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The puzzling resilience of transnational organized criminal networks

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Abstract

Why is transnational organized crime so difficult to dismantle? While organized crime networks within states have received some attention, actual transnational operations have not. In this article, we study the transnational drug and gun trafficking operations of the Shower Posse, a violent international organized crime syndicate based in Jamaica, whose resilience proves particularly puzzling. We were curious to know whether there is any evidence that international borders have an effect on the structure of illicit networks that cross them. It turns out that transnational drug distribution networks such as the Shower Posse rely on a small number of brokers whose role is to connect otherwise distinct domestic markets. Due to the high transaction costs associated with developing and maintaining transnational movement, the role of such brokers appears particularly important in facilitating the flow of illicit commodities across national borders. These brokers coordinate their own smaller subnetworks, while still maintaining the communication and collaboration necessary to ensure that the overall aims of the network are achieved.

Introduction

The dramatic arrest of Christopher Coke in Kingston, Jamaica on 22 June 2010 marked the end of a criminal career forged by transnational drug trafficking and political corruption on a grand scale. Assisted by helicopters, 2000 soldiers and police took on heavily armed gunmen in the Kingston neighborhood of Tivoli Gardens. The fighting left 73 dead, and more than 500 people in custody. Coke was the leader of the Shower Posse, an international criminal organization based in Jamaica that had used the Jamaican diaspora to spawn a drug trafficking network across North America, with particular prominence in New York City and Toronto. The Shower Posse was no average gang. It regularly influenced Jamaican politics, and its operation was likened more to a Fortune 500 Company than a street gang (Edmonds, 2010). American authorities had flagged Coke as one of the most dangerous drug dealers in the world. A New York court sentenced him to 23 years in prison for trafficking marijuana, cocaine, and firearms (Pilkington, 2012; United States District Court, 2010).

Coke’s case raises a series of questions. How was a drug dealer of his stature able to live out in the open and avoid capture for so long? And how did the Jamaican Shower Posse that he headed extend...
its reach all the way from Jamaica to the United States and Canada? As it turns out, transnational drug distribution networks such as the Shower Posse rely on a small number of actors whose role is to connect domestic markets. In network science, such actors are known as brokers (Morselli, 2009; Walther, 2015) because they bridge parts of networks that would otherwise be disconnected. Deeply embedded in their own community, brokers are also able to develop connections beyond their group and, by doing so, attract resources that would otherwise be unavailable locally (Spiro, Acton, & Butts, 2013). Their role, we assume, is particularly crucial when illicit commodities cross national borders, due to the high transaction costs of maintaining and developing transnational activities. Since a border imposes transaction costs on the movement of illicit goods in a network, brokers are needed on either side. This modus operandi is duplicated and increased in scope as the network confronts additional borders. Brokers need to be coordinated across countries by the network's leadership, which increases the network’s complexity. These brokers also coordinate their own smaller subnetworks, while still maintaining the communication and collaboration necessary to ensure that the overall aims of the network are achieved.

The article comprises three case studies of multiplayer networks operated by the Shower Posse. Each network supplied narcotics to the United States and Canada. The first case study maps out the broader global network of the Shower Posse, while the second and third focus on two specific cases of Shower Posse operations in Canada that were targeted by police in 2009 and 2010. Although the scope of cases is limited to Jamaica and Ontario, Canada, the broader domain encompasses other parts of the Caribbean, Latin America, and the United States.

The first section of the article explains the scholarly payoff to studying drug trafficking networks and operationalizes key concepts related to the structure of criminal networks and the role of brokers. The second section discusses the method used in this study. The third section analyzes the Shower Posse's transnational drug trafficking networks with a view to highlighting the role of certain prominent actors and their potential brokerage activities. Implications include a more nuanced understanding of how to deter, detect, and dismantle different types of illicit networks. The conclusion ponders the local structure of networks around the border and discusses the implications for law enforcement agencies.

**Networks**

Networks make it possible for criminal groups to overcome inherent problems of mobilization and communication between large numbers of people over distances (Everton, 2013; Gerdes, 2015). Network structure may come about as a result of formal planning, such as in the case of a business designing an organizational chart. Many real-world networks, however, develop more organically, and are the result of the accumulation of pairwise connections between individuals. The resulting structure of such networks is often constrained by purpose, and is a good indication of ‘what works.’ If the network does not contain the required actors, or if those actors cannot communicate as required, the network will be unsustainable.

Networks provide resiliency for criminal operations. Resilience in drug trafficking networks is defined as the ability of network participants to preserve existing levels of exchange between buyers and sellers, despite external pressure aimed at disrupting the trade (Bouchard, 2007). Duijn, Kashirin, and Sloot (2014) found that criminal networks can become even stronger after being targeted by law enforcement, meaning that police must act with care when targeting criminal networks. There is a consistent trade-off between security and efficiency in dark networks, and criminal organizations often opt for efficiency, since time is usually at a premium (Morselli, Giguère, & Petit, 2007). While one often thinks of criminal networks as rigid in structure, the extent to which they adapt is key to their survival (Morselli & Roy, 2008). In response to pressure from law enforcement, networks have been found to decentralize their structure (Morselli & Petit, 2007). Indeed, Bright and Delaney (2013)
found that over time the centralities of nodes in a drug trafficking network changed as individuals changed roles to meet the evolving needs of the network.

As a result, illicit networks are often more decentralized than commonly assumed. For example, Leuprecht, Walther, Skillcorn, and Ryde-Collins (2015) show that Hezbollah’s foreign fundraising operations are far more decentralized and autonomous than previously thought. Similarly, Kenney (2007) found that the Colombian drug trade was based on a series of small fluid networks, rather than monolithic cartels. However, just because a network is decentralized does not mean that authority is absent. While a network may take on a decentralized structure, hierarchies still exist, and a gang leader plays an important role in coordinating the activities of the network, and ensuring operational success (Varese, 2013). Decentralized or not, a key focus of transnational drug trafficking operations is the minimization of risk and the maintenance of network security, and resiliency is vital to both aims (Benson & Decker, 2010). By virtue of their ability to adapt, their resilience makes transnational drug trafficking networks exceptionally intractable for law enforcement. This aspect has been the subject of previous studies dedicated to international networks: Dorn, Oette, and White’s (1998) work on drug importation in the United Kingdom, Morselli and Giguère’s (2006) work on the cocaine and hashish network targeted by Project Caviar, which spanned Canada, the United Kingdom, Spain, Italy, Brazil, Paraguay, and Colombia, and Bright, Hughes, and Chalmers (2012) analysis of drug trafficking networks importing methamphetamine to Australia.

Two inter-related concepts outlined by Morselli (2009) are useful in describing and analyzing how nodes influence the movement of information and resources within and between networks: degree centrality and betweenness centrality. Degree centrality is a measure of how well connected a node is, based on the number of links it has to other nodes. Betweenness centrality is a measure of how often a node acts as a bridge between other groups of nodes, creating new paths in the network (Morselli, 2010). Nodes with high degree centrality have been found to be more likely to be arrested than those with high betweenness centrality, as high betweenness centrality allows an individual to remain active in the gang more discretely; consequently, gang leaders will often limit their connections in the network (Calderoni, 2012; Morselli, 2010). Brokers are conferred positional advantage in networks insofar as they bridge structural holes (two unconnected groups of nodes) by virtue of having greater access to information, opportunities, and skills (Burt, 1992, 2005). The positional advantage of brokers and the role they play in coordinating the activities of their networks means that they are key to the flexibility of their network as it adapts to face new challenges (Morselli & Roy, 2008).

The use of brokers as coordinators of network activity may be meant to provide an insulating layer between the supply chain of the network and the network’s leadership, by limiting contact between those two segments of the network to a small group of people (Williams, 1998). Some brokers are referred to as ideal brokers. An ideal broker is one with high betweenness centrality and low degree centrality. It is a node that is connected to many parts of the network beyond his own group but has few connections to other nodes within his group (Morselli, 2010, p. 386). For example, a drug trafficker whose role is to establish new connections with other criminal groups can play the role of ideal broker without necessarily being strongly connected to many members of his own organization. This allows such a broker to manage the flow of information and resources in the network without being widely known, which makes the broker less vulnerable to identification and arrest should the network be targeted by law enforcement (Hofmann & Gallupe, 2015; Morselli, 2010, p. 386). While this configuration is ideal, it is also rare. Most networks (especially smaller ones) feature brokers with both high betweenness and degree centrality (Morselli, 2010).

Method

Data for this article was extracted from public sources, including one US indictment report, two Canadian police reports, two Canadian sentencing reports, and 16 news articles from nine sources in four countries published between 2009 and 2013: the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, the Toronto Star, the National Post, the Toronto Sun, the Jamaica Observer, The New York Times, The
Economist, The Guardian, and the British Broadcasting Corporation. Interactions between actors in the case studies were defined as meetings, personal relationships, or an exchange of goods. When two actors were from the same family, met frequently, or had developed personal relationships, the strength of the tie between them was coded as 'strong'. When two actors were loosely connected – such as between mules transporting illicit commodities and other network members – the ties were coded as 'weak'. Since transnational brokers were of particular interest, we also coded whether the connection between two actors crossed a national border.

Much of the network data comes from evidence presented during court cases that secured a conviction. Having thus withstood judicial scrutiny, although qualitative and limited, they can be considered robust. However, data for some actors is missing or incomplete: while connections between major players – such as Christopher Coke and his associates – are well documented, little is known about the connections within the gangs that used to buy drugs from the Shower Posse network in North America (MNE, 400 crew, Falstaff Crips, Five Points Generalz), and about possible ties between the various mules employed by traffickers to move drugs across borders. Many internal ties within the Jamaican, American, and Canadian branches of the Shower Posse are also unknown. In other words, the relationships observed in this article only provide a partial view of the criminal network in question, that is, of convicted individuals and their close associates. The relatively small number of players involved and the limitations of the available data did not allow us to conduct a detailed social network analysis of the Shower Posse, which would have measured the importance of each actor in terms of degree and betweenness centrality. Nonetheless, by virtue of being able to identify prominent nodes and their characteristics, our analysis provides a qualitative assessment of the overall structure of the network.

**Findings**

**Rise and resilience of the Shower Posse network**

Established in Jamaica, the Shower Posse emerged not long after the Jamaican Labor Party (JLP) came to power in the 1980 elections in a political environment characterized by widespread corruption (Figuero & Sives, 2010). The JLP’s leader, Prime Minister Edward Seaga, supported local strongmen who delivered votes and money to the JLP. Christopher Coke’s father, Lester Lloyd Coke was one of these strongmen, and, in return, was allowed to control the neighborhood of Tivoli Gardens in Kingston (Silverman, 2010). That arrangement afforded Lester Coke the autonomy necessary to establish the Shower Posse in the 1980s.

Diaspora support has been found to be important for providing financial and logistical assistance to illicit groups, and the Shower Posse was no different (Byman, Chalk, Hoffman, Rosenau, & Branna, 2001). Coke and his chief lieutenant, Vivian Blake, used the Jamaican diaspora in the United States and Canada to gain a foothold in North America. Blake set up the American operations of the Shower Posse in New York City, while Lester Coke ran the gang from its Jamaican headquarters (Figure 1).

After avoiding conviction on a number of previous charges, Lester Coke and Vivian Blake were eventually arrested in 1990, with extradition pending to face charges in the United States. In 1992, Lester Coke died in a mysterious fire in the General Penitentiary in Kingston, Jamaica, before he could be extradited to the United States (Jamaica Observer, 2009). His son, Christopher Coke, inherited control of the Shower Posse, subsequently becoming one of the world’s most notorious drug dealers.

The death and imprisonment of key operators, such as Lester Coke and Vivian Blake, notwithstanding, the Shower Posse prevailed until 2010. Attempting to bring down such organizations through the prosecution of low and mid-level dealers proved ineffective, as the network was too complex to be disrupted by the loss of one or two nodes with limited connections. New actors replaced arrested ones, and the gang’s leadership remained largely untouched, protected by a strong network and political links. The sophistication of the Shower Posse’s transnational operations, combined with its political influence in its home country, made it exceedingly difficult for authorities to eradicate. From Jamaica, the Shower Posse spawned a transnational network to traffic drugs. Mules transported narcotics from...
Panama and the Dominican Republic to North America, where they were distributed to street gangs in New York and Toronto (Robbins, 2010).

Political influence was key to the success of the Shower Posse. During Lester Coke’s time, Prime Minister Edward Seaga was the Member of Parliament for West Kingston, the electoral district in which the Shower Posse’s headquarters in Tivoli Gardens was located. Prime Minister Bruce Goldman would later represent the district during the career of Christopher Coke (Jamaica Observer, 2009). Tivoli Gardens was one of Kingston’s ‘garrison communities,’ beyond the control of the city’s law enforcement, and virtually autonomous (Edmonds, 2010). The Shower Posse – a violent non-state actor – became a de facto government and provider of state services. It supplanted the legitimacy of the state by means of a new social order where it provided public goods, such as personal security, dispute resolution, financial opportunity, and employment to a burgeoning youth population.

The governing Jamaican Labor Party, headed first by Seaga and later by Golding, condoned this arrangement in exchange for the electoral and financial backing of the Shower Posse. Residents of Tivoli Gardens overwhelmingly voted for the JLP: In 1993, it won an astounding 99% of the vote (Silverman, 2010). When Prime Minister Seaga attended Lester Coke’s funeral in 1992 he explained that he looked ‘at the man in terms of how the community respects and treats him as a protector from their community’ (Silverman, 2010). When the United States Department of Justice requested Christopher Coke’s extradition in August of 2009, Prime Minister Golding rejected the request, claiming the evidence against Coke had been obtained illegally, and only backed down after months of intense domestic and international pressure. Prior to approving Coke’s extradition, the JLP was still

![Map of the Americas with drug routes](image)
supporting Coke’s construction company, Incomparable Enterprise Ltd., with millions of dollars in government contracts (Edmonds, 2010). These political connections had allowed the Shower Posse to construct a parallel state in Tivoli Gardens, winning the loyalty of the local population by handing out food and cash, and setting up schools and clinics (The Economist, 2010). To residents of West Kingston, Christopher Coke was not a criminal, but a respected community leader, philanthropist, businessman, and powerful political authority (Edmonds, 2010). This long history of political support gave the Shower Posse a powerful base to operate from.

**Project Fusion**

Project Fusion, organized by the Toronto Police Service, and carried out in April of 2009, took down a trafficking operation that kept several Toronto gangs supplied with narcotics and firearms. Courtney Ottey, a Jamaican-born resident of Toronto, imported cocaine from the Shower Posse, and sold it to Hubert Green, who controlled the 400 Crew and MNE gangs in Toronto through his lieutenants, Queen ‘Guggz’ Hibbert, and Floyd ‘Tall Man’ Atkins (Pazzano, 2009). Green also worked with Lisa Parmanand in Toronto, a personal care worker who moonlighted as the trafficker who kept Green’s network supplied with guns (Pazzano, 2012). She ran a network of mules that legally obtained firearms at gun shops in Illinois and Georgia and smuggled them into Canada over the Queenston Bridge at Niagara Falls (CBC, 2012; Poisson & Bruser, 2013). Drugs and guns served different purposes for the MNE and the 400 Crew: Guns were used to keep gang members armed, while drugs were trafficked further and sold by drug dealers employed by MNE and the 400 Crew as a source of revenue (Leuprecht & Aulthouse, 2014, p. 62). The network targeted by Project Fusion is depicted in Figure 2.

![Figure 2](#). The network targeted by Project Fusion. Source: authors. Note: the color of the nodes refers to their location. Strong ties between actors are indicated with thick lines; weak ties are indicated with thin lines.
The figure highlights the main connections between the Jamaica Shower Posse and street gangs in Toronto. ‘Strong’ interpersonal ties are indicated with thick lines while ‘weaker’ ties are indicated with thin lines. The central role of Hubert Green in both the drug and guns trade is particularly evident from the sociogram.

**Project Corral**

Project Corral, organized by the Toronto Police Service, and carried out in the Spring of 2010, resulted in the seizure of 73 kg of cocaine, over 100,000 ecstasy tablets, 19 firearms, and thousands of dollars in cash (Vallis, 2010). Courtney Ottey, out on bail after being arrested the previous year on drug trafficking charges as part of Project Fusion, ran what could be described as a ‘franchise’ of the Shower Posse that kept warring Toronto gangs supplied with firearms and narcotics. Oliver Wills, David Parker, and Mauro Giuseppe, were three Canadian participants in this network who were arrested in the Dominican Republic when 72 kg of cocaine meant for export to Canada were discovered in the bed of their truck (Powell, 2010). Guns were smuggled into Canada from the United States through networks run by Shower Posse operative Derrick Smith (Balkissoon, 2010).

The Toronto chapter of the Shower Posse consisted of around ten members. In typical Shower Posse fashion, none were involved in street level crime (DiManno, 2010). Ottey acted as the guns and drugs wholesaler to the warring Five Point Generalz (which he also controlled) and the Falstaff Crips (Powell, 2010). Neigabe Stewart, his chief lieutenant, aided Ottey. Stewart took over operations of the Five Point Generalz while Ottey was under house arrest for various drug trafficking charges (Powell, 2010). The Toronto chapter of the Shower Posse was supplied with drugs by Shower Posse headquarters in Jamaica. Several key members of the Toronto Shower Posse, such as Ottey and Smith, used the Shower Posse network to remit money to family members in Jamaica; Smith was even building a house there (Powell, 2010). Police wiretaps indicate that key members of the Toronto Shower Posse were in contact with the Jamaican Shower Posse’s leadership, notably Coke. Coke also had a sister living in the Greater Toronto Area, who provided him with a place to stay when he visited Toronto to check on Shower Posse business (Baksh, 2012). Little information is available on Coke’s sister, but her presence in Canada underscores the close ties between Toronto and the Shower Posse. The network targeted by Project Corral is depicted in Figure 3 (see also Leuprecht & Aulthouse, 2014, pp. 62, 65). With no

![Figure 3](https://example.com/figure3.png)

**Figure 3.** The network targeted by Project Corral. Source: authors. Note: the color of the nodes refers to their location. Strong ties between actors are indicated with thick lines; weak ties are indicated with thin lines.
fewer than five countries involved, the figure highlights the importance of cross-border connections among the Dominican Republic, Panama, and Jamaica, and between Jamaica and North America.

**Analysis**

**A network with strong political support**

The different examples indicate an all-channel network structure underpinning the drug trafficking operations. All-channel networks are notable for multiple, well-connected, and influential nodes. The Shower Posse took advantage of the Jamaican diaspora in North America to extend these networks. Shower Posse actors were largely male. Brokers, such as Ottey and Smith, were co-ethnic offenders: born in Jamaica, they maintained close ties to the island, which underscores the importance of gender, ethnic capital, and kin ties to enhance trust in otherwise highly vulnerable networks.

The transnational network employed by the Shower Posse branched out from a central hub in Jamaica that controlled the flow of drugs from Panama and the Dominican Republic to North America, but Shower Posse networks in Toronto and New York City controlled their own networks in their respective countries once the drugs arrived, and distributed them to local street gangs. While the Shower Posse's overall network could be classified as a hub network, given the influence of the Jamaican Shower Posse, it is more aptly classified as a multiplayer network, as the Toronto and New York branches of the Shower Posse brokered their own networks largely independently of the direction of the gang's leadership back in Jamaica. The Toronto and New York branches of the Shower Posse were key brokers in their own right. They connected the Shower Posse's drug trafficking network with the distribution networks of criminal organizations in Canada and the United States. Contraband traced back to the Shower Posse has been found across Ontario and the contiguous United States. The fact that the Shower Posse acted as a wholesaler of drugs and that its members were rarely involved in street level crime made it difficult for law enforcement to target the organization. Dealers who peddled the narcotics distributed by street gangs were easy targets for arrest, but establishing a clear connection with the Shower Posse proved difficult.

What made the Shower Posse really durable, however, was its political support in Jamaica. Indicative of its control over global supply and its connection with the country's ruling Jamaican Labour Party (JLP) was a spike in international drug prices during Jamaican elections (Halfnight, 2010). Extra revenue from the drug trade went toward supporting the JLP. The JLP reciprocated by giving the Shower Posse free reign to operate. Even if authorities abroad targeted the gang's operations, its headquarters would remain intact, allowing it to endure and rebuild networks when they were disrupted by law enforcement. Only when the JLP finally caved to international pressure to extradite Coke was the network damaged irreparably. In its transnational network, the various branches of the Shower Posse connected mules transporting drugs from Latin America and the Caribbean with street gangs in North America. Separating the operations of the organization through the creation of what were essentially Shower Posse franchises in Canada and New York helped to reduce the degree centrality of the Jamaican Shower Posse, thereby reducing the gang's vulnerability to law enforcement.

**Trafficking across borders**

While the limited sample limits the conclusions that can be drawn, it is plausible to hypothesize that the structure of the Shower Posse network was a response to the borders the network spanned. As the coordination required to evade security and law enforcement in multiple countries, one can assume that the network needed a series of influential brokers who could bridge distant sub-parts of the network.

The network targeted by Project Fusion shows how the Shower Posse supplied local gangs with narcotics, but had little connection to street-level crime. The gun trafficking network operated by Green and Parmanand was a hub-and-spoke network, in which most of the actors are connected to one central actor, without being connected to each other. This structure is particularly efficient
when it comes to giving orders or communicating information and resources. It is also a structure particularly vulnerable to disruption if the central actor is targeted. In the network targeted by Project Fusion, Parmanand was the seller, and Green was the buyer. Together they bridged a key structural gap between their respective networks. Green in particular was connected to most of the other nodes and, as a result, his arrest dealt a crippling blow to the trafficking network.

The network targeted by Project Fusion is also noteworthy for the role played by Courtney Ottey, who imported cocaine from the Jamaican Shower Posse and sold it to Green, allowing him to keep street gangs under his control supplied with drugs. Green was Ottey’s only connection to the network targeted by Project Fusion, but he bridged a key structural gap between Green’s network and the Shower Posse’s, making him an ideal broker. This insulated Ottey from the impact of Green’s arrest. Ottey remained a key figure within the Shower Posse’s trafficking operation until his own arrest as part of Project Corral in 2010 (Powell, 2011). In light of Ottey’s role, the network targeted by Project Fusion can be viewed as a multiplayer network. Ottey, Green, and Parmanand all acted as brokers in their own right, and shielded the Shower Posse from direct participation in street level crime.

The network targeted by Project Corral demonstrates the true complexity of the Shower Posse’s operations. The Shower Posse used multiple influential nodes to allow cocaine to be trafficked from the Dominican Republic and Panama to Toronto. Conversely, the network the Shower Posse used to import firearms into Canada appeared to be a relatively simple hub network with Smith as the broker, similar to the network Parmanand used to traffic guns targeted by Project Fusion. Derrick Smith established a bridge between the Canadian and American branches of the Shower Posse, which otherwise communicated mainly through the gang’s headquarters in Jamaica. It is harder to determine Smith’s number of connections as less is known about his network of mules, but given his place within the Toronto and Jamaican branches of the Shower Posse he was hardly an ideal broker. Ottey played a much more central role in this network than he had in the one targeted by Project Fusion, but his role at the center of the network undermined his status as an ideal broker.

Reflecting on the existing literature on criminal networks, several commonalities and differences can be found through the case of the Shower Posse. Similar to the findings of Varese (2013), the Shower Posse network was decentralized, but not without leadership. Just as Calderoni (2012) and Morselli (2010) had found, the Shower Posse’s leadership seems to have reduced their likelihood of arrest by avoiding participation in street-level crime. As previously seen in the work of Bright and Delaney (2013), members of the Shower Posse changed their role over time, as the gang adapted to new circumstances. This flexibility that has been studied in criminal networks in the past helps generate the hypothesis that the Shower Posse had a more complex network in response to the presence of borders. As the Shower Posse expanded from Jamaica, it was no longer possible for Lester Coke to run a simple network based solely out of Tivoli Gardens. Vivian Blake became a broker in his own right who coordinated the New York chapter of the Shower Posse, and this model was repeated in the different countries the gang expanded into. Moving illicit commodities across borders required the Shower Posse to have a presence on both sides. Network complexity was enhanced by the Jamaican diaspora in the United States and Canada, which eased the process of creating local Shower Posse chapters. The Shower Posse also took advantage of political corruption in Jamaica to ensure security for their network, allowing for a greater focus on the coordination necessary to traffic large quantities of illicit commodities across multiple borders.

**Conclusion**

The Shower Posse ran a sophisticated drug trafficking network. It acquired narcotics in Latin America and the Caribbean and trafficked large quantities of these illicit commodities into the United States and Canada. Branches in New York City and Toronto distributed the drugs to local street gangs. This could only be achieved through a network that had sufficient players to procure ingredients, manufacture drugs, traffic them across international jurisdictions, and bring them to market among many small-scale buyers. Drawing on observations from the Shower Posse’s operations, this article hypothesizes
that the role of brokers was crucial in ensuring that illicit commodities could be trafficked successfully over such an extended period of time across multiple jurisdictions. Bridging gaps between countries across their borders resulted in the Shower Posse network featuring a multitude of nodes with many connections beyond their group. This resulted in a network that featured many capable brokers, coordinated centrally from the gang’s headquarters in Jamaica. Ergo, the evidence suggests that there is a border effect on network structure.

The precise nature of this effect is not entirely clear. We might reasonably expect a symmetric structure on either side of the border, since prudence would dictate that keeping the cross-border connections as narrow as possible is the best means of averting detection: a dispatcher on the one side, and a receiver on the other, with mules as the go-betweens. However, that is not what we appear to observe: there appears to be no broker on the outgoing side. That could just be a problem of missing individuals that do not show up in the open source data. But that seems unlikely, both because there is no immediate indication of glaring data gaps in the networks and because Calderoni (2012) and Leuprecht and Aulthouse (2014) have observed the same discrepancy in the context of other illicit cross-border networks: a single individual managing the border. So, it could be that one person handles both sides of the border, possibly by crossing frequently himself. Alternatively, the absence of a dispatcher may indicate that only the receiver on the other side is functionally integral to the network, because he wishes to avoid mules going into business for themselves instead of delivering the goods to him. This is the conclusion at which Leuprecht and Aulthouse’s (2014) study of cross-border gun-running networks arrives. Or perhaps both configurations – a single broker managing the border versus two brokers, each managing one side – can be found, in which case one would want to know the determinants that drive one network structure over another.

The policy implications of this article for law enforcement are twofold. First, the Shower Posse example shows that transnational criminal organizations are durable if they can count on strong political connections. Since clientelism is corrosive to democracy, measures to curb the political corruption that allows such gangs to flourish in the countries in which they are based will pay dividends by making organized crime networks less resilient. Second, the Shower Posse network suggests that the structure of networks matters to deterring, detecting, and disrupting them. Transnational networks already pose a unique challenge because they span multiple jurisdictions. They also adapt network structure by virtue of straddling borders. Networks such as the Shower Posse’s are largely impervious to being targeted through street-level dealers and will continue to operate with little disruption, as those in charge and other dealers, mules, and distributors are still left intact. At a higher level, it also appears that removing one key actor from a complex network will do little to disrupt it and that a highly coordinated effort targeting different structural roles at several levels of the network is usually required to bring it down. The presence of multiple brokers across several borders is an additional challenge for law enforcement agencies and should stimulate further research: While the movement of illicit commodities is reasonably well understood, the structure of the transnational organized crime networks that facilitate the exploitation of a global marketplace is not.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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