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Research to combat cross-border crime

Northumbria University academics are playing a key role in a new project aimed at fighting crime in Europe.

The £1.2 million project, which involves eight European partners including European policing agency Europol, will facilitate the more regular exchange of DNA data between all member states to prevent offenders crossing borders to evade prosecution. The University's participation in this work has been made possible by financial support from the European Commission's Prevention of and Fight Against Crime programme and the Belgian government.

Some countries within the EU already share DNA data obtained from known individuals to match with anonymous DNA recovered from crime scenes and all member states are in the process of doing so.

Northumbria's School of Law is considering the legal, political and economic questions posed by these arrangements while senior lecturer in crime science and principal investigator in the project at Northumbria, Derek Johnson, supported by research assistant Mary McCloskey, will plot the movement of offenders across the UK and the EU to assess any patterns of behaviour.

Mr Johnson said: "We are looking at all crimes where the offender leaves a trace – anything from crime to murder but also organised crime such as drug dealing and human trafficking.

"By looking at offences and tracking where offenders are from we will be able to build up a pattern of cross-border crime. We already know, for example, that some organised gangs move to countries where there are fewer controls."

He added: "We know offenders move around the EU to carry out crimes where legislation or cultural factors make it easier for them. For example, jewellery shops in Vienna were targeted by East European ram-raiders a few years ago because Austria had little experience of the crime and were considered "soft" targets.

"Our role will be to look at patterns of offending and then propose recommendations on crime prevention policy at state level and see how biometric information can be best used for maximum impact, both for detecting specific crime through the existing data-sharing arrangements and seeing how lessons drawn from successes as result of these measures might shape future EU policies for preventing crimes.

"There's a huge knowledge gap on cross-border offenders so this work has the potential to have great impact."

The legal and public policy aspects of the initiative are being considered by Prof Tim Wilson and colleagues from Northumbria's Centre for Evidence and Criminal Justice Studies.

Prof Wilson said: “Our work will focus on issues such as the validity of match reports and the inferences that can be safely drawn from such information for prosecution purposes. There is also the need to maintain a balance between the exchange of genetic data to detect criminals and the protection of individual or family privacy under human rights and data protection laws.”

The research will also consider ways to optimise criminal justice resources to enable better co-operation.

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