POLSKA AKADEMIA NAUK • INSTYTUT NAUK PRAWNYCH

ZAKŁAD KRYMINOLOGII

ARCHIWUM KRYMINOLOGII

Archives of Criminology

PL ISSN 0066-6890

DOI 10.7420/AK2024.14

2024 • 46(1) • 5–14

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Enhancing the criminology of mobility: A need for interdisciplinary and multi-sited research approaches. Introduction

Wzmacniając kryminologię mobilności. O konieczności interdyscyplinarnych i wielostanowiskowych badań i podejść. Wprowadzenie

Abstract: Scholars from various disciplines, geographic locations and research traditions have examined border dynamics – investigating what occurs at borders, how it happens, its origins, consequences and normative implications. This has given rise to the burgeoning field of the "Criminology of Mobility", an academic discipline focussed on issues such as citizenship, race, gender, ethnicity and immigration control. This relatively new and innovative academic discipline delves into the processes of inclusion and exclusion both at and within state borders, often employing methods traditionally associated with the criminal justice system, law enforcement and military operations – frequently without the safeguards typically in place. Scholars in this field investigate how existing inequalities – particularly those related to gender, race, nationality and class – are exacerbated by new power structures and systems of belonging. We have observed that there remains a notable lack of diversity in research from global regions, as well as a lack of attention to the perspectives of those directly affected by or involved in border control mechanisms and their extraterritorial dimensions. This special issue is a step to address this gap.

Keywords: criminology of mobility, border criminology, crimmigration, criminalisation of migrants, border practices

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Abstrakt: Od wielu lat naukowcy z różnych dyscyplin, geograficznych lokalizacji i tradycji badawczych analizują dynamikę granic – badając, co się na nich dzieje, jakie praktyki są tam stosowane, gdzie te procesy mają swoje początki oraz jakie przynoszą konsekwencje. Ruch ten dał początek rozwijającej się dziedzinie „kryminologii mobilności" – dyscyplinie akademickiej koncentrującej się na takich kwestiach jak obywatelstwo, rasa, płeć, pochodzenie etniczne i kontrola imigracji. Ta stosunkowo nowa i innowacyjna dyscyplina zgłębia procesy włączania i wykluczenia, mające miejsce zarówno na samych granicach państwa, jak i w ich pobliżu. Działania państwa w tym zakresie często wykorzystują metody tradycyjnie kojarzone z systemem sądownictwa karnego, pracą organów ścigania i operacjami wojskowymi – często prowadzone są jednak bez typowych środków gwarancyjnych, które prawo powinno oferować. Naukowcy zajmujący się kryminologią mobilności badają, w jaki sposób istniejące nierówności – zwłaszcza te związane z płcią, etnicznością, narodowością i klasą – są pogłębiane przez nowe struktury władzy i systemy przynależności. W prowadzonych badaniach widoczny jest jednak brak różnorodności w odniesieniu do analizowanych regionów świata, mało uwagi poświęca się również perspektywom osób bezpośrednio dotkniętych mechanizmami kontroli granicznej lub w nie zaangażowanych oraz ich eksterytorialnym wymiarem. Ten numer tematyczny jest krokiem w kierunku wypełnienia tej luki.

Słowa kluczowe: kryminologia mobilności, kryminologia graniczna, kryminalizacja migracji, kryminalizacja migrantów, praktyki graniczne

European nation-states are actively seeking to regulate migration (Geiger, Pécoud 2013). After periods of recruiting, welcoming and tolerating migrants, these states have shifted towards the belief that entry restrictions are necessary to manage migration flows and safeguard national security systems, particularly since the early 1990s (Burgers, Engbersen 1999; Franko 2020; van der Woude 2022). This shift has resulted in a growing emphasis on determining who is permitted to enter the country and who is not (Guiraudon, Joppke 2001; Staring, van Swaaningen 2021). Migration *policies* that once encouraged international migration have gradually given way to migration *controls* aimed at preventing the arrival of migrants deemed undesirable (Guiraudon, Joppke 2001; Bosworth 2008). Nation-states have introduced a broad array of control mechanisms to regulate entry and residency within their borders (Franko 2020). On the one hand, external migration controls are designed to prevent unauthorised entry by constructing so-called "metaphorical walls" (Finotelli, Sciortino 2013) based on, inter alia, joint visa policies, pre-admission screening, carrier sanctions, shared identification databases, standardised border control procedures, the operations of Frontex (the European Border and Coast Guard Agency), physical barriers, joint maritime surveillance and advanced technology (Carling 2007; Broeders 2009; Scholten 2014; Dekkers 2019; Vavoula 2022). On the other hand, internal migration controls focussed on preventing unauthorised residency and deporting illegalised individuals (Bauder 2014) have been developed, involving various exclusionary practices, identification mechanisms, immigration detention, re-entry bans and deportation (Brochmann 1999; Albrecht 2002; Brandariz 2021).

These control mechanisms aim to prevent the arrival of migrants without legal residency and to combat their unlawful presence. Whilst they are evolving in response to geopolitical, socioeconomic and sociocultural shifts (Franko 2020; Staring, van Swaaningen 2021), eight key trends have significantly reshaped the nature, structure and scope of migration controls in recent decades in Europe (cf. Kox 2024). Firstly, migration controls have become more restrictive, as European states have tightened immigration laws and introduced new mechanisms (Aas 2011; Aas, Bosworth 2013). Secondly, institutional cooperation has increased, shifting controls to international, intergovernmental and supranational levels (Guiraudon, Lahav 2000; Lavenax 2006). Thirdly, the EU and its Member States have increasingly externalised borders through agreements to monitor entry beyond their territories (Weber 2006; Gammeltoft-Hansen, Sørensen 2013). Fourthly, European authorities have adopted responsibilisation strategies, transferring some responsibility for migration control to local governments and non-state actors, compelling them to address unauthorised entry, unlawful residency and deportation procedures (Kalir, Wissink 2015; Kox, Staring 2022). Fifthly, the right to asylum has become central in policy and public discourse, to then be gradually restricted in practice through the development of strategies of pushbacks at borders and the new EU Pact (Goodwin-Gill 2011; Gammeltoft-Hansen 2013; Barnes 2022). Sixthly, scholars have observed the rise of "crimmigration", the intertwining of migration control with crime prevention in laws, policies and enforcement practices (Stumpf 2006; 2013; van der Leun, van der Woude 2013). Seventhly, European states increasingly use digital infrastructures and databases to monitor and manage mobility (Koslowski 2002; Ericson, Haggerty 2006; Lyon 2007; Ferraris 2023). Lastly, humanitarianism combines repressive control with care during migration enforcement (Pallister-Wilkins 2017; Kox, Staring 2022). These trends highlight the need for a more comprehensive and holistic approach to migration regulation and migration control practices (Kox 2024).

These developments have been accompanied by a surge in studies and publications on external and internal migration controls across Europe. Scholars from various disciplines, geographic locations and research traditions have examined border dynamics – investigating what occurs at borders, how it happens, its origins, consequences and normative implications. This has given rise to the burgeoning field of the "Criminology of Mobility", an academic discipline focussed on issues such as citizenship, race, gender, ethnicity and immigration control (Aas, Bosworth 2013). This relatively new and innovative academic discipline delves into the processes of inclusion and exclusion both at and within state borders, often employing methods traditionally associated with the criminal justice system, law enforcement and military operations – frequently without the safeguards typically in place (Pickering, Bosworth, Aas 2015). Scholars in this field investigate how existing inequalities – particularly those related to gender, race, nationality and class – are exacerbated by new power structures and systems of belonging (Bowling 2013; van der Woude 2023). These issues are particularly pressing in light

of contrasting migration practices, such as the relatively welcoming reception of Ukrainian war refugees versus the broader crisis of receiving European asylum seekers, alongside the political shift towards far-right parties across Europe.

The term "Criminology of Mobility" is still widely used in academic debates. Yet, it has also been criticised as it supposedly does not quite convey that it is the movement of people itself being criminalised (Bosworth 2017). Some scholars prefer to speak of "border criminology" because the latter, according to Bosworth (2017), "captures more clearly the way in which this is a field of study which is trying to understand both things that are happening at the border but also things that are happening in our criminal justice system". As we believe it is important to capture both what is happening at borders as well as what happens once migrants are en route, we prefer to speak of the criminology of mobility. By using this term, we aim to include the rationales and practices that are directly or indirectly associated with the current use of borders as well as all processes behind and because of the borders.

We have observed that there remains a notable lack of diversity in research from global regions (Brandariz et al. 2025), as well as a lack of attention to the perspectives of those directly affected by or involved in border control mechanisms and their extraterritorial dimensions (see also Pickering, Bosworth, Aas 2015). This gap, we believe, limits a comprehensive understanding of borders. To address this, the Working Group on Criminology of Mobility of the European Society of Criminology – formerly known as the Working Group on Immigration, Crime and Citizenship – seeks to bring together scholars from various disciplines, locations and research traditions across Europe to further advance the criminology of mobility. After all, a nuanced understanding of developments in migration, crime and citizenship requires collaboration among scholars with diverse backgrounds, who can share their insights and foster meaningful dialogue. To promote this collaboration, we strive to bridge gaps between scholars, disciplines, research traditions and methods to stimulate discussion and enhance this field of study. As part of this effort, we organised the conference "Migration, Crime, and Citizenship: Interdisciplinary and Multi-Sited Research Approaches", held at Erasmus University Rotterdam in March 2023. Over 60 scholars from different backgrounds participated, exchanging ideas and research, and helping to create stronger connections between theories, insights and scholars working in the field of migration. Through these efforts, we hope to cultivate a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of migration, crime and citizenship, paving the way for future research and informed policy development in this evolving field.

This issue

In this issue, participants of the conference are given the opportunity to present their findings to a wider audience in order to contribute – either directly or

indirectly – to the criminology of mobility scholarship. We present six articles which collectively examine various aspects of migration control, enforcement and migrant experiences across European borders, revealing common themes of procedural rigidity, the symbolic power of enforcement and migrant agency. By focussing on different localities and revealing both similar mechanisms and different outcomes, these contributions add to the criminology of mobility scholarship. For instance, Laure Deschuyteneer and Lars Breuls' study on return procedures in Belgium highlights how officials' decision-making often prioritises bureaucratic consistency over individual circumstances, echoing Perkowska's findings at the Polish–Belarusian border, where judges quickly process less serious cases by largely relying on indictments rather than personal investigation. Similarly, Carvalho da Silva's research on southern Spain reveals the criminalisation of young migrants labelled as human smugglers upon arrival, often without adequate understanding or legal representation, suggesting a systemic neglect of due process. Constanza Agnella and Eleonora Celoria's analysis of Italian immigration detention underscores the dual function of such policies: whilst detention has limited impact on actual deportations, it symbolically reinforces state sovereignty. In contrast, Michela Trinchese explores climate-driven migrations in Italy, advocating for legal reforms that recognise environmental migrants' unique needs, challenging traditional distinctions within migration law. Veronika Nagy's study shifts the focus to refugees' adaptive strategies along the Balkan route, highlighting how digital self-censorship practices enable them to navigate intense surveillance and assert their agency. Despite differing local contexts and case specifics, these studies expose a shared pattern of systemic control, legal rigidity and symbolic power, alongside different forms of migrant resilience and adaptation in the face of institutional constraints.

To conclude, we discuss the contributions to this special issue in more detail. Firstly, Laure Deschuyteneer and Lars Breuls delve into the decision-making process in return cases in Belgium. Their work is based on extensive research, including ethnographic fieldwork in the Immigration Office of Belgium in Brussels and interviews with the officials responsible for decisions in return procedures. Their findings were supplemented by the analysis of written decisions made by officials in return procedures. The paper aims to take a closer look at the work of street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky 1980) and the factors that influence their decision-making processes. The authors found that the main reasons are bureaucratic and pragmatic in nature and heavily rely on what they are used to doing and what solution they are used to choosing, which is supplemented by fears about what would hold up before the administrative court should the decision be appealed. The individual and their story, which should be at the centre of the procedure, seem to be of less importance to the officials than the procedural aspects. Such an approach raises questions about the legitimacy of such procedures and decisions that result from these processes, as they rather seem to be a form of structural violence imposed on people with precarious legal status – in this case, immigrants (cf. Borrelli 2018).

In a similar vein, Magdalena Perkowska's article analyses criminal court decisions in cases of facilitating irregular border crossings at the Polish–Belarussian border. Whilst the very topic of the cases differs significantly from Laure Deschuyteneer and Lars Breuls's study and just some of the research methods are mirrored in this paper – for which only court files constituted the basis of the research – several main findings remain similar. It seems that the judges wanted to make the cases quickly go away. They relied heavily on information from indictments prepared by prosecutors and rarely delved into the cases themselves, to the point that they did not take enough time to prove the perpetrators' guilt. The cases judges were dealing with were of low severity and mostly concerned random people who had assisted border crossers by transporting them. The sentences were rather repetitive across the cases and their pragmatic character was highly visible. The findings not only echo other research on the Polish justice system (Klaus 2024), but also contradict the assumptions that judges have more reflection on the cases they adjudicate upon and their decisions are more just. But this does not seem to be the case, since the similarities of decision-making processes between the judges in Perkowska's research and the administrative professionals in Laure Deschuyteneer and Lars Breuls's work are striking and highly disturbing.

Jacqueline Carvalho da Silva examines the consequences of judicial decisions on irregular border crossings, with a particular focus on the imprisonment of individuals accused of human smuggling. In this case study, we shift our focus to another external border of the European Union, namely the southern one, with a view to analysing in the context of anti-smuggling policies the response of EU Member States to the arrival of boats on their coasts. After contextualising the criminalisation of boat captains in Europe, this paper analyses the profile and the testimonies of young people imprisoned in southern Spain, who reported having gone to prison directly following their arrival on Spanish shores in dinghies. The research team identified this population profile whilst conducting fieldwork to ascertain the various profiles of individuals aged 18 to 30 incarcerated in Andalusian prisons. The significance of this finding prompted the research team to develop a targeted questionnaire for this particular group, which yielded distinctive insights into the Western Mediterranean route. The findings of the study – consistent with observations made regarding the Central Mediterranean route to Italy and the Atlantic route to the Canary Islands – indicate that detainees frequently demonstrated a lack of comprehension regarding their legal circumstances and often reported limited access to legal counsel. This suggests the potential for violations of due process.

The article by Constanza Agnella and Eleonora Celoria invites us to shift our attention towards an examination of the political implications of migration control. In particular, their work analyses the symbolic use by a number of Italian governments of immigration detention, or administrative detention as it is called in Italy, as a means of managing migratory flows. However, as the researchers demonstrate, this strategy does not appear to yield significant practical outcomes.

To this end, the authors relate the reforms of immigration detention to the quantitative data available on detained migrants. Whilst the recent reforms of the far-right government led by Giorgia Meloni include lengthening the detention of migrants to expand the deportations as a response to the increasing number of migrants arriving at Italy's borders, the researchers demonstrate that the capacity of detention centres has not increased significantly and that the rate of returns has remained stable. They conclude that whilst the detention of migrants serves practical purposes with regard to the deportation of a relatively small percentage of asylum seekers and irregular migrants, its symbolic function as a means of conveying a political message of strong state sovereignty and harsh border control are equally significant.

The fifth paper by Michela Trinchese explores climate change-induced migrations in Italy, examining the legal and social challenges through a sociolegal perspective. It is based on the concept of borders as tools of control and resistance, analysing the struggles related to international protection for environmental migrants. Migrations due to climate change challenge traditional legal and policy distinctions between persons in need of protection and economic migrants. The analysis of the Italian legal system highlights how case law has recognised forms of protection for environmental migrants, particularly through the so-called humanitarian protection, a national form of protection. The article argues for the need to reform legal frameworks to more comprehensively address climate migration, advocating for an approach that recognises the centrality of human rights and promotes social justice and inclusion.

Finally, the article written by Veronika Nagy explores a relatively unexplored topic: the bottom-up dynamics of avoiding surveillance. In particular, it focusses on how Syrian and Afghan refugees, especially along the Balkan migration route, engage in self-censorship practices in response to surveillance by state actors and border authorities. Rather than concentrating on traditional forms of self-censorship (e.g. restricting speech or written content), the paper emphasises how refugees manage the material aspects of their digital connectivity, such as selecting specific mobile devices, disabling certain features and altering how they use mobile networks to avoid detection. The text addresses the ubiquitous nature of mobile technologies, which contribute to empowerment, but also expose refugees to increased scrutiny, whilst avoiding oversimplified narratives that portray refugees solely as objects of control. Instead, it emphasises their resilience, tech-savviness and ability to assert autonomy in a heavily monitored environment. In conclusion, the study advocates for recognising refugees as active participants in shaping their digital identities and highlights the need for a more inclusive discourse that acknowledges their resistance to surveillance and their capacity for self-determination.

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