

GANGS:

AIRPORTS AS THE BATTLEGROUND



Gangs; they cause chaos worldwide. Their activities range from petty crime and disruption to high profile criminal activities. Transnational gangs are the ultimate entrepreneurs, relentless in conducting their business and harder to control the more lucrative and powerful they become. They fill the gap in the global supply of illegal goods and services, operating a parallel economy, which does not abide by national or international laws and regulations but by their own customs, and ones which can adapt and change rapidly. Those who run and coordinate high-profile gang activities constantly push to stay one step ahead of the law and employ a plethora of approaches to conducting their enterprises and preventing recognisable patterns in their activities. These groups pose a great challenge for the airports that become their targets or the grounds upon which they carry out their business. But, how do gangs use airports, what can be learnt from their activities at airports over the last few years and what should our takeaways be regarding how these diverse groups are dealt with? **Lucy Rawlings** explores.

"If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles."

Sun Tzu, The Art of War

In trying to better understand our enemy, it does not help that there is no universal definition of a 'gang' and, to make matters worse, these organised criminals often fight to ensure that they do not conform to many aspects of these varying definitions, meaning they are less likely to be identified. It is, however, in common agreement that gangs are a 'group of persons working to unlawful or antisocial ends' and whose members collectively identify with one another and meet on a recurring basis – although physical meetings are becoming less frequent with technological advancements and the use of encrypted messenger services.

As gangs evolve and adapt to ensure their longevity and profitability, the ways in which airports deal with them must also evolve, and coordination and information sharing between aviation security, law enforcement agencies and government intelligence services is vital. But not all gangs consist of high-profile, organised criminals, and airports and everyday travellers are not always the intended targets. To better understand how to manage gangs and

the challenges they pose, there is a need to consider the many ways in which airports become the sites for their endeavours.

GANG-ON-GANG VIOLENCE

In March 2009, a Hells Angels Motorcycle Club associate, Anthony Zervas, 29, was killed during a huge brawl with the Comancheros, a rival club, at Sydney Airport's domestic terminal, one of Australia's most monitored and secure public spaces. The confrontation between the gangs was said to have occurred following an encounter between the Comancheros' leader and a Hells Angels boss on a flight from Melbourne. In the subsequent court case it was reported that there had been a flurry of messages and phone calls from the leaders to other associates as soon as the plane had landed. The tensions between the Angels and Comancheros at this time was high following the bombing of one of the Angels' clubhouses earlier in the month.

It was tit-for-tat gang violence that also led to the shooting of Corsican

gangster Antoine Quilichini, also known as 'Tony the Butcher', at Bastia Airport in December 2017. Quilichini had been convicted in 2016 of conspiring to murder a cousin of the Corsican mafia boss, Jean-Baptiste Jerome Colonna, in 2016. It was believed Quilichini's murder was in retaliation.

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GANGS TARGETING THE AIRPORT AND PASSENGERS

Johannesburg's OR Tambo International Airport suffers from recurring spates of airport robberies orchestrated by gangs targeting people leaving the airport. In the past, robbers have frequently used blue lights and shown fake police

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identification in order to pull over cars they followed leaving the airport. Victims were then intimidated and stripped of their possessions. During 2013, over 200 cases were reported, decreasing to about five per month following the involvement of the National Investigating Unit. The unit, in conjunction with airport and local police, intensified their intelligence gathering and began to profile suspects and their vehicles, enabling them to make more arrests and providing a deterrent for these gangs.

Since the start of 2019, however, there has been an upsurge in these kinds of attacks, now with victims frequently being followed home where gang members are able to retrieve even more bounty. On 14 January, a Turkish Airlines crew became the target of an attack while their shuttle bus was waiting at the traffic lights in Johannesburg, and other victims were followed home in various attacks throughout the month. These kinds of attack are a gang favourite and new



Antoine Quilichini, aka 'Tony the Butcher', was killed at a Bastia Airport in Corsica in 2017

groups are taking up these activities all the time as they are perceived to be fairly low risk. The move to attacking people at home has also followed from the police crackdown on cash-in-transit heists.

Viracopos International Airport in São Paulo is frequently the target of robberies, muggings, carjackings and kidnappings carried out by gangs. The highway that leads to the airport is notorious for crime as gangs target vehicles transporting merchandise and, in 2017, 10,500 such freight thefts were recorded across São Paulo. In recent years, many companies have, as a result, chosen to send shipments via plane, and the volume and value

of goods passing through Viracopos Airport has increased – raising its profile as a target. A major heist occurred in 2018 when five armed gang members drove vehicles painted to resemble airport security pick-up trucks onto the tarmac, parking next to a Lufthansa plane from which employees were transferring bags of cash into an armoured vehicle. Following a swift looting, the gang made away with approximately US \$5,000,000 (c.£3,500,000). No arrests were made following this and the complexity of the heist demonstrates the ability of organised criminals to carefully plan and coordinate high-profile attacks.



Rebels bikies were removed from a Qantas flight bound for Melbourne from Hobart in 2017

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USING AIRPORTS FOR DRUG TRAFFICKING

Drug seizures at airports are unending and the high volumes of various drugs in circulation in regions which don't even produce or grow them is a testament to the ingenuity of transnational drug smuggling gangs. With drug smuggling being so lucrative, gangs become protective of their 'patch' or routes and when rivals try to compete, violence becomes the natural option.

In July 2014, two people were killed and six injured in a drive-by shooting at Curaçao International Airport. The shooting was connected with an ongoing war between rival drug gangs as Curaçao is a key drug trafficking export point for narcotics bound for Europe from South America. One of the men killed, Jais Juliana, was the boss of a criminal gang and smuggling ring.

CAUSING DISRUPTION IN-FLIGHT

In October 2017, two members of the Rebels, an Australian motorcycle gang, were removed from a Qantas flight bound for Melbourne from Hobart. The pilot had reported that the 'bikies' had been causing "fear and apprehension" onboard as well as behaving in an intimidating way towards the airline's staff. Four other people connected to the Rebels also departed the plane. It was not possible to press charges as

the pair were not violent and no one was harmed, but could this have been a different case had the crew not acted to remove them?

THE INSIDER THREAT

The insider threat has gained a huge amount of attention in recent years and gangs have used insiders working in a variety of positions across the airport to gain information and access. Insiders operating X-ray machines have allowed bags containing various contraband to pass through; baggage handlers have willingly loaded bags filled with drugs onto aircraft; and catering staff have delivered trolleys with illicit contents to aircraft. The list goes on and the fact is that any insider has the ability to compromise the security of the airport.

Thirteen members of a trafficking gang were sentenced in London in April 2018 for their roles in smuggling £16,000,000 worth of drugs, predominantly cocaine and marijuana, into Heathrow Airport. Two of the men involved worked at the airport as baggage handlers where they moved suitcases flown from Brazil onto carousels for UK domestic arrivals where other members of the gang collected them. They were arrested following an 18-month investigation by the National Crime Agency.

A major security concern surrounds the outsourcing of roles, which allow direct access to baggage, aircraft and passengers to external companies, particularly when the contract is simply awarded to the contractor offering the lowest cost but not necessarily the most thorough security checks nor the most professionally trained employees. This is not to say, however, that contracted companies are to blame; airports need to be vigilant in

ensuring that background checks are conducted into all employees, that all employees undergo security screening before and after shifts, and that staff working across the airport are trained to be vigilant and observant of each other's behaviours, and any concerns are reported.

One example of gang activities within a contracted baggage company hit the news in the USA when an Alaskan Airlines jet suffered from decompression during flight. Upon landing, investigators discovered that a luggage loading conveyor belt had been driven into the side of the plane next to the cargo doors and the baggage hold was covered in graffiti affiliated with both the Crips and Bloods – two notorious rival gangs. It was later determined that the airline had recently replaced its professional baggage handlers, who were employees of the airline, for a less expensive contractor. According to other airline employees, many of the newly contracted staff looked, spoke and acted in ways associated with the gangs. This begs the question, who ran background checks on these individuals and who was responsible for supervising them as they worked? Additionally, although the criminal damage cost the airline a large amount and, thankfully, nobody was harmed, this is not to say in the future that groups with similar access would not be able to cause greater damage. If gangs are able to deface baggage holds, cause damage to the aircraft exterior without it being noticed and smuggle drugs so efficiently, who is to say that next time the damage may not be greater or that it will not be explosives that are loaded onto the aircraft?



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GANGS – THE FUTURE?

Rapid technological developments have had a huge impact on aviation security over the last couple of decades. But, as much as technology can greatly enhance security procedures, we are fully aware that it also comes with challenges. As security pushes for the right to hold more data on travellers in order to assess individuals' threat levels, we also make ourselves a greater target for cybercrime, and cyber gangs are capable of causing huge disruption and damage. Groups such as LulzSec have managed to hack, disrupt and retrieve data from government authorities, the FBI, and media outlets such as PBS and Fox, as well as Sony Pictures Entertainment from whom the information of millions of customers was stolen. Other cyber gangs such as the Syrian Electronic Army work to take control of government sites, systems and computers to send political messages. If airports are frequently targeted by protesters as a stage for a global audience to hear their political views, then what better target for cyber hackers wishing for their messages to be heard?

Gangs using drones to disrupt law enforcement and transport drugs has become increasingly commonplace. Drones offer gangs the ability to carry out a number of activities remotely, decreasing the risk of getting caught and making the perpetrators difficult to track down. Gatwick Airport was brought to a standstill on 19 December 2018 following multiple reports of drones flying close to the runway and delays were caused at Heathrow on 9 January due to a drone sighting. The perpetrators of these incidents have not yet been caught.

CONCLUSION

We have seen that there are numerous ways in which gangs carry out their activities at airports and that each gang may have different modus operandi. They are constantly coming up with new angles, and potential cyber and technological threats are ones we are going to have to consider more in the future. It is clear, though, that certain

types of gang activities are more common at certain airports or in certain regions. As such, each airport must ensure that they know and understand their enemy and know themselves, as well as those working within their parameters, as well as the local law enforcement agencies and intelligence services they must work alongside. Additionally, airports must continue to encourage staff to report any unusual activity or behaviour they witness and openly express any concerns about colleagues or travellers. ■



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