



CINA, ADAC, and CCICADA Organize a Workshop on Enhanced Crime During COVID-19

In the early stages of the coronavirus pandemic, the FBI and U.S. Secret service issued a [press release](#) detailing the potential for dramatic increases of novel types of crimes that could arise:

“Swindles, scams, and outright thefts have long been a feature of major disasters. The more catastrophic the event, the more active the fraudsters. However, the COVID-19 pandemic provides criminal opportunities on a scale likely to dwarf anything seen before. The speed at which criminals are devising and executing their schemes is truly breathtaking.”

This early warning has, unfortunately, been realized:

- Drugs are being marketed at “cures” or vaccines for COVID-19
- Unapproved and counterfeit N95 masks, gowns, gloves, and other PPEs are being sold
- Unapproved and even dangerous sanitizing and disinfecting products are on the market
- Debt relief scams are on the rise
- Cyber attacks on the supply chain are increasing, including even ransom demands on hospitals treating COVID patients
- Illegal hoarding and price gouging is on the rise
- Fraud against the CARES Act
- Donation schemes
- Disruption of legal supply chains

Crimes in remote areas have been a specific problem, resulting from:

- Vulnerable transportation and communication systems making crime easier
- Law enforcement concentrating on the pandemic and spread very thin
- Temptation to go against the law during the pandemic and illegally dump waste or illegally fish or poach wildlife
- Increased reliance on social media leading to problems *relative to* misinformation



N95 masks were among the counterfeit items being sold online. Photo credit: Wikimedia commons

This led three DHS university centers of excellence (COEs), [CINA](#) led by George Mason University, [ADAC](#) led by the University of Alaska, and [CCICADA](#) led by Rutgers University, to organize a virtual workshop entitled Enhanced Crime During COVID-19. Held on August 21, 2020, the workshop was organized around two panels: “Crime in Licit and Illicit Supply Chains” and “Rural Crime/Crime in Remote Areas.”

The workshop was part of the [DHS University Centers of Excellence COVID-19 Supply Chain Initiative](#).

A “FEEDING FRENZY” FOR TRANSNATIONAL CRIME

Louise Shelley of the [CINA](#) COE led by George Mason University said that the pandemic has produced a “feeding frenzy” for transnational crime. There has been a growth in every type of transnational crime: online fraud, calls intended to defraud individuals, sale of counterfeit goods needed for protection during the pandemic. This “ecosystem” could not have been developed this rapidly without attaching itself to the existing pharmaceutical counterfeit ecosystem. According to Shelley, the result has been:

- Drug problems do not go away even when supply chains are disrupted; opioid deaths are growing – despite the disruption of supply chains for narcotics
- Human trafficking is flourishing online and increasing in the streets
- Environmental crime such as poaching, timber theft, etc. has been increasing globally

Shelley said that these crimes are being committed by both state and non-state actors. We need to be doing much more network analysis and large-scale data analysis to understand who is facilitating the online sale of narcotics, the sale of counterfeit PPEs, etc.

Several of the speakers, including Jack Staton, Deputy Director, DHS’ Joint Task Force – West (JTF-W), spoke about the ability of transnational criminal organizations to change rapidly and exploit COVID.

CYBER ATTACKS INCREASING AT AN ALARMING PACE

Randy Sandone, Executive Director of the [CIRI](#) COE led by the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, said that cyber criminals are developing and boosting their attacks at an alarming pace:



US law enforcement intercepted COVID-19 "treatment kits" bound for California and Utah

Source:

<https://www.ice.gov/news/releases/british-man-charged-shipping-mislabeled-and-unapproved-treatments-patients-suffering>

Photo credit: ICE

- Increasing numbers of phishing attacks using COVID as a lure
- Malware related to COVID
- Attacks on pharmaceutical companies, research labs, academic institutions, and individuals
- Increasing attacks on individuals forced to work at home with little preparation
- Stealing people’s credentials when they access their coronavirus relief account

Sandone argued that technology such as Artificial Intelligence, Machine Learning, and Natural Language Processing can be key contributors to more efficient and resilient modern supply chains, but since they depend upon cyber systems, their value can be undermined by cyber attacks on those systems. With just-in-time scheduling, which has led to great efficiencies, having only one supplier pulled offline can lead to a disruption of the entire supply chain.

LAW ENFORCEMENT NEEDS NEW TOOLS

Jere Miles, Assistant Director, Operational Technology and Cyber Division, Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) described some of the tools law enforcement can use help with:

- When counterfeit PPE is sold over the Internet, some corporation is manufacturing it. How do we find it?
- How do we detect hoarding and price gouging early?
- Theft from legal supply chains leads to shortages or worse. This is usually handled at the state level, but it is interstate commerce and new tools would help. How do we determine how big a role organized crime is playing in all of this?



HSI is an investigative arm of DHS that is working against COVID-19-related criminal activity. Photo credit: ICE-HSI Office of Public Affairs

With specific emphasis on counterfeiting in electronics and micro-electronics (an area where 30% of the supply is counterfeit or cloned), Kerry Bernstein, a consultant developing hardware security technologies for DoD, talked about the availability of and need for:

- Tools for understanding where a (counterfeit) part came from
- Ways to use social networking to expose counterfeit networks
- Ways to test any component onsite

COVID-19 HIGHLIGHTS FRAGILE SUPPORT SYSTEM IN REMOTE REGIONS

Michael Duxbury, an [ADAC](#) Executive Counselor who is retired from the Alaska Department of Public Service, discussed the lack of infrastructure and redundancy in remote regions such as in parts of Alaska. The pandemic, he said, has highlighted the fragility of the system. It has highlighted and increased the lack of services, leaving people vulnerable. Whitney Lackenbauer, faculty member at Trent University in Ontario, pointed out the high cost of services in such

regions. The demand price for legal drugs has increased, and there are shortages. Making rural supply chains more resilient is a major part of what Canada hopes to accomplish in such regions.

Lackenbauer spoke about the importance of information sharing to gain domain awareness *and* enhance coordination, while Shannon Jenkins, head of the Arctic Policy Office at U.S. Coast Guard Headquarters, pointed out the challenges with engaging with communities and overall domain awareness by the Coast Guard as a result of the pandemic. If the Service isn't present, then that opens the door for potentially illicit activity.

Several panelists spoke about the reduction in law enforcement activities, in part because of health concerns and in part because of infrastructure challenges. This has exacerbated problems with crime. Lackenbauer and Duxbury mentioned ways in which COVID has exacerbated the crime situation:

- Increased domestic violence and sexual abuse, already high in remote areas
- Continued narcotics trafficking even when prices have risen dramatically (methamphetamine and heroin prices doubled and more than tripled in price in some areas)
- Illicit fishing and wildlife trade

VULNERABLE RURAL/REMOTE AREA TRANSPORTATION SYSTEMS ENHANCE CRIME

In remote rural regions such as in Alaska or Canada's Northern Territories, transportation of people and goods is primarily through the Maritime Transportation System (MTS) or small air carriers. During disruptions such as COVID-19, when these systems are disrupted, crime can flourish.



Many remote areas are inaccessible by land and must rely on maritime and air transportation systems. Photo credit: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Kivalina_Alaska_aerial_view.jpg

Shannon Jenkins pointed out that rural Alaska, with few roads and dependence on the MTS, encountered challenges and additional stressors due to the pandemic. One example was that crews on vessels were restricted from going ashore as they normally do to facilitate the transfer of cargo and fuel. In one instance, this directly led to a fuel spill. These are the types of additional stressors, disruptions in the flow of stability within the communities, which could foster opportunities for criminal activity, both from inside and external sources.

Michael Duxbury observed that during COVID, air cargo, parcels, and products carried on vessels were more vulnerable to crime. (For approximately two months at the

peak of the crisis, interdiction activity that involved search warrants was shut down for fear of exposure.)

Duxbury also pointed out that, because of COVID, a major rural air carrier in Alaska, Ravn Air, went bankrupt, and shortages of air transportation made it difficult to get domestic violence and sexual assault victims out of remote rural villages to services and treatment. It was also difficult to get criminal suspects out to court as well. Court personnel reductions reduced the number of hearing trials and remands, leaving criminal suspects free to commit further crimes. Whitney Lackenbauer also spoke about the decrease in air traffic in the Northern Territories due to COVID, resulting in more food, fuel, and equipment being transported by ship, thus increasing the opportunity for crimes against shipping.

CLOSED BORDERS AS “THREAT VECTORS” RATHER THAN SECURITY ASSETS

Whitney Lackenbauer said that even with the closing of borders between Canada and the U.S., and even between provinces in Canada, human smuggling and other crimes were issues. In fact, closing borders presented new “threat vectors” rather than making security easier.

Jack Staton pointed out the difficulty early in the pandemic of identifying what defined an “essential business” between Mexico and the U.S. because of an incongruence of what are considered essential businesses. An example would be if a U.S. corporation/business owned factory in Mexico was closed because it was classified as non-essential by the Mexican Government. This closure would create a challenge for the U.S. corporation/business that was considered essential in the United States and required the parts manufactured by their factory in Mexico to maintain the production of essential products in the United States.

Staton also said that as of this past July, illicit migration has returned to pre-COVID levels and there has been an increase in narcotic, money, and ammunition seizures along the southwest border. Staton said even though COVID-19 negatively affected economies on both sides of the border, transnational criminal organizations do not appear to have been impacted in the same way. The increase in seizures does not necessarily indicate an increase in criminal activity, but could represent a higher number of inspections along the southwest border due to a decrease in non-essential traffic.

For further information:

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For more information on all of the COEs: <https://www.dhs.gov/science-and-technology/centers-excellence>. The COEs are funded by the [Office of University Programs](#) in DHS’ Science and Technology Directorate.