

SOME OF THE MODES OF OPERATION USED BY DRUG TRAFFICKERS

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Abstract

This article delves into the sophisticated and diverse methods employed by drug traffickers to evade law enforcement. It outlines the ingenious ways traffickers hide and transport narcotics, from using everyday vehicles modified with secret compartments to deploying complex drug manufacturing in clandestine laboratories. The study highlights the use of public transportation systems and international postal services for drug movement, underscoring the challenges faced by authorities in detecting these covert operations. Additionally, it details various methods for the identification and detection of narcotics, emphasizing the necessity of advanced scientific techniques to combat this global issue. The article provides valuable insights into the evolving strategies of drug trafficking, offering a comprehensive understanding crucial for law enforcement and policy development.

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J.E.L. Classification: K42, F17, 017

1. Introduction

This article aims in-depth exploration of the multifaceted and clandestine world of drug trafficking. This article sheds light on the intricate methods employed by traffickers to elude detection, encompassing both the transportation and concealment of narcotics. The investigative focus extends from the utilization of everyday vehicles, ingeniously modified for smuggling, to the complexities of drug production in hidden laboratories. The analysis also highlights the exploitation of public transport systems and international postal networks, revealing the daunting challenges faced by law enforcement agencies. Moreover, this piece delves into the advanced scientific techniques necessary for the identification and detection of narcotics, underscoring the continuous evolution of drug trafficking strategies. Through this exposition, the article aims to provide a thorough understanding of the operational tactics in drug trafficking, crucial for effective law enforcement and policy-making against this global issue.

2. Literature review

The literature review for "Some of the Modes of Operation Used by Drug Traffickers" encompasses a range of authoritative sources, offering a comprehensive overview of the criminalistics and legal aspects of drug trafficking. Bercheșan and Pletea's works (1994, 1998) provide foundational knowledge on the investigation of crimes involving narcotic substances, setting a theoretical and practical framework for understanding drug trafficking operations. Bunea (2019) and Gheorghică (2017) further expand on this by detailing criminalistic approaches and methodologies, offering insights into the complexities of detecting and analyzing drug-related crimes. Olteanu's (2004) focus on on-site research tactics aligns closely with the practical aspects of law enforcement in drug trafficking scenarios. Stancu's work (2001) adds another layer, discussing the broader scope of criminalistics in this context. The incorporation of legal frameworks, including The Romanian Criminal Code, The Romanian Criminal Procedure Code, and relevant laws (LAW

no. 143/2000 and LAW no. 300/2002), ensures a comprehensive understanding of the legal implications and guidelines governing the investigation of drug trafficking. This amalgamation of criminalistic literature and legal directives forms the bedrock of the current study, guiding the analysis of drug trafficking methods and the challenges faced in curbing this global issue.

3. Methodology

The main research objectives of the article "Some of the Modes of Operation Used by Drug Traffickers" are as follows:

- a) To examine the diverse methods used by drug traffickers for concealing and transporting narcotics: The article explores various ingenious techniques employed by traffickers, including the use of modified vehicles and other means of transport.
- b) To investigate the processes involved in the clandestine manufacture of drugs: This includes a look at the setup and operation of clandestine laboratories and the raw materials used in drug production.
- c) To analyze the methods of drug detection and identification: The article delves into the scientific and forensic techniques used to identify and analyze narcotics, including chemical analysis and chromatographic methods.
- d) To understand the challenges faced by law enforcement in combating drug trafficking: The research explores the difficulties encountered in detecting and intercepting drug smuggling operations, highlighting the need for advanced methods and strategies in law enforcement.

The research hypotheses are:

1. *Drug traffickers employ increasingly sophisticated methods for concealment and transportation, making detection by law enforcement agencies significantly more challenging.*
2. *Advanced forensic and chemical detection techniques are more effective in identifying narcotics compared to traditional methods, leading to a higher rate of interception and seizure of illicit drugs.*
3. *The effectiveness of drug trafficking prevention and enforcement is significantly influenced by the existing legal frameworks and regulations, with more comprehensive laws leading to more successful control and reduction of drug trafficking activities.*

4. Modes of operation used by drug traffickers

The forensic investigation of crimes related to drug trafficking and consumption is an extremely important activity for identifying the perpetrators of these highly dangerous acts. Drug traffickers employ a wide range of methods to conceal and transport drugs, aiming to avoid detection by judicial or customs authorities.

Regarding the locations and methods used for hiding narcotics, traffickers demonstrate considerable ingenuity. The choice of a hiding spot depends on the amount of drugs being trafficked, the method of transportation, the presence of inspections they must undergo, and, lastly, the trafficker's level of expertise and willingness to take risks.

Judicial experience has shown that traffickers use a variety of transportation means to move narcotics, such as cars, trucks, passenger or freight trains, boats, small vessels like sloops, commercial airplanes, and both private and company-owned passenger and cargo planes.

The significance of the *modus operandi* can be outlined as follows:

- a) By understanding the specific methods used in narcotics trafficking, judicial authorities gain a valuable tool for accurately identifying a pool of suspects.

Priority is given to individuals with a criminal history related to drug trafficking, those in the traffickers' circles, and those susceptible to committing such acts. Through targeted operational activities, there's a foundation for discovering narcotics or toxic products, items of illicit trafficking, as well as instruments used for drug administration, either on their persons or in their homes.

- b) Considering the operational methods used and correlating these with the timing of the crime, judicial authorities can identify potential witnesses from specific groups of people.

The practice of criminal investigation agencies in the anti-drug fight shows that traffickers often resort to placing narcotics in traditional "networks". Based on this, information about the movements of these

individuals in a certain area, their frequency of visits, and the company they keep, provides valuable clues about the location of the illegal activity, potential accomplices, and supply sources.

c) Lastly, understanding the *modus operandi* aids the judicial authorities in discerning or predicting the psycho-behavioral characteristics of the perpetrator.

This aspect is particularly significant in initiating criminal investigation procedures, choosing tactical surveillance strategies, and employing evidence and methods of proof.

5. Methods of masking the specific odors of some drugs

To prevent the detection of drugs due to their distinctive smell, especially by tracking dogs specialized in such operations, traffickers employ various methods:

1. Packaging drugs, particularly marijuana, in special cartons or tin canisters containing fish with a strong odor or mothballs to mask the scent.

2. Adding garlic or onion essences to parcels containing drugs, as these smells can confuse service dogs.

3. Using hermetically sealed containers that prevent any odor from escaping. However, these containers may still carry traces of drugs from being handled by individuals who have come into contact with the narcotics.

According to information provided by OIPC-INTERPOL, among the methods of disguising or concealing drugs, the most common methods of illicit drug trafficking include:

a) Industrial manufacturing of concealment devices using machinery, boxes, and labels from production lines of canned goods, often involving the complicity of employees from such factories. This operation involves substituting food products with narcotics.

b) Artisanal production of concealment devices through purchasing machines and raw materials like lids, empty boxes, and labels (either new or removed from full boxes) of appropriate sizes.

c) Altering finished canned products in several ways:

- Normally opening the can, peeling off the label, emptying its contents, cleaning it, and cutting it transversely below the factory seal. After inserting the drugs, the can is resealed and the label is reattached. The resulting can is slightly shorter in height.

- Making holes in the can's side walls after label removal, then emptying, inserting the drugs, sealing the cutouts, and reattaching the label.

- Cutting the can transversely and creating a lid. After label removal and cutting about 13 mm from the top edge, a metal strip is welded inside, slightly protruding. Drugs are inserted into the lower part, and the lid is placed on top, sealed with adhesive tape, and the label is re-glued. This allows for the transportation of drugs in solid or liquid form without odor emission.

d) Combining fabrics with narcotics for cocaine transport. This involves dissolving cocaine in pure alcohol, soaking cotton or linen fabrics in this solution, and then drying them for inconspicuous transportation. Approximately 1 kg of cocaine can be hidden in 140 handkerchiefs.

e) Utilizing the postal system, particularly by concealing drugs in letters or objects within parcels. Examples include:

- Narcotics hidden in letters, like in France where customs officers and anti-narcotics units discovered heroin in envelopes from Sri Lanka. Over a few months, 387 letters containing heroin were intercepted.

- Concealing narcotics in various objects sent through postal parcels, such as a case in Paris involving a tax inspector who received around 30 parcels from Latin America, used as a front by a trafficking network.

f) Employing couriers who sometimes ingest drugs in small plastic containers, or "olives," each containing a few grams of cocaine. One case involved a Colombian who managed to swallow 171 olives. For small-scale trafficking, drugs are also hidden in various bodily cavities and in everyday items like mouthpieces, dentures, underwear, bras, socks, vests, shoes, spray cans, hair dryers, babies' diapers, milk cartons, cans, fake cassettes, rigged batteries, and cigarette packs.

6. Ways of hiding drugs in transit

Vehicles, particularly cars, are most commonly used in drug smuggling, as they can conceal and transport up to 100 kg of drugs without drawing the attention of authorities. Regarding the construction and types of vehicles, numerous hiding places have been discovered, including:

- The ceiling and seat upholstery
- Headlights and glove compartments
- The dashboard and fuel tank
- Ornamental covers of car wheels
- Spare wheels or other specially arranged areas

These hiding spots are also utilized in buses, coaches, and trucks. It's well-known that at border points, both in Romania and in other countries, the largest drug seizures often involve passenger cars or TIR trucks.

In buses and trucks, the hiding places can extend to the cargo compartment, with well-disguised access routes created in various parts, such as:

- The cold production installation
- Inside the fuel tank with double walls
- The battery compartment
- The flooring and walls of compartments intended for furniture
- The connection point between the trailer and the tractor

Railway wagons are frequently used by traffickers due to the multiple concealment possibilities and the limited time for survey control by customs bodies when crossing borders.

In air traffic, passengers' suitcases, maps, and bags with double bottoms and walls are commonly used for drug trafficking. Common hiding places found in air traffic include areas related to the technical construction of the aircraft, such as:

- The crew cabin, toilets, passenger seats, ceiling, and side walls
- In the transported goods and personal belongings of travelers, such as flowers (both natural and artificial), beverage bottles, sports equipment, statuettes, and various personal items

On ships, suitable places for hiding narcotics include:

- The wind trunk and empty fuel tanks
- Cupboards and shelves with navigation logs
- Life belts, stores, refrigerators, crates, concave parts of the masts, the propeller, and rope coils

If a vessel, its crew, or cargo arouses suspicion of involvement in illicit drug trafficking, both a technical inspection of the vessel (engine room, crew cabins, radio room) and a thorough check of the goods and cargo structure are necessary.

The advancement in transportation and international trade in the modern era has greatly reduced distances between countries, allowing plants and drugs of formerly local significance to be known and transported to other regions of the world.

Particular attention must be paid to the inspection of transportation means, as they offer countless and unpredictable hiding places. Dismantling parts may be necessary, and it is advisable to include a specialist, typically an automotive bodywork expert, in the inspection team.

7. Manufacture, transport and distribution of drugs

Various methods are employed in the manufacturing, transporting, and consumption of narcotics for drug trafficking purposes. Concerning drug production, the raw materials come from clandestine cultivation of opiate poppy, *Cannabis indica* or *sativa*, the coca plant, and hallucinogenic mushrooms. These illicit crops often expand at the expense of food crops. Like the cultivation, narcotics manufacturing is conducted clandestinely in specially designed laboratories located in isolated areas.

The term "clandestine laboratory" typically refers to facilities where narcotics and psychotropic substances intended for the illegal drug market are produced, manufactured, and transformed, outside legal regulations, to supply drug addicts. Theoretically, any internationally controlled drug can be produced or refined in such a laboratory. The equipment used is improvised and inexpensive, easily purchasable from regular stores without raising suspicion. It has been observed that traffickers frequently change their laboratory locations to evade police detection.

Drugs are transported via air and sea routes, using various means ranging from individual carriers to airplanes and helicopters. Transport involves TIR vehicles, trains, aircraft, or ships. In TIR transport, traffickers exploit the fact that these vehicles are often loaded with perishable goods (meat, fruits, vegetables), which cannot be detained and inspected for extended periods.

Traffickers also use vehicles with false or temporary registration numbers for smuggling drugs. Romania is regarded by law enforcement as both a transit point for major drug trafficking networks and a consumer market. Drug trafficking and consumption, once sporadic, have now become commonplace. Narcotics from distant corners of the world enter Romania through various border points, eventually reaching the consumer market.

At the country's entry points, including various border crossings, personal cars and buses are subject to selective checks in addition to personal searches. However, large networks often have methods to evade these checks or, in some cases, corrupt the control bodies with bribes.

8. Methods of detection and identification of drugs

As known, the general characteristics of any substance can be observed through direct examination, which also applies to narcotic or toxic products or substances. Their general characteristics depend on their external morphological appearance. Narcotic or toxic drugs can be in solid, liquid, or gaseous states.

Solid products or substances might be crystalline or powdery, with a homogeneous or non-homogeneous structure, existing as single or mixed substances of plant or synthetic origin. Liquid or gaseous narcotics or toxic substances can appear as single substances, solutions, or mixtures.

The color and smell of toxic or narcotic drugs are due to their inherent properties or other components in the mixture. However, neither the color nor the smell provide definitive individualization, but only offer information about the nature of the examined substance.

This type of recognition, although indicative, requires technical-scientific analysis or expert verification to confirm the nature of the substances and products in question, determining if they belong to the group of toxic narcotics and if they constitute the material object of the crime of drug trafficking.

The external morphological examination, the initial stage of laboratory analysis and preliminary analysis, is conducted with the naked eye, in natural light, and under ultraviolet radiation, observing the color, appearance, and smell.

One of the methods for drug identification involves their precipitation and coloring reactions. Clues about the nature of substances that are suspected to be narcotics can be obtained from precipitation reactions when treated with specific reagents. Such reactions are particularly useful for alkaloids, with common reagents including picric acid, Mayer's reagent, Dragendorff's reagent, and Bouchardat's reagent.

For instance, cocaine forms a yellow precipitate when reacted with picric acid (1:100), turning brown when treated with Bouchardat's reagent. Morphine does not react with picric acid but forms a red-yellow precipitate (1:5000) with Dragendorff's reagent and a reddish-brown precipitate (1:5000) with

Bouchardat's reagent. Codeine exhibits similar reactions. These precipitation reactions are presumptive but should not be overlooked.

Presumptive analysis methods also include chemical analysis through color reactions and rapid on-site narcotic tests. Common reagents for color reactions are sulfuric acid, nitric acid, Erdmann's reagent, Frohde's reagent, Mandelin's reagent, Marquis reagent, and Mecke's reagent. These color tests are performed on residues or hydrochloric acid solutions, usually on porcelain or glass plates.

Microscopic examination is another method for detecting drugs. This examination, conducted with either a regular or stereomicroscope in natural or artificial light, can provide important information about the substance's nature, shape, and individual characteristics. It helps determine whether the substance is of plant, animal, or chemical origin and whether it is in an amorphous or crystalline state. For synthetic substances, the microscope can reveal the crystal's shape, color, and homogeneity.

Identifying narcotics or toxic substances can also involve determining the melting point or behavior in the flame. The melting point value is a unique characteristic of a substance and is influenced by its purity. For example, basic cocaine melts between 96°C-98°C, atropine at 116°C, and barbiturate derivatives have melting points ranging from 123°C - 220°C. The behavior in the flame can distinguish between inorganic substances (which don't burn) and organic substances (which burn, sometimes emitting smoke), or a mix of both, which partially burn leaving a residue.

For liquid samples, pH determination in aqueous solution is necessary before testing. Chromatographic methods are also employed for drug detection and analysis. Common drugs in illicit traffic include cannabis, heroin, cocaine, LSD, and amphetamines. Drugs sent to specialized laboratories are typically examined by chromatography to determine their nature and purity, with thin-layer chromatography (TLC), gas chromatography (GC), and high-performance liquid chromatography (HPLC) being the most frequently used methods.

Chromatographic methods are separation techniques. Although their selectivity isn't very high, they play a crucial role, especially when combined with high-selectivity techniques like spectrometry. Chromatographic separation procedures are considered indispensable in analyzing complex mixtures of narcotic drugs, providing detailed information on minor constituents and aiding in the evaluation of the substances or products discovered.

9. Conclusions

The study highlights the evolving complexity and ingenuity in the methods used by drug traffickers for concealing and transporting narcotics. It underscores the necessity for law enforcement to adapt and develop more advanced detection techniques to effectively combat these sophisticated smuggling strategies. The research emphasizes that the success of drug trafficking prevention is significantly dependent on robust legal frameworks and international cooperation. The findings indicate a pressing need for continuous advancement in forensic and chemical analysis methods, as traditional approaches are often inadequate against the increasingly innovative tactics of traffickers. The study also calls for enhanced training and resource allocation for law enforcement agencies to keep pace with the dynamic nature of drug trafficking operations. In conclusion, a multi-faceted approach involving technological innovation, legal rigor, and international collaboration is crucial for effectively addressing the challenges posed by drug trafficking.

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