

Criminals behind the steering wheel

The nature and extent of the use of rental motor vehicles for criminal activities

Summary

Bureau **Beke**

Original title:

Criminelen achter het stuur

Original subtitle:

Aard en omvang van het gebruik van huurmotorvoertuigen voor criminele activiteiten

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Commissioned by the Ministry of Justice and Security – Directorate-General for the Police and Safety Regions (DGPenV) – Bureau Beke investigated the involvement of rental motor vehicles in criminal activities. The research question posed was: *Are rental motor vehicles used for criminal activities and, if so, what is the nature and extent of the problem? In particular, criminal activities referring to forms of subversive crime.*

The research entailed a number of activities. First, we conducted a literature search and media analysis. Second, we analysed registered data from the BOVAG¹ and National Police and reviewed official records from four regional police units concerning the topic vehicle rental. Additionally, interviews were held with twenty representatives of public and private parties, includ-

ing police officers, analysts from the Regional Information and Expertise Centres (RIECs), a city marshal, BOVAG employees and owners of vehicle rental companies. Lastly, we examined investigations involving rental motor vehicles using five case studies for which we studied (police) records and interviewed twelve investigators.

This summary presents and clarifies the main findings of the study. First, we describe the conclusions we can draw regarding the extent to which rental motor vehicles are involved in criminal activities. Second, we outline the nature of these criminal activities. Finally, this summary presents some concluding remarks and reflection on the research and its findings.

The extent of criminal involvement of rental motor vehicles

In the following box we present the conclusions that can be drawn as to whether rental motor vehicles are used for criminal purposes and what is known about the extent of that phenomenon.

1. The BOVAG is a branch association for vehicle rental companies in the Netherlands.

Conclusions

- Based on the findings from this study, we conclude that the vehicle rental industry is susceptible to criminal involvement. Criminals (ab)use rental motor vehicles for a variety of illegal activities.
- Multiple sources indicate that bonafide and malicious vehicle rental companies (un)knowingly facilitate criminal activities. As a result, the vehicle rental industry serves as an important link between the under- and underworld and is therefore vulnerable to subversive crime.
- Unambiguous and reliable figures on the extent or frequency with which rental motor vehicles are used for criminal activities are not available. However, we can conclude that for various reasons rental motor vehicles frequently occur in police intelligence and crime investigations.

Clarification

Below, we highlight the findings from various sources in relation to the vehicle rental industry and which of these sources provide indications to the extent rental motor vehicles have been used for criminal activities.

- Drawing from literature of the previous two decades, we learn that the vehicle rental industry is susceptible to abuse for criminal purposes. Likewise, further consulted sources indicate that the vehicle rental industry is attractive to criminals. Rental motor vehicles provide criminals with a means of transportation, the opportunity to drive anonymously and avoid drawing attention by frequently changing vehicles, and a relative sense of impunity as the vehicle cannot be confiscated from them.
- Data from BOVAG and open sources indicate that roughly 1,200 vehicle rental companies have been registered with the Dutch Chamber of Commerce of which 400 companies are BOVAG members. It is unknown how many vehicle rental companies exist besides the registered ones.
- Interviews, administrative reports and criminal investigations reveal that malicious vehicle rental companies operate in several Dutch regions. The owners of these companies often have criminal records. Subsequently, evidence suggests that these malicious businesses knowingly facilitate criminals and criminal activities.
- The Netherlands currently lacks a national overview of these malicious companies, although several police departments are trying to gain insight in them. The administrative reports have identified several malicious companies in various districts. Partially depending on the scope and range used in the administrative reports, varying from a single malicious company within one district to several dozen in another district.
- The fleet of vehicle rental companies visible covers nearly 90,000 vehicles, about a third of which are for private use. An internet search reveals that around 40,000 times a month people search for car rental on Google.
- A media analysis conducted for the years 2016 to 2018 reveals 54 unique articles regarding the use of rental motor vehicles for criminal activities.
- On an average day in 2019, vehicle rental companies register 7,000 person registrations of tenants in ELENA, the alert system in which BOVAG members can register violations and malpractices.

- Nearly 1,400 incidents are registered in CARENT, the National Police's project code for incidents involving a rental motor vehicle, over the period 2016-2018. However, CARENT does not provide a reliable image of the extent to which rental motor vehicles are used for criminal activities as registration under this project code is generally not consistent and not all registrations actually relate to criminal activities.
- Summ-IT, a system in which the National Police records all investigation files, contains over 30,000 investigation files over the period 2016-2018. In over 3,000 investigations files (10%), rental motor vehicles appear. That said, Summ-IT does not provide a reliable picture of the extent of the criminal involvement of rental motor vehicles because the appearance of a rental motor vehicle in the file does not necessarily mean that the vehicle was used for the crimes committed.

The nature of criminal involvement of rental motor vehicles

In the following box we present the conclusions regarding the nature of the criminal activities in which rental motor vehicles are involved.

Conclusions

- Based on the findings of this study we can conclude that a substantial share of vehicle tenants hold criminal antecedents.
- Multiple sources indicate that criminals use rental motor vehicles for a variety of subversive forms of crime, such as money laundering, drug-related crime, transportation and trafficking of illicit goods, vehicle theft, burglaries and ram-raids to life crimes such as liquidations and terrorist attacks.
- Criminal activities committed using a rental motor vehicle involve cross-border activities.

Clarification

Below, we present the main findings regarding the nature of criminal activities involving rental motor vehicles.

- Previous research and administrative reports from various police departments have shown that rental motor vehicles are frequently used by criminals: the majority (at least 70 percent) of the inspected drivers have criminal records. Often, this involves (far) more than 10 prior offenses for various criminal acts.
- Interviews, administrative reports and criminal investigations reveal that criminals often pay in cash, possibly via the use of straw men. Especially when large amounts of money are involved, renting vehicles provides an opportunity for laundering criminal assets.
- An analysis of media reports reveal that most of the reports on rental motor vehicles in relation to crime relate to the use of rental motor vehicles for drug and weapon transportation possibly in combination with other crimes. Media reports mainly cover abuses in relation to rental motor vehicles in the south, west and east of the Netherlands and neighbouring countries.

- According to the respondents, rental motor vehicles are mostly used for transporting illegal goods such as drug-related goods, weapons and money. These goods are often hidden in existing hollow spaces in the vehicle and sometimes in cunningly created secret spaces. In addition, rental motor vehicles are used as a means of transport for committing theft, ram-raids and explosive attacks, liquidations and terrorist acts.
- Administrative reports and criminal investigations confirm practical knowledge that rental motor vehicles are used for a wide range of criminal activities. According to police information, rental motor vehicles are used to traffic drugs and weapons, commit burglaries and also carry out liquidations.
- The 7,000 registrations in ELENA mostly concern behaviours that directly harm businesses such as non-payment and vehicle theft. A small proportion of those registrations (1.6%) relate to committing criminal activities with the rental vehicle.
- A significant amount of the nearly 1,400 registrations in CARENT concern traffic incidents (42%) and suspicious situations (29%). Almost 1 in 10 registrations (9.8%) are related to criminal activities including drug-related incidents, property-related incidents, violent incidents and incidents related to weapons.
- The more than 3,000 Summ-IT investigation files in which rental motor vehicles are involved relate to drug-related crimes (30%), robbery, burglary or theft (26%), property crimes (25%), violent crimes (18%), crimes related to weapons and ammunition (14%) and life crimes (10%).
- Based on interviews, a media analysis and criminal investigations, we conclude that criminal activities carried out using rental motor vehicles have a cross-border character. Criminal activities are often committed abroad with a Dutch rental motor vehicle or in the Netherlands with a foreign rental motor vehicle. Examples include transporting illegal goods abroad or to the Netherlands and committing burglaries across the border.

Concluding remarks

For decades, there have been signs that rental motor vehicles are used for criminal activities. This study provides an insight into the extent to which these signs are correct, and the extent to which serious subversive forms of crime are committed using rental motor vehicles. We conclude that criminals calculatingly and systematically use rental motor vehicles for various, serious and subversive forms of crime. The abuse of rental motor vehicles for criminal purposes and involvement of vehicle rental companies create an undesirable link between the under- and upperworld.

Reasons for criminals to use rental motor vehicles are firstly that they simply need a means of transport, secondly, rental motor vehicles offer them anonymity and thirdly, a rented vehicle cannot be taken away from them personally. This study identifies a number of factors that make vehicle rental companies susceptible to abuse by criminals. These include the acceptance of cash payments, low occupancy rates, limited visibility and recognisability of the vehicles, renting out vehicles to other vehicle rental companies thus losing sight of the tenants, failure to carry out identity checks, underutilisation of the ELENA warning system by BOVAG members and inadequate bookkeeping. Finally, it should be mentioned that the vehicle rental industry is polluted with malicious companies founded by criminals to serve criminals. Their rental locations are often meeting places for criminals of all kinds, including members of Outlaw Motorcycle Gangs.

According to the study, criminals use rental motor vehicles from both bonafide and malicious companies. Factors in criminals' modus operandi that complicate criminal investigations include renting vehicles through straw men, paying with cash, changing vehicles regularly, using a wide range of vehicle rental companies and straw men, and renting vehicles abroad.

The impact of the criminal (ab)use of rental motor vehicles is extensive. The consequences go beyond the damage caused by criminal activities and the direct damage that vehicle rental companies may suffer. At micro level, rental companies fear reputational damage when associated with crime. At macro level, the criminal association affects (the reputation of) an entire industry, as there is concern of criminalisation and subsequent stigmatisation of the vehicle rental industry due to observed incidents. All parties involved, including the BOVAG, vehicle rental companies and the government, have a vested interest in a "clean" vehicle rental industry. Importantly, these parties are all willing to make an effort to achieve this clean industry. Measures should create barriers for malicious businesses and reduce the abuse of bonafide companies. Proposed solutions include better regulation within the industry, implementing certification systems, enhancing the resilience of companies and their staff, fostering stronger public-private collaborations, and intensified international cooperation due to the transnational nature of the problem. Generally, respondents expressed a positive view towards a licensing system for the vehicle rental industry, provided it is implemented nationwide to prevent a waterbed effect.



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