

## CASE STUDY



### COMMODITIES INVOLVED

Rhino horns and various fraud and smuggling crimes

### CONVERGENCE TYPOLOGY

Opportunistic convergence

### GEOGRAPHIC REGION

Europe



**The Rathkeale Rovers** are an organised crime network of “travelling traders” based in Ireland but operating internationally across a range of criminal activities including fraud, money laundering, drug smuggling, and art theft. They are particularly notorious for their fraudulent schemes which have included trading in bogus electrical goods, counterfeit antiques, and tarmacking scams.<sup>29</sup> The Rathkeale Rovers are a classic example of a diversified network that actively seeks new criminal opportunities to exploit.

**As rhino poaching began** to escalate in South Africa from 2010 due to the high demand and high prices rhino horn commanded in the black markets in Asia, the Rathkeale Rovers master-minded an opportunity to exploit this trade from Europe. The group was behind a spate of organised robberies at museums, zoos, and auction houses across Europe targeting

the theft of rhino horns and mounted rhino heads worth millions of Euros between 2010 to 2013.<sup>30</sup> During this period, 58 theft incidents involving 95 rhino horns occurred in Germany, France, Portugal, United Kingdom, Italy, the Netherlands, and Ireland. Europol coordinated a large joint investigation called Operation Oakleaf to tackle the thefts, with the participation of law enforcement agencies from 17 countries. In total, 31 members of the Rathkeale Rovers were arrested.<sup>31</sup> During the sentencing of 14 members of the group that had been arrested in the United Kingdom in April 2016, it was described as an “extremely sophisticated conspiracy”.<sup>32</sup> None of the stolen horns were recovered and all are believed to have been trafficked to Asia. Several rhino horn trafficking cases involving the Rathkeale Rovers were also linked to the United States.<sup>33</sup>



*Image 8: The horn from a black rhino was stolen from the Museum in Ritterhaus in Offenburg, Germany. Credit: AFP/Getty Images.*

<sup>29</sup> <https://www.sundayworld.com/crime/world-crime/from-africa-to-iceland-norway-to-new-zealand-rathkeale-rovers-travellers-have-dealt-in-everything-from-tarmac-to-rhino-horn-40059841.html>

<sup>30</sup> <https://www.irishmirror.ie/news/irish-news/crime/irish-sunday-mirror-investigates-irish-2274088>

<sup>31</sup> <https://www.europol.europa.eu/about-europol/europol-20-years/europol-20-most-noteworthy-operations>

<sup>32</sup> <https://www.independent.ie/irish-news/courts/rathkeale-rovers-gang-members-jailed-over-multi-million-euro-rhino-horn-spree-34597780.html>

<sup>33</sup> <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/crime-and-law/member-of-rathkeale-rovers-jailed-for-rhino-horn-smuggling-1.3292633>



*Image 9: Ten of the 14 Rathkeale Rovers who were arrested and convicted in the United Kingdom. Credit: Durham Police/ PA Wire.*

**The robberies prompted** many museums and other institutions across Europe to increase the security of their exhibits and remove rhino horns from display. As a result of these increased security measures and the successful law enforcement response there have not been any further thefts of rhino horn from museums or other institutions, highlighting the opportunistic nature of convergence in this case. However, the group continues to operate and expand into other lines of criminal activity and has most recently been reported to be trading in forged negative COVID-19 test certificates.<sup>34</sup>

#### GOOD PRACTICE

- **International cooperation** on a large, joint law enforcement operation to investigate widespread crimes which were linked by a similar pattern of modus operandi.

#### INTERVENTION STRATEGY FOR FUTURE CONSIDERATION

- **Intelligence analysis and organised crime group mapping** in this type of case are useful techniques to identify and map out members of the criminal network who may be dispersed across many countries and to tackle the problem from an organised crime point of view.

<sup>34</sup> <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/crime-and-law/irish-gang-forging-negative-covid-19-tests-for-european-travellers-europol-warns-1.4473032>