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***Family-based crime: an EUPCN toolbox on effective
prevention***

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Background: the EUCPN and the Toolbox on family-based crime

The European Crime Prevention Network (EUCPN) is an EU platform for knowledge exchange and cross-border cooperation regarding crime prevention. The EUCPN also manages international crime prevention campaigns and other preventive actions within the EMPACT framework. In its publications, prepared by the EUCPN Secretariat with the help of experts in the field, it aims to bring research insights to the front line. Visit the EUCPN's website (<https://eucpn.org>) for more information.

Twice a year, a toolbox is dedicated to a topic selected by the EUCPN Presidency, which follows the rotational presidency of the Council of the European Union. For its Presidency during the second half of 2020, Germany put the spotlight on family-based crime (FBC). Below I present certain key insights on the prevention of FBC. The full toolbox is freely available for download in English, German and French at <https://eucpn.org/toolbox-familybasedcrime>.

Family-based crime: a complex and diverse problem

Family-based crime (FBC) is crime committed by crime groups characterised by family ties. Such a crime group can essentially be comprised of members of a nuclear family, an extended family, or even people who associate on the basis of more remote kinship ties, in which case we can speak of clans. What sets these groups apart from other crime group constellations is that people are born into families. This also means that children in such families are vulnerable and at an increased risk of becoming criminals themselves (Rowe & Farrington 1997; Segeren et al. 2020; Besemer et al. 2017; Farrington et al. 2001). This presents preventionists with

an additional challenge. Not only should they aim at disrupting criminal activities and preventing further criminal activity, but they should also aim at preventing that children affiliated with these groups grow up to be criminals themselves. Additionally, criminal families may belong to ethnic minorities or be isolated from mainstream society, which presents intercultural challenges as well as difficulties regarding (re-)integration.

Looking at FBC across the EU, it is to be noted that FBC is at once diverse and complex. It is diverse because it looks different everywhere. There are FBC groups of different ethnic and cultural groups, some belonging to the majority ethnic group, others to different minorities. They may be fully integrated into mainstream society or rather be isolated from it and distrustful of it. Different FBC groups are involved in different types of crime, which could be anything from domestic burglary to sexual exploitation. They are also organised differently: one of the older men is often the leader, but that is not always the case. Finally, as already noted, they could essentially be a nuclear family, an extended family, or a clan. All in all, while there are some similarities, mainly the kinship aspect, there are also very significant differences between different types of FBC. One only need to look at the Mhallami crime clans in Germany (Haverkamp 2018; Ghadban 2018), Dutch families involved all sorts of property crimes and drug production and trafficking crimes (Spapens & Moors 2020), and the 'Ndrangheta mafia in Calabria (Sergi & Lavorgna 2016; Sergi 2020), to appreciate the wide variety within the phenomenon of FBC.

Family-based crime is also complex. By definition, it has at least two layers. The first is the ongoing crime problem: the criminal activities in which members of the family or clan are already involved. The second is the risk that children growing up in such families "inherit" their family members' criminality. This constitutes a surefire recruitment mechanism and ensures continuation of the criminal enterprise. On top of that, there may be other layers, other problems which either form the substrate of FBC or emanate from it. These could include socio-economic problems, intercultural issues, issues with migration and integration, domestic abuse, truancy, criminal exploitation of children, substance use issues, and mental health problems.

An integrated approach to preventing family-based crime

There are so many variables that it is impossible to offer a single preventive solution. Viable solutions ought to be identified through careful analysis of the specific FBC problem. The EUCPN Toolbox offers a general framework for the prevention of FBC which can guide preventionists through the process of developing an approach to FBC tailored to a particular situation.

First of all, it is key to adopt a process-driven approach (see Figure 1). The first step should always be to understand the problem at hand. Without a thorough understanding of the problem and the needs, effective prevention is impossible. Subsequently, a preventive approach must be developed that is suitable for that problem. In doing so, one should rely on existing knowledge, i.e. base the intervention on evidence and robust theory, to maximise its effectiveness. Only at that point can the prevention initiative actually be implemented. In the end, the only way to find out whether the intervention has the desired effect is to conduct an outcome evaluation. Rushing into implementing something, omitting the other steps, is often a waste of public resources. This applies to crime prevention in general, but it is particularly the case for wicked problems such as FBC. Finally, because of the multi-faceted nature of FBC, a prevention programme will often turn out not to be just one action but rather a combination of preventive actions, each addressing a different aspect of FBC. An integrated or holistic approach is thus advised.

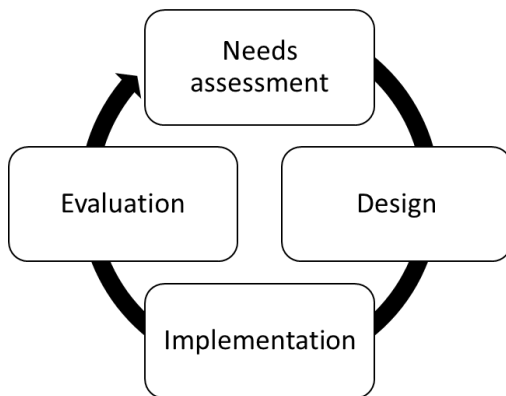


Figure 1: Schematic representation of the process of developing and implementing an effective crime prevention intervention.

In order to guide this process and to help devise an integrated approach to FBC, one can rely on the theoretical model depicted in Figure 2. In essence, it is an elaborated version of the Situational Action Theory (Wikström 2004 & 2006), which posits that two things are needed for crime to take place: first, at the level of the individual, the moral beliefs that make one think of a criminal act as a valid course of action, and second, a situation which allows one to perform the criminal act (and get away with it). In crime prevention, a distinction is often made between primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention. In the case of family-based crime, all three are needed. We need to prevent that people growing up in a criminal family come to think of certain types of criminal behaviour as acceptable. At the same time, we should aim to prevent that those who already think this way have the chance to actually commit those acts. Finally, when they do commit offences, we must prevent that they reoffend.

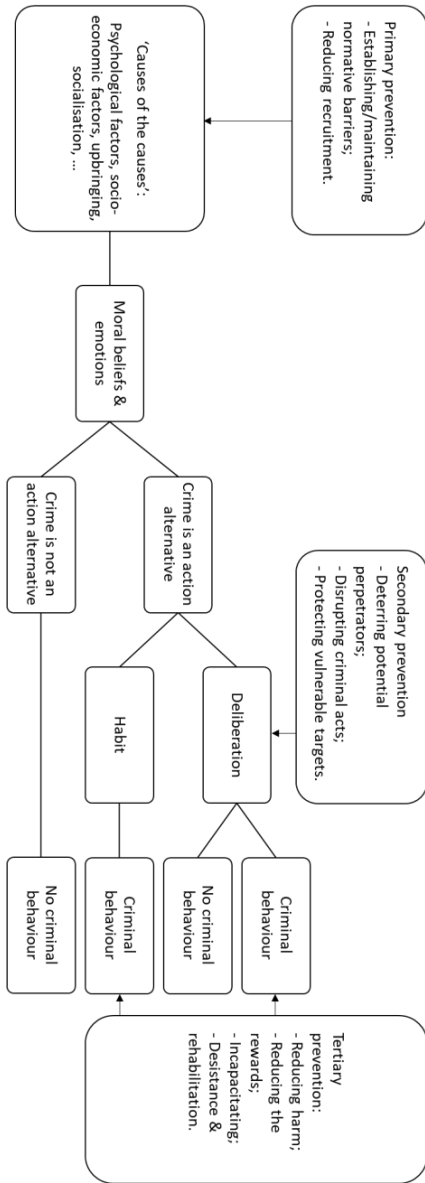


Figure 2: Visualisation of an integrated approach to crime prevention, demonstrating how different preventive actions manipulate different aspects of the process leading to criminal behaviour.

Criminologist Tore Bjørge (2016) has devised nine crime prevention mechanisms, i.e. nine ways in which crime can be prevented. These range from establishing normative barriers to incapacitation (prison sentences). Crime prevention initiatives should activate at least one of these mechanisms. However, as shown in Figure 2, not all of them are suitable for every stage of crime prevention. A model like this illustrates the importance of the theoretical underpinnings of crime prevention interventions, and can help preventionists design more effective approaches.

Of course, integrated or holistic approaches also present challenges. Multiple partners, usually both local and national, private and public, will have to collaborate (Wikström & Torstensson). Collaboration, in turn, requires an exchange of data and information, which in view of confidentiality and data protection laws could be difficult or outright impossible. This emphasises that systems matter: legal frameworks, governance structures and resources all determine the success of multi-agency collaborations in crime prevention. Ideally, there are procedures in place to facilitate multi-agency collaboration and data exchange on a case-by-case basis. In the worst case, the institutional framework slows down or even inhibits collaborations and data exchange, and thus effective action. Whenever that is the case, that issue should be addressed first, and a framework created that allows efficient and effective cooperation and data exchange in crime prevention.

The building blocks of the effective prevention of family-based crime

In this section, we consider seven types of interventions for the FBC, looking at the evidence and the pros and cons of each. Each of these seven intervention types addresses a particular aspect of FBC. As such, they could be considered building blocks of an integrated prevention programme. The list is not exhaustive, however, and there are other interventions which could be effective in the fight against FBC.

1. Family-based interventions

Family-based interventions are social prevention initiatives that focus on family support and good parenting. The primary aim is to prevent that children and teenagers develop or further

engage in delinquent and other anti-social behaviour. The preventive mechanisms they aim to activate are the establishing of normative barriers and the reduction of recruitment. The evidence base for family-based therapies is significant: Functional Family Therapy (FFT), Multisystemic Therapy (MST), and Multi-Dimensional Family Therapy (MDFT) have been the subject of robust evaluation studies several times over and each of them turned out effective for the reduction of youth delinquency (Littell et al. 2005; Filges et al. 2015a; Filges et al. 2015b). So have several parenting training and parenting support interventions, such as the Parent-Child Interaction Therapy, the Incredible Years programme, and the Triple P Positive Parenting Programme (Farrington & Welsh 1999; Furlong et al. 2012; Piquero et al. 2016).

Still, there are challenges in successfully applying such interventions to FBC. First of all, it is difficult in general to fundamentally change the situation of families in multi-problem situations (Tausendfreund et al. 2016). Secondly, family-based interventions require a certain level of willingness to cooperate on the part of the parents, which may be a problem when trying to apply family-based interventions to FBC. FBC is an intergenerational problem, and when the parents are themselves involved in crime, they will be less likely to accept an intervention or to acknowledge the need for one (Nixon & Parr 2009).

There are a few things that can be done to try to overcome these challenges. In multi-problem families, the focus should not be on just one problem, but the key problems should each receive appropriate attention. At the same time, however, it should at all times be avoided that families have to deal with too many different representatives of the institutions involved (Carey 2015). Finally, social workers should have the right professional profile and come across as empathic and understanding but also tenacious and assertive (cf. Schout et al. 2010).

2. After-school activities

Another type of intervention that aims to instil normative barriers and reduce recruitment is diversion in the form of extra-curricular activities. Such initiatives, which usually pivot on team sports or other collective leisure activities for children and teens, are quite frequently used in crime prevention. The idea behind it is to remove children from their family environment at regular times of the

week and offer them a different environment where they can develop healthy social skills and relations. In doing so, such initiatives do not just keep children off the streets while the activities last, but also intend to improve social cohesion and stimulate positive behaviour in the longer run.

However, the evidence in favour of after-school activities is mixed (Kremer et al. 2015). Some of these programmes have positive effects whereas others do not, and it is not always clear why. There are two plausible explanations. It could be that the programmes do not reach at-risk youths, attracting mostly those who are likely to stay out of trouble anyway. This seems likely in the case of FBC. It could also be that after-school activities create a situation in which at-risk youths reinforce one another's antisocial behaviour through a mechanism called deviance training (Rubenson et al. 2020). Thus, in the context of FBC, it should be made sure that the target group actually participates and that the activities do not reinforce anti-social behaviour.

3. Neighbourhood-based interventions

Neighbourhood-based interventions have the potential to trigger several crime prevention mechanisms: maintaining normative barriers, deterring offenders, protecting targets, and reducing the harmful consequences of crime. They work best for those types of crime which are associated with a particular neighbourhood, as is often the case with FBC. The rationale behind neighbourhood-based interventions is twofold. First, crimes are linked not just to the criminal and victim but also to the place. Secondly, crimes affect not only the perpetrators and the victims, but also the neighbourhood, where they may contribute to an increase in public nuisance and fear of crime, a major harmful consequence of crime (Bjørge 2016: 28-9).

Successful neighbourhood-based interventions share two characteristics. They involve all stakeholders, including residents, property and business owners, the police and local authorities (cf. European Crime Prevention Network 2019: 71). They are also longer-term programmes that acknowledge that it takes time to transform neighbourhoods. Beyond that, it is hard to tell why neighbourhoods are successful, and thus hard to predict which ones will be effective. That is due, in large part, to the fact that most neighbourhood-oriented programmes consist of several actions, the

effects of which are impossible to disentangle. Stakeholder and resident involvement will increase social cohesion and informal control, lower fear of crime, but the effects could also be due to increased reporting and police patrols (Sampson et al. 1997; cf. Bennet et al. 2008: 3-4).

4. Policing strategies: focused deterrence

The police has a major role in guaranteeing the safety of citizens, which includes addressing problems with criminal families. Policing strategies may or may not contribute to the disruption and prevention of family-based crime. Reactive police tactics—i.e. looking for or catching criminals that have already committed a crime—perform fairly poorly in terms crime prevention. Prison detention keeps the prisoner from committing further crimes for a period of time, but usually has little effect on the criminal activity of the crime group, or family, of which he or she was a part (European Crime Prevention Network 2021). Even the arrest of key figures of a crime group has only a limited effect on that group's criminal activities (Lindo & Padilla-Romo 2018). Custodial sentences perform poorly at preventing recidivism (Villettaz et al. 2015; Barnett & Fitzalan Howard 2018). An excessive show of force on the part of law enforcement may even lead to an escalation of violence, particularly when the groups that are targeted have negative attitudes towards the police.

An alternative is to focus on deterrence. The threat of being caught and punished in itself can keep potential offenders from offending, and thus have a preventive effect. One promising policing strategy is focused deterrence (Kennedy 1997; National Network for Safe Communities 2016). Focused deterrence strategies originated in the US and have been used successfully for the prevention of gang violence in many cities in the US and for cartel violence reduction in Latin and South America. The technique is currently also being implemented in the EU, for instance in Sweden. What makes it so applicable to FBC, at least in theory, is that it uses the connectedness of the group and their loyalty to each other as leverage (hence its nickname, "pulling levers"). Focused deterrence strategies pivot on direct communication: spokesmen of the police and other authorities directly communicate to offenders and their families that they want the offences, specifically the violence, to stop, and that they will do everything in their power

to dismantle the whole crime organisation upon the first transgression. In doing so, the members' loyalty to their co-offenders is turned into a peer pressure to desist from criminal activity. Additionally, the preventionists will attempt to appeal to the moral voice of non-criminal family members, often women (wives and mothers), who in doing so are often empowered to speak out about their dissatisfaction with the criminality, thus also putting pressure on offenders to stop offending. The final part of the message is that help is on offer. If there are any underlying problems which may contribute to the criminality, such as debt or substance abuse, appropriate support or treatment is offered as long as they do not commit crimes. By combining these aspects, focused deterrence strategies are able to achieve moderate but sustained effects (Braga et al. 2019).

5. Removing children from criminal families

A rather radical way to stop the intergenerational transmission of criminality and to disrupt the operations of criminal families is to remove the children from criminal families as a preventive measure and place them for instance in foster care. This option has been suggested in popular media and a form of it has been implemented, albeit briefly, in southern Italy in the context of the fight against the 'Ndrangheta mafia (Sergi 2018).

The idea behind it is that by suspending parental rights and removing the children from their families, they would not be exposed to the values, norms and social contacts that would likely make them criminals too. But there are substantial problems and difficulties with this approach. A first problem is that there is no strong evidence base in support of this intervention. In the Calabrian case, children were no longer followed-up when they reached the age of majority and a formal evaluation was not carried out, making it hard to say anything about the effectiveness of the intervention.

Some evidence regarding the effectiveness of removing children from criminal families in terms of the reduction of criminal recruitment was produced by PROTON's agent-based model, a simulation technique that allows to test interventions in a virtual world so that their effect can be predicted. The PROTON project tested several policy interventions, including the removal of children from criminal families in two ideal types of organised crime environments: the northern European city and the southern European

city. It showed that the intervention should not be expected to have a significant effect on the overall number of offenders or new recruitment (Calderoni et al. 2021).

The second, perhaps more serious problem with the preventive termination of parental rights has to do with the proportionality and the ethical aspect of the intervention. What are the legal grounds to remove the children from their families preventively, i.e., when there are no obvious reasons to detain the parents and in that way sever the ties with their children? What is the legal status of such families and which boundaries would need to be crossed before the children can be removed from their family? Generally speaking, prevention policies should not cause harm. However, the removal of children from their homes is likely to negatively impact their wellbeing and the emotional distress caused by it might actually increase the risk of delinquent behaviour (Monahan et al. 2015). Also, because of the negative impact of foster care on delinquency (Davis 2009; Krinsky 2010), it could be argued that it should only ever be used as a last-resort solution, not as a preventive measure (e.g. Herstbaek et al. 2020).

All in all, the preventive removal of children from criminal families is not advised as a measure against FBC. The scarce evidence does not indicate that it has the desired effect; in fact, the harmful consequences likely outbalance them. Consequently, the intervention is disproportionate and ethically questionable.

6. Exit programmes

Exit programmes, which primarily drive on the mechanism of desistance and rehabilitation, have a proven track record in the context of extremist groups and organised motorcycle gangs (Bjørge 2019). They are premised on the fact that many individuals involved in a criminal group, at one point or another, want to leave that group or can be persuaded to no longer engage in the criminal behaviour of it.

There are two conditions for exit programmes to be successful. The first is that leaving the crime group is perceived as a valid and feasible option. Many outlaw motorcycle gangs allow members to leave. Consequently, individuals who want to quit are able to cut ties with the group and adopt a different lifestyle. The second condition is that the alternative to continued involvement in the

crime group is sufficiently attractive and sustainable. Usually, this comes in the form of a “normal” family life, a legitimate job and a satisfying social life (Decker et al. 2014). Therefore, offenders who are willing to leave a crime group often cannot do so on their own. They need the support of the correctional rehabilitation system, the education system, employers, health care, and the welfare system to make the change to a different life (Bjørgero 2016: 31).

In the case of criminal families, one or both of these conditions are often not met. First, leaving a family is difficult, if not impossible. In some cultures, cutting ties with one’s family is in violation of the prevailing norms and values and could invite retaliation, at the extreme in the form of honour killings. The latter is a concern especially in cases in which girls or women attempt to escape a forced marriage, a practice in certain minority communities also associated with family-based crime (Ghadban 2018). In such cases, far-reaching additional protection measures, including relocation and a new identity should be part of the exit programme (Bjørgero 2016: 157). Families also provide exactly what in other cases is the incentive to leave: marriage, parenthood, and a family life (Sweeten et al. 2013). This makes leaving relatively less attractive.

In the absence of evidence regarding the effectiveness of exit programmes for members of FBC groups, these considerations would lead to believe that they hold limited promise for tightly-knit criminal families. Those with weaker ties, for instance the unmarried, are more likely to benefit from an exit programme. As in the context of extremist group members, the prison system appears to be the most suited context to offer exit support because offenders are already physically removed from their families. Finally, special protection should be provided to girls and women who want to leave FBC groups and avoid arranged marriages.

7. Administrative approach

The seventh and final type of intervention for family-based crime is the administrative approach to serious and organised crime, which aims to disrupt criminal activities as well as reduce the rewards. The administrative approach does that by denying criminals access to the legal infrastructure, on which they frequently rely to successfully complete their criminal actions or enjoy the proceeds. Organised crime depends on official businesses as fronts for money-laundering as well as on transportation and shipping services for

the illicit trafficking of goods and persons. There are also frequent interactions with authorities, for instance for licenses, permits, and travel documents (European Network on the Administrative Approach 2020).

A successful implementation of the administrative approach hinges on multi-agency collaboration and information exchange. Local authorities could deny organised criminals a license for a business, but in order to know when to do so, they would have to have access to fiscal or criminal justice data. A legislative framework that regulates a two-way exchange of information between local and national actors is a precondition for the administrative approach. Another inherent limitation of the administrative approach is that it only works for organised crime which relies on the legal infrastructure. It will not work, for instance, for crime that is less organised and that uses predominantly small cash transactions.

It should also be noted that the administrative approach is a disruptive mechanism: it is a response to ongoing criminal activity. That is not to say that the administrative approach does not have important preventive effects: both disrupting crime and reducing the rewards of crime keep offenders from continuing to commit offences and make crime less attractive in the long run. It is therefore complementary to social prevention initiatives which primarily target the recruitment into organised crime, i.e. children growing up in criminal families.

Conclusion

Family-based crime is both diverse and complex. Consequently, there is no one-size-fits-all solution. The effective prevention of family-based crime accounts for both the diversity and the complexity. Prevention should be tailored to the specific problem: a particular (extended) family, crime group, or crime phenomenon. At the same time, a holistic approach is recommended: prevention programmes should address the problem in all its complexity and integrate different social and situational interventions that activate different prevention mechanisms.

In this paper, we discussed seven types of interventions that could be used for the prevention of family-based crime. Due to implementation issues, however, they do not always deliver the results

we might expect. Certain programmes have proven effective for other types of crime groups but transferring them to criminal families presents a challenge. In other cases, there are ethical concerns. In sum, there is no panacea: there is no conclusive proof that any of the types of interventions on its own is effective in preventing family-based crime. When addressing family-based crime, preventionists should keep in mind the particular challenges of family crime groups, combine several measures, and monitor the results.

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