

Europol: How COVID-19 Shapes Serious and Organised Crime Landscape in the EU



News

Cornelia Riehle

On 30 April 2020, Europol published a [report to assess the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on serious and organised crime](#). The report expects the impact of the pandemic to unfold in three phases:

- The current and immediate short-term outlook;
- A mid-term phase, which will become apparent over the upcoming weeks and months;
- A long-term perspective.

According to the report, the short-term phase will entail developments in the areas of cybercrime, trade in counterfeit and substandard goods as well as different types of fraud and schemes linked to organised property crime.

While only a limited impact has been observed in the area of terrorist threats to the EU so far, the pandemic is nevertheless widely being used as a propaganda tool. Regarding cybercrime, the report states that phishing and malware attacks have become more sophisticated and complex and are also being conducted on a larger scale. An increase in activities involving child abuse material online is also apparent.

For the second, mid-term phase, the report predicts a return to previous levels of criminal activity featuring the same type of criminal acts as those committed before the pandemic, in addition to the continuation of new criminal activities created during the crisis. In the area of cybercrime, the report sees cybercriminals shifting back to exploiting legal businesses. Child sexual exploitation online will largely depend on whether or not lockdowns continue. Organised Crime Groups (OCGs) producing counterfeit and substandard goods will continue to adapt and attempt to fill gaps in product shortages. Furthermore, the report states that the emergence of an increased number of scammers offering a vaccine against COVID-19 is likely. Once a genuine vaccine has been found, counterfeit products are expected to be heavily offered on the online market. Another threat to be expected is more cases of trafficking and inadequate disposal of medical and sanitary waste. The economic fallout caused by the pandemic may also lead to an increase in money laundering. With regard to the drug market, in the mid-term, the report predicts a drop in the demand for certain types of drugs due to lockdowns; however, the report sees no long-term effect occurring. With respect to migrant smuggling, the report expects further changes to the *modi operandi* used to smuggle migrants and higher prices for facilitation services. The fear also exists that prolonged economic instability may trigger new waves of irregular migration towards the EU and that the EU may have a higher demand for cheap labour.

In the long term, the report estimates that economic hardship and recession may lead to an increased receptiveness to offers of organised crime, an increase in corruption levels, enhanced migratory flows, an

AUTHOR

Cornelia Riehle

Deputy Head of Section
Academy of European Law

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increased demand for labour and sexual exploitation, and an increased demand for counterfeit and sub-standard goods. Organised property crime may reappear with new forms of tricks tailored to the pandemic. Cybercriminals are also likely to continue exploiting the enhanced online lifestyle. Furthermore, the report expects the overall shift towards non-cash payment options to have an impact on criminal businesses and to lead to increased money laundering. Ultimately, the distribution of disinformation is a worrying trend observed in the report. The report is part of a series of Europol reports on the impact of COVID-19 on crime and security. On 27 March 2020, Europol published a report on “[Pandemic profiteering: how criminals exploit the COVID-19 crisis](#)” (see [eucrim 1/2020](#), p. 19).

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