

Irish Security Soundings

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Possible implications of COVID-19 on Crime and Security

On 11 March 2020, the WHO declared the new coronavirus outbreak a global pandemic. According to the Johns Hopkins University, by the end of March 2020, over 860,000 confirmed cases have been recorded, and over 42,000 people have died with the virus, globally. Initially, many nations echoed the WHO's recommendations with regard to taking basic hygiene measures and social distancing. However, as the impact of COVID-19 was felt across the globe, nations started implementing stricter containment measures, which have included; curfews, closure of all but essential services, lockdowns, and border closures. Such measures are largely implemented from a public health perspective, but have the potential to have unintended consequences in other areas. This piece will look at the potential impact on crime and security, over the short to medium term.

Due to the scale, scope and nature of this pandemic, governments and frontlines services are being redirected to deal with this unprecedented public health issue, including security and policing agencies, which is both understandable and necessary. To enable the security sector implement certain measures, greater powers have been given. For example, in Hungary, the Prime Minister has been given the power to rule by decree, while in Israel they have introduced mass surveillance measures in the form of contact tracing. The changing landscape this creates is not going unnoticed by malicious actors across the globe, be they individuals or part of larger groups. In the grips of a pandemic, why is this happening?

Security Challenges

Like entrepreneurs, many criminals are always looking for the next opportunity to maximize gains. In an environment where police and other security services are redirected or services reduced, the balance between risk and reward for criminals is often tipped in their favour. Where risk reduces and potential rewards increase, criminality flourishes. Criminals quickly alter and adapt their modus operandi to maximise opportunities presented. COVID-19 has provided such opportunities; increased people working remotely from home; high demand for certain goods, in this case medical supplies; limited or restricted access of other goods; and, growing societal and individual fears and anxieties associated with the spread of the virus. But opportunity is unlikely to be the only driver in these circumstances. Criminals and their activities are not immune to the negative impact of COVID-19 on their economies. Similar to the shock being experienced within the legitimate economy, the grey and black economies are also feeling the effect. For example, restrictions at borders negatively impact supply chains; less people flying makes importation of illegal commodities via human mules more difficult; the supply of counterfeit materials is limited given many factories have been closed, lock downs and curfews make it difficult to move things on the streets undetected. That said, unlike the legitimate economy, some elements of the grey and black economies are less constrained by the containment measures, and adherence to them. They are much more flexible and agile in how they can adapt to maximize the opportunities COVID-19 is creating.

According to the GI-TOC (Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime) report on 'Crime and Contagion' and EUROPOL's report 'How criminals profit from the COVID-19 Pandemic' many criminal groups around the world are already maximising these opportunities. For example; there is a reported increase in the trade of animal products as cures for the virus in Asia, an uptake in the production and sale of pirated drugs and counterfeit medical equipment, increased attempts to smuggle essential stocks of medical face masks and hand sanitiser, much of which will later be sold online. There has also been an increase in cybercrimes associated with COVID-19, targeted both at individuals and organisations, evidenced by Europol's regular warnings over the past few weeks and the recent cyberattack in the Czech Republic, which by chance or design impacted the ability of the hospital to respond to COVID-19. The attack was perpetrated on the IT network of the Brno University Hospital, reportedly resulting in delayed test results, the cancellation of operations and the transfer of patients to other hospitals. Moreover, some criminal groups see COVID-19 as an opportunity to build their social legitimacy within the communities they operate. For example; criminals in Rio de Janeiro have reportedly been enforcing a lockdown at night, thereby solidifying their positioning, in the absence of government. Similar concerns are emerging from Italy, where reports suggest that there are fears that the Mafia will be able to offer loans and black market jobs while the government is distracted. These developments, while not exhaustive, serve to illustrate the dynamic nature of crime and criminality during these unprecedented times.

What might this mean for Ireland?

The risk to Ireland is no different, similar to it not being immune from the virus, it is not immune from the risk of increased criminality. While certain types of crime may see a reduction, such as public order offences, burglaries etc., other crimes are likely to see an increase. For example; domestic violence, cybercrime, counterfeiting, theft and/or looting, and the subsequent trade of such goods. While many of these may be opportunistic, existing organised crime groups feeling the negative impact of COVID-19 may ramp up incidents of this nature. For example; raids on wholesalers, heists on trucks and distribution centres. In addition, similar to Rio de Janeiro and Italy, areas with high concentrations of gangs may see such gangs try to implement strategies to improve their social legitimacy by supporting their communities, capitalising on the difficulties people are experiencing at this time. Conversely, other groups may try to increase tensions within communities to deepen divides. This may be seen in increased incidents of racism and discrimination, a growing sentiment of us versus them towards minority communities, or online in the form of disinformation about certain groups. This may be targeted at the local, national or international level, with the aim of increasing existing tensions.

While public health is the priority for the Irish Government at this time, crime and security prevention should also be maintained, regularly reviewed and properly resourced. Activities by An Garda Síochána to deploy a full time public order unit and to visit the homes of domestic violence survivors illustrates that they are cognisant of potential emerging threats both in the short and medium term. This is echoed in their frequent warnings about emerging cyber threats and predatory frauds. But as the virus impacts their members, which it is likely to do, resources may be tight and services compromised. In advance of this, contingency planning is key, but unlike normal times, it may be prudent for An Garda Síochána to look outward for support. Not discounting the state bodies that they work well with, these too may be compromised over time in regards to resources. This is also likely to be seen in the number of security guards available; with some seeing changes in their roles and responsibilities, as some contracts shift from full time guards to patrols. Capitalising on the excellent networks and by developing new ones, An Garda Síochána and the security services should look to new and innovate ways to build greater resilience both to their services and responses to this evolving landscape. This could involve greater cooperation with universities, cybersecurity experts, supply chain experts, tech companies, and former offenders. However, this is not an exhaustive list.

Criminals are seeking to exploit the many new attack vectors that COVID-19 is presenting to them. This is likely to result in a fluidity in the nature and types of criminality in the short to medium term, resulting in a dynamic and shifting environment. Some of these new threats will dissipate after the crisis is over or contained, while others will continue. There is unlikely to be a complete return to what was formally known as 'business as usual', at least in the medium term. More likely, a 'new normal' will emerge. An Garda Siochana, the government and other agencies need to explore what this 'new normal' might look like, especially from a security perspective. It is unlikely that they can get ahead of the criminals at this time, but staying at pace is the least we should aim for.

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