



# Rental vehicles across the border

European lessons on tackling  
the use of rental motor vehicles  
for criminal purposes

## Summary

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## Rental vehicles across the border

**European lessons on tackling the use of rental motor vehicles for criminal purposes**

### Original title

*Huurvoertuigen over de grens. Europese lessen met betrekking tot de aanpak van het gebruik van huurmotorvoertuigen voor criminele doeleinden*

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# Summary

The Dutch Ministry of Justice and Security (J&S) has expressed its intention to reinforce its (national) strategy to tackle the use of rental vehicles for criminal purposes. This intention arose partly in response to a study conducted by Bureau Beke in 2019, regarding the extent to which criminals make use of rental vehicles. One of the conclusions of this study was that the vehicle rental industry is vulnerable to abuse by criminals. The under- and upper-world are undesirably intertwined in this sector. For the benefit of the national strategy to tackle this issue, Minister Yeşilgöz-Zegerius (J&S) asked the Netherlands Vehicle Authority (RDW)<sup>1</sup> to investigate options with regard to the registration of renters and drivers of rental vehicles in the national vehicle registration register. Bureau Beke was subsequently asked to investigate how other EU member states deal with the issue of crime involving rental vehicles. The results of this research are drawn in this report. The research question posed was: How do other EU member states deal with the use of rental vehicles for criminal purposes and what directions for solutions are being pursued abroad that could also be of interest to the Dutch strategy?

The research entailed a combination of desk research, interviews and document analysis. Drawing on scientific and grey literature, we made an inventory of approaches used in EU member states. A number of examples originating outside the continent emerged from the desk research. As we did not want to limit ourselves to only European search results, these global lessons were also included in this study. All together, we got in contact with 43 experts on the topic representing 20 European countries, through our own network and through three European calls via networks of the police (EU-EMPACT), the RDW (EReg) and Leaseurope. Furthermore, experts shared information on potentially other respondents and relevant official documents. We conducted interviews with these (inter)national experts via e-mail and MS Teams. Altogether, we gathered

information on 21 EU member states. Finally, we performed a document analysis on relevant official documents obtained from the first two research methods.

This summary presents and explains the main findings of the study. Hereafter, we outline the lessons we can draw from foreign approaches and Dutch experiences, highlighting promising solutions for the Dutch strategy. The report concludes with a final review in which we reflect on the study and its findings.

## Foreign lessons

In the section below, we outline the lessons that can be drawn from foreign countries dealing with the use of rental vehicles for criminal purposes.

### Conclusions

- The use of rental vehicles for criminal purposes is an internationally recognised problem. Contrary to the Netherlands, however, this problem owes its ‘fame’ abroad to the use of rental vehicles as weapons (VAW) during terrorist attacks.
- Based on the findings, we conclude that the number of (EU) countries pursuing active (national) policies against the phenomenon is very limited. The study reveals that apart from the Netherlands, only the United Kingdom, France, Belgium, Germany and Malta have or are currently developing dedicated policies against the criminal use of rental vehicles. While strengthening the Dutch policy, one would recommend to look at the methods used in these countries.
- At **local level**, countries introduced mainly repressive policies, aimed at creating barriers that prevent malicious vehicle rental companies from pursuing crime and sharing good practices with local parties.
- At **national level**, countries adopted policies targeting three general domains:
  - Strengthening and protecting the bonafide vehicle rental companies. This policy strategy emphasises the shared responsibility of a ‘clean’ vehicle rental sector and the societal and business risks associated with the criminal use of rental vehicles. Industry supporting initiatives include awareness campaigns, information sharing on security methods and automated security and administration systems.
  - Providing transparency on renters and drivers of rental motor vehicles by imposing (voluntary or mandatory) registration requirements to rental vehicle companies.

- Exposing rental vehicles and thus tackling their anonymous nature. To this end, Malta utilises unique number plate numbering for rental motor vehicles to distinguish them from other vehicles.
- At **international level**, countries collaborate by sharing information and good practices with neighbouring countries and within European committees. To the best of our knowledge, only Germany and the Netherlands have cooperated at case level.
- A variety of sources indicate that imposing registration requirements could make a positive contribution to tackling the criminal use of rental vehicles. However, for the measure to be successful, it must relieve landlords of work instead of adding to their administrative burden. In this view, it is desirable to develop an automatic registration system where landlords provide data from renters and police can access the system in case of involvement in criminal investigations. With regard to (speeding) fines or other minor penalties, the system should forward them directly to the renter's address without burdening the landlord.

## Lessons from Dutch experiences

Based on the results, it can be concluded that the Netherlands is leading the way in its efforts to tackle the use of rental vehicles for criminal purposes. Complementary to the original research question, we therefore examined what lessons can be drawn from Dutch experiences.

### Conclusions

- A variety of sources indicate that certain target groups demand specific strategies:
  - Support **bonafide rental vehicle companies** in preventing the criminal use of their rental vehicles. It is essential to reinforce public-private cooperation between the police, government and vehicle rental sector (organisations). Close links between the police and rental agencies are important. The strategy should emphasise the shared responsibility towards a 'clean' sector and recognising money mules or 'katvangers' as victims of criminal exploitation.
  - Tracking **malicious rental vehicle companies** and creating barriers to prevent them from pursuing crime. To increase the effectiveness of these measures,

barriers (such as compulsory permits) must be nationally implemented. In fact, we currently see that local and regional initiatives cause a waterbed effect.

- Mapping, monitoring and dismantling **multi-level networks of facilitating vehicle rental companies**. At present, the Netherlands fails to respond adequately to this group. To form an effective response, it is vital to map and monitor these facilitator networks prior to developing new policies.
- As a result of measures implemented by the Netherlands, we observe a trend of criminals adjusting their modus operandi by renting vehicles in other countries. The introduction of (voluntary or mandatory) registration requirements can contribute to this trend. Special attention and international cooperation is therefore required to prevent the criminal use of rental motor vehicles with foreign license plates.

## Concluding remarks

The issue regarding the use of rental motor vehicles for criminal purposes does not restrict itself to the Dutch borders; it is an internationally recognised transnational problem. Despite widespread awareness within Europe and elsewhere in the world, only a limited number of countries pursues active policies. Drawing on the findings of this study, we conclude that the Netherlands is leading the way in tackling this problem. The differences between the Dutch approach and that of other countries can be attributed to the adopted phenomenon-oriented approach of the Dutch police, good past experience with public-private partnerships and a focus on both prevention (by strengthening the bonafide vehicle rental sector) and repression (by detecting and tackling malicious operators).

Experience and examples from abroad teach us that, in order to be effective, the Dutch strategy should focus on every aspect of the phenomenon. First, measures should be taken to support bonafide renters in preventing the criminal use of their products through industry-supporting initiatives. Second, it is important to emphasise the shared responsibility in creating and maintaining a clean sector and to rely on knowledge, skills and good intentions of bonafide entrepreneurs. Third, Malta shows that rental vehicles can be easily detached from its anonymous nature by using a unique sequence on number plates. The modification of the number plate provides investigating agencies with a clear indication that they are dealing with a rented vehicle without this being evident to the 'ordinary citizen'. Finally, we can conclude that (voluntary or mandatory) registration

requirements are frequently used tools in other countries to combat the issue. Based on the data gathered, we conclude that registration requirements should meet the following conditions to be both effective and feasible:

1. The digital registration system is user-friendly and highly secure.
2. The registration system used should reduce administrative workload for lessors and increase usability rather than providing an additional administrative burden.
3. The system is linked to police systems so that (traffic) offences and fines can be sent directly to the renter or driver. The lessor is informed of the involvement of his/her vehicles to such offences.
4. In case of criminal involvement of a rental vehicle, the police must be authorised to access the information recorded in the system.

Furthermore, several experts underline the importance of an international approach. Criminals do not limit themselves to a single country's borders and potential, therefore an effective response should not either. Sharing good practices assists countries in developing effective policies, stimulates a unified European approach and thus counteracts the waterbed effect. As for the Netherlands, cooperation at case level should be encouraged more with their neighbouring countries Germany and Belgium.

While the Netherlands employs several measures to strengthen bonafide companies and tackling criminal ones, measures targeting multi-level networks of facilitating companies are currently lacking. This complex group is difficult to grasp and masks a well-structured organisation. To create a tailored approach, a number of case studies and network analyses can provide insight into these structures and those involved. Given the cross-border nature of these networks, countries will have to collaborate to successfully conduct such research. Certain exploratory research is essential for developing effective policies against multi-level networks of facilitating companies.

At present, several local initiatives against the criminal use of rental motor vehicles are in place in the Netherlands, such as compulsory permits and an ongoing search to malicious vehicle lessors at regional level. Rather than repeatedly reinventing the wheel and relocating any criminal activity, it would be advisable to implement these local initiatives nationwide. Complementary, new directions for solutions – drawn from this report – can be employed, such as automatic registration systems and visibility enhancing features of rental vehicles. Furthermore, exploratory international investigations into multi-level networks

of facilitators in the vehicle rental industry can offer insight in their modus operandi, thus contributing to the development of successful (international) policies.

## Endnote

1. In Dutch: de Dienst Wegverkeer.





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