Chapter 34
Transnational Crime and the American Policing System

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ABSTRACT

The 21st century US can be characterized as a period of globalization, during which countries have become increasingly interconnected. However, since the 9-11 terrorist attacks on US soil—unease about the possibility of subsequent attacks and other transnational crimes has become ever more prevalent. While traditional security agencies, such as the FBI and CIA, have changed since this phenomenon, US police have been forced to assume a greater share of the responsibility as part of a comprehensive homeland-security framework. Consequently, through an in-depth descriptive analysis of transnational crime and the strategies and methods police agencies presently have at their disposal to combat it, one can determine if US police have the tools needed to handle this salient issue. Thus, recommendations can be made of ways to improve the efficacy of US policing agencies in the pursuit of their homeland-security directives, and moreover, methods of implementing these recommendations can be devised.

INTRODUCTION

Early in the 21st century, the United States experienced the most horrific act of terrorism ever committed on its soil. During the September 11 attacks, passenger jets were hijacked by Al Qaeda Islamic extremists and were crashed into the World Trade Center buildings in New York City and the Pentagon in Virginia. A fourth aircraft was also hijacked by the same group with the intent of crashing it into an undisclosed target in Washington D.C., yet this attempted attack resulted in the hijacked aircraft’s crashing in a field in central Pennsylvania. Thousands of lives were lost in these attacks, and amidst the pain, fear, and confusion that followed, the US not only recognized how tangible a threat international terrorism is but also realized that other previously unnoticed threats to its national security also existed. As the international community was becoming more interconnected through globalization (i.e., the transnational connectivity of economies, national policies, and ideas), global criminal activity was also becoming more of a concern (Schlegel, 2000). Despite the existence of domestic crime issues in the US
prior to the attacks, international crime and the possibility that it might again be perpetrated on US soil gained wider attention. Since then, the term transnational crime has been used to describe criminal acts that occur across national borders, originating in one country and ending in another, with the criminals involved being foreigners in either country or conspiring with one or more countries against another. Some examples of transnational crimes include terrorism, organized crime, drug trafficking, human trafficking (e.g., sex slavery, kidnapping, and illegal immigration), and cyber-crime.

Essentially, the issue of transnational crime has been present in the United States since the early 1900s—as is evident when examining, for instance, the behavior of the Mafia and similar organized-crime syndicates during that period. Since 9-11, though, transnational crime has been more widely recognized as a legitimate and growing concern. US government officials, policy makers, and average citizens have become increasingly anxious over whether their country is prepared to prevent future attacks, and in response to such threats, the US has paid increasing attention to homeland security. Albeit federal security agencies like the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) have traditionally dealt with transnational crime, state and local police departments are now also tasked with protecting domestic security in the US. Police are often the first criminal-justice personnel to encounter transnational criminal activities and so have several methods of confronting and neutralizing such threats at their disposal. Nevertheless, one might wonder if this is enough to curb transnational crime. By first discussing and analyzing transnational crime, then by examining a few of the leading strategies police currently use to combat it, the present paper seeks to determine what strategies or combinations of strategies are most effective at preventing transnational crime.

This chapter’s objective is primarily to create more fluid dialogues about homeland-security and criminal-justice policies and studies. While some might feel criminal-justice ideas and perspectives play, at best, a minor role in homeland security, this chapter will shed light on a commonly overlooked field, police science, and open the door for increased research, analysis, and dialog on policies pertaining to it. Because homeland security can be very complex, a willingness to try different methods of countering disasters is imperative. This chapter will aim to provide information on current policing strategies, then examine the efficacy of each strategy with respect to various transnational crimes. This chapter should therefore serve as a gateway for researchers seeking a better understanding of the strategic role US police departments can play in homeland security. Moreover, as this chapter focuses on what does and does not work, interested professionals can examine the strategies presented and use this chapter as a springboard for meaningful discussions on law-enforcement reform that can save public resources.

BACKGROUND

Elected officials, public policy makers, and other stakeholders in homeland-security undertakings have continuously sought crime-prevention methods that balance efficiency with lowered costs. The aim, of course, is to cut back on the public funds spent by implementing practices empirically proven to improve national security. As various previous studies have shown, the traditional way of dealing with criminal activity to date (e.g., increasing spending on police and prisons) has cost billions of dollars, yet is ineffective on reducing criminal activity, encouraging security, and establishing safety. Other studies have shown the most effective means of countering threats lie in building progressive partnerships between citizens, communities, police, and federal agencies, in addition to implementing scientific models and technology. Crime in the 21st century has thus far been a testament of how criminals can manipulate