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Characteristic features of robberies against residential property committed by organised groups in rural areas

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Abstract

The relevance of the subject under study lies in the fact that under martial law, the problem of robberies against citizens' homes is exacerbated, specifically, their danger increases due to the greater probability of members of an organised criminal group having firearms than in peacetime. The purpose of this study was to identify the characteristics of robberies against residential premises in rural areas committed by organised groups, to establish the factors which influence the choice of the victim of a future attack by the perpetrators, and to identify preventive measures to reduce the commission of such crimes. To address these issues, the study employed a set of methods of scientific cognition: systemic-structural, comparative, statistical, and systemic. The study found that a characteristic feature of such attacks is that they are committed by a group consisting mainly of fellow villagers with internally stable, long-term, trusting relationships, with a willingness to systematically commit violent crimes against individuals. They are characterised by a hierarchy and preparation for robberies in rural areas. It was established that during preparation for a robbery, to obtain the necessary information, offenders often study the routes of the village, find out information about its inhabitants, and select a victim. They can even speak directly to the potential victim and/or their neighbours. Therefore, interviewing villagers during the investigation of such a criminal offence is a significant step in identifying the perpetrators. The study identified factors that influence the commission of robberies in rural areas (presence of valuable property of the victim; remoteness of their residence, absence of neighbours;

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planned power outages, physically vulnerable person, etc.). To commit attacks on people's homes in rural areas, attackers choose several villages in relatively familiar areas, which may be located in one region or in another region with which they border. It was noted that this complicates the work of law enforcement agencies in investigating this type of crime. The practical value of this study lies in the consideration by law enforcement officers of the theoretical results of this study regarding the impact on the choice of victims by criminals and the established characteristics inherent in such robberies

Keywords:

crimes against property; organised criminal group; planning of a crime; potential victim; factors of committing a criminal offence

Introduction

In 2024, robberies against people's homes in rural areas by an organised group are becoming an increasingly pressing issue for both citizens and law enforcement agencies, as the war has made weapons more easily accessible through illegal means. With police overwhelmed by investigating war-related crimes and criminals continuing to develop their illegal activities using the latest technological advances, the vulnerable population is at greater risk than before 2024. During power outages caused by Russian missile attacks (Abramova, 2024), it is particularly difficult for rural residents to call law enforcement if members of an organised criminal group invade their home. Therefore, it is crucial to investigate the characteristics of residential robberies committed by organised groups in rural areas, as this will help law enforcement agencies to investigate such crimes more effectively and take preventive measures to avert them.

In 2019-2024, scientists performed a considerable number of studies on combating robberies, but the issue of the characteristics of robberies against the homes of persons committed in rural areas was not given sufficient attention, and this issue was not considered as a separate research topic. Thus, V. Teliichuk & D. Pristupa (2019) considered both robberies and their characteristic features. A special place in this study was given to the analysis of the counteraction to such crimes organised by law enforcement agencies. The researchers emphasised that the commission of such criminal offences always attracts increased attention in the country, because it is by the prevalence of these socially dangerous acts that citizens mostly assess the state of law and order and the level of personal security, both in the village and in the district, region, and state as a whole.

M. Semenishin (2020) examined the liability for robbery in the criminal law of Ukraine, specifically from the European perspective. In his study, M. Semenishin (2020) emphasised that robbery is the most dangerous crime among property offences, as robbery is characterised by an attack on the person. The researcher noted that improvement of law enforcement activities also involves a comprehensive investigation and research of robberies to improve criminal law protection of a person from such criminal attacks which are dangerous to life, health, and property rights. The researcher covered the reasons for the development of the rules

on liability for crimes against property and, specifically, for robbery and the characteristics of property crimes, revealing their differences.

N. Basarab (2021) considered measures to prevent robberies in Ukraine. The researcher noted that the study of robberies in Ukraine involves consideration of comprehensive information on the dynamics, levels, and structure of such crimes. Basarab emphasised that knowledge of the real picture of the state of robberies is necessary to develop measures to prevent such types of crimes by the units of the National Police of Ukraine. L. Lisnychenko (2019) provided a criminological description of both assaults with intent to rob and aggravated robberies, covered their common and distinctive features, and provided a comprehensive description of each of the above-mentioned criminal offences against property.

P. Svir (2020) investigated robberies against people's homes but did not separately highlight the specific features of such crimes committed in rural areas. The researcher noted that in the context of rising unemployment and declining material living standards of citizens, which is manifested in the lack of opportunities for many individuals to satisfy a considerable part of their basic needs in a legal manner, the development of measures to counteract robberies against housing requires special attention, and it is necessary to establish the specifics of external manifestations of certain property crimes.

J. Diaz & B. Poblete (2019) considered a separate type of property crime committed by an organised group. The researchers pointed out that, considering the increasing openness and aggressiveness of criminal attacks, criminals have begun to commit increasingly elaborate, more prepared property crimes: on the one hand, those that provide quick and significant profits, and on the other hand, those that make it difficult to establish the circumstances of the crime and bring the perpetrators to justice.

In their study, B. Aqifi *et al.* (2023) highlighted a range of problems related to the regulation and protection of property rights in the Republic of Kosovo. One of the principal tasks of the Kosovo Police is to protect the lives and property of the population. Apart from general tasks related to the protection of society, the Kosovo Police is responsible for preventing the detection of criminal offences against property. This area covers the

process of identifying criminals, investigating evidence, motives, etc. Considering the significance of the property institution, Kosovo has adopted laws that protect property rights, which enjoy civil protection, criminal protection, and international protection. The researchers emphasised that without sufficient scientific research of the problems related to property rights, there can be no comprehensive practical solution.

G. Alguera & R. Meave (2021) examined the impact of the location where a robbery or assault was committed on the number of robberies in Mexico City. They analysed the difference between robberies committed in the city and its surroundings, and considered other factors that may affect the number of such crimes (availability of shops, bus stops, etc.). The researchers emphasised that all these features have a direct impact on the mechanism and frequency of robberies and assaults. S. de Oliveira (2018) also investigated preventive measures against robberies and assaults, but specifically private ones, i.e., those that a potential victim can take. The researcher emphasised that although such a person can reduce the possibility of a robbery against their home, it is impossible to eliminate such a possibility completely while unassisted.

O. Mirkovets (2021) considered the investigation of robberies committed by an organised group. The researcher identified the following elements of the methodology for investigating robberies committed by an organised group: forensic characteristics; investigative versions; typical investigative situations both at the stage of detection of a robbery and at the stages of its investigation; circumstances to be established.

The purpose of this study was to investigate and describe the specific features of robberies against the homes of persons in rural areas committed by organised groups, to identify the characteristics of persons whom the perpetrators choose as victims of future attacks, the reasons why such persons may become victims of robbery against their homes, and to outline preventive measures aimed at preventing robberies against the homes of persons in rural areas.

Materials and Methods

Both general scientific and special research methods were employed to conduct the study. Among the general scientific methods of scientific cognition, the following were used: the method of induction, deduction, analysis, classification, and systematisation methods. The study also employed such special methods of scientific research as the method of comparison, statistical method, method of extrapolation, method of system

analysis, M. Weber's method of ideal types, and the system-structural method, which helped to establish the structure of organised criminal groups committing robberies against homes in rural areas.

The statistical method was employed to collect information on this research object from the Unified State Register of Court Decisions (n.d.) and criminal proceedings on robberies against homes in rural areas by organised groups to identify the serial nature of their crimes and to record such crimes. Next, the use of system analysis methods helped to build a generalised model of the characteristics of robberies against the homes of individuals committed by organised groups in rural areas, to reflect all the elements, as well as the factors and interrelationships manifested in relation to this object of study. This method helped to consider such robberies as a system with a set of constituent elements, connections, and relations between the constituent parts of its elements, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, as a unity in an unbreakable connection with social phenomena and processes that affect it. Then, using the comparative method, the study compared robberies against citizens' homes in rural areas in different settlements, both between villages and between cities and villages. Using M. Weber's method of ideal types, the study reduced casual, isolated cases of robberies committed by an organised group in rural areas into typical characteristics of this type of crime, which simplified their study. Using the methods of systematic analysis and interpretation, the study investigated the subjective perception of individual members of their place in a criminal group.

Therefore, the Unified state register of court decisions (n.d.), which is characterised by the availability of relevant court decisions and verdicts on various types of criminal offences, including those related to the topic under study, became a prominent source for the study. For the purposes of the present study, 100 decisions of national courts from the above register for 2019-2024 were analysed – this number of cases analysed testifies to the representativeness of the sample. The criteria for selecting cases were the location and classification of the crimes committed. The sample included both cases involving a single robbery and cases involving several robberies. The regulatory framework for the study included the Constitution of Ukraine¹, the Law of Ukraine "On the National Police" No. 580-VIII²; the Resolution of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine No. 877 on the National Police dated 28 October 2015³, Strategy for Combating Organised Crime in Ukraine (Order of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine No. 850-p/2022)⁴, and the

¹ Constitution of Ukraine. (1996, June). Retrieved from <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/254к/96-вп#Text>.

² Law of Ukraine No. 580-VIII "On the National Police". (2015, July). Retrieved from <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/580-19#Text>.

³ Resolution of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine No. 877 "Regulations on the National Police". (2015, October). Retrieved from <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/877-2015-%D0%BF#Text>.

⁴ Order of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine No. 850-p "On the Approval of the Plan of Measures for Implementation of the Strategy on Fighting Organized Crime". (2022, September). Retrieved from <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/850-2022-%D1%80#Text>.

Criminal Code of Ukraine¹. This study used the aforementioned sources because they regulate the social relations related to the commission and investigation of robberies against the homes of individuals in rural areas by an organised group. They form the basis from which certain types of crimes, including certain types of robbery, are studied.

Results

The study of cases from the Unified state register of court decisions (n.d.) and criminal proceedings found that robberies against homes committed by an organised group in rural areas in 2019 and 2024 were characterised by a criminal group formed, in the vast majority of cases studied (81%), by fellow villagers. The leader in such a group has a prominent level of trust and long-term relationships with their associates, which ensures unconditional compliance with their organisational instructions². This leads to the creation of a highly organised and closed group of people with internally stable relationships based on the recognition of leadership and authority.

For instance, a resident of Konotopskyi district, Sumy Oblast, decided to involve three persons he had checked, who were his fellow villagers and in relation to whom the latter had a prominent level of trust, being an older person, having leadership qualities and authority in relation to these persons. This influenced the unconditional implementation of his organisational guidelines. The group was dominated by the understanding and execution of each person's role in a single criminal plan to seize the property of citizens. The purpose was to make illegal profits. The persons involved in the organised criminal group were characterised by poor financial situation, lack of official employment, other sources of legal income, desire for quick systematic enrichment, a tendency to commit intentional acquisitive crimes, and the ability to systematically commit the same type of grave and especially grave crimes by their moral, volitional, and practical qualities. For quick and safe arrival at crime scenes, quick departure from them after robberies, transportation of tools for breaking into private homes and stolen property, the group used a VAZ-2103 car belonging to one of the participants, as well as to store the tools of criminal offences³.

The analysed robberies against residential property committed by organised groups in rural areas are characterised by the following specific features. The group members understand and perform certain roles in a single criminal plan during the seizure of citizens' property to achieve the ultimate criminal result in the form of obtaining illegal profits from this activity. All members of the group share a common purpose, and therefore are interested in reaching a common result. The combination of actions of several actors together, united by a common purpose, causes the interconnectedness of the actions of accomplices, which determines the causal link between the actions of each of the accomplices and the achievement of a single criminal result. In 94 investigated cases of robberies in rural areas, the perpetrators targeted persons belonging to particularly vulnerable groups, specifically, elderly citizens (pensioners), with the purpose of illegally seizing property, relying on their cash savings in the form of pensions or payments for the use of land shares, as well as other outsize liquid property⁴. For instance, a resident of the village of Popivka, Konotopskyi district, developed a plan of criminal activity, according to which he decided to organise the systematic illegal seizure of property of pensioners, relying on their cash savings in the form of pensions or payments for the use of land shares, as well as other outsize liquid property. When planning the commission of criminal acts, the leader of the criminal group determined that the robberies should take place outside the place of residence of the group members and in remote settlements⁵. Therewith, when selecting targets, such criminals consider the inability of older people to resist sufficiently during an unlawful attack⁶. Thus, in Donetsk Oblast in 2021, a group of people, according to the distributed roles, committed a robbery of a single pensioner, on the preliminary conspiracy to openly rob someone else's property by breaking into a home. The victim fell to her knees inside the house, while the attackers physically assaulted her, holding the victim's neck and demanding that she hand over all her money and jewellery. Fearing for her life, the pensioner was forced to comply with the offender's demands and handed over her mobile phone, gold ring, bank card, providing the pin code and explaining that the card contained funds in the amount of USD 2,000⁷.

¹ Criminal Code of Ukraine. (2001, April). Retrieved from <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/2341-14#Text>.

² Judgement of the Leninskyi District Court of Poltava in Case No. 553/1632/24. (2024, June). Retrieved from <https://reyestr.court.gov.ua/Review/119725893>.

³ Judgement of Kovpakivskyi District Court of Sumy in Case No. 592/6091/24. (2024, April). Retrieved from <https://reyestr.court.gov.ua/Review/118550930>.

⁴ Judgement of the Druzhkivka City Court of Donetsk Oblast in Case No. 219/10584/21. (2024, May). Retrieved from <https://reyestr.court.gov.ua/Review/119379759>.

⁵ Judgement of the City of Sumy in Case No. 574/583/20. (2024, May). Retrieved from <https://reyestr.court.gov.ua/Review/119150324>.

⁶ The verdict of the Kovpakivskyi District Court of Sumy in Case No. 592/6091/24. (2024, April). Retrieved from <https://reyestr.court.gov.ua/Review/118550930>.

⁷ Judgement of the Druzhkivka City Court of Donetsk Oblast in Case No. 219/10584/21. (2024, May). Retrieved from <https://reyestr.court.gov.ua/Review/119379759>.

Another characteristic of the crimes studied is the victims' residence in remote settlements (in 68% of the analysed cases of robberies in rural areas, the persons whose homes were attacked lived in remote settlements). For instance, in November 2020, a resident of Karlivka, Poltava Oblast, pursuing motives of illicit enrichment, created an organised group of people to engage in criminal activity for a long period of time, namely, committing grave and especially grave criminal offences for profit in remote villages of Poltava Oblast, including robberies of the homes of elderly or solitary persons¹.

Commission of criminal offences in a location other than where they live (other settlements/districts/neighbouring oblasts) to complicate detection (in 59% of the studied cases of robberies in rural areas). For instance, in June 2020, a criminal group of three people, one of whom was a driver of a vehicle from Kyiv, arrived in the village of Nova Basan, Bobrovytskyi district, Chernihiv Oblast, with a prior conspiracy to commit an attack with the purpose of seizing another's property, attacked a woman of 74 years old, knocking out the front door of her house, inflicting serious bodily injuries, after which the woman died in hospital. They took possession of UAH 10,000 and a mobile phone².

If necessary, the use of physical or psychological violence of varying degrees of intensity against victims to achieve the desired result of seizing someone else's property (in 100% of the investigated cases of robberies in rural areas). For example, in January 2023, in the Radekhivskyi district of Lviv Oblast, a group of people committed a robbery combined with breaking and entering to seize the victim's property and money by prior conspiracy. The perpetrators illegally entered the territory of a household whose front door was opened by the victim himself, attacked him, and tied the victim's hands with a cloth. Using their physical and psychological superiority over the victim and his helpless state, the perpetrators threatened him with murder and physical violence, demanded that he hand over money, and used violence against him that was dangerous to his life and health. By inflicting numerous blows to the victim's head and torso, the victim suffered severe physical injuries in the form of closed blunt trauma to the chest, the lateral surface of the abdomen on the left and the back; in addition to this, the

victim suffered physical injuries in the form of multiple bruises on the face and head^{3,4,5}.

Members of criminal groups committing robberies against citizens' homes in rural areas, in most cases (in 79 analysed cases of robberies in rural areas), are characterised by poor financial situation, lack of official employment, other sources of legal income; desire for quick, systematic enrichment, which was confirmed by the court; skills in navigating the terrain, ability to drive vehicles, compliance with internal discipline and subordination, long-term trusting relationships with each other, as indicated in court decisions. O. Matvienko (2023) noted in his study that "in the overall structure of committed crimes, almost 70% are criminal offences of acquisitive nature". The mercenary motives of such crimes can be interpreted as the desire of the offender to achieve the desired material benefit for themselves and/or for third parties by committing a criminal offence. It is worth emphasising that, according to A.L. Melnychuk (2021), the standard of living of the rural population has changed as a result of the large-scale negative impact of the COVID-2019 pandemic and the Administrative Territorial Reform in Ukraine, which is manifested in the deterioration of the socio-economic situation of territorial communities, increased unemployment, and risks to employment in rural areas. As a result, crime is on the rise.

For instance, Person 1, being near the Talant shop on Konotopska Street in the village of N., Sumy Oblast, met with his previously made acquaintances Person 2 and Person 3, who were in a poor financial situation and were consuming alcohol beverages. Person 1 also suffered from a difficult financial situation and knew a family of elderly pensioners who had cash and valuable property. Potential victims were incapable of resisting properly, had places of permanent employment and pensions, i.e., systematic income, and therefore could save significant amounts of money. In the household at the place of residence of the above-mentioned persons, the intention to enrich themselves by committing a robbery arose⁶.

Another example of a criminal group consisting of seven people who had no official sources of income and were in a poor financial situation. In November 2020, a resident of Karlivka, Poltava Oblast, who was not officially employed, created an organised group of

¹ Judgement of the Leninskyi District Court of Poltava in Case No. 553/1632/24. (2024, June). Retrieved from <https://reyestr.court.gov.ua/Review/119725893>.

² Judgement of the Kozeletskyi District Court of Chernihiv Oblast in Case No. 729/146/21. (2023, August). Retrieved from <https://reyestr.court.gov.ua/Review/112604246>.

³ Judgement of Mykolaivka Village of Mykolaivskyi District Court of Odesa Oblast in Case No. 494/1362/23. (2024, June). Retrieved from <https://reyestr.court.gov.ua/Review/119855336>.

⁴ Judgement of the Tyachivskyi District Court of Zakarpattia Oblast in Case No. 301/48/22. (2024, June). Retrieved from <https://reyestr.court.gov.ua/Review/119577485>.

⁵ Judgement of the Leninskyi District Court of Poltava in Case No. 553/1632/24. (2024, June). Retrieved from <https://reyestr.court.gov.ua/Review/119725893>.

⁶ The verdict of the Konotop City District Court of Sumy Oblast in Case No. 582/262/22. (2024, June). Retrieved from <https://reyestr.court.gov.ua/Review/119886006>.

seven people, previously known to him, who were not working and had no legal sources of income. There was a persistent association of a group of people to engage in criminal activity for a long period of time, namely to commit grave and especially grave criminal offences of an acquisitive nature in the territory of Poltava Oblast: theft and robbery with the purpose of seizing another's property, combined with violence dangerous to the life or health of the person who was attacked, or with the threat of such violence, in large or especially large amounts, with breaking and entering into a dwelling or storage facility. Furthermore, the leader of this group organised and independently carried out thorough preparation for the commission of criminal offences, communicating with the victims for a long time. He selected the targets of attack, examined the routes of access and escape, determined the arrangement and sequence of actions of accomplices, as well as the cover-up of criminal activity, constantly analysing the surrounding situation at the crime scene, including, based on signals from other group members, establishing and analysing the presence of obstacles and conditions conducive to the commission of thefts and robberies. The leader also organised the immediate concealment and sale of the stolen property and gave relevant instructions to his accomplices. To conceal his criminal activities, he decided to use homemade masks to cover the face, flashlights, gloves, and tools to open windows and doors. The leader of the group was directly involved in committing thefts and robberies and directed the actions of other accomplices. He ordered other members of the organised group not to use mobile phones during the attacks. He also made decisions about tying up the victims. He distributed the proceeds of crime among his accomplices¹. Thus, the leader of an organised group selects participants, considering their personal qualities – a tendency to commit intentional acquisitive crimes, the ability to unconditionally obey instructions, the state of their social and domestic life, the desire for quick enrichment, the ability to systematically commit the same type of grave and especially grave crimes by their moral, volitional, and practical qualities (in 88 cases of robberies in rural areas studied).

The leader of such a criminal group, considering the analysed cases of robberies in rural areas, creates a hierarchy of relationships between group members, which is usually a continuation of their social hierarchy that existed before, but has become much more pronounced, ensuring stability, which is the ability of the group to perform its functions for which it was created stably and for a long time, and the professionalism of the group. For example, in November 2020, a resident of Poltava Oblast created a stable association of a group

of people to engage in criminal activity for a long period of time, namely, committing thefts and robberies in the villages of Poltava Oblast with the purpose of seizing other people's property, combined with violence dangerous to the life or health of the person who was attacked, or with the threat of such violence, on a large or especially large scale, with breaking and entering into a dwelling or storage facility. He recruited unemployed residents and those without legal sources of income, previously known to him, and established close, trusting psychological relationships that transformed into special general rules of conduct and sustained criminal activity of the organised group members. The hierarchically structured organised group was based on the authority of the organiser. The organiser of this group distributed roles among its members (one of the members drove the vehicle that delivered the victims to the object of the robbery, while another member exerted moral and physical pressure, inflicting bodily harm and ordering other members of the criminal group to search the victims' households for money and valuables). The leader of the organised group searched for targets of illegal encroachment, developed plans to commit attacks on households, while clarifying the conditions and circumstances under which they should be committed². The leader manages the group, determines the timing of the criminal actions planned by him. Therewith, some aspects of the crimes are agreed upon with the group members, including the targets, the use of weapons, the method of commission, and the roles of each participant. The leader of the criminal group maintains his unquestioned authority. After receiving money during robberies, the leader distributes it among all members of the organised group (in 98 cases of robberies in rural areas that were committed by an organised group with a leader).

The leader develops and communicates to all participants a unified plan for the attack on the property of selected victims (in 83 cases of robberies in rural areas that were committed by an organised group with a leader). It states that in case of any resistance by the owners in the apartment, a certain level of physical and/or psychological violence (threats or bringing dangerous objects to the victims' body parts to demonstrate the reality of their threats, hitting, inflicting thermal burns, cuts to body parts) should be used to overcome their resistance, find out where their savings or valuable property are stored, and tie the victims up.

For example, pursuing a mercenary motive, the organiser of a criminal group with two other persons intentionally, jointly decided to commit a robbery against a family of villagers living in the village of Braha, Kamianets-Podilskyi district, Khmelnytskyi Oblast,

¹ Judgement of the Leninskyi District Court of Poltava in Case No. 553/1632/24. (2024, June). Retrieved from <https://reyestr.court.gov.ua/Review/119725893>.

² Ibidem, 2024.

and to implement their criminal intent, realising that they could not carry out the plan alone, decided to involve other persons in the commission of the crime. On 26 December 2019, at about 02:30, they headed out to the area where the crime was committed, taking with them items prepared in advance, including a rope for binding, balaclava masks, cloth gloves, police uniforms, a rubber baton, and a gun. While travelling in the specified direction, on the Kyiv-Zhytomyr motorway towards Zhytomyr near Kyiv, according to a preliminary agreement, they were joined by two other persons unidentified by the pre-trial investigation and agreed on the method of committing the robbery and the role of each of them. According to the final criminal plan, it was planned that one person, unidentified by the pre-trial investigation, would stay behind the wheel of the vehicle near the crime scene to ensure a quick escape after the robbery of the other participants in the crime, one of the members of the criminal group would stay on the adjacent territory of the farm to observe the surrounding situation so that their illegal actions would not be noticed by anyone, and the leader and two other unidentified persons would enter the house of the villagers and commit the robbery. They opened a metal gate, which was locked from the inside, and entered the yard. They entered the house through the unlocked door, where a resident of the house was standing at the front door of the room, one of the unidentified persons struck the victim once with the palm of his hand in the nose, and she lost consciousness, two unidentified persons tied her to the sofa with a rope. A person who was on the bed in the room struck the victim once in the chest with a baton, causing a fracture of the 6th rib. Subsequently, the victim was punched ten times. After being beaten, he was dragged to the floor and tied to the bed with a rope. While inside the house and entering each of the rooms, they found another victim on the bed, struck him four times with their fists, namely one blow to the left parietal area of the head, two blows to the left shoulder, and one blow to the chest, dragging him to the floor and tying his hands and feet with a rope. In the room where the victims were, the offender, showing a gun in his hands, asked where the money and other valuable property were kept, threatening to use the weapon if they did not provide the valuables. Another attacker grabbed an elderly woman by the hair and asked her where the money and valuables were. The daughter, worried about her mother's health, pointed out the location of the money¹.

The organisational and preparatory actions of the leader of a criminal group that commits robberies against citizens' homes in rural areas include: choosing the date and time of the criminal offence; agreeing on the chosen object of the attack; choosing, discussing,

and agreeing on the method of committing the criminal intent; thinking through and discussing the route of arrival and prompt escape from the place of the planned criminal offence by the group members; the obligation of all group members to wear gloves and disguise their appearance (collar, scarf, stockings, glasses, etc.); distribution of roles between the participants in the robbery (breaking into the house and finding other people's property in the victims' homes, if necessary, neutralising the active actions and tying up the victims during the commission of crimes); instructing the perpetrators on how to seize money, precious metal jewellery and other outsize valuable property from homes, and on the immediate seizure and smashing of victims' mobile phones at the crime scene to prevent them from calling the police; instructions to unscrew or switch off the fuses on the electric meters in the victims' homes and use only hand-held lights; commands to leave the scene; determination and distribution of the criminally obtained reward to each of the perpetrators.

For example, in early January 2020, a criminal group in Sumy Oblast committed six especially grave robberies of citizens' homes in Krolevetskyi and Burynskyi districts using weapons. In one of them, members of an organised group, disguising their appearance and wearing gloves prepared in advance, entered the household of an elderly couple at night. To prevent the victims from switching on the light and expose the offenders, the members of the criminal group, according to a previously developed plan and distribution of roles, unscrewed the "plugs" – electrical fuses and attacked the owners of the house. To overcome possible resistance, the victims were tied up using improvised means, namely a rag and a handkerchief. Subsequently, they covered the victims' faces with a sheet and held a knife to their necks, threatening to use violence, and demanded to know the location of their money and valuables. After causing the victims property damage totalling UAH 9,000 and failing to find any other valuables, the members of the organised group left the house at the command of the leader and disposed of the stolen property.

The organiser and leader of the criminal group, a resident of Konotopskyi district, Sumy Oblast, who had previously been engaged in unofficial income – buying feathers, nuts, scrap metal, etc., from the population, knowing the area of neighbouring villages, developed a plan of criminal activity, according to which he decided to organise a systematic armed illegal seizure of property of elderly citizens (pensioners) by breaking into their homes. He involved persons with whom he had long-standing relationships through the above-mentioned unofficial activities and spent his free time together on a trusting basis, which was manifested by

¹ Judgement of the Kamianets-Podilskyi City District Court of Khmelnytskyi Oblast in Case No. 676/2548/20. (2023, October). Retrieved from <https://reyestr.court.gov.ua/Review/114051539>.

the fact that all members of the group belonged to the Roma group of peoples. The organiser planned to use a car to quickly deliver the participants and the tools of the crime (forks, crowbars, screwdrivers, hand lamps, etc.) to the scene, as well as to transport the stolen property. The organiser also obliged all members of the criminal group to wear dark-coloured clothes and economic gloves, to mask their faces, not to take electronic devices from their homes, which can then be tracked by law enforcement agencies, not to say anything to each other about complicity, in case of their detention by law enforcement officers^{1,2,3}.

If an organised group is preparing to commit a robbery in a place where they do not live (i.e., they are not sufficiently familiar with the place: its geography, routes, people living there), then in 62% of the court decisions examined on the commission of a robbery in rural areas by an organised group in a place where they do not live, they carry out an additional preparatory stage of the robbery. The members of the organised group study the routes of such a village, find out information about its inhabitants, and select a victim. They try to find the most vulnerable people. For example, pensioners or people who live alone^{4,5,6}. As for the attack on a person living alone, in Radekhivskiy district of Lviv Oblast in 2023, a group of people committed a robbery with breaking and entering against a solitary citizen. Using the factor of surprise, physical and psychological superiority over the victim and his helpless state, threatening him with murder and physical violence, using violence dangerous to life and health, inflicting numerous blows to the torso and head, demanding that he hand over money and asking him where it was kept. Furthermore, against the victim's will, under psychological and physical duress, they forced the victim to go down to the basement located under the summer house of the same household and blocked the exit from the basement by placing a wooden chair on the exit lid, and locked the door to the summer house with a metal block, thus illegally depriving the resident of his liberty, restricting his freedom of movement⁷. Another noteworthy example of an attack on elderly people in Poltava Oblast in 2018, by prior conspiracy, a group of people using a vehicle arrived on the outskirts of the village of

Kybyntsi village, Myrhorodskiy district, to the pre-determined place of the criminal offence, armed with a nail drawer, to break down the door and illegally enter the home, covering their faces with masks and wearing household gloves, which they had prepared in advance, to commit the crime without a trace. The perpetrators forcibly entered the house by breaking the hinged bracket from the front door with a nail drawer, and committed sudden, unexpected for the victims aggressive acts of violence aimed at unlawful appropriation of another's property, namely, inflicted blows to the victim's body, who was born in 1945, with their fists. This criminal group has committed three other established robberies against the homes of elderly and single people in rural areas⁸.

In 76% of the judgments studied, the criminal group was very meticulous in the preparatory phase. They find out the potential victims' schedules, information about their neighbours, whether they have guests, and what savings, jewellery, or other valuable property they have. For this, they regularly drive around villages in their vehicles, and therefore it is important for law enforcement officers in rural areas to pay attention to unfamiliar vehicles that drive around without a clear purpose, but systematically. Notably, as a rule, members of criminal organisations drive rather slowly to have time to obtain all the information they need. Sometimes, they even talk to villagers to find out as many details as possible about their potential victim(s) or their neighbours.

Before a crime, criminals can even communicate with the future victim of an attack. Criminals did this in 39% of the court decisions studied. This way, they can observe at least the person's yard, and at most the house itself. They start the conversation with seemingly innocent questions: "How do I get to the next village?", "Who sells houses in the village?", "Where can I buy homemade milk?", etc. Criminals may even simply ask for water or certain tools to quickly fix the car. In this way, they try to start a casual conversation, in which they learn everything they need to know little by little. These methods, which were recorded in the court's verdict, were used by the perpetrators in 16 of the court decisions studied. For instance, in Poltava Oblast in 2020, the leader of an organised criminal group,

¹ Judgement of the City of Sumy in Case No. 574/583/20. (2024, May). Retrieved from <https://reyestr.court.gov.ua/Review/119150324>.

² Judgement of the Burynskyi District Court of Sumy Oblast in Case No. 574/218/21. (2021, October). Retrieved from <https://reyestr.court.gov.ua/Review/100530790>.

³ Judgement of Kovpakivskiy District Court of Sumy in Case No. 592/6091/24. (2024, April). Retrieved from <https://reyestr.court.gov.ua/Review/118550930>.

⁴ Judgement of the Kozeletskiy District Court of Chernihiv Oblast in Case No. 729/146/21. (2023, August). Retrieved from <https://reyestr.court.gov.ua/Review/112604246>.

⁵ Judgement of the Leninskyi District Court of Poltava in Case No. 553/1632/24. (2024, June). Retrieved from <https://reyestr.court.gov.ua/Review/119725893>.

⁶ Judgement of the City of Sumy in Case No. 574/583/20. (2024, May). Retrieved from <https://reyestr.court.gov.ua/Review/119150324>.

⁷ Judgement of the Radekhivskiy District Court of Lviv Oblast in Case No. 451/466/23. (2024, May). Retrieved from <https://reyestr.court.gov.ua/Review/119237458>.

⁸ Judgement of the Velykobahachanskyi District Court of Poltava Oblast in Case No. 541/531/21. (2022, December). Retrieved from <https://reyestr.court.gov.ua/Review/108089218>.

organised thorough preparation for the commission of criminal offences, and independently communicated for a long time with the victims, selected the objects of attack, examined the ways of access and escape, determined the arrangement and sequence of actions of accomplices and the cover-up of criminal activity, constantly analysing the surrounding situation at the crime scene, including signals from other group members, established and analysed the presence of obstacles and conditions that facilitated the commission

of thefts and robberies¹. The perpetrators may even pose as volunteers to get into the home of a potential victim or to ask neighbours about them. In this way, they can find out where the most physically vulnerable people live without being suspicious, because volunteers are called upon to help just such people: pensioners, people with disabilities, etc. However, no such cases were recorded during the study. The classification of factors that influence the choice of a target for a robbery in rural areas is presented in Figure 1.

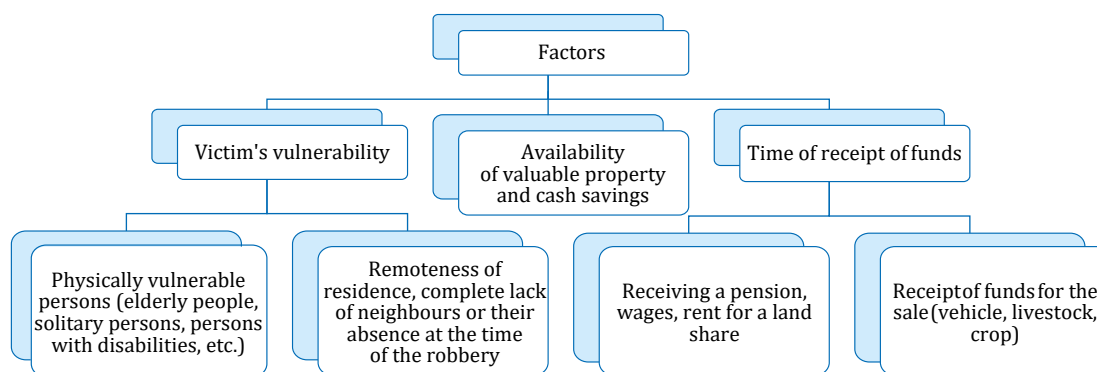


Figure 1. Factors that influence the choice of a target for a robbery in rural areas

Source: developed by the authors of this study

When investigating such a criminal offence, it should be remembered that in 57% of the cases examined in this study, the fellow villagers of the robbed persons had seen the perpetrators on several occasions. Therefore, even if the victim(s) died in the aftermath of such an attack, it does not mean that no one else in the village has ever met the perpetrators. It is also important to note that an organised group may not repeat the same crime in the same village². They may even move to another region to reduce the probability of exposure. However, such criminals usually do not travel too far. In other words, they generally choose several neighbouring districts that are relatively familiar to them, which may be located in the same region or in several regions if they border each other. This complicates the work of law enforcement agencies in investigating this type of crime. But this does not mean that the criminal group will not return to the village where they have already committed a robbery, especially if the village is relatively large.

In 76% of the cases studied, such crimes are serial, and therefore despite the possible material costs of such robberies, if they have started, law enforcement officers should regularly patrol the settlements under threat from such a criminal group, considering the geographical factor described above. That is, it is necessary to patrol both the village where the robbery took place and the neighbouring settlements.

Furthermore, law enforcement officers need to bear in mind that organised criminal groups specialising in robberies of rural dwellings know when rural residents receive rent for their land shares and pensioners receive their pensions in 64% of the cases studied. Often, they try to organise such a robbery at a time when the potential victim has not had time to spend the money. Admittedly, this is not a prerequisite for committing a robbery, as the attackers may target not only recently received funds, but also existing savings or valuable property (gold, equipment, orders, pearls, amber necklaces, religious icons, etc.). Members of the organised group know that the elderly tend to save a certain amount of money for their funerals, and therefore pensioners are a priority for them as potential victims.

Thus, interviewing villagers during the investigation of such a criminal offence is a crucial step in identifying the perpetrators. After this type of crime is committed, regular patrolling of the streets is necessary, both in the village where the criminal offence was committed and in neighbouring settlements. The above-mentioned preventive measures can significantly reduce the number of robberies committed by organised groups against people's homes in rural areas, especially considering the power outages caused by the energy crisis in the country as a result of the full-scale armed aggression of the Russian Federation, as minimal

¹ Judgement of the Leninskyi District Court of Poltava in Case No. 553/1632/24. (2024, June). Retrieved from <https://reyestr.court.gov.ua/Review/119725893>.

² Judgement of the Kamianets-Podilskyi City District Court of Khmelnytskyi Oblast in Case No. 676/2548/20. (2023, October). Retrieved from <https://reyestr.court.gov.ua/Review/114051539>.

lighting makes it easier for criminals to commit robberies. Despite the possible additional financial costs of such patrols, they are justified in terms of public safety, as rural residents will even feel safer psychologically, knowing that law enforcement officers are preventing new robberies of people's homes.

Discussion

Quite a few researchers have considered robberies against homes in rural areas by organised groups in the general context of robberies. The work of such researchers constitutes a significant basis for investigating an issue that has not received sufficient attention in the field of scientific research and requires separate coverage. O. Ostroglyadov (2020) considered property crimes in large cities from the victimological perspective. He stated that the study of the determinants of victimisation of citizens is the most important way to prevent crimes with a mercenary orientation. The researcher identified the most effective ones, including explaining to the public the characteristic psychological aspects of the behaviour of perpetrators and victims; providing practical recommendations on ways and options for protection of both physical and property integrity; developing skills to recognise threatening situations; preventing recurrence of victimisation, namely preventing new victims from being victimised. His position on the significance of studying the victimhood of victims against property is also relevant. Specifically, the characteristics of the victims of robberies committed by an organised group against the homes of individuals in rural areas were described in this study. Victimisation prevention is admittedly crucial, as this study emphasises.

In their research, M. Ihsan *et al.* (2019) analysed the vulnerability and victimisation of houses located in the vicinity of settlements and considered the possibility of using a Geographic Information System to conduct such an analysis. This study can be used to prevent robberies and assaults with intent to rob in rural areas and on the outskirts of cities. At the same time, this study pays insufficient attention to the characteristics of organised groups and does not consider the specifics of individual countries and special circumstances that may affect the commission of robberies, and in Ukraine specifically.

R. Zaloznyi (2021) paid special attention to the fact that forensic research of robberies (he considered robberies against drivers of motor vehicles) is necessary to develop a methodology for investigating a particular type of crime. This point has also been emphasised in the present study, which highlights the significance of law enforcement agencies knowing the forensic features of robberies. This will help them to investigate criminal proceedings related to this type of crime more effectively.

In his study on the prevention of robberies committed by an organised criminal group, P. Eprintsev (2021)

noted that both the prevention and investigation of robberies require knowledge of the specifics of the mechanism, the way they are committed and the use of tools, as well as the specifics of the offender's behaviour at the scene of the criminal attack, and the specifics of the object of the criminal attack to put forward versions of the person who committed the attack. The researcher proposes the revival of preventive public associations, voluntary people's guards, and public policing stations to stimulate and develop public activity, united by people's desire to protect themselves from criminal attacks, including robberies. Prevention of criminal offences is truly crucial.

M. Dzhelilova (2023) emphasises that regional organised crime requires increased attention, it has specific features, extremely dangerous methods and forms of criminal functioning, considering the specific features of both the territorial and economic factors of the relevant region. The researcher outlines the factors that have the greatest impact on regional crime, such as unemployment, income levels and their specifics in a particular territory, urbanisation, alcoholisation of the population in a particular area, the effectiveness of law enforcement agencies, and the availability of penal institutions. A. Babenko (2021) shares this opinion, arguing that the main purpose of the criminal offence prevention system is to exercise preventive control over the criminological regional environment and to influence the factors that determine not only the detection of criminal offences against property in Ukraine, but also in its regions, and to stop those crimes that are already at the stage of preparation. The researcher believes that a positive result of this will be a significant reduction in the quantitative and qualitative indicators of crimes against both persons and property, which will guarantee a long-term stabilisation of the level of criminal acts. Admittedly, crimes, including robberies, are no less widespread and dangerous in the regions, and therefore preventive control over the regional crime environment is necessary and relevant.

O. Mirkovets (2020) investigated the issue of signs and their properties of the offender's personality, which should be studied and considered within the framework of forensic characteristics. These characteristics must include data describing the processes of establishment and operation of the organised group. The distribution of roles between members of an organised group is a characteristic feature of robberies. Without consideration of the differences in the structure of organised groups, which are determined by the focus on the territorial coverage of the territories under their control, it is advisable to distinguish three levels of links in them: lower (executive links); middle (organisational and control links); upper (leader-organiser, leaders). Despite the differences in the structural arrangements of organised groups, which are determined by the focus of their criminal activity and the territorial

coverage of the territories under their control, three levels of links can be distinguished: lower (executive links); middle (organisational and control links); upper (leader-organiser, managers). Summarising the data of the criminal proceedings against members of organised groups, it can be stated that senior and partially middle-level members of the previously mentioned groups have criminal authority based on their criminal activity and experience. Admittedly, these findings of O. Mirkovets (2020) are relevant for such type of property crime as a robbery committed by an organised criminal group in rural areas.

N. Basarab (2022) covered the individual preventive measures of the National Police of Ukraine to prevent robberies. The researcher defines them as a set of various measures based on criminological knowledge of the characteristic anti-social traits of persons committing acquisitive violent criminal offences aimed at prompt diagnosis and termination, and limitation of the possibility of criminal behaviour. This researcher is correct in arguing that persons who commit crimes such as robbery by an organised criminal group have characteristic antisocial traits.

Conclusions

Thus, to investigate robberies against homes committed by organised groups in rural areas, 100 decisions of national courts from 2019 to 2024 were analysed using the Unified state register of court decisions. These decisions were analysed, and the conclusions drawn were substantiated and set out in this study. They are intended to help law enforcement agencies investigate these types of robberies more effectively in the future, as well as to take more effective preventive measures against such criminal offences.

Considering the nature of the crime of robbery of homes in rural areas by an organised group, this criminal offence is particularly dangerous, as it targets particularly vulnerable groups of people. This study emphasises that such crimes are systemic, and the

connection between the members of the criminal group is strong. As a rule, this type of robbery is not committed within a single village or settlement. Therefore, law enforcement officers need to consider the geographical factor described in this study when investigating robberies against homes in rural areas by an organised group. It should also be noted that such organised groups usually carry out a rather long and thorough preparatory stage before committing the robbery itself to obtain the necessary information to better plan their criminal actions. In preparation for the robbery, the offenders interact with the villagers in the village where they plan to commit the crime. Moreover, they can even talk to the neighbours and fellow villagers of a potential victim. This study also suggested possible measures that could help prevent a considerable number of robberies against homes in rural areas by an organised group, as well as elucidated factors contributing to the commission of this type of crime and the creation of stable organised groups with criminal goals.

In further research on this topic, it would be advisable to consider in greater detail and depth both the mental and social state of individual members of an organised group committing robberies, the victimological characteristics of victims of robberies committed in rural areas, and the ways and measures by which such crimes can be prevented, thereby reducing the crime rate in the country and regions.

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Conflict of Interest

The author of this study declares no conflict of interest.

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Характерні особливості розбійних нападів на житло осіб, вчинених організованими групами в сільській місцевості

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Анотація

Актуальність досліджуваної теми полягає в тому, що в умовах воєнного стану загострюється проблема розбійних нападів на житло громадян, зокрема посилюється їх небезпечність унаслідок більшої ймовірності наявності в учасників організованої злочинної групи вогнепальної зброї, аніж у мирний час. Мета статті полягала у виявленні характерних рис розбійних нападів на житло осіб у сільській місцевості, що вчиняють організовані групи, встановленні чинників, які впливають на вибір зловмисниками жертви майбутнього нападу, визначенні превентивних заходів для зменшення вчинення таких злочинів. Для вирішення зазначених питань у дослідженні було застосовано комплекс методів наукового пізнання: системно-структурний, порівняльний, статистичний та системний. Було з'ясовано, що характерною особливістю таких нападів є вчинення їх групою, яка складається переважно з односельців з внутрішньо стійкими, тривалими, довірчими стосунками, з готовністю систематично вчиняти насильницькі злочини проти осіб. Їм притаманна ієрархія та підготовка до вчинення розбійного нападу на житло осіб у сільській місцевості. Встановлено, що під час підготовки до вчинення розбою для отримання необхідної інформації зловмисники часто вивчають маршрути села, дізнаються інформацію про його мешканців, обирають жертву. Вони можуть розмовляти безпосередньо з потенційною жертвою та/або її сусідами. Тому опитування жителів села під час розслідування такого кримінального правопорушення є важливим кроком для виявлення особи зловмисників. Встановлено чинники, які впливають на вчинення розбійних нападів у сільській місцевості (наявність цінного майна в жертви; віддаленість її проживання, відсутність сусідів; планове відключення електроенергії, фізично уразлива особа тощо). Для вчинення нападів на житло осіб у сільській місцевості зловмисники обирають декілька сіл відносно знайомих їм районів, які можуть знаходитися як в одній області, так і в іншій, з якою межують. Зауважено, що це ускладнює роботу правоохоронних органів у розслідуванні такого типу злочинів. Практична цінність дослідження полягає у врахуванні правоохоронцями теоретичних результатів цього дослідження щодо впливу на вибір зловмисниками жертви та встановлених характерних особливостей, які притаманні таким розбоям

Ключові слова:

злочини проти власності; організована злочинна група; планування злочину; потенційна жертва; чинники вчинення кримінального правопорушення