aspects to the role of the land border vis-à-vis serious and organised crime in the UK and Ireland; first, how criminal actors and markets operate across the island of Ireland and, second, how this affects criminality within the Common Travel Area – long-standing considerations that have assumed additional importance since the UK's departure from the EU.

Cross-border cooperation between organised crime groups in Northern Ireland and the Republic is a well-established feature of criminality on the island of Ireland, as are groups that carry out criminal activities in both jurisdictions.[35] Law enforcement reporting has previously indicated that between around 22 per cent[36] up to nearly half of all organised crime groups subject to police investigation in Northern Ireland were believed to enjoy 'strong links and associations' with criminal groups in the Republic.[37] This research indicates that, for certain crime types, such as drug supply (see Chapter 5), many criminal entities treat the island as a single market[38], with the border largely ignored for the purpose of sales but used to their advantage, when required, through the exploitation of differing legislative and policing frameworks,[39] or for the purposes of smuggling to take advantage of different rates and duties applied to certain products.[40] As such, a number of bodies in both Ireland and the UK have warned that **Brexit** 'has the potential to increase cross-border criminality',[41] whether through steadily widening legislative divergence,[42] making law enforcement cooperation more cumbersome,[43] or enhancing the profitability of smuggling as the range and extent of regulatory and tariff differentials expand or deepen over time.[44]

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Some of this initial anxiety has been mitigated by the security and criminal justice provisions contained within the Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA) reached between the UK and the EU in December 2020,[45] as well as the lack of tariff differentials secured as part of the TCA.[46] Yet there remain wider concerns that organised crime groups will continue to exploit the **Common Travel Area (CTA)**[47] by using the open border on the island of Ireland in order to traffic drugs, human beings, firearms and cash from the Republic of Ireland to the UK, and/or vice-versa.[48] At the time of writing, even the most recent publicly available literature was equivocal on the extent to which organised crime groups were abusing the CTA any more than they were prior to the UK's withdrawal from the EU taking effect on 1 January 2021 – though it was acknowledged that this so-called 'wait and see' approach may have been at least in part due to the Covid-19 travel restrictions.[49] Notwithstanding this, experts continue to caution that highly agile and innovative organised crime groups will monitor and probe border controls in both jurisdictions and will swiftly seek to exploit any real or perceived vulnerabilities in either the UK or Ireland to move their illegal goods and services into and within the CTA.[50] Indeed, there were early indications that networks involved in a range of criminal ventures were starting to use[51] the new and additional roll-on/roll-off ferry services between Ireland and EU countries (notably France) that emerged in the post-Brexit trade dispensation.[52]

Borders also represent a 'pinch point' where law enforcement and other authorities are able to apprehend wanted fugitives, intercept illegal goods, or monitor the movements of those subject to ongoing operations. For criminals, therefore, the ability to travel under assumed identities is a significant advantage – particularly for those with commercial links overseas or who are under pressure from police or rivals. Whilst creating entirely false UK and Irish passports has become increasingly challenging due to the complexity of modern anti-counterfeiting measures, both countries have seen growing use of **fraudulently obtained genuine (FOG) passports** by organised criminals. These are genuine passports obtained by an individual who bears a physical resemblance to the document's end user, but with the photograph of the end user submitted with their application – for which the original applicant and complicit counter-signatories are typically paid a modest fee. There have been some cases of British and Irish FOG passports being facilitated by individuals,[53] however there are also criminal networks that supply such documents as a specialist service to other organised crime groups. In 2021, in what the UK's National Crime Agency described as 'one of the most significant NCA investigations of recent times', ten people were arrested who were believed to offer a sophisticated service providing FOG passports to a range of clients involved in organised crime – including a convicted firearms trafficker who used his FOG British passport to travel to Ireland to evade UK law enforcement.[54] Indeed, the NCA's long-running operation appeared to reveal various Irish connections, with one of the principal suspects reported as being a regular traveller to Ireland (and Spain) and Irish organised crime groups allegedly amongst his clientele.[55] The Irish media have previously suggested that similar schemes exist in Ireland itself, using indebted drug addicts as applicants to obtain FOG Irish passports, which are in high demand by criminals who need to travel regularly due to ongoing feuds and Garda attention.[56]

3.4 Professional and public sector corruption

In addition to illegally sourcing travel and other official documents, organised crime groups often depend upon the active or passive involvement of those occupying positions of trust in both the public and private sectors. These '**corrupt enablers**' span a range of functions and roles, with the nature and range of corruption varying considerably between different contexts: in high-income countries, for example, the corrupt facilitation of criminal activity typically assumes a far more subtle or systemic form than the more visible rent-seeking or widespread bribe-taking that might be observed in certain other settings.[57] Both Ireland and the UK have consistently achieved relatively positive and similar ratings in Transparency International's annual Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI)[58] – though independent analysts have cautioned that their large, open financial sectors are vulnerable to being used as conduits for significant illicit financial flows, including from organised crime.[59] In 2021, Chatham House reported[60] that 'a whole ecosystem' of professional enablers has developed in the UK – centred around the City of London[61] – in order to service the needs of suspect capital; the latest in a series of credible warnings that has prompted the UK government to acknowledge the 'significant reputational risk to the integrity of UK's financial sector'[62] posed by large-scale money laundering (see 6.2).[63] And whilst the popular images of foreign kleptocrats and domestic drug gangs, for instance, may be quite distinct, both make extensive use of complicit accountants, company formation agents, investment managers, lawyers, notaries and other professionals to move, clean, spend and defend their ill-gotten gains within the legitimate economy.[64]

In other spheres of criminal activity, corrupt officials and employees play important – and sometimes indispensable roles – in facilitating the movement of illegal goods, providing sensitive information on law enforcement activities or judicial proceedings, or ensuring that senior members of organised crime groups can continue to control their criminal activities from within the prison system. For transnational organised crime – which by its very nature involves the passage of illegal goods across borders – the involvement of corrupted workers at ports, airports and international mail hubs can represent a core element of a crime group's 'business plan', wherein such staff use their insider knowledge and access to facilitate the movement of particular bags, packages or people through or around security measures.[65] Indeed, a raft of ongoing cases in both the UK and Ireland demonstrate

the utility of such individuals to a range of criminal ventures[66] – a trend that UK authorities were concerned may have increased during the Covid-19 pandemic, as workers' income dropped and criminals' options for cross-border smuggling were reduced due to travel restrictions.[67]

The active corruption of personnel within law enforcement and criminal justice agencies by organised crime groups appears to be rare in the UK and Ireland, yet remains a risk in both countries – and can have a disproportionately damaging impact on public confidence; not only in the agencies involved, but in the rule of law more widely also.[68] The methods used to corrupt individuals tend to differ between sectors, with financial reward the more common means of recruiting those working in ports and airports, whereas pre-existing personal associations and vulnerabilities – whether familial, social or romantic – are assessed as the more likely route used to gain access to law enforcement personnel and their information.[69]

3.5 Criminal use of firearms

Though rates of illegal firearm possession and use in Ireland and the UK remain low by international standards, firearms nevertheless represent an important tool for some organised crime groups, with a particularly strong correlation between gun-related violence and drug supply, both at wholesale and retail levels of the market. In the UK, most criminal use of firearms is by – and against – middle-market groups and street gangs looking to recover debts, reinforce a reputation, assert territorial control, or carry out retributions.[70] Higher-level organised crime groups also use, or threaten to use, firearms for similar purposes, though typically in a more targeted, strategic manner to avoid unnecessary law enforcement attention.[71]

The criminal market in firearms in the UK is supplied primarily by organised crime groups who purchase and import weapons from overseas, in particular from Central and Eastern Europe and Turkey, which are usually smuggled into England by ferry and then sold to lower-level gangs in major cities across the country.[72] Handguns are the most commonly used type of firearm on the criminal market, owing to their lower cost and ease of portability and concealability, though UK law enforcement continues to recover smaller numbers of machine pistols, submachine guns and assault rifles.[73] In recent years, there has been an increasing trend for standard, self-loading handguns and blank-firing pistols to be converted to enable fully automatic fire.[74] Though

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most criminal use of firearms is of original, 'lethal purpose' weapons, there are also a significant number of shootings from converted or reactivated blank-firers, imitation firearms, previously deactivated weapons and low calibre 'Flobert' pistols.[75] Indeed, one notable case in 2019 involved an Irish national (who had recently been released after serving a prison sentence for fraud in Ireland) being apprehended at Dover ferry terminal with 60 convertible blank-firing Turkish-made handguns concealed in his vehicle.[76] Though such smuggling remains the predominant means of supplying organised crime in the UK, some criminals order original and – more commonly – convertible blank-firing or imitation firearms online from overseas, either via the dark web or surface web, and have them delivered by post or fast parcel services.[77]

There is very limited literature on the criminal market for firearms in Ireland, though academic analyses of gun-crime and feuds between Irish organised crime groups suggest that violence between such groups may be less to do with competition over drugs markets and influenced more by trans-generational subcultures of violent family feuding.[78] There certainly appears to be

a disproportionately greater level of firearms-related violence amongst organised crime groups involved in importations and wholesale level drugs supply in Ireland than similar, higher-level groups in the UK – which lends credence to analyses that highlight non-'rational actor' understandings of such violence. Irrespective of their long-term causes, the increase in feud-related deaths during the 2000s and 2010s was, in part at least, due to greater use of high-velocity firearms amongst Irish criminal groups[79] – as reflected in ongoing seizures by An Garda Síochána.[80] Since 2015, the Garda National Drugs and Organised Crime Bureau have seized 137 firearms, including 86 semi-automatic handguns, 17 submachine guns and seven assault rifles – most of East European origin, with some reconditioned Turkish blank-firers and a small number of pistols believed to be from the US.[81] Firearms for the Irish criminal market are sourced predominantly from East European organised crime groups, in particular in Moldova, and are sometimes imported with drugs consignments.[82] In addition, previous reporting indicated that weapons are sourced through the theft of legally held firearms, some of which are stolen 'to order'.[83]

As regards criminal use of firearms across the island of Ireland, a previous North-South law enforcement assessment suggested that a number of organised crime and terrorist groups store firearms on one side of the Irish border for use in the other jurisdiction.[84] One cache found near Newry in 2021 contained three handguns and eight automatic weapons, and was believed to be under the control of organised crime.[85] Police in Northern Ireland suggest that firearms retained by paramilitary crime groups are jealously guarded for their own use, and that the particularly restrictive firearms licensing regime in Northern Ireland means that there are relatively few firearms in general circulation, though some targeted burglaries of gun clubs and licensed owners do take place to supply criminal demand.[86] In addition, law enforcement across the island of Ireland remain concerned about the spread of readily available instructions online for manufacturing 'homemade' weapons, as well as the emergence of new technologies (such as 4D printing) that enable the domestic production of firearms without the need for risky importations from overseas.[87]

3.6   Conclusion

This chapter has explored four broad, cross-cutting enablers of serious and organised crime; namely the use of technology, exploitation of the border, professional and public sector corruption, and the criminal use of

> **There is scope for a programme of continuing research to assess emerging and future trends in publicly accessible communications platforms, CDSC and grey infrastructure, as well as the dark net and criminal use of crypto-assets.**

firearms. The chapter has demonstrated that, whilst these phenomena are relevant to criminality worldwide, the manner in which they manifest in Ireland and the UK are in many ways broadly comparable to one another. Both countries have seen not only the use of criminally dedicated secure communications (CDSC), but have also played host to different elements of the technological, or 'grey', infrastructure that facilitates such platforms. Similarly, organised crime groups in both the UK and Ireland appear to make extensive use of fraudulently obtained genuine (FOG) passports, in some cases possibly using the same specialist suppliers. Criminal exploitation of the Common Travel Area (CTA) and the land border on the island of Ireland remains a source of concern for both countries, even if some of the initial anxieties around how Brexit might facilitate criminality within and between the two jurisdictions have been tempered by the provisions of the Trade and Cooperation Agreement. The use of corrupt enablers is a feature of the criminal landscape in both Ireland and the UK, notably as facilitators in the port and airport environments. In the case of criminal use of firearms, the chapter has demonstrated a key divergence in the propensity for higher-level Irish organised crime groups in Ireland to use firearms as part of ongoing feuds, even if that brings overwhelming state and law enforcement attention.

Looking to the future, there are a number of aspects of the enablers considered in this chapter that would merit further research. First, given that the chapter has demonstrated that organised crime groups' use of technology presents an ongoing challenge to law enforcement and policy-makers, there is scope for a programme of continuing research to assess emerging and future trends in publicly accessible communications platforms, CDSC and grey infrastructure, as well as the dark net and criminal use of crypto-assets. The success of recent multinational operations against certain CDSC platforms suggests that any such program might be optimised through collaborative approaches that utilise multi-agency and cross-sectoral expertise, and could be extended on a bilateral basis between the UK and Ireland to harness the knowledge and experience of both countries. Second, it would be worthwhile to conduct ongoing analysis of how organised crime groups in the UK and Ireland are responding to changes in legitimate trade patterns as a result of the post-Brexit trade dispensation – with a view to assessing how this will affect criminality in port cities (see Chapter 5) and exploitation of the CTA. Third, the chapter's discussion of the role of corrupt enablers indicates that sector-specific research might help to identify vulnerabilities in particular professions or industries (such as port and airport staff), and to explore how professional associations and representative bodies might assist in addressing identified weaknesses.

4

MODERN SLAVERY AND HUMAN TRAFFICKING

4.1 Introduction

Of all forms of serious and organised crime, human trafficking arguably presents the closest association with the suffering and exploitation of vulnerable people. Yet it is also a much more varied, complicated and nuanced type of criminality than popular depictions often convey, with its victims sometimes moving in and out of the legal definition of 'human trafficking', its perpetrators not always part of 'organised crime groups' as they are conventionally conceived, and the range of 'legitimate' industries using trafficked people much broader than is widely appreciated.[1] This chapter seeks to remain cognisant of such complexity whilst exploring human trafficking into, and within, Ireland and the UK, and demonstrating how it intersects with other forms of serious and organised crime.

The first section examines how human trafficking and human smuggling relate to one another, highlighting how victims' status can oscillate between the two definitions several times in the course of their journeys, as well as emphasising how the nationalities of smuggled migrants and trafficking victims do not always neatly correlate. The second section provides an overview of the main 'markets', methods and criminal actors involved in human trafficking in the UK and Ireland, with a particular focus on sexual exploitation and labour exploitation. Finally, the third section delves into the relationship between human trafficking and drugs supply, notably through cannabis cultivation, the 'County Lines' phenomenon in Britain and similar forms of criminal exploitation in Ireland – in particular of children, young people and vulnerable adults on the margins of society. In terms of the literature base on this topic, the chapter draws on official reporting and media articles, as well as benefitting from a relatively

substantial body of academic and non-governmental research on human trafficking in both the British and Irish contexts.[2]

4.2 The relationship between human trafficking and human smuggling

Though this report is focused on the actors, methods and markets involved in serious and organised crime in Ireland and UK – as opposed to the policing responses or legislative frameworks around such activities – the legal **concepts** and **definitions** of 'human trafficking' and 'human smuggling' are vital to understanding these offences. Internationally, human trafficking was first defined in 'The UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons'[3], which was agreed in 2000 as part of the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (UNTOC) (see 2.1). The Protocol distils human trafficking into three constituent elements: first, the *act*, in which the trafficker must recruit, transport, transfer, harbour or receive a person; second, the *means*, whereby the trafficker must threaten or use force, coercion, abduction, fraud, deception, abuse of vulnerability, or giving payments or benefits; and third, the *purpose*, which must be exploitative.[4] (For the purposes of the Protocol, the trafficking of children does not require the means element of this test.[5]) Migrant smuggling was codified in a separate addendum to UNTOC (which has only recently been given partial effect in Ireland)[6] – 'The UN Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants'[7] – as 'the facilitation, for financial or other material gain, of irregular entry into a country where the migrant is not a national or resident', which is typically carried out for profit by well-organised, multinational criminal networks.[8]

The crucial distinction between the two definitions, therefore, is that human trafficking is involuntary, whereas human smuggling involves the consent of the person being smuggled,[9] even if the conditions that led them to make that decision – including conflict, famine, persecution, natural disaster or other hardship – stretch the concept of consent. A further distinction is that human smuggling must involve the illegal or irregular crossing of a state's border, whereas human trafficking – though often involving victims moving across borders – can and does also take place solely within one jurisdiction. Some countries, such as the UK, use the term 'slavery' or 'modern slavery' alongside 'human trafficking' to provide an all-encompassing, broader concept that includes not only trafficking for labour or sexual exploitation but also other forms of slavery, servitude and forced or compulsory labour.[10]

Yet whilst legal definitions, threat assessments and other official reports on serious and organised crime draw such clear delineations between human trafficking and human smuggling – or 'organised immigration crime', as it is often referred to[11] – the **lived reality** of those being exploited can be far less clear-cut. Once an individual has – however willingly – committed themselves (or their dependents) into the hands of criminal networks who offer to smuggle them across borders, the risk of that person being abused, exploited, coerced or deceived increases substantially. Indeed, **Europol previously calculated that 20 per cent of criminals involved in facilitating irregular migration were also involved in human trafficking – with unaccompanied child migrants identified as being particularly vulnerable to abduction or exploitation by people smugglers through sexual abuse, forced labour or compelled criminal activity.**[12] Interviews with migrants and trafficking victims demonstrate how their experiences can often defy neat categorisation: exploitation may, for example, take place at any one or more specific points during a migrant's journey but then cease, or it may be ongoing but less obvious, or not be considered exploitative by the migrant themselves.[13] Law enforcement officers report

regular crossovers between classifications, whereby people can start their journey looking to be smuggled and end up being trafficked, in some cases switching between the legal status of migrant and trafficking victim several times during their journey.[14]

Of course, even without any form of exploitation, human smuggling carries its own very significant physical risks to migrants – as was so tragically illustrated by the deaths of 39 Vietnamese people discovered in the back of a lorry in Essex in 2019[15]– with 16 migrants found alive in a refrigerated truck on a Wexford-bound ferry just weeks later.[16] Indeed, as with drug trafficking (see 5.2), corrupt elements within the haulage and logistics industries are considered vital enablers of human smuggling and human trafficking into the UK and Ireland, with complicit hauliers considered unlikely to be aware – or perhaps even concerned – of the status of the 'commodity' they transport.[17]

Having established the complex connections between human smuggling and human trafficking, it is also important to highlight two key **distinctions** between them. First, not all trafficking victims have been smuggled into the UK or Ireland: in many cases, victims arrive via legal means and with valid documentation, or are British or Irish citizens exploited for sexual, labour or criminal purposes without any cross-border travel whatsoever.[18] In the UK in 2021, British nationals constituted the largest group (31 per cent) of people referred as potential trafficking victims by nationality, of whom 75 per cent were children (in part due to the County Lines phenomenon), followed by Albanians (20 per cent) and Vietnamese (8 per cent).[19] In Ireland in 2020, the top three nationalities identified as victims of trafficking were Nigerians (29 per cent), Romanians (16 per cent) and Zimbabweans (13 per cent).[20]

Second, as is clear from this data, **despite the high risk of exploitation during any clandestine smuggling, there is not an axiomatic link between the main nationalities being smuggled into European countries – primarily Afghans, Syrians, Bangladeshis and Sudanese21 – and those nationalities that are statistically most likely to be victims of trafficking.** This is important to emphasise as some political and media commentary suggests a direct correlation between the two, with an inference – sometimes explicit, sometimes more subtle – that migrants are abusing National Referral Mechanisms (NRMs)[22] by falsely claiming to be victims of trafficking. Whilst it would be naïve to assume that such practices do not

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take place, analysis of those detained within the UK for immigration offences in 2019 who subsequently claimed to be victims of trafficking shows that 89 per cent were subsequently found by the Home Office to have 'reasonable grounds to believe that they may be a victim of slavery'.[23] Moreover, empirical research with victims shows that confusion or apparent ambiguity over the details of their experiences can often be the result of trauma and/or limited awareness of the route they have taken, the means used to transport them or the individuals involved in their exploitation.[24]

4.3 Key markets, methods and actors in human trafficking

Whilst human smuggling typically ends with a migrant's arrival at their destination, human trafficking frequently involves an ongoing process of exploitation , either during the victim's journey or within the country of destination – or both. In the UK in 2021, the majority of identified potential victims (58 per cent) claimed that they were exploited in the UK only, whilst approximately one third (31 per cent) claimed exploitation[25] overseas only, with a smaller proportion (11 per cent) claiming that they were exploited both overseas and within the UK.[26] In Ireland in 2020, just over three quarters of identified victims (76 per cent) were exploited in Ireland, with the remainder (24 per cent) exploited overseas.[27] (The data provided by the Department of Justice does not indicate if some victims had been trafficked both outside and within Ireland.)

> **The National Crime Agency estimate that at least 6,000 to 8,000 criminals are involved in 'recruiting, moving, controlling and successfully monetising the services of victims', with British, Romanian, Chinese, Vietnamese and Albanian nationals the leading offenders – in many cases exploiting victims from their own countries.**

Irrespective of the location in which it takes place, the continuing nature of trafficking is a key factor in its profitability and attraction to serious and organised crime. Unlike consumable illicit commodities such as drugs, trafficked human beings can be – and are – exploited over and over again, providing a steady income stream for the **criminal actors** who control them. Research suggests that the illicit economy around human trafficking in the UK is both extensive and 'highly organized, involving a range of foreign criminal groups as well as domestic criminal actors' operating in communities right across the country.[28] Indeed, the National Crime Agency estimate that at least 6,000 to 8,000 criminals are involved in 'recruiting, moving, controlling and successfully monetising the services of victims', with British, Romanian, Chinese, Vietnamese and Albanian nationals the leading offenders[29] – in many cases exploiting victims from their own countries. Some of these offenders work within tight-knit organised crime groups, others as part of loosely structured criminal networks, whilst some operate as 'sole agents' or in small groups of two or three.[30] Similarly, in Ireland, 'well organized gangs from source countries play a key role' in trafficking,[31] with Irish, Brazilian, Romanian, Egyptian[32] and Nigerian[33] offenders identified by An Garda Síochána over the past two years.

The illicit economy in human trafficking revolves around three main '**markets**' for its victims: criminal exploitation (see 4.4, below), labour exploitation and sexual exploitation. In the UK, criminal exploitation is the largest category, with the vast majority of victims being children, followed by labour exploitation, of which most victims are men, and sexual exploitation, of which most victims are women.[34] In Ireland, sexual exploitation is the most commonly identified form of

human trafficking, followed by labour exploitation and then criminal exploitation[35] – though both domestic[36] and international[37] reporting consistently highlights the inadequacy of sufficient NRM data on which to draw reliable conclusions. In particular, labour exploitation is said to be 'under-recognised and under-prosecuted',[38] and therefore likely to be significantly more pervasive than official figures portray.

As many anti-trafficking advocates are at pains to emphasise, **human trafficking does not take place in a vacuum: in the case of trafficking for sexual exploitation, it exists to make a profit from supplying vulnerable girls and women (and in some cases boys and men) to meet the demand of clients in commercial prostitution and the 'sexual entertainment' trade**.[39] In labour exploitation cases, it exists to meet the demand for cheap labour across a range of different sectors of the visible, 'legitimate' economy. In the UK and Irish contexts, this includes agriculture, construction, domestic service, food production, garment manufacturing and hospitality.[40] (In wider international contexts, the demand for coerced or forced labour – in many cases of children – is implicated in the production of goods that are ubiquitous in Western countries, including cobalt for smartphones[41] or the cheap, mass produced clothing required to keep pace with 'fast fashion'.[42]) There has been a particular focus in recent years on labour exploitation within the fishing industry, both in Ireland[43] and overseas.[44] Though the Irish government maintains that 'No evidence has been found to support the allegations of widespread human trafficking in the fishing industry',[45] recent academic research revealed severe violations of working conditions and the use of deception and coercion as a means to control workers[46] – highlighting

the nebulous distinction between poor labour conditions and human trafficking, in particular of migrants.[47]

The **methods** used to recruit and maintain control over victims are many and varied, often involving subtle forms of coercive control or culturally-specific forms of manipulation that do not involve physical assault or restraint,[48] such as witchcraft rituals or traditional religious beliefs.[49] Based upon extensive research with victims across the island of Ireland, one report listed the most common methods used, in order of prevalence, as deception, threat, use of force, abuse of position of vulnerability, coercion, abuse of power, abduction, giving or receiving payments or benefits, and fraud.[50] Victims who are sexually exploited – particularly those from Eastern Europe – are often recruited through the so-called 'lover-boy' method,[51] wherein girls or young women are groomed by an ostensible boyfriend using gifts, flattery and attention.[52] British and Irish victims exploited domestically are recruited using similar methods, with young people who have been through the care system especially vulnerable to such approaches.[53]

For those who travel to the UK or Ireland, control is in many cases secured during their journey or soon after their arrival through rape and/or other sexual or physical brutalisation,[54] with the victims then maintained in a state of perpetual psychological trauma and physical exhaustion, in some cases servicing an average of ten clients a day for six or seven days a week.[55] Limits on the provision of basic necessities such as electricity and food may be used as a further means of control, with the supply of alcohol and drugs used to create and enhance victims' dependency on their traffickers.[56] Such is the extent of this dependency – and fear – that some victims return to their traffickers after having been 'rescued' by the authorities.[57] **In cases of trafficking for both sexual and labour exploitation, victims are frequently controlled through 'debt bondage', wherein they must work off the debt to their trafficker, with implied or explicit threats to them and/or their families should they fail to do so.[58]** Victims sometimes do not realise that they are being exploited, either because of cultural norms around prostitution, for example, or the shame of not honouring their debt, or because they are 'getting paid' by their trafficker, however negligible that amount may be.[59]

In relation to the extent to which human trafficking for sexual and labour exploitation takes place between the UK and Ireland, unsurprisingly the main link appears to relate to cross-border exploitation on the **island of**

Ireland. Both the literature and interviews point to an active, all-island illicit economy for trafficking victims, notably for the purposes of sexual exploitation through prostitution.[60] The now established use of online marketplaces and content delivery systems – including the dark net – for advertising sexual services has made the exploitation of trafficking victims more secure for the criminals who control them, as well as opening up their services to a broader geographic client base – including on both sides of the Irish border.[61] Organised crime groups involved in human trafficking also exploit the Common Travel Area by maintaining operating bases in both jurisdictions,[62] in some cases moving their victims around the island 'like shoals of fish'.[63] Legitimate online letting platforms such as Airbnb and booking.com are used to rent accommodation for short periods as 'pop-up' prostitution sites, and to give the traffickers a degree of anonymity.[64] **Whilst the available literature on human trafficking between Britain and Ireland is relatively sparse, there have been several confirmed cases between the two islands, in particular by Romanian criminal groups,[65]** as well as through the use of Ireland and Northern Ireland as a route to transport trafficking victims into Britain, exploiting the CTA.[66] Notwithstanding such patterns, the extensive footprint of trafficking networks across Europe[67], coupled with the high volume of direct flights to Belfast and Dublin mean that many victims are flown straight to Ireland from various locations on the continent – a trend that may increase with the recent addition of several new direct ferry routes from Europe to Dublin and Rosslare.[68]

4.4 Where drugs and modern slavery intersect

The past decade has seen increasing acknowledgement that significant numbers of people active in criminality may have been exploited in ways that constitute human trafficking – though the extent to which this is considered a major trafficking or modern slavery issue differs markedly between countries.[69] Whilst trafficking victims might be forced or coerced to participate in low-level crimes, such as organised begging, shoplifting or pickpocketing, trafficked people are also extensively used as a source of labour within the drugs trade.

In the UK and Ireland, there are two main ways in which trafficking victims are exploited in the drugs trade: the first of which, **cannabis cultivation**, presents similarly in both jurisdictions. The long-term trend towards large-scale domestic production of high potency herbal cannabis in the UK and Ireland alike (see 5.3) requires significant human input for supervising the plants' growth, drying-out their leaves, removing their buds, and

packaging into bags or blocks for onward transportation and sale.[70] With South East Asian organised crime groups active in cannabis cultivation in both countries,[71] and Albanian groups increasingly prominent in cannabis production and sale in the UK, there is a clear correlation between these nationalities and those of identified and suspected victims of trafficking found in law enforcement raids on cannabis 'farms'. In the UK, Albanian nationals are reported as the predominant nationality referred as potential victims of trafficking in England and Wales, whilst Vietnamese nationals are most commonly reported in Scottish cannabis cultivation.[72] A recent assessment on Vietnamese organised immigration crime in the UK suggested that cannabis cultivation is considered to offer higher earnings than other forms of 'employment', with debt bondage and artificial inflation of debts then used to exploit some of those who work in such activities.[73] In Ireland, though South East Asians do not feature as identified victims of trafficking in recent official data,[74] Gardaí have encountered both Vietnamese and, in lesser numbers, Chinese nationals at raids on cannabis grow houses, and strongly suspect that at least some of these individuals may have been trafficked – though they have been very reluctant to engage with the authorities.[75]

The second crossover between the drugs trade and human trafficking concerns street-level dealing of heroin and crack cocaine, a particularly pernicious form of which is known in Britain as the '**County Lines**' model. The phenomenon developed during the 2010s to extend drug supply from large cities into suburban areas, rural towns and coastal regions through the use of dedicated mobile phone lines, thus creating new drug markets and expanding existing markets.[76] In practice, it involves young dealers being sent by a city-based group (known as 'going country') to take over the property of a local dependent drug user as a base from which to store, cut, bag and despatch drugs (known as 'cuckooing').[77] **Although County Lines networks are constantly evolving in response to law enforcement activity,[78] the entire business model is reliant 'on forms of exploitative labour undertaken by vulnerable populations'[79] – even if many of those involved in such activities resist the idea that they are being exploited.[80]** The children and young people involved are typically recruited from poor and/or chaotic backgrounds, including the care system – with one case involving the assistant manager of a children's home recruiting children under his own care.[81] Those whose properties are used for cuckooing[82] are

> **The children and young people involved are typically recruited from poor and/or chaotic backgrounds, including the care system – with one case involving the assistant manager of a children's home recruiting children under his own care.**

typically vulnerable adults suffering from mental health issues, substance abuse and/or challenging domestic circumstances, and are often coerced into compliance through the threat or use of violence, or induced through 'payment' in drugs[83] – with their levels of agency varying from almost none to what one researcher calls 'constrained choice'.[84]

Though the County Lines model has not taken root in either Ireland[85] or Northern Ireland,[86] there are ongoing examples of vulnerable people being exploited in the drugs trade across the island.[87] One notable such case involved a Lithuanian organised crime group that is reported to have recruited and trafficked at least 65 people – most of whom were drug addicts or from vulnerable backgrounds – to act as street dealers selling heroin in various cities on both sides of the Irish border,[88] including Belfast, Dublin, Waterford, Tralee and Cork.[89] Research has also identified the 'grooming' of children into criminal networks in certain communities; practices that appear to exhibit some of the features of trafficking for criminal exploitation.[90]

4.5 Conclusion

This chapter has explored human trafficking and modern slavery to and within the UK and Ireland from three perspectives. First, it explained the concepts of

human smuggling and human trafficking, highlighting both the divergences and the connections between the two – including the exploitation of *vulnerability* that is common to both – as well as stressing the complexity of many irregular migrants' experiences, which can defy neat categorisation. The second section examined the main 'markets' for trafficking victims in Ireland and the UK, the varied and not always obvious methods used to recruit and control them, and the criminal actors responsible for their exploitation. In particular, this section demonstrated how the *ongoing* nature of exploitation is a core reason why human trafficking is so attractive to organised crime groups, with debt bondage used to maintain control over victims, and horrific levels of repeated sexual abuse keeping (primarily female) victims in the sex trade in a perpetual state of psychological trauma, physical exhaustion and dependency on their traffickers.[91] Finally, the third section discussed the intersection of the drugs trade and human trafficking, with a focus on cannabis cultivation and the use of children and vulnerable adults in street-level drugs sales. This section suggested that the use of trafficking victims – in particular from South East Asia – in cannabis farms or grow-houses is common to both the UK and Ireland, whilst the County Lines model seen in Britain has not – to date at least – manifested in any significant degree within the island of Ireland. Notwithstanding this, there have been cases of organised crime groups exploiting vulnerable people for low-level street sales in cities across Ireland. In addition, academic research has drawn attention to the systematic grooming of Irish children into serious crime in certain communities in ways that might be described as human trafficking for criminal exploitation.

Looking to the future, there are four issues around human trafficking in the UK and Ireland that would benefit from further research and/or improved data collection. First, there is a widely acknowledged dearth of reliable data on human trafficking in both countries[92], which prevents clear-sighted analysis of the threat and hinders the development of the most effective, appropriate responses. Whilst this is a challenge globally, in the unique context of the UK and Ireland it would be extremely beneficial to extend the all-island approach used in pioneering recent academic research on human trafficking[93] to official data-collection and analysis. **Given that this chapter has shown how many of the criminals involved in human trafficking treat the island of Ireland to all intents and purposes as a single market for exploitation, the two jurisdictions' understanding of the threat**

is likely to remain deficient until its information-gathering and assessment is similarly coordinated. Second, there remain unexplored opportunities to harness new technological developments – such as artificial intelligence – to analyse large data sets to identify both strategic-level trends and patterns in human trafficking, as well as previously unrecognised suspects, locations and crossovers with other forms of criminality.[94] Third, cultural barriers can serve as an impediment to effective identification of human trafficking victims, as well as their participation in both victim support services and criminal justice processes. There is scope for further practice-based research into the role of cultural mediation and culturally appropriate, non-state victim liaison workers to build confidence and trust with those who, by the very nature of their victimisation, are reluctant to engage with services in unfamiliar cultural and/or linguistic environments.[95] Finally, there is a significant risk that organised crime groups will seek to exploit the large numbers of people – at the time of writing predominantly women and children – displaced by Russia's invasion of Ukraine.[96] Research with refugees, as well as with the service providers supporting them, may help to identify patterns in attempted exploitation, and inform both domestic and pan-European efforts to tackle such abuse.

5 DRUG TRAFFICKING

5.1 Introduction

Illicit drugs cumulatively represent by far the largest share of criminal markets worldwide, with cannabis, synthetic drugs, cocaine and heroin – in that order – the most significant individual narcotics trades globally.[1] **Within Europe, both the UK[2] and Ireland[3] have amongst the highest *per capita* levels of illicit drugs use**, and thus constitute two highly lucrative markets for those criminal networks involved in the importation, distribution and sale of such products. This chapter begins by providing an overview of the methods used to smuggle narcotics to the UK and Ireland from overseas, before exploring the main drugs markets in turn – namely cannabis, cocaine, heroin and synthetic drugs – charting the routes they follow, the nature of the domestic markets they feed, and the organised crime groups involved in both.

It should be noted that, whilst research for this chapter draws upon a wide variety of data sources, there is a marked difference between official British and Irish literature on these issues, with extensive reporting on drug trafficking by UK law enforcement and other state bodies, whereas reporting on drugs in Ireland is predominantly from a health service or health research perspective. Both are of course equally valid, but there is less official data on the criminal aspects of drugs trades within an Irish context, and the chapter should therefore be read with that caveat in mind. Moreover, references in this chapter to 'the UK' and 'Ireland' should not be taken to imply that either jurisdiction presents entirely homogenous drugs markets; there are significant (and in some cases long-standing) variations in patterns of drug supply and consumption between different parts of the two countries. While the chapter

remains cognisant of such variations – such as the particular prevalence of the heroin trade in Scotland, for example[4] – its primary focus is on state-wide trends.

5.2 From global to local: trafficking methods

The methods used to smuggle various different forms of illegal narcotics to the UK, Ireland and other European consumer markets may differ slightly between different commodities, but tend to share the same basic characteristics.

Trafficking by air includes the use of air cargo as a cover load for the drugs,[5] or utilising corrupt airport or airline staff to smuggle packages or baggage containing drugs whilst evading standard security screening.[6] The most common method is sending regular but small quantities – known as 'little and often' – using individuals as 'couriers' or 'mules',[7] who are often recruited on the basis of their precarious financial situation. In exchange for a relatively small financial reward, these couriers will either be given products containing drugs (such as dried milk or cultural artefacts) to carry in their luggage, or luggage which itself contains drugs in purpose-built concealments, or the drugs will be concealed on their person in elasticated, figure-hugging 'body suits'. Alternatively, or in addition, couriers may be given several condoms filled with drugs to swallow[8] – which can be lethal if even one package bursts[9] – and later pass with their faeces; repeating the process if required on journeys lasting several days. To transport much larger consignments, traffickers have been known to use private aircraft; either light aircraft for short journeys, such as across the Channel from continental Europe to South East England,[10] or even small-to-medium sized private jets flown direct from production or transit countries to small airports in the UK.[11] In one recent

case, three men were arrested at Waterford Airport and their light aircraft was seized after it had allegedly been used to drop off 50 kilograms of cocaine at an airfield in the English Midlands, having initially flown from Belgium.[12]

Most **maritime trafficking**[13] uses containers, with the drugs either concealed within the structure of the container itself, or within the actual cargo – which usually requires the creation of fake front companies or the complicity of corrupt staff in the consignor and consignee companies. The most common method using containers is known as 'rip-on/rip-off', whereby corrupt port staff insert bags containing drugs into specified containers destined for European ports, where the bags are retrieved by stevedores or gangs before the container leaves the port area. Another maritime method is 'coopering', whereby small craft pass waterproof bags containing cocaine to corrupt sailors on board ocean-going vessels, who then either place the bags into a specified container or drop them into the sea (often with a navigational aid attached) at a pre-arranged point in European waters for collection by other smaller boats. Other methods require varying degrees of marine engineering skill, from the construction of 'deep concealments' within hard-to-reach areas of ocean-going ships, to the attachment of torpedo-like tubes or other containers holding multi-kilo drugs loads onto the underside of large vessels, which are later recovered by divers when the ship reaches Europe. Recent years have also seen the use of manned semi-submersibles[14] – and possibly unmanned sub-surface drones[15] – that are capable of trans-oceanic voyages with multi-ton loads. A further, well-established method for transporting the largest, multi-ton drug consignments to Europe – including to Ireland and the UK – is to use small or medium sized craft such as sailing vessels, fishing boats or luxury motor vessels, which are still capable of long distance voyages but can land and off-load discreetly on deserted coastlines or in small harbours.[16]

With the exception of direct trafficking by air or sea, the last phase of most drug importations to the UK and Ireland are by **roll-on/roll-off ferries** from drug distribution hubs in continental Europe, and in Ireland's case from the UK itself – though the patterns and routings of ferry traffic are changing after the UK's departure from the EU (see 3.3). For foot passengers carrying drugs on ferries, or those using minibuses or coaches, traffickers use many of the same concealment methods as for air passengers. For larger

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consignments, traffickers either make use of natural voids in the vehicles' construction, or conceal the drugs in purpose-built concealments – in some cases using quite elaborate cover stories.[17] Most commonly, however, drugs are hidden within cargo loads on heavy goods vehicles, making use of their regular travel to and from Europe, the UK and Ireland.[18] For drug trafficking to the island of Ireland, corrupt hauliers have been identified as providing a vital specialist logistics service smuggling any illicit commodities required from Britain to Northern Ireland and the Republic on behalf of a range of different organised crime groups and paramilitary-affiliated criminal entities, including rivals.[19]

Finally, there are large numbers of low quantity drug importations via the **postal system**, either using the regular national mail service or 'fast parcel' courier delivery services. This method is particularly important for drugs sales via the dark and clear web (see 3.2), and was seen to increase substantially during and after Covid-19 restrictions.[20]

5.3 Cannabis

Cannabis remains the world's largest drugs market,[21] though is not necessarily the most profitable.[22] Whilst there is continued domestic commercial production of herbal cannabis in both Ireland[23] and the UK[24] – which is often linked to the exploitation and trafficking of vulnerable people (see 4.4) – most of the cannabis resin consumed in both countries still originates from

overseas, in particular from Morocco.[25] For the UK market, Afghanistan and Morocco are the primary source countries for cannabis resin, with cannabis herb smuggled into the country from Southern Africa, the Caribbean and the Netherlands[26] – in addition to increasing seizures also from the United States and Canada, which is likely to reflect deregulation in some regions.[27] Some of the cannabis destined for the UK market is also reported as being adulterated with lower potency Albanian strains once it reaches the Netherlands.[28] Although organised crime groups will often be involved in trafficking more than one type of drug, simultaneous poly-commodity smuggling of cannabis with cocaine or heroin is considered a higher risk,[29] as cannabis is easier for the authorities to detect – partly due to its stronger odour – and thus threatens the higher unit value of cocaine and heroin.[30] Notwithstanding this, cannabis smuggling to reach the main consumer markets in Western Europe – including Ireland and the UK – often utilises the same trafficking infrastructure as heroin, travelling via the so-called 'Balkan route' (see 5.5, below)[31] to reach key, established drug distribution hubs in Spain (notably for Moroccan cannabis resin) and the Netherlands.[32]

The retail markets for cannabis in Ireland and the UK are the largest and most diffuse of all the main drug categories in both countries, in part due to the domestic cultivation of cannabis plants significantly enlarging the range of producers involved – which has contributed to a relatively poor understanding of the market as a whole.[33] As such, the production, distribution and sale of cannabis ranges from lone individuals and small, localised networks involved in growing cannabis plants through to large and sophisticated transnational organised crime groups involved in poly-commodity trafficking and supply, with a particularly strong correlation between the cannabis and cocaine trades.[34] In Britain, criminal involvement in the cannabis market is dominated by white British, Vietnamese and Albanian organised crime groups, with Albanian groups believed to use cannabis as a stable income generator for reinvesting into the more profitable but riskier cocaine trade.[35] Some organised crime groups continue to use trafficking victims – in particular Vietnamese and East European nationals – as forced labour in cannabis grow-houses (see 4.4).[36] On the island of Ireland, Irish groups are believed to dominate the market, 'controlling both supply routes and grow houses',[37] though in increasing collaboration with Polish networks for supply into the Republic[38], with Lithuanian and Chinese networks also involved in

> **In broad terms, trafficking by air either uses direct routes to European airports – which presents higher risks of detection due to border agencies' well-practised profiling of flights from Latin American and the Caribbean – or using longer, circuitous routes via Africa or even the Middle East, which involve several connecting flights but obscure the original point of departure**

cannabis cultivation in Northern Ireland.[39] Mirroring wider global[40] and European[41] trends, both Ireland and the UK have in recent years seen a reduction in the circulation of cannabis resin and a diversification of the wider cannabis market, with the expansion of both higher and lower potency product ranges. At one end of the spectrum, producers have used advances in technology and growing techniques to increase the tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) content of their products,[42] whilst new markets have also emerged for myriad cannabis derivatives with a lower THC content – including oils or edibles, such as sweets and jellies (perhaps to attract younger buyers).[43]

5.4 Cocaine

Cocaine is produced from the coca plant in Colombia, Peru and Bolivia, and is then smuggled across Latin America and the Caribbean by land, air, sea and rivers to key airports and ports – such as Santos in Brazil[44] – for onward transportation to its main consumer markets in North America and Europe.[45] Establishing and maintaining control of the main cocaine trafficking

routes in South and Central America and the Caribbean is the subject of intense, ongoing and frequently violent competition between rival trafficking groups,[46] with corruption of state officials used as a key tool to protect these lucrative trades.[47] **In order to reach Europe, traffickers use a multiplicity of different air and maritime routes;[48] any and all of which can and will shift in response to law enforcement activity, changes in legitimate trade or travel patterns and broader socio-economic forces – such as the restrictions on air travel as result of Covid-19**.[49]

In broad terms, trafficking by air either uses direct routes to European airports – which presents higher risks of detection due to border agencies' well-practised profiling of flights from Latin American and the Caribbean – or using longer, circuitous routes via Africa or even the Middle East, which involve several connecting flights but obscure the original point of departure.[50] Maritime trafficking is most commonly via cargo consignments that arrive into Europe – either directly or via Africa – through major ports such as Rotterdam, Antwerp, Hamburg, Valencia, Algeciras, Felixstowe, Gioia Tauro and Le Havre, where the cocaine is off-loaded using complicit port workers, customs officials or even local street gangs.[51] Indeed, the sheer volume of cocaine now entering the Port of Rotterdam has spawned an entire mini-economy of 'cocaine collectors' – comprised predominantly of young men from poor and minority communities – who are paid to extract bags of cocaine from containers in the port, fuelling wider drug-related violence in the city.[52] And whilst there continue to be occasional large maritime cocaine importations to the British and Irish coasts – usually using sailing boats or other smaller sized vessels[53] – most cocaine consignments are consolidated in drug distribution hubs in Spain, Belgium and, in particular, the Netherlands,[54] before being smuggled on to national-level distribution networks in end-user countries, including in the UK and Ireland.

Recent years have seen exponential growth in the volume of cocaine shipments to Europe and significant disruption to previous models of trafficking to the region,[55] with Irish[56] and UK-based[57] organised crime groups emerging at the forefront of the European cocaine trade, as well as networks from the Western Balkans developing a commanding role in the transportation of cocaine via maritime cargo vessels.[58] The UN Office on Drugs and Crime reports that 'the cocaine supply chain to Europe has become more efficient, resulting in greater supply, a purer product and increased availability'[59] – **trends that continue to fuel the growth and diversification of the consumer base for cocaine far beyond its long-established reputation as a primarily middle class drug**.[60] At the same time, the fragmentation of Colombian supply networks has led some Irish[61] and UK-based[62] traffickers to mimic the

> **As with other drugs, a large proportion of the heroin destined for the UK and Ireland starts the final phase of its journey in the major drug distribution and wholesale centres of the Netherlands and Belgium, where loads are warehoused and then broken down to be smuggled to organised crime groups supplying end-user markets.**

'Ndrangheta[63] by sourcing cocaine directly from South American suppliers, often coming together with others to increase their purchasing power and organise large consignments funded by several different organised crime groups. Cutting out wholesalers has considerably increased the profit margins of those buying further up-stream,[64] undercutting competitors still reliant on European distributors and keeping retail prices low and purity levels high, which has in turn spurred even greater demand.[65] Indeed, this aggressive approach is considered key to the rapid rise to prominence of Albanian organised crime in the UK,[66] which now dominates the wholesale supply of cocaine across the country, as well as some retail supply.[67]

In contrast, Irish organised crime groups continue to control most supply and retail of cocaine in the Republic of Ireland, with some foreign national groups involved in sales[68] to meet a continued increase in cocaine use across diverse demographics.[69] Albanian organised crime does, however, have a presence in Ireland and has started to establish itself, but to date has not made any aggressive moves into the Irish cocaine market.[70] **And though Ireland is generally an end market for cocaine from Europe (whether direct or via Britain), the attractiveness of its extensive coastline for direct, large-scale maritime drug shipments – and potentially also the higher volumes of ferry traffic due to Brexit (see 3.3) – mean that an undetermined quantity of cocaine is also likely to move in the opposite direction; from Ireland to the UK and/or into Europe**.[71] While the Northern Irish market is supplied primarily from Britain,[72] there is 'significant collaboration' between organised crime groups supplying drugs north and south of the Irish border[73] – **with the island of Ireland typically viewed**

as a single market for the purposes of drug supply.[74] Indeed, the profitability of the cocaine trade across the island of Ireland is considered likely to attract increasing interest from organised crime groups in Britain and further afield, which may in future result in new entrants attempting to displace established suppliers – even in Northern Irish markets hitherto dominated by paramilitary groups.[75] Organised crime groups in both jurisdictions already engage in murder and serious violence to secure control over lucrative markets. As cocaine consumption continues to expand across diverse groups of users in both Ireland[76] and the UK[77] – including the emergence of crack cocaine in certain parts of Ireland[78] and the continuing use of the County Lines model for selling crack in the UK (see 4.4) – violent competition in pursuit of the profits they generate is likely to continue.[79]

5.5 Heroin

Heroin is produced from the opium poppy in Afghanistan, Myanmar and Mexico – with the overwhelming majority of heroin consumed in the UK, Ireland and elsewhere in Europe originating from Afghanistan.[80] Once heroin leaves Afghanistan, it is transported to its main user markets in Western Europe via two primary routes,[81] known as the 'Balkan' and 'Southern' routes – with the Balkan route considered to be the most important for supplying the UK[82] – and likely also Ireland. It should be noted that there are multiple different itineraries used under these broad 'routes', with the exact journey varying depending on geo-political events and law enforcement activity at any given time, as well as the extent to which governance structures in some transit countries are willing to permit (and 'tax') the passage of illicit narcotics through their territories.[83]

Despite its name, the Balkan route includes the passage of heroin through Iran and/or Iraq, sometimes via Syria, and into Turkey or the Caucasus, from where consignments might take one of a number of itineraries to EU countries, including: (i) across the Black Sea into Ukraine and then Poland;[84] (ii) across the Black Sea into Bulgaria and Romania (including via the Danube) then across Central Europe; (iii) across the Mediterranean into Italy; or (iv) longer maritime shipments direct to major Western European ports, such as Antwerp and Rotterdam.[85] The Southern route – which developed in part due to conflicts along the Balkan route[86] – follows a much longer and more circuitous path, with bulk consignments passing overland through Pakistan or Iran and then leaving the Makran coast across the Arabian Sea and Indian Ocean to Africa, either hidden in maritime cargo from commercial ports, or in traditional dhows following centuries-old littoral trading patterns down the 'Swahili coast' of East and South East Africa.[87] The heroin is then landed in Somalia, Kenya, Tanzania or Mozambique, before being driven overland to South Africa, from where it is smuggled to Western Europe by air or sea, making use of South Africa's extensive trading and transport infrastructure.[88]

As with other drugs, a large proportion of the heroin destined for the UK and Ireland starts the final phase of its journey in the major drug distribution and wholesale centres of the Netherlands and Belgium, where loads are warehoused and then broken down to be smuggled to organised crime groups supplying end-user markets. The supply chain for heroin has remained relatively stable, in part because Turkish organised crime groups continue to control the majority of heroin importations to Western Europe – including the UK and Ireland – working closely with Dutch and Belgian networks at key distribution hubs.[89] Reflecting their dominance of other drug markets, Albanian organised crime has become involved in lower-level wholesale supply of heroin, but typically in areas where they already control the supply and/or retail of cocaine and cannabis.[90] Most of the heroin for the UK market is imported by organised crime groups linked to Pakistan, or by family-based Turkish networks, or – notably in the North West of England – by British groups, who sell on to national or local wholesalers.[91] In terms of heroin flows to Ireland, senior Gardaí suggest that Irish organised crime groups control both importation and supply direct from Europe, including through increased collaboration with Turkish organised crime.[92]

At a retail level, heroin sales in the UK are controlled largely by city-based organised crime groups, with networks stretching out into rural areas and coastal towns via the 'County Lines' model (see 4.4), which uses young people to sell heroin alongside crack cocaine, either from the homes of vulnerable, dependent drug users or from short-term rented properties.[93] Although many heroin users also use crack cocaine, the number of new heroin users has been declining for some time, with a parallel emerging trend of younger crack users who do not use heroin.[94] Notwithstanding these trends, heroin is still the largest drug market in the UK by revenue, worth £4 billion per annum – the bulk of which is generated from within extremely deprived communities, with competition for control of local retail markets for heroin and crack cocaine also leading to high rates of violent crime.[95] The heroin retail market in Ireland is 'stable and entrenched', concentrated in particular communities in Dublin, with some use also in smaller urban centres and rural towns and villages.[96]

Despite the use of vulnerable people in street sales, the County Lines model is not currently a feature of retail markets in either the Republic of Ireland or Northern Ireland – though authorities in both jurisdictions remain watchful for attempts to mimic this approach to create new markets.[97] The demographics for heroin use in Ireland are broadly reflective[98] of European trends for older consumers who comprise a diminishing proportion of overall drug users.[99] Nevertheless, it remains unclear whether the apparent reduction in heroin usage in either Ireland or the UK has been offset by an increase in the supply and sale of diverted medicines, crack cocaine or synthetic opioids[100] (see 5.6, below) – a trend that may have been catalysed by a constriction on heroin supply caused by Covid-19 restrictions.[101] Moreover, the rates of heroin versus synthetic opioid consumption[102] are also likely to be affected by how the Taliban policy on opium production in Afghanistan affects heroin supply[103].

5.6 Synthetic drugs

Synthetic drugs cover a wide range of different substances, but are often grouped for classification purposes into 'traditional' synthetics, such as MDMA (known as ecstasy) and amphetamines, and 'new synthetics', including 'New Psychoactive Substances' (NPS), which cover a diverse and ever-expanding number of synthetic substances.[104] Synthetic drugs are synthesised using a series of chemical reactions using precursor chemicals – processes that can, in theory, be undertaken almost anywhere.[105] In practice, whilst there has been some amphetamine production in the UK and Ireland (the latter reportedly on a small scale), most

traditional synthetics for the Irish[106] and British markets are produced in illicit laboratories in the Netherlands and Belgium and imported by established Dutch and Belgian organised crime groups involved primarily in the wholesale supply of cannabis, cocaine and/or heroin.[107] Irish law enforcement also report a number of smaller organised crime groups involved in supplying traditional synthetics as part of a range of other drugs; known as poly-commodity suppliers.[108]

NPS, including synthetic cannabinoids (many of which are collectively known as 'spice') and synthetic opioids, such as fentanyl, are typically produced in China[109] and to a lesser extent India, and are trafficked to Europe via air, sea and post.[110] Some NPS, including synthetic opioids, are produced in legitimate chemical facilities and transported internationally using commercial chemical products as cover,[111] though recent restrictions on precursor chemical production in China – coupled with new legislative and other controls on NPS in Europe – may be having an impact on the extent of such transnational flows, as well as the number of newly generated NPS.[112] By 2019, the UN Office on Drugs and Crime had identified 541 different NPS on the market worldwide, 71 of which were identified for the first time that year; down from a peak of 163 newly identified substances in 2013.[113] However, despite a steady stabilisation in the number of newly generated NPS internationally, the number of synthetic opioids and benzodiazepine-type NPS continues to grow.[114]

In terms of the retail market for traditional synthetics, sales in the UK remain centred around the night-time economy, and are often linked to the sale of cocaine, with the dark web also an important retail platform.[115] The UK has seen a long-term decline in the use of amphetamines, with demand for MDMA remaining stable and methamphetamine use largely limited to certain, distinct consumer groups.[116] Notwithstanding this, there are indications that methamphetamine production has increased rapidly in Afghanistan, which may lead to increased supply to the UK market via well-established heroin trafficking routes.[117] **In Ireland, by contrast, there are indications across several data sources that the market for traditional synthetics is strong and may be increasing: the customs service continues to report a high number of amphetamine and ecstasy seizures;[118] health specialists have identified a trend for increased amphetamine use amongst students at third-level educational institutions[119]; amphetamine-related deaths are increasing;[120] and regional-level research suggests**

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Despite a steady stabilisation in the number of newly generated NPS internationally, the number of synthetic opioids and benzodiazepine-type NPS continues to grow.

that Ireland has the second highest rate of MDMA use in Europe (after the Netherlands),[121] with record levels of purity and potency, and growing mainstream use of the drug beyond its previous association with specific nightlife sub-cultures.[122] Notwithstanding these trends, experts caution that the market for MDMA in Ireland is still poorly understood,[123] and Irish law enforcement emphasise that 'MDMA and related drugs … share their market segment with other substances such as ketamine, designer drugs, and illegally obtained prescription drugs'.[124]

The retail market for new synthetics in both the UK and Ireland reflects the breadth of products on offer, the emergence of new techniques for buying and selling (such as fentanyl being sold in pill form),[125] as well as the diversity of their user bases – which extend from recreational consumers to long-term, habitual opiate users who may alternate between heroin and synthetic opioids. A significant proportion of NPS (though not synthetic cannabinoids) consumed in both countries are sold online, both via the dark web and the clear web, and then mailed to users through standard postal

and courier services[126] – a trend that is likely to have increased as a result of Covid-19 restrictions.[127] In the UK, whilst demand for NPS amongst the general population declined following the introduction of legislation prohibiting psychoactive drug supply in 2016, use has remained high amongst marginalised demographics such as prisoners and rough sleepers.[128] Synthetic cannabinoid use has for some time been reported as particularly widespread within the UK prison system, contributing to increased levels of violence, disorder and health problems.[129]

Similar dynamics were seen after the introduction of legislation banning NPS in Ireland, with small groups of persistent and in many cases problematic users continuing to source NPS, notably online, while others returned to 'street drugs'.[130] Nevertheless, the use of synthetic opioids and cannabinoids appears to remain relatively limited in Ireland, though health researchers are cognisant that these markets are constantly changing, and that Irish organised crime groups have previously been involved in tableting commonly-abused pharmaceutical drugs, such as benzodiazepines, which may increase supply.[131] **Law enforcement on both sides of the Irish border are concerned that organised crime groups are 'intentionally introducing synthetic opioids into the drug supply chain' by selling them as heroin.[132] Indeed, though there are gaps in understanding of the market for new synthetics in the UK and Ireland, the greatest concern in both countries is that organised crime will increase the importation of potent fentanyls or its analogues – which are easier to conceal and thus to import – in order to cut or replace heroin, which would considerably increase the risk of death and other harms for its users, as seen in the opioid crisis in North America.[133]**

5.7 Conclusion

This chapter has explored the end-to-end nature of drug trafficking to, and within, the UK and Ireland, beginning with the methods used to smuggle narcotics from production regions to consumer markets, before examining the trades in cannabis, cocaine, heroin and synthetic drugs at both supply and retail levels in the two countries. The chapter has shown that, in many respects, drugs flows to and within both jurisdictions share many of the same characteristics; using the same trafficking routes and methodologies, and with common patterns in several drugs markets, for instance continuing increases in cocaine purity, potency and rates of consumption. There are also a number of important differences, such as the apparent divergence

in the market for amphetamines, and the way in which the County Lines model for retail supply of heroin and crack cocaine has – thus far at least – remained largely confined to Great Britain. Yet the geographical proximity of the two countries, the all-island nature of the drugs market in Ireland and Northern Ireland, the freedom of travel guaranteed by the Common Travel Area, and the very close relationships between Irish and UK-based organised crime groups together call for ongoing vigilance, since shifts in drug trafficking trends in one jurisdiction are likely to have at the very least a limited – and possibly a more profound – impact in the other.

In this respect, three issues warrant particular attention and further research. First, **the extent to which highly potent and easily concealable synthetic opioids transplant heroin amongst already vulnerable user groups; a trend underway for some time but which is also likely to be influenced by the Taliban's approach to opium production. Second, the potential for aggressive attempted takeovers of drugs markets on the island of Ireland by foreign organised crime networks; a risk that is likely to heighten in the aftermath of dominant criminal groups being successfully dismantled by law enforcement. Third, the impact on organised crime in Irish and British port cities if Rotterdam and Antwerp become less important transit hubs for UK-bound goods in the post-Brexit trade dispensation, and traffickers look for alternative entry points for their drugs destined for lucrative UK markets**.[134] As the spiralling levels of drug-related violence in the Netherlands suggest,[135] and as has previously been flagged by Europol as a key risk for drug transit hubs,[136] this issue requires careful monitoring.

6

ECONOMIC CRIME

6.1 Introduction

While popular perceptions of serious and organised crime often focus on violence and intimidation on the streets, there are various less visible illicit financial activities that generate significant profits for organised criminal networks, including through the exploitation of individuals, businesses and economies more widely. This chapter explores two such forms of organised economic crime, namely money laundering and cyber-enabled fraud,[1] examining in particular how they manifest in the UK and Irish contexts. Particular attention is paid to how these illicit activities make use of emerging trends in technology, for example the increasing use of virtual and crypto-assets, as well as how they respond to socio-economic shocks, such as Covid-19.
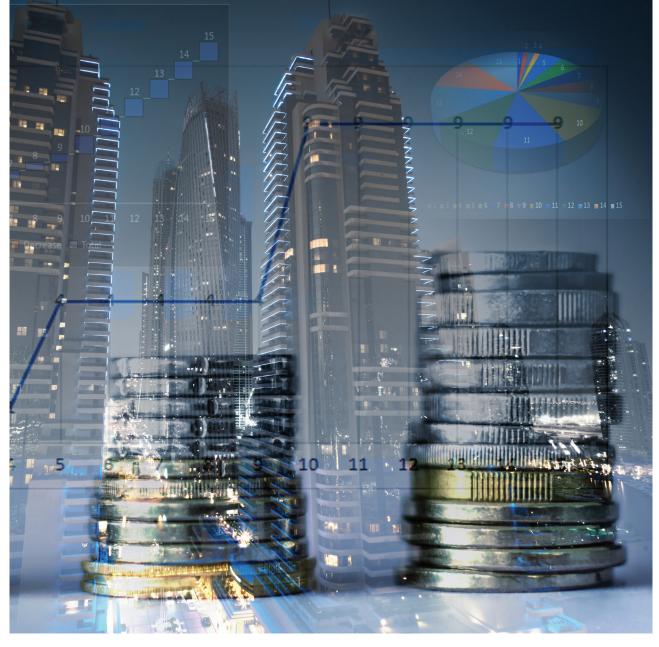
In contrast to drug trafficking, on which much of the publicly available literature is from media outlets or law enforcement reporting, or human trafficking, on which there is abundant literature from academic and not-for-profit institutions, the literature on economic crime emanates from a diverse range of sources, including corporate, regulatory and multilateral bodies. In the case of money laundering, this is in part a reflection of the ongoing international peer review framework, such as the periodic Financial Action Task Force (FATF) assessments, which continuously assess countries' progress in tackling money laundering and illicit financial flows.[2] Though differing in terms of scale, the British and Irish economies share several fundamental characteristics in relation to organised economic crime, including their openness to foreign capital and investment, their integration into the global financial system, and their 'business friendly' regulatory

frameworks – features that make such countries attractive for legitimate financial activity but also leave them vulnerable to criminal exploitation.[3]

6.2 Money laundering

Money laundering is perhaps the best example of how open, internationally exposed economies can be particularly susceptible to economic crime. In its most basic sense, money laundering is the process of making illicitly obtained assets appear legitimate. In practical terms, this process is often described as involving three key components: 'placement', when the illicit funds are first inserted into the financial system; 'layering', whereby those funds are moved through the financial system to distance them from their criminal origins and also to conceal their ultimate beneficiary; and 'integration', when the funds re-enter the legitimate economy, either through consumption (spending) or reinvestment in other assets or business ventures.[4] As such, **money laundering represents both a critical service for nearly every form of profit-driven serious and organised crime (including all those considered in this report), as well as itself constituting a distinct form of organised crime.**

The methods used to carry out money laundering have over time adapted to take advantage of the emergence of new financial instruments and the development of new technology, as well as in response to regulatory controls and law enforcement activity. Common methods used to launder criminally obtained assets include: the purchase of property and other high-value assets (such as artwork, horses or luxury boats or vehicles); moving cash between different jurisdictions via money service bureaux (MSBs) and informal value

transfer systems; disseminating funds in small amounts via large numbers of individual accounts not linked to criminality (known as 'money muling'); physically moving goods through the international trading system (known as trade-based money laundering); using cash-rich businesses to hide the origin of cash deposits into bank accounts; and using virtual[5] or crypto[6] assets to conceal the true origin of funds, typically using exchanges with low regulatory standards.[7] Some crime groups launder their funds themselves, whilst others employ professional money launderers, who may act in an individual capacity or as part of a specialist money laundering group on behalf of a range of different criminal clients.[8]

In the **UK**, after many years of sustained criticism that the country had become a haven for laundering the proceeds of illicit activity overseas – including both high-level corruption and organised crime[9] – the British government admitted in 2018 that money laundering through the UK may be 'in the tens of billions of pounds', representing a 'significant reputational risk' to the financial sector.[10] The National Crime Agency (NCA)

subsequently revised this estimate upwards, repeating in all its recent annual Strategic Threat Assessments that **'it remains a realistic possibility that the scale of money laundering impacting the UK is in the hundreds of billions of pounds annually'[11] – comprised mostly of 'corrupt money from outside the UK', as well as 'the proceeds of crime generated within the UK'.[12]** Official recognition of the scale of money laundering via the UK has been accompanied by a raft of strategic, policy, regulatory, institutional and legislative measures designed to make the country's economy a less benign environment for illicit financial flows.[13] One of the most prominent recent examples of such steps – which has been given renewed impetus by the political response to the invasion of Ukraine[14] – has been the sudden reappearance of the long-delayed Economic Crime (Transparency and Enforcement) Bill, which would establish a register of overseas entities and their beneficial owners, and make provisions for Unexplained Wealth Orders and sanctions.[15] Notwithstanding the potential benefits of this legislation, even very recent parliamentary reports from early 2022 have continued to highlight the persistence and enormity of the challenge

posed by the laundering of illicit finance from overseas through the UK economy.[16]

Nevertheless, **while such measures are aimed primarily against 'high-end money laundering' from overseas,[17] they are also likely to have repercussions for the ability of domestic organised crime groups to launder their assets through the UK financial system**. Current money laundering trends used by serious and organised crime in the UK include greater use of 'over-the-counter' methods[18] to introduce illicit cash into the financial system, for instance via the Post Office, as well as through MSBs and cash-in-transit operators,[19] and by using UK-registered companies with opaque beneficial ownership.[20] **In Northern Ireland, MSBs operating near the border are considered a possible money laundering risk, in part due to low levels of engagement with authorities**.[21] Recruitment of money mules has continued, in particular amongst young people and international students, with mule 'herders' (those who recruit and coordinate networks of money mules) making extensive use of social media and FinTech banking platforms.[22] And though cash-based laundering remains central to organised crime groups who collect most of their revenue in cash – such as those involved in drug supply or human trafficking – the **use of crypto-assets, in particular via unregulated exchanges in hard-to-reach jurisdictions, is an increasingly common money laundering method across serious and organised crime within the UK**.[23]

While Ireland is unlikely to experience comparable levels of money laundering as its nearest neighbour, 'Dublin's status as a well-developed financial market creates an inherent risk to potential exploitation',[24] both in terms of the proceeds of illicit activities overseas, as well as those of Irish organised crime. Ireland hosts 250 of the world's leading financial companies – including half of the world's top 50 banks – with €2.8 trillion in net assets domiciled in the country, and services 40 per cent of global hedge fund assets.[25] The Irish Financial Services Centre is a major global hub for wholesale banking and the Irish Stock Exchange acts as a world-leading listing venue for fund and structured debt products.[26] If previous UN estimates of illicit funds representing 3.6 per cent of Gross Domestic Product were to be extrapolated to the volume of capital hosted in Ireland, even a conservative calculation would suggest that very considerable sums of illicit finance flow through the Irish financial system.[27] Despite improvements to its anti-money laundering regime,[28] and the proposal of various changes to

prevent, investigate and penalise economic crime,[29] the money laundering threat from overseas tends not to receive significant attention in Ireland – though this may change due to a heightened awareness of illicit financial flows in the wake of the recent invasion of Ukraine. To date, however, **relatively few money laundering cases involving international organised crime and corruption have reached the Irish courts,[30] and in 2021 Transparency International warned that Ireland remained vulnerable to the laundering of illicit finance from overseas, with a limited understanding of the threat from overseas corruption.[31]**

By contrast, Ireland appears to present a comparatively hostile environment for money laundering by domestic organised crime – in large part due to its internationally-recognised legislative and institutional measures against criminal finances[32] – which may account for why the vast majority of revenue accrued by Irish organised crime groups remains held in cash, some of which is then smuggled out of the State – including to or via the UK.[33] Whilst a good deal of this outbound cash is payment for drugs or other illicit commodities, it is believed that a proportion is either reinvested into future criminal ventures or laundered through foreign economies, with overseas property purchases being a long-standing favourite laundering method of Irish organised crime groups.[34] More recently, there have been unconfirmed indications that large Irish organised crime groups, some of whose leaders are based outside the State, are seeking to repatriate laundered assets and reinvest them into the Irish property market.[35] In addition, domestic organised crime still attempts to utilise other mainstream money laundering methods, including via MSBs and money mules, as well as high value and easily transferable commodities such as designer watches, jewellery, pre-paid debit and gift cards, precious metals and gemstones.[36] The luxury and used car markets have also long been important platforms for money laundering by Irish organised crime groups,[37] as have cash-rich small businesses – though the shutdown of many such firms during Covid-19 severely limited their ability to use this method.[38] **Despite some instances of money laundering using crypto-assets, Gardaí report that this remains relatively rare within Irish organised crime,[39] perhaps due to the volatility of crypto-currency markets.[40]**

6.3 Cyber enabled fraud

In most common law jurisdictions, 'fraud' involves a wide and diverse range of dishonest and/or deceptive

> **Whilst a good deal of this outbound cash is payment for drugs or other illicit commodities, it is believed that a proportion is either reinvested into future criminal ventures or laundered through foreign economies, with overseas property purchases being a long-standing favourite laundering method of Irish organised crime groups.**

acts (or omissions) that are carried out with the aim of making a gain or causing a loss.[41] Although fraud is not a new crime, and continues to take place in various offline environments, advances in information communications technology (ICT) have exponentially increased the reach, scale and impact of such offences, expanding the opportunities for their commission from almost any location in the world and forming a category of offending known as 'cyber-enabled' fraud.[42] **Moreover, states' inability (or, in some cases, unwillingness) to actively tackle online fraud has made cyber-enabled fraud an especially low risk and high reward form of criminality, making it more attractive to potential offenders, as well as eroding victims' trust in the ability of state authorities to effectively protect them from such crimes.[43]** The vast spectrum of cyber-enabled fraud includes bank and credit card fraud, consumer or retail fraud (also known as non-investment fraud), advance fee fraud (including romance or dating scams), investment fraud (including 'boiler room' scams and 'pyramid' or 'ponzi' schemes), third party fraud (including business identity theft and 'CEO' frauds),[44] and myriad other schemes.[45]

In a **European** context, investment fraud (most commonly involving fake crypto-currency opportunities), business email compromise (BEC) and 'CEO' frauds have been amongst the most dominant cyber-enabled fraud threats in recent years.[46] **The restrictions imposed due to Covid-19 created multiple additional opportunities and favourable conditions for cyber-enabled fraud, with a 'massive and uncoordinated shift' to home working (in both the public and private sectors), as well as sharp increases in both the volume of electronic transactions and the use of online platforms in general during national lockdowns[47] – not to mention online frauds around the procurement of medicines and face masks.[48]**

Organised crime networks have refined their approaches to identify and exploit potential victims – often using a combination of traditional 'social engineering' methods and phishing attacks.[49] They have also developed a more sophisticated infrastructure, creating language-specific call centres, authentic-looking advertising and more realistic websites, as well as using remote access software to take over victims' accounts and money mule networks to launder the proceeds of such activities.[50] Moreover, those criminals involved in cyber enabled fraud tend to use a loose, cell-based model, with separate cells operating from various European jurisdictions; each of which is responsible for a different aspect of their activities, such as contacting potential victims or laundering the proceeds of the frauds – including the 'cashing out' phase, which often takes place in the UK and uses legitimate FinTech banking or money transfer platforms such as Revolut or Transferwise.[51] This 'business-like' approach, combined with an agile and mobile geographical footprint, makes cyber-fraud networks more resilient to law enforcement disruption than the hierarchical model traditionally used by organised crime groups involved in, for example, drug trafficking – a contrast that is further exemplified by their tendency not to use violence to settle disputes.[52]

In the **UK**, a number of different reports have over recent years highlighted the enormity of both the scale of fraudulent activity and its harmful impact, as well as the challenge posed by significant under-reporting.[53] **Even with such under-reporting, official statistics indicate that fraud constitutes the largest stand-alone crime type in England and Wales,[54] with 80 per cent of total reported fraud being cyber-enabled.[55]** Fraud is widely recognised to cause considerable financial losses to businesses and individuals, as well as incalculable

> **Recent cases of cyber enabled fraud have included an Ireland-based organised crime group involved in BEC and invoice re-direction fraud that allegedly stole more than €14 million from Irish citizens and businesses, with links established to the US, South Africa and possibly also to the West African 'Black Axe' organised crime network – which specialises in cyber enabled attacks worldwide.**

psychological harm – in particular to vulnerable people[56] – cumulatively exacting a cost to the UK economy that one previous report estimated at £190 billion – nearly 10 per cent of Gross Domestic Product.[57] **Recent analysis indicates that digital fraud rose substantially in the UK in 2021, with account takeovers and payment transfer frauds increasing by 288 per cent and 462 per cent respectively.[58] The Covid-19 pandemic led to an increase in cyber-enabled frauds** due to greater use of online shopping, auctions and advertising, including via social media, through the exploitation of loneliness and isolation with romance scams,[59] and by impersonating the websites of trusted organisations such as the National Health Service and Royal Mail.[60] Perhaps the largest-scale recent example of cyber enabled fraud in the UK was through the systematic targeting of the Covid-19 'Bounce Back Loan Scheme', from which the National Audit Office estimates £15-26 billion will have been lost due to fraud.[61]

Organised crime groups have also been quick to use other economic and political events: very low interest rates have spurred investment frauds which exploit those seeking higher returns as an alternative to standard savings accounts, and the UK's exit from the EU has led to phishing emails seeking to take advantage of uncertainty over new trading arrangements.[62] In Northern Ireland, there has been a trend towards younger victims in their twenties and thirties being targeted with crypto-asset investment frauds.[63] Whilst some organised criminal groups and networks involved in cyber enabled fraud operate within the UK itself, the majority are believed to be based overseas, in particular in West Africa and Eastern Europe[64] – including in 'hard to reach' jurisdictions (such as Russia) that offer only minimal levels of cooperation with British authorities.[65]

Similarly, in **Ireland** it is widely recognised that Internet-enabled crimes – notably including fraud – 'are proliferating fast',[66] with the internationalised nature of such criminality posing a particular challenge for effective state responses,[67] which can in turn exacerbate the sense of impunity around such offences. As with the UK, the Irish government recognises the impact that cyber enabled criminality has on both individuals and the wider economy, noting that 'Cyber Crime incidents in Ireland are increasing with 61% of Irish organisations reported to have suffered cybercrime such as Fraud in the last two years with an estimated loss on average of €3.1m'.[68] Indeed, a survey of corporations in 2020 indicated that cyber-enabled fraud constituted the most prevalent type of fraudulent activity affecting businesses in Ireland, with the reported incidence of cybercrime as a whole (including both cyber enabled and cyber dependent crimes) experienced by Irish firms (69 per cent) nearly double that experienced by companies globally (34 per cent).[69]

Recent cases of cyber enabled fraud have included an Ireland-based organised crime group involved in BEC and invoice re-direction fraud that allegedly stole more than €14 million from Irish citizens and businesses, with links established to the US, South Africa and possibly also to the West African 'Black Axe' organised crime network – which specialises in cyber enabled attacks worldwide.[70] In another case, an organised crime group used a corrupt bank employee to disable security features to facilitate the extraction of customer funds – a vulnerability that has been exacerbated by financial institutions' staff working from home during Covid-19, making robust supervision significantly harder.[71] **Ireland's sizeable financial services sector has also been used to process and launder (see 6.2, above) the proceeds of large-scale cyber-enabled criminality in other jurisdictions;** the perpetrators of the 'OneCoin'

crypto-currency pyramid fraud, for example, transferred the proceeds of the scheme – amounting to US$400 million – through bank accounts in the British Virgin Islands, Cayman Islands and Ireland.[72]

In terms of cyber-frauds directed against individuals, **Gardaí have seen increased crossovers between different *modus operandi*.** In one such permutation, victims are 'groomed' using typical romance fraud methods, and then – once trust has been established – they are **enticed into investing in fictitious investment schemes, often involving purportedly high-yield crypto-currency ventures.**[73] In another crossover between different methods, victims are again recruited using romance fraud tactics, before being used – wittingly or not – as money mules.[74] **The profiles of money mules recruited by cyber-fraud networks has diversified over recent years, including not only students but middle aged people too**, with younger members of West African communities in Ireland also being targeted for use of their bank accounts.[75]

6.4 Conclusion

As with other forms of serious and organised crime, there are multiple parallels between how money laundering and cyber enabled fraud are carried out within – and impact upon – the UK and Ireland. The similarities between the two countries' economies, including the prominent role of their respective financial sectors and their openness to international trade and capital, mean that both are vulnerable to the laundering of illicit assets, whether from overseas or domestic criminality. Yet there are also important divergences: **in the UK, the immense scale of illicit finance from overseas being laundered through the British economy has in recent years been recognised as presenting a systemic reputational threat to the financial system as a whole, with a sophisticated laundering infrastructure having developed that is of benefit to both foreign and domestic criminal actors alike. In Ireland, by contrast, the state's largely successful focus on domestic criminal finance has created a challenging environment for money laundering by Irish organised crime groups, who appear to remain largely wedded to cash, whilst understanding of the threat from illicit financial flows from overseas remains under-developed.**

In terms of cyber-enabled fraud, the two jurisdictions appear to suffer similarly high levels of attacks – many of which originate from overseas – using a similar range of methods, the scale of which was exacerbated by

the massive increases in online activity as a result of Covid-19 restrictions. In both countries, investment frauds – including those related to crypto-assets – and cyber-enabled targeting of businesses – through, for example, BEC and invoice redirection or payment transfer frauds – have increased substantially. Moreover, **it is not uncommon for the proceeds of cyber-enabled fraud carried out in other jurisdictions to be laundered via the Irish and UK economies.**

Looking to the future, there are four issues related to economic crime that merit further research and/or monitoring. First, the steady expansion of legitimate crypto-currency use has been seized upon as a key money laundering platform throughout Europe and the UK, in particular by cyber criminals but increasingly also by organised crime groups in the offline environment, including those involved in drug trafficking. **Although Irish organised crime groups appear not to have yet embraced crypto-currencies for laundering purposes, it is likely that there will be greater use of such assets by serious and organised crime as they become more commonplace within society, posing challenges for identifying, tracing, freezing and seizing such assets.** Second, despite new trends in money laundering, the property sector in both countries is still a relatively safe setting for the reinvestment of criminal assets, including those re-entering the country from abroad, and deserves ongoing scrutiny by researchers, regulators and law enforcement alike.[76] Third, although recent UK parliamentary assessments remain unimpressed by the pace of the country's anti-money laundering efforts, there seems little doubt that the ongoing implementation of a raft of such measures will start to create additional obstacles to laundering illicit finance through the British financial system – a process likely to be given added impetus by the UK government's response to the invasion of Ukraine.[77] Due to the closely interconnected nature of the two countries' legitimate economies and criminal markets, there may be some risk of displacement to Ireland as such measures begin to take effect, in particular from overseas criminality and corruption. Finally, **there are likely to be other unforeseen consequences of the conflict in Ukraine on serious and organised crime in Europe; not least in the field of cyber-enabled fraud.** This may include a heightened risk of cyber-enabled attempts to **exploit the immense and growing humanitarian crisis to fraudulently obtain funds from state bodies, charities and private donors in both the UK and Ireland.**

7 KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Having assessed three key forms of serious and organised crime in Ireland and the UK, as well as the cross-cutting 'enablers' that facilitate these and other criminal activities, this chapter identifies and brings together the main findings, knowledge gaps and challenges that have emerged throughout the research. The chapter is organised into five broad, over-arching themes: (1) the geography of criminal markets; (2) the role of technology; (3) corrupted transport facilitators; (4) external events and shocks; and (5) building a shared knowledge base.

Where appropriate, recommendations are proposed for how such gaps, issues or challenges might be addressed, and by whom. (It is possible that some of the recommendations relating to state bodies are already underway but have not been publicly disclosed.) In keeping with the overall purpose of this report (see Chapter 1), **the focus of this chapter is on building an accurate, shared understanding of the threat posed by serious and organised crime across the UK and Ireland, as a predicate condition for shaping more effective responses.**

7.1 The geography of criminal markets

7.1.1 Many organised crime groups treat the island of Ireland as, in effect, a **single market for both drug trafficking and human trafficking**. Such groups ignore the border for the purposes of the transportation and sale of illicit drugs and the exploitation and 'marketing' of trafficking victims, whilst at the same time exploiting the different legal and policing jurisdictions to their advantage.

7.1.2 The **East – West link** between the island of Ireland and Great Britain remains important for **wholesale drug trafficking**, in particular to Northern Ireland. However, the role of Great Britain-based organised crime groups in supplying Irish drugs markets has diminished considerably over the past decade as Irish drug traffickers have established their own importation and supply chains to Ireland. These supply chains include both European drug distribution hubs, notably in Belgium, the Netherlands and Spain, as well more lucrative but limited connections further 'upstream', including in South America. For drug importations to Ireland, Britain increasingly acts as a 'waypoint' (rather than a source of supply) for consignments from Europe, though these flows are likely to change in correlation with decreased legitimate use of the UK 'land-bridge' and additional direct ferry routes to Ireland from France and Spain.

7.1.3 In terms of individual **drugs markets**, the UK and Ireland share several characteristics, including the increasing and diversifying consumer base for cocaine and continued domestic production of high-potency herbal cannabis. However, there are also important differences between the two countries' drug markets, such as diverging demand for amphetamines (reducing in the UK; stable or rising in Ireland), and synthetic opioids and cannabinoids (widespread amongst certain vulnerable demographics in the UK but seemingly limited in Ireland). The 'County Lines' model, used in Britain for heroin and/or crack cocaine sales, has to date not become a feature in the drugs market in either Ireland or Northern Ireland, though exploitation of dependent drug users for street-level heroin sales is not uncommon.

> **Whilst there are some proven links between trafficking for sexual exploitation on the island of Ireland and in Britain, the nature and extent of these East–West connections is poorly understood and represents a knowledge gap in publicly available research.**

Recommendation 1:

*Increased **drug market monitoring**, including via the routine use of waste water testing[1], would provide health researchers and law enforcement alike with accurate, up-to-date and geographically-specific data sets upon which to plan more targeted and effective health services and policing interventions.*

7.1.4　Given the expanding demand for cocaine in Ireland, it is possible that **non-Irish organised crime groups** will attempt to gain a larger share or even dominance of supply to the lucrative Irish and/or Northern Irish markets. The 'takeover' of the British cocaine market by Albanian organised crime suggests that this could take place through undercutting existing suppliers with cheaper, high purity product, initially at least using lower-level Irish criminals for local distribution and retail sales. Though this scenario remains unlikely whilst major Irish organised crime groups control the Irish market, the vacuum created by the dismantling or large-scale disruption of such groups by law enforcement may provide an opportunity for such an attempt.

7.1.5　Some criminal networks involved in **human trafficking for the purposes of sexual exploitation** maintain bases of operations on both sides of the Irish border, both for logistical reasons and to market their victims in the sex trade in different locations across the island. Whilst there are some proven links between trafficking for sexual exploitation on the island of Ireland and in Britain, the nature and extent of these East – West connections is poorly understood and represents a knowledge gap in publicly available research.

Recommendation 2:

*The Departments of Justice in Ireland and Northern Ireland, the Home Office in England and Wales, and the Justice Directorate in Scotland should consider funding a comprehensive research project to **map the nature and scale of human trafficking between the island of Ireland and Great Britain**, and to make recommendations for tackling human trafficking within the CTA. The project should collate data from a wide range of stakeholders, including victim support/aftercare services, law enforcement and victims themselves.*

7.1.6　Although **human trafficking for the purposes of labour exploitation** is also believed to take place on an all-island basis, understanding of the scale and nature of this activity suffers from differing jurisdictional approaches to forced labour and labour conditions more generally. Irregular migrants from South East Asian countries – in particular from Vietnam and China – are believed to be exploited in cannabis farms in both Ireland and Northern Ireland, yet the connections between human smuggling, human trafficking and cannabis production across the island remains a knowledge gap.[2]

Recommendation 3:

*Authorities in both jurisdictions should consider **harmonising data collection and analysis on human trafficking** on an all-island basis, with mechanisms put in place to promote and encourage cross-border coordination and best practice across all relevant state and non-state bodies. Law enforcement officers in Northern Ireland have suggested that the creation of an independent, all-Ireland anti-trafficking commissioner or ombudsman might add significant impetus and accountability to any such cross-border efforts.*

7.2 The role of technology

7.2.1 **Emerging technologies have transformed criminal communications**, both through the use of widely-available Virtual Private Networks (VPNs) and messaging platforms with end-to-end encryption (E2EE), as well as more sophisticated criminally dedicated secure communication (CDSC) devices. Organised crime groups throughout the UK and Ireland make extensive use of encrypted communications, and though recent multinational operations have successfully penetrated some such platforms, encryption represents a serious, ongoing challenge to the investigation of serious and organised crime. There have been a small number of cases involving companies in both countries financing CDSC platforms and hosting criminally dedicated VPNs.

Recommendation 4:

*The Irish Department of Justice should consider **establishing an independent 'technology futures' research advisory group**, with a specific remit to advise law enforcement on emerging technologies, in particular in the fields of encrypted communications, online marketplaces (including the dark net) and crypto-assets (see below). Such a group should harness the expertise of Ireland's sizeable technology sector, and also have representation from data protection and privacy experts, the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications, as well as Gardaí from relevant specialist bureaux.*

7.2.2 **Crypto-currencies are steadily becoming more mainstream within various strands of organised criminal activity**, including illicit markets that operate predominantly offline, such as drugs sales. Organised crime groups in the UK are increasingly using crypto-currencies to launder the proceeds of crime. In Ireland, criminal use of crypto-currencies appears to remain limited, though it is considered likely that this will change if crypto-assets become more widely used throughout society. Cyber-enabled investment frauds involving false crypto-investment schemes have become common in both the UK and Ireland over the past two years, and thefts of crypto-assets are rising globally. Despite this, knowledge and understanding of the role of crypto-currencies within serious and organised crime – whether for money laundering purposes

or as an attack vector for cyber-enabled fraud and theft – remains limited.

Recommendation 5:

*Research institutions, law enforcement bodies and regulated crypto-currency exchanges in Ireland and/ or the UK should consider **a joint research programme exploring and monitoring the role of crypto-assets in serious and organised crime**. Separate strands of the programme might examine (i) crypto use in money laundering; (ii) crypto-related investment fraud; (iii) crypto theft; and (iv) crypto as payment on darknet markets.*

7.3 Corrupted transport facilitators

7.3.1 Corrupted workers at **ports and airports** are highly valuable assets for organised crime groups involved in the importation of illicit commodities into the UK and Ireland. Port workers in particular are indispensable in identifying containers for drug 'rip-offs', notably of cocaine from South America. This is likely to be become a more commonplace trafficking method into Ireland as Irish organised crime groups expand their contacts further upstream in drugs supply chains, and as trade flows adjust following the UK's exit from the EU.

7.3.2 Corrupted workers in the **logistics and haulage industries** – in particular complicit drivers of heavy goods vehicles (HGVs) – play an essential role in the importation of drugs and the smuggling of irregular migrants (a proportion of whom may be the victims of human trafficking) onto the island of Ireland. This crucial role will continue despite changes in the use of the 'land-bridge' through Great Britain as more direct routes open to and from Europe.

Recommendation 6:

*An Garda Síochána, the Revenue Commissioners, the Police Service of Northern Ireland, the National Crime Agency and the UK Border Force should consider a **bilateral research project on corrupted transport workers** involved in drug trafficking and organised immigration crime between the UK and Ireland. Separate strands of activity should be considered on port workers, airport/airline staff, HGV drivers and criminal logistics specialists. Geo-spatial and social network analysis methods may assist in such research.*

> **Crypto-currencies are steadily becoming more mainstream within various strands of organised criminal activity, including illicit markets that operate predominantly offline, such as drugs sales. Organised crime groups in the UK are increasingly using crypto-currencies to launder the proceeds of crime.**

7.4 External events and shocks

7.4.1 Like the wider societies in which they operate, organised crime groups are impacted by large-scale political, economic and environmental events or shocks, whether in the context of the UK and Ireland or on a global scale. However, they are typically more agile in their response than states or civil society, and quick to **use crises or profound changes to their own advantage**, in some cases by directly exploiting others' vulnerability or generosity.

7.4.2 The UK's exit from the EU led to initial uncertainty within criminal markets reliant on legitimate trade flows into and between the UK and Ireland, as organised crime groups waited to ascertain the impact of any eventual trade agreement. Despite the continuities in trading patterns ensured by the Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA), it is highly likely that **organised crime will take advantage of post-Brexit shifts in legitimate trade flows**, including the additional direct roll-on/roll-off ferry routes between Ireland and continental Europe.

7.4.3 Any changes in legitimate containerised maritime trade flows to the UK are likely to have a significant knock-on impact on drugs flows to (and between) both the UK and Ireland. In particular, if the Netherlands and Belgium diminish in relative importance as drug distribution hubs feeding the sizeable UK cocaine and heroin markets, there is a risk that **organised crime groups will seek to off-load drug consignments directly into UK ports, or indirectly into Irish ports** for onward transportation to Britain. Whilst it is at present hard to assess the likelihood of this shift, its impact in terms of drug supply, corruption and violent criminal competition would be significant, especially in port cities, and may be exacerbated by an increased presence of Balkan, Latin American and/or Turkish drug traffickers to supervise large consignments.

Recommendation 7:

*An Garda Síochána and the National Crime Agency should consider a joint project with Europol and Dutch and Belgian authorities to **actively monitor any changes in drug flows to the UK from the Netherlands and Belgium**, and the nature and scale of any displacement to British and/or Irish ports.*

7.4.4 The Covid-19 pandemic prompted significant shifts in how various forms of serious and organised crime are carried out, some of which are likely to become permanent features of criminal markets and methodologies. In particular, the move towards **online drugs sales during the pandemic is likely to retain a greater segment of retail-level drugs** sales, both via the dark web and surface web, and will prove a challenge to law enforcement approaches tailored towards off-line contexts. The extent of national and local-level drug consumption facilitated by online platforms is likely to remain a significant knowledge gap for healthcare and policing authorities alike for some time.

7.4.5 The impact of the US and allied **withdrawal from Afghanistan on heroin flows may not yet be visible in consumer markets, such as the UK and Ireland**, due to the length of supply routes

> **There is a dearth of authoritative, publicly available information on, and analysis of, serious and organised crime in Ireland. What credible commentary does exist in the public domain is largely limited to a handful of journalists and sector-specific assessments of particular crime types, such as corporate assessments of the impact of cybercrime on business.**

and the effects of stockpiling. The Taliban's policy towards opium production is an important factor in whether or not heroin supply is constrained – and, if so, to what extent. If supply is significantly constrained, it is likely that existing trends towards increased use of synthetic opioids may accelerate, which is likely to have serious health and social implications amongst vulnerable drug dependent user groups.

7.4.6   The spill-over effects of **Russia's invasion of Ukraine will have a significant and long-lasting impact on various forms of serious and organised crime** across Europe, including in the UK and Ireland. Organised crime groups involved in human trafficking are highly likely to seek to exploit Ukrainian women and children refugees for the purposes of sexual exploitation. Cyber-enabled fraud schemes are likely to target efforts to mitigate the humanitarian fall-out from the war. In the longer term, it is likely that a proportion of the weapons circulating in Ukraine will enter criminal firearms markets in Eastern Europe, from which some will be purchased by UK and Irish groups.

7.4.7   A rapid scaling-up of anti-money laundering measures in the UK in light of the war in Ukraine is likely to make the country a more hostile environment for money laundering, notably by foreign criminal actors. Given the proximity,

similarity and integrated nature of the British and Irish economies, **it is possible that there may be some displacement of illicit financial flows (IFFs) from the UK to Ireland**, in particular from overseas corruption and crime. Despite Ireland's effective regime against domestic criminal assets, there is limited understanding of the threat to its economy from IFFs from overseas.

Recommendation 8:

*The Department of Justice and Central Bank of Ireland should undertake a **review of the threat to the Irish economy from the laundering of illicit finance from overseas,** including from organised crime and corruption. This review should involve a range of stakeholders, including a wide range of experts on global IFFs from Irish and foreign civil society, with a particular focus on international money laundering through well-regulated economies.*

7.4.8   More widely, **any enduring disruption to global or regional trade flows as a result of the war in Ukraine is likely to be exploited by organised crime**. In the context of the UK and Ireland, this is likely to lead to a resurgence in cross-border smuggling to take advantage of price and duty differentials. If trade disruption continues into the longer-term, it is possible that organised crime groups will become increasingly involved in the transportation and supply of restricted or limited goods by adapting their existing supply chains.

7.5 Building a shared knowledge base

7.5.1 **There is a dearth of authoritative, publicly available information on, and analysis of, serious and organised crime in Ireland.** What credible commentary does exist in the public domain is largely limited to a handful of journalists and sector-specific assessments of particular crime types, such as corporate assessments of the impact of cybercrime on business. This paucity of reliable analysis leaves a vacuum that is often filled by more sensationalist narratives focusing on – and arguably glamorising – the exploits of individual criminal actors. The lack of a single, authoritative and publicly available assessment of serious and organised crime in Ireland is a significant factor in the absence of a sober, constructive public conversation on this topic.

7.5.2 **Understanding of serious and organised crime on a North–South basis on the island of Ireland is relatively well developed**, in large part due to the close cooperation between law enforcement and other governmental bodies. Public understanding of criminality on the island has in the past been assisted by the publication of Cross-Border Organised Crime Threat Assessments.

Recommendation 9:

*The Department of Justice and An Garda Síochána should consider **the production of a regular strategic threat assessment on serious and organised crime in Ireland**, based upon all-source reporting from across all State agencies. The classified version of this threat assessment should be used to shape an informed, whole-of-government response to serious and organised crime. The public version of the threat assessment should be used as the basis for more informed discussions on the topic within the public square, and to generate a whole-of-society response that complements and enhances the efforts of the State. Such an assessment could be coordinated with the existing **(North – South) Cross-Border Organised Crime Threat Assessments**, and also – subject to the participation of the NCA – with a regular **East–West (UK–Ireland) threat assessment**, produced on a bilateral basis.*

Recommendation 10:

*Civil society organisations and research institutions across Ireland and the UK should explore **practical, collaborative mechanisms to promote independent analysis of serious and organised crime**.*

8

CONCLUSION

This report set out, in Chapter 1, to assess the current, publicly available knowledge base on serious and organised crime in Ireland and the UK in order to provide a strategic-level, qualitative assessment of organised crime as it operates across the two jurisdictions. Chapter 2 provided the conceptual and methodological framework for the study, examining different definitions of organised crime, explaining the approach to the literature review and interviews, and outlining the limitations of the research. Crucially, this chapter also articulated the underlying assumptions of the project, including the importance of understanding the threat from serious and organised crime as a precondition for crafting effective responses, as well as the recognition that organised crime groups do not operate in a distinct, hermetically sealed 'underworld', but rather exist to meet the demand for illicit goods and services within society. Chapter 3 explored cross-cutting criminal enablers that facilitate various forms of serious and organised crime, notably new technologies, the exploitation of borders (including the Common Travel Area), professional and public sector corruption, and criminal use of firearms. Chapters 4, 5 and 6 examined modern slavery and human trafficking, drug trafficking and economic crime respectively, with a particular focus on how these crime types manifest in the UK and Irish contexts, as well as how they are situated within global and regional illicit flows. Finally, Chapter 7 drew from the research project as a whole to identify its main findings, including knowledge gaps and emerging challenges. This chapter also provided specific recommendations for how to build understanding of serious and organised crime within both the state and civil society, with a view to catalysing more sophisticated 'whole-of-government' and 'whole-of-society' responses.

Throughout the study, particular attention has been paid to examining the interaction of illicit markets across and between Ireland and the UK. Whilst there are some significant knowledge gaps – for instance in relation to the scale of human trafficking between Britain and the island of Ireland – the report has been able to draw two central conclusions. The first is that for various forms of criminality, in particular drug trafficking and human trafficking for the purposes of sexual exploitation, many organised crime groups treat the island of Ireland as a single market, and simultaneously use the differing legal jurisdictions to their maximum advantage to evade law enforcement attention. Second, the relationship between organised crime groups in Ireland and Britain has changed significantly as major Irish drug traffickers have increasingly sourced their product directly from wholesale suppliers in the key distribution hubs of the Netherlands, Belgium and Spain, and in some instances directly from cocaine and heroin suppliers even further upstream.

Indeed, the criminal markets that operate within and across the UK and Ireland can only be properly understood within their regional and global contexts, highlighting the internationalised nature of nearly every form of serious and organised crime considered in this report. Cyber-enabled frauds, for example, are perpetrated largely by organised crime networks that are based far beyond these two islands, or by small, highly mobile cells that operate across Europe and rapidly move location in response to any real or suspected law enforcement attention. But this research has also demonstrated that, like any globalised supply chains, serious and organised crime is susceptible to external shocks or events that impact on wider society; the difference being that organised crime groups swiftly reorient themselves in order to use such situations for their own benefit. Just as criminals 'capitalised on the chaos of coronavirus by adopting new methods',[1] so an array of criminal actors will inevitably try to use the war

in Ukraine to exploit vulnerable people, defraud efforts to mitigate its humanitarian fall-out, and sell firearms onto other criminal groups.

This report began by recounting the tragic deaths of 39 Vietnamese migrants in a refrigerated container in England in 2019, and the subsequent discovery of links between criminals involved in different forms of organised crime across Ireland, the UK, continental Europe and beyond.[2] Whilst the report has striven to focus on the markets, methods and trends that characterise serious and organised crime across these two islands, it is imperative to further emphasise the human cost of such activities; a cost that falls disproportionately on the most vulnerable in society. Poor communities bear the brunt of drug crime and related violence; the elderly, lonely and financially precarious are exploited through online frauds; trafficked women in the sex trade are subject to repeated abuse in some of the most degrading conditions imaginable. The unique nature of the relationship between the UK and Ireland – in particular the land border and Common Travel Area – demands a collaborative approach to tackling these injustices, which is underpinned by a shared understanding of the organised crime groups responsible.

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29. Though by no means unheard of – see, for example: McCambridge, Jonathan (2022), 'Two held as cocaine and cannabis worth £1.8m seized at Belfast Harbour', 12th February 2022, URL: https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/two-held-as-cocaine-and-cannabis-worth-18m-seized-at-belfast-harbour-41340551.html (accessed 16th February 2022).

30. Saggers (2019), *op. cit.*, pp. 10–11.

31. Saggers (2019), *ibid.*, p. 10.

32. Black, Carol (2020), 'Review of Drugs – Evidence relating to drug use, supply and effects, including current trends and future risks', Her Majesty's Government, London, p. 12.

33. Black (2020), 'Review of Drugs – Executive Summary', *op. cit.*, p. 11.

34. Black (2020), 'Review of Drugs – Evidence', *op. cit.*, p. 34.

35. Black (2020), 'Review of Drugs – Evidence', *ibid.*, p. 34.

36. National Crime Agency (2020), 'National Strategic Assessment', *op. cit.*, p. 34.

37. Health Research Board (2021), 'Drug markets and crime', *op. cit.*, p. 12.

38. Interview with Detective Chief Superintendent Seamus Boland, Garda National Drugs and Organised Crime Bureau, 4th March 2022.

39. Interview with PSNI CID officers, 21st December 2021.

40. UN Office on Drugs and Crime (2021), 'World Drug Report 2021 – Drug Market Trends: Cannabis, Opioids', United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, Vienna.

41. European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (2021), 'European Drug Report 2021: Trends and Developments', European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction, Lisbon.

42. Health Research Board (2021), 'Drug markets and crime', *op. cit.*, p. 4

43. Organised Crime Task Force (2022), 'Organised Crime Task Force Annual Report and Threat Assessment 2020-21', Organised Crime Task Force, Belfast, p. 32.

44. Dalby, Chris (2022), 'How Brazil's Port of Santos Became Cocaine's World Trade Center', 13th January 2022, URL: https://insightcrime.org/news/how-brazils-port-of-santos-became-cocaines-world-trade-center/ (accessed 28th January 2022).

45. McDermott, Jeremy; James Bargent; Douwe den Held & Maria Fernanda Ramírez (2021), 'The Cocaine Pipeline to Europe', Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, Geneva & InsightCrime, Medellín, p. 2. It should also be noted that the flow of cocaine across Latin America and the Caribbean has over time led to the development of significant domestic consumer markets for powder cocaine and crack cocaine in production and transit countries, such as Brazil.

46. Mistler-Ferguson, Scott (2022), 'Targeted Killings: The Favored Modus Operandi of Paraguay's Drug Gangs', 16th February 2022, URL: https://insightcrime.org/news/paraguay-targeted-killings/ (accessed 17th February 2022).

47. Robbins, Seth & Papadovassilakis (2022), 'Former Honduras President Accused of Drug Conspiracy That Moved 500 Tons of Cocaine', 15th February 2022, URL: https://insightcrime.org/news/with-us-extradition-request-accusations-finally-catch-up-to-former-honduras-president/ (accessed 17th February 2022).

48. For a stark visual depiction of how many different routes are used for European-bound cocaine, see: McDermott, Bargent, den Held & Ramírez (2021), op. cit., pp. 3–4.

49. Reitano, Tuesday & Mark Shaw (2021), 'How Covid-19 caused an organised crime boom', 25th April 2021, URL: https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/how-covid-19-caused-an-organised-crime-boom-1.4543623?mode=sample&auth-failed=1&pw-origin=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.irishtimes.com%2Fculture%2Fbooks%2Fhow-covid-19-caused-an-organised-crime-boom-1.4543623 (accessed 15th December 2021).

50. McDermott, Bargent, den Held & Ramírez (2021), op. cit.

51. UN Office on Drugs and Crime & Europol (2021), 'The illicit trade of cocaine from Latin America to Europe: From oligopolies to free-for-all?', United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, Vienna & European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation, The Hague.

52. Pressly, Linda & Michael Gallagher (2021), 'The 'cocaine collectors' retrieving smuggled drugs in Rotterdam', 26th November 2021, URL: https://www.bbc.com/news/stories-59379474 (accessed 28th December 2021).

53. There is a well-established history of such importations – see, for example: McDonald, Henry (2014), 'Irish navy intercepts massive cocaine shipment off coast of Cork', 24th September 2014, URL: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/sep/24/irish-navy-cocaine-drug-smuggled-ireland (accessed 13th December 2021).

54. UN Office on Drugs and Crime & Europol (2021), op. cit., p. 3. Whereas Spain, and to a lesser extent Portugal, were previously the preeminent drug distribution hubs for Western Europe, the locus of such activity has in recent years shifted to the Netherlands and Belgium – in part due to the vital role of Rotterdam and Antwerp ports as key entry points for cocaine, heroin and cannabis shipments.

55. UN Office on Drugs and Crime & Europol (2021), op. cit.

56. Ford, Alessandro (2021), 'Ireland seizures highlight growing role in cocaine trade', 1st December 2021, URL: https://insightcrime.org/news/ireland-seizures-highlight-growing-role-cocaine-trade/ (accessed 14th January 2021).

57. Townsend, Mark (2019), 'Kings of cocaine: how the Albanian mafia seized control of the UK drugs market', 13th January 2019, URL: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jan/13/kings-of-cocaine-albanian-mafia-uk-drugs-crime (accessed 10th December 2021).

58. Kemp, Walter (2020), 'Transnational Tentacles: Global hotspots of Western Balkan Organized Crime', Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime, Geneva, pp. 51–66.

59. UN Office on Drugs and Crime (2021), 'World Drug Report 2021 – Drug Market Trends: Cocaine and Amphetamine-type Stimulants', United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, Vienna, p. 9.

60. Townsend, Mark (2021), 'Cocaine, the yuppie drug? Not now, say experts - its lure is crossing all classes', 19th September 2021, URL: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/sep/19/cocaine-the-yuppie-drug-not-now-say-experts-its-lure-is-crossing-all-classes (accessed 14th January 2021).

61. O'Connor, Niall (2021), 'Ex-garda fighting Europe's €14 billion drugs trade says Irish gangs are 'top of the pyramid'', 23rd July 2021, URL: https://www.thejournal.ie/cocaine-smuggling-atlantic-maritime-operation-analysis-centre-5501718-Jul2021/?utm_source=story (accessed 15th December 2021).

62. Townsend, Mark (2021), 'British gangs and international rivals join forces to increase cocaine sales', 19th September 2021, URL: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/sep/19/british-gangs-and-international-rivals-join-forces-to-increase-cocaine-sales (accessed 14th January 2021).

63. One of the leading Italian mafia groups, based in Calabria.

64. The profit margin for 1 kilogram of cocaine can exceed E20,000 – see: Saggers (2019), *op. cit.*, p. 15.

65. Europol & UN Office on Drugs and Crime (2021), *op. cit.*, p. 11.

66. Some sources emphasise that descriptions of 'Albanian' organised crime may in fact include other Western Balkan actors – see: Saggers (2019), *op. cit.*, pp. 10–16 and Kemp (2020), *op. cit.*

67. Townsend (2019), 'Kings of cocaine', *op. cit.*

68. Interview with Detective Chief Superintendent Michael Gubbins, Criminal Assets Bureau, 16th February 2022.

69. Keenan, Eamon & Nicki Killeen (2021), 'Report of the Emerging Drug trends and Drug checking Working Group 2021', Health Service Executive, Dublin, p. 9.

70. Interview with Detective Chief Superintendent Seamus Boland, Garda National Drugs and Organised Crime Bureau, 4th March 2022.

71. Health Research Board (2021), 'Drug markets and crime', *op. cit.*, p. 5.

72. Interview with officers from the Organised Crime Bureau and Paramilitary Crime Task Force, Police Service of Northern Ireland, 21st December 2021.

73. An Garda Síochána & Police Service of Northern Ireland (2018), 'Cross Border Organised Crime Threat Assessment 2018', Department of Justice, Belfast & Department of Justice and Equality, Dublin, p. 6.

74. Interview with Detective Chief Superintendent Seamus Boland, Garda National Drugs and Organised Crime Bureau, 4th March 2022.

75. Interview with officers from the Organised Crime Bureau and Paramilitary Crime Task Force, Police Service of Northern Ireland, 21st December 2021. For a deeper analysis of the role of paramilitary-affiliated organised crime in the drugs trade in the island of Ireland, see: Hourigan, Niamh; John Morrison; James Windle & Andrew Silke (2018), 'Crime in Ireland north and south: Feuding gangs and profiteering paramilitaries', in *Trends in Organized Crime*, 21:4, pp. 126-146.

76. Keenan & Killeen (2021), *op. cit.*, p. 9.

77. Black (2020), 'Executive Summary', *op. cit.*, p. 10.

78. Health Research Board (2021), 'Drug markets and crime', *op. cit.*, p. 6.

79. UN Office on Drugs and Crime & Europol (2021), *op. cit.*, p. 26.

80. National Crime Agency (2021), 'National Strategic Assessment', *op. cit.*, p. 32.

81. This is not to exclude heroin trafficking via the 'Northern route', i.e. through the Central Asian Republics into Russia, Belarus or Ukraine – though this route primarily serves those countries' heroin markets rather than Western Europe – see: UN Office on Drugs and Crime (2018), 'Afghan Opiate Trafficking Along the Northern Route', United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, Vienna.

82. Black (2020), 'Evidence Pack', *op. cit.*, p. 4.

83. Chance, Alexander (2021), 'Winning the peace, losing the state? Organised crime, governance and liberal peacebuilding in post-war Mozambique', Trinity College, The University of Dublin, Dublin, pp. 214–219.

84. This route is likely to have been halted by the prevention of shipping entering Ukrainian ports since the invasion on 24 February 2022.

85. Saggers (2019), *op. cit.*, p. 16.

86. UN Office on Drugs and Crime (2016), 'The Afghan Opiate Trade and Africa: A Baseline Assessment', United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, Vienna, pp. 25 & 34.

87. Haysom, Simone; Gastrow, Peter & Shaw, Mark (2018), 'The heroin coast: A political economy along the eastern African seaboard', ENACT, INTERPOL & Institute for Security Studies, Pretoria.

88. Haysom, Gastrow & Shaw (2018), *ibid.*

89. Saggers (2019), *op. cit.*, p. 17

90. Saggers (2019), *ibid.*, p. 17.

91. Black (2020), 'Evidence Pack', *op. cit.*, p. 4.

92. Interview with Detective Chief Superintendent Seamus Boland, Garda National Drugs and Organised Crime Bureau, 4th March 2022. DCS Boland pointed out that this is a very different supply chain to that which existed between the 1980s to the early 2000s, when drugs supply – and in particular heroin – was almost totally reliant on UK organised crime groups, notably in Liverpool.

93. Black (2020), 'Evidence Pack', *op. cit.*, pp. 44–45.

94. Black (2020), 'Executive Summary', *op. cit.*, p. 5.

95. Black (2020), 'Executive Summary', *ibid.*, pp. 8–10.

96. An Garda Síochána & Police Service of Northern Ireland (2018), *op. cit.*, p. 7.

97. Interviews with officers from An Garda Síochána and the Police Service of Northern Ireland, December 2021 – February 2022.

98. Health Research Board (2021), 'Drug markets and crime', *op. cit.*, p. 12.

99. European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (2021), 'European Drug Report 2021', *op. cit.*, p. 30.

100. Windle, James; Sinéad Drew & James Leonard (2020), 'Why drug dealing and drug use will increase after Covid-19', 15th September 2020, URL: https://www.rte.ie/brainstorm/2020/0901/1162507-drug-dealing-consumption-ireland-recession-coronavirus/ (accessed 10th December 2021).

101. Europol (2020), 'EU Drugs Markets: Impact of COVID-19', European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation, The Hague, p. 7.

102. For deeper analysis of the overlap between heroin and synthetic opioid use globally, see: UN Office on Drugs and Crime UN Office on Drugs and Crime (2021), 'Cannabis, Opioids', *op. cit.*, pp. 57–63.

103. Windle, James (2021), 'How a Taliban ban on opium could affect the Irish drugs market', 23rd August 2021, URL: https://www.rte.ie/brainstorm/2021/0819/1241629-afghanistan-taliban-opium-heroin-drugs-ireland/ (accessed 10th December 2021).

104. Black (2020), 'Evidence Pack', *op. cit.*, pp. 10–11.

105. Black (2020), 'Executive Summary', *op. cit.*, p. 12.

106. Global Initiative (2021), 'Profile – Ireland', *op. cit.*, p. 3

107. Black (2020), 'Evidence Pack', *op. cit.*, pp. 9, 35 & 47.

108. An Garda Síochána & Police Service of Northern Ireland (2018), *ibid.*, p. 9.

109. An Garda Síochána & Police Service of Northern Ireland (2018), *op. cit.*, p. 9.

110. Black (2020), 'Evidence Pack', *op. cit.*, pp. 10–11.

111. An Garda Síochána & Police Service of Northern Ireland (2018), *op. cit.*, p. 9.

112. Black (2020), 'Review of Drugs – Evidence Pack', *op. cit.*, p. 9.

113. UN Office on Drugs and Crime (2021), 'World Drug Report 2021 – Global Overview of Drug Demand and Drug Supply', United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, Vienna, pp. 60–64.

114. UN Office on Drugs and Crime (2021), 'Global Overview of Drug Demand and Drug Supply', *ibid.*, p. 60.

115. Black (2020), 'Executive Summary', *op. cit.*, p. 12.

116. National Crime Agency (2021), 'National Strategic Assessment', *op. cit.*, p. 34.

117. National Crime Agency (2021), 'National Strategic Assessment', *ibid.*, p. 34.

118. Revenue (2021), 'Headline Results 2021', Office of the Revenue Commissioners, Dublin, p. 6.

119. Health Research Board (2021), 'Drug markets and crime', *op. cit.*, p. 13.

120. Keenan & Killeen (2021), *op. cit.*, pp. 13–14.

121. European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (2021), 'European Drug Report 2021: Trends and Developments', European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction, Lisbon.

122. Keenan & Killeen (2021), *op. cit.*, pp. 5 & 15.

123. Keenan & Killeen (2021), *ibid.*, p. 15.

124. An Garda Síochána & Police Service of Northern Ireland (2018), *op. cit.*, p. 9.

125. National Crime Agency (2021), 'National Strategic Assessment', *op. cit.*, p. 34.

126. UN Office on Drugs and Crime (2021), 'Global Overview of Drug Demand and Drug Supply', *op. cit.*, pp. 65–74.

127. Europol (2020), 'EU Drugs Markets: Impact of COVID-19', European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation, The Hague.

128. Black (2020), 'Executive Summary', *op. cit.*, p. 12.

129. Black (2020), 'Executive Summary', *ibid.*, p. 12.

130. Hearne, Evelyn; John Wells & Marie Claire Van Hout (2017), 'Country report on New Psychoactive Substances in Ireland', Waterford Institute of Technology, Waterford.

131. Health Research Board (2021), 'Drug markets and crime', *op. cit.*, p. 4.

132. An Garda Síochána & Police Service of Northern Ireland (2018), *op. cit.*, p. 9.

133. Black (2020), 'Evidence Pack', *op. cit.*, pp. 14 & 5.

134. Saggers, Tony (2019), 'Brexit, Bananas and the UK Drug Market', 18th January 2019, URL: https://shoc.rusi.org/blog/brexit-bananas-and-the-uk-drug-market/ (accessed 18th October 2021).

135. Holligan, Anna (2019), 'Is the Netherlands becoming a Narco-state?', 19th December 2019, URL: https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-50821542 (accessed 22nd February 2022).

136. In 2021, Europol highlighted the phenomenon of significant increases in violence centred around key drug trafficking transit hubs, in particular port cities – see: Europol (2021), 'The use of violence by organised crime groups', European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation, The Hague, p. 2.

Chapter 6

1. Other forms of economic crime – such as insider trading, bribery and corporate corruption – are sometimes included in analyses of serious and organised crime but were omitted from the scope of this report.

2. The most recent FATF assessments of Ireland and the UK were published in February 2022 and 2018 respectively – see: (i) Financial Action Task Force (2022), 'Ireland – Follow-up Report & Technical Compliance Re-Rating', Financial Action Task Force, Paris; (ii) Financial Action Task Force (2018), 'United Kingdom – Mutual Evaluation Report', Financial Action Task Force, Paris.

3. HM Government & UK Finance (2019), 'Economic Crime Plan 2019-22', Her Majesty's Government & UK Finance, London, p. 7.

4. Levi, Michael (2014), 'Money Laundering', in Paoli, Letizia (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Organized Crime*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, p. 421. Levi cautions that this standard three-stage description of the laundering process remains disputed by some academic and anti-money laundering experts.

5. There are some indications that entirely virtual assets, such as Non-Fungible Tokens (NFTs), may be used for money laundering purposes – see, for example: Owen, Allison & Chase, Isabella (2021), 'NFTs: A New Frontier for Money Laundering?', 2nd December 2021, URL: https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/nfts-new-frontier-money-laundering (accessed 7th December 2021).

6. For an in-depth analysis of the role of crypto-currencies in money laundering (and other forms of criminality), see: Europol (2022), 'Cryptocurrencies: Tracing the evolution of criminal finances', European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation, The Hague.

7. National Crime Agency (2021), 'National Strategic Assessment of Serious and Organised Crime 2021', National Crime Agency, London, pp. 54–56.

8. Financial Action Task Force (2018), 'Professional Money Laundering', Financial Action Task Force, Paris, p. 6.

9. Potentially including the Italian 'Ndrangheta mafia laundering their assets via the UK economy – see: Ready, Tom (2021), 'Italy's largest mafia trial for decades: will the UK come under scrutiny?', in *Financial Crime Digest*, November 2021, Aperio Intelligence, London, pp. 34–36.

10. HM Government (2018), 'Serious and Organised Crime Strategy', Her Majesty's Government, London, pp. 13–14.

11. National Crime Agency (2019), 'National Strategic Assessment of Serious and Organised Crime 2019', National Crime Agency, London, p. 38.

12. National Crime Agency (2020), 'National Strategic Assessment of Serious and Organised Crime 2020', National Crime Agency, London, p. 54.

13. HM Government & UK Finance (2019), *op. cit.*

14. BBC (2022), 'Labour urges action on economic crime over Russia tensions', 24th February 2022, URL: https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-60497572 (accessed 25th February 2022).

15. UK Parliament, 'Economic Crime (Transparency and Enforcement) Bill', URL: https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/3120 (accessed 3rd March 2022).

16. See, for example: Bennett, Oliver & Ali Shalchi (2022), 'Economic Crime in the UK: a multi-billion pound problem', House of Commons Library, London, pp. 6–7.

17. HM Government (2021), 'Global Britain in a Competitive Age: The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy', Her Majesty's Government, London, p. 53

18. See, for example: Vaughan, Henry (2021), 'NatWest accepted £700,000 cash deposit at branch in bin bags, court told', 13th December 2021, URL: https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/uk/natwest-accepted-700000-cash-deposit-at-branch-in-bin-bags-court-told-41145403.html (accessed 3rd March 2022).

19. National Crime Agency (2021), 'National Strategic Assessment', op. cit., pp. 54–56.

20. The extent to which UK corporate structures are used for money laundering has been revealed by a series of leaks of documents related to illicit financial flows internationally, including the release of files from the Financial Crimes Enforcement Network ('FinCEN'), part of the US Treasury Department – see: BBC (2020), 'FinCEN Files: All you need to know about the documents leak', 21st September 2020, URL: https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-54226107 (accessed 25th February 2022).

21. Interview with Detective Chief Inspector and Detective Constable, Economic Crime Unit, Police Service of Northern Ireland, 20th December 2022.

22. National Crime Agency (2021), 'National Strategic Assessment', op. cit., p. 56.

23. For a case study of a Manchester-based organised crime group using Bitcoin to launder the proceeds of drug trafficking, see: Grauer, Kim; Will Kueshner & Henry Updegrave (2022), 'The 2022 Crypto Crime Report', Chainalysis, New York, pp. 20–21.

24. An Garda Síochána & Police Service of Northern Ireland (2018), 'Cross Border Organised Crime Threat Assessment 2018', Department of Justice, Belfast & Department of Justice and Equality, Dublin, p. 10.

25. Chance, Alexander & Colin King (2021), "Safe Haven?' Targeting the Proceeds of Foreign Corruption in Ireland', Transparency International Ireland, Dublin, p. 13.

26. Chance & King (2021), ibid., p. 13.

27. This percentage is quoted by the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) on its website, as is a 'widely-quoted' previous study by the International Monetary Fund, which found that 'the aggregate size of money laundering in the world could be somewhere between two and five percent of the world's domestic product' – though FATF emphasises that such estimates should be treated with some caution, since to the clandestine nature of money laundering makes it impossible to produce definitive estimates. See: Financial Action Task Force, 'How much money is laundered per year?', URL: https://www.fatf-gafi.org/faq/moneylaundering/ (accessed 25th February 2022).

28. FATF (2022), op. cit.

29. Hamilton, James (2020), 'Review of structures and strategies to prevent, investigate and penalise economic crime and corruption: Report of the Review Group', Department of Justice, Dublin.

30. One case that has been through the Irish courts involved the return of nearly €5.5 million of corruptly-obtained assets to Nigeria – see: Criminal Assets Bureau (2021), 'Criminal Assets Bureau Annual Report 2020', Criminal Assets Bureau, Dublin, pp. 31–32.

31. Chance & King (2021), op. cit., pp. 35–36.

32. Despite consistent operational successes with its Proceeds of Crime legislation and multi-agency Criminal Assets Bureau (CAB), which has won Ireland widespread international praise, Ireland's framework around civil forfeiture is not without its critics from some jurists. For an overview of legal debates on this issue, see: King, Colin (2017), 'Civil Forfeiture in Ireland: Two Decades of the Proceeds of Crime Act and the Criminal Assets Bureau', in Katalin Ligeti & Michele Simonato (eds.), Chasing Criminal Money: Challenges and Perspectives on Asset Recovery in the EU, Hart Publishing, Oxford, pp. 77–99.

33. Interview with Detective Chief Superintendent Michael Gubbins, Criminal Assets Bureau, 16th February 2022 and interview with Detective Superintendent Anthony Kelly, Garda Liaison and Protection, 21st February 2022.

34. Interview with Detective Chief Superintendent Patrick Lordan, Garda National Economic Crime Bureau, 2nd March 2022.

35. Interview with Detective Chief Superintendent Patrick Lordan, Garda National Economic Crime Bureau, 2nd March 2022.

36. An Garda Síochána & Police Service of Northern Ireland (2018), op. cit., p. 10.

37. Criminal Assets Bureau (2021), op. cit., pp. 37–38.

38. Lally, Conor (2021), 'How has the drugs trade reached every corner of Ireland, and who is involved?', 8th May 2021, URL: https://www.irishtimes.com/news/crime-and-law/how-has-the-drugs-trade-reached-every-corner-of-ireland-and-who-is-involved-1.4558401 (accessed 23rd February 2022).

39. Interview with Detective Chief Superintendent Michael Gubbins, Criminal Assets Bureau, 16th February 2022.

40. Interview with Detective Superintendent Anthony Kelly, Garda Liaison and Protection, 21st February 2022.

41. Hamilton, James (2020), 'Review of structures and strategies to prevent, investigate and penalise economic crime and corruption: Report of the Review Group', Department of Justice, Dublin, pp. 10–11.

42. This is in contrast to 'cyber-dependent' crime, which can only be committed through the use of computer technology. For thorough analyses of cyber dependent threats in the Irish and UK contexts respectively, see: (i) Brady, Sheelagh & Caitriona Heinl (2020), 'Cybercrime: Current Threats and Responses – A review of the research literature', Department of Justice and Equality, Dublin; and (ii) National Cyber Security Centre, 'Weekly threat reports', URL: https://www.ncsc.gov.uk/section/keep-up-to-date/threat-reports?q=&defaultTypes=report&sort=date%2Bdesc (accessed 1st March 2022)..

43. Blakeborough, Laura & Sara Giro Correia (2019), 'The Scale and Nature of Fraud: A Review of the Evidence', Home Office, London, p. 16.

44. For explanations of specific fraud-related terms, see: Action Fraud, 'A-Z of fraud', URL: https://www.actionfraud.police.uk/a-z-of-fraud (accessed 1st March 2022).

45. Blakeborough & Giro Correia (2019), p. 25.

46. Europol (2021), 'IOCTA 2021 - Internet Organised Crime Threat Assessment 2021', European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation, The Hague, p. 30.

47. Global Initiative (2020), 'Cybercrime threats during the COVID-19 pandemic', Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime, Geneva, p. i.

48. Ditcham, Keith (2020), 'How Covid-19 is Changing the Organised Crime Threat', 24th March 2020, URL: https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/how-covid-19-changing-organised-crime-threat (accessed 20th October 2021).

49. Phishing is when criminals use fake messages to lure people into clicking on compromised links within an email or text message ('smishing'), or via telephone (known as 'vishing'), or to provide sensitive personal or corporate information – see: Europol (2021), *ibid.*, p. 30.

50. Europol (2021), *ibid.*, p. 32.

51. Interview with Detective Chief Superintendent Patrick Lordan, Garda National Economic Crime Bureau, 2nd March 2022.

52. Interview with Detective Chief Superintendent Patrick Lordan, Garda National Economic Crime Bureau, 2nd March 2022.

53. One of the most recent examples of which was a House of Commons assessment of economic crime in the UK – see: Treasury Committee (2022), 'Economic Crime: Eleventh Report of Session 2021-22', House of Commons, London.

54. HM Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (2019), 'Fraud: Time to Choose - An inspection of the police response to fraud', Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services, London, pp. 28–29.

55. Action Fraud (2021), 'NFIB Fraud Assessment (Partners) 2020/21: Fraud Crime Trends', URL: https://data.actionfraud.police.uk/cms/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/2020-21-Annual-Assessment-Fraud-Crime-Trends.pdf (accessed 1st March 2022).

56. HM Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (2019), *op. cit.*,

57. Experian (2017), 'Annual Fraud Indicator 2017: Identifying the cost of fraud to the UK economy', Experian Limited, Nottingham.

58. KPMG (2022), 'Fraud Barometer 2021: A snapshot of fraud in the UK', KPMG UK Limited, London, p. 4.

59. National Crime Agency (2020), 'National Strategic Assessment', *op. cit.*, p. 52.

60. Gardner, Bill & James Cook (2021), 'Police losing battle against gangs behind surge in scam messages', 28th March 2021, URL: https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2021/03/28/exclusive-police-losing-battle-against-gangs-behind-surge-scam/ (accessed 25th January 2022).

61. National Crime Agency (2020), 'National Strategic Assessment', *op. cit.*, p. 51.

62. National Crime Agency (2020), 'National Strategic Assessment', *op. cit.*, p. 52.

63. Interview with Detective Chief Inspector and Detective Constable, Economic Crime Unit, Police Service of Northern Ireland, 20th December 2022.

64. Interview with Detective Chief Inspector and Detective Constable, Economic Crime Unit, Police Service of Northern Ireland, 20th December 2022.

65. Dawda, Sneha; Ardi Janjeva & Anton Moiseienko (2021), 'The UK's Response to Cyber Fraud: A Strategic Vision', Royal United Services Institute, London, pp. 50–51.

66. Commission on the Future of Policing in Ireland (2018), 'The Future of Policing in Ireland', Commission on the Future of Policing in Ireland, Dublin, pp. xii & 27.

67. Hamilton (2020), *op. cit.*, pp. 20–21.

68. Government of Ireland (2019), 'National Cyber Security Strategy 2019-2024', Government of Ireland, Dublin, p. 18.

69. PricewaterhouseCoopers (2020), 'PwC Irish Economic Crime Survey 2020- Fraud and Economic Crime – an evolving challenge', PricewaterhouseCoopers Ireland, Dublin, pp. 8 & 5.

70. INTERPOL (2021), 'INTERPOL-supported financial crime operation: Irish police dismantle local network operating worldwide', 10th November 2021, URL: https://www.interpol.int/en/News-and-Events/News/2021/INTERPOL-supported-financial-crime-operation-Irish-police-dismantle-local-network-operating-worldwide (accessed 7th January 2022).

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73. Interview with Detective Chief Superintendent Patrick Lordan, Garda National Economic Crime Bureau, 2nd March 2022.

74. Interview with Detective Chief Superintendent Patrick Lordan, Garda National Economic Crime Bureau, 2nd March 2022.

75. Interview with Detective Chief Superintendent Patrick Lordan, Garda National Economic Crime Bureau, 2nd March 2022.

76. For an academic study of barriers to effective anti-money laundering in the UK property market, see: Zavoli, Ilaria & Colin King (2020), 'New development: Estate agents' perspectives of anti-money laundering compliance – four key issues in the UK property market', in *Public Money & Management*, 40:5, pp. 415–419.

77. Including the sudden reappearance of the long-delayed Economic Crime (Transparency and Enforcement) Bill – see: UK Parliament, *op. cit.*

Chapter 7

1. Senior gardaí have noted with interest the success of New Zealand's waste-water drug testing scheme - see: New Zealand Police (2019), 'Wastewater Pilot Programme', URL: https://www.police.govt.nz/about-us/publication/wastewater-pilot-programme (accessed 22nd March 2022).

2. This is not a new issue; the 'dearth of information and expertise in this area' was raised nine years ago - see: Migrant Rights Centre of Ireland (2013), 'Trafficking for Forced Labour in Cannabis Production: The Case of Ireland', Migrant Rights Centre of Ireland, Dublin, p. 5.

Chapter 8

1. Reitano, Tuesday & Mark Shaw (2021), 'How Covid-19 caused an organised crime boom', 25th April 2021, URL: https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/how-covid-19-caused-an-organised-crime-boom-1.4543623?mode=sample&auth-failed=1&pw-origin=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.irishtimes.com%2Fculture%2Fbooks%2Fhow-covid-19-caused-an-organised-crime-boom-1.4543623 (accessed 15th December 2021).

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