

## **A Qualitative Approach to the Criminal Mobility of Burglars: Questioning the "Near Home" Hypothesis\***

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The aim of this article is to present a qualitative approach to the study of burglary that addresses distances travelled. Different from previous research, this article introduces the hypothesis that burglars may travel as far as 150 km to their target. Few previous studies have questioned the hypothesis that offenders commit crimes closer to home. The majority of studies concentrating on criminal mobility are based on police data. The data gathered for this study includes interviews with offenders in prisons, and thus provides deeper insight into the offenders' processes of target selection. As a consequence, the qualitative aspect of the data gathering process and analysis opens a discussion on whether there are other possible sources for examination than police data.

Many studies have proposed that offenders commit crime close to home (Brantingham & Brantingham, 1981; Stephenson, 1974; Baldwin & Bottoms, 1976; Barker, 1999; Wiles & Costello, 2000; Ratcliffe, 2003; Bernasco & Luykx, 2003). Recently, however, at least one study argued that this is not the case for all offenders (Morselli & Royer, 2008). As there is already evidence of differences between the distance of offenders of different age, gender, and type of crime (Baldwin & Bottoms, 1976; Nichols, 1980; Repetto, 1974; Snook, 2004), the same logic could be used to propose many offenders do not commit crimes close to home (Van Koppen & de Keijser, 1997). The differences in distances travelled to targets have already been supported by research pertaining to suburb boundaries (Ratcliffe, 2001). Eck and Weisburd (1995) also state that the difference in distance of offenders may be due to the research design itself. Thus other approaches not solely using police data should be explored.

The present article examines the spatial behaviour of burglars in the Czech Republic, and proposes the possibility that an offender can travel long distances to targets. The study does not rely on police data but on interviews with offenders. Because many studies used police data and have thus reached similar conclusions, the author decided to approach the subject qualitatively. The use of interviews with offenders and the sketches of maps for better depiction of the distances travelled are quite rare (Morselli & Royer, 2008). Despite the methodological shortcomings, it is believed this type of data provides more information about the distances travelled by burglars than if police data were used.

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The study used semi-structured interviews with 30 offenders. The interviews concentrated on the strategies, tactics, and reasons for burglary, and were accompanied by drawing of mental maps of “places where (you) offend and live” as well as a questionnaire aimed at determining the importance of certain places to the offenders. To better understand the data, some introductory information about the Czech Republic, its transportation system, and two cultural characteristics important to the criminal mobility is provided.

### **Information about the Czech Republic**

The Czech Republic is a landlocked country with an area of almost 79,000 square kilometres (similar to Ireland) and population of 10.3 million. Its neighbouring states are Germany (to the west), Poland (to the north), Slovakia (to the east, which until 1992 constituted Czechoslovakia) and Austria (to the south). Administratively, the Czech Republic is divided into 14 regions. From the most western point of the country, Aš, to the most eastern city of Český Těšín the distance is 590 km and the trip by car would take 7.5 hours. Geographically, the western part of the Czech Republic (Bohemia) is surrounded on all sides by mountains; only eastward from Moravia is it then separated by the lower Czech-Moravian highlands. Overall, the Czech Republic can be described as hilly.

The road and railway network is very dense. In the scope of the European Union, the Czech Republic ranks highest in the density of its railway network, with 120 kilometres of rail for every 1,000 square kilometres of land. According to the statistical yearbook of Czech railways, in 2003 the number of passengers for domestic traffic was 170.323 million and the average distance travelled by domestic passengers was 36.48 km. The average distance traveled in 2005 rose to 172 km. Besides city transport, there are also interstate bus lines, which are more important for this article. According to the Ministry of Transportation, the average number of kilometres travelled by one person was 25 km, and 375 million people used this mode of transportation. That means that, on average, each person makes 36 trips by bus per year (<http://www.mdcz.cz/en/HomePage.htm>). The Ministry of Interior, which is responsible for information on car travel, stated that in 2007, there were 4.3 million cars registered in the Czech Republic. Because of the availability of public and private transport, it is easy for burglars to travel long distances, and there are other possibilities than using a car. On the other hand, it is also apparent that cars are widely available and the dense road network provides many opportunities to reach targets.

The first cultural phenomenon that influences travel is the number of cottages or summerhouses in the Czech Republic. The Czech word *chata* is sometimes translated as cottage, summerhouse, weekend house, or countryside house. It is a small, simple, out of town dwelling, often built by the owners. The first *chata* appeared after the First World War as a romantic idea of the Wild West, but the majority of *chata*'s were built during Communism (1948 - 1989) as people were allowed to build their own houses on small lots, close to forests and rivers. *Chata*'s and *chata*-going became something like a national sport in Czechoslovakia. It is estimated that there are 432 thousand of these houses. Every Friday, thousands of people leave the city to these summerhouses to return on Sunday night. It is postulated that only the Scandinavian countries are equal to the Czech in this phenomenon (Helstrup & Magnussen, 2001).

The second cultural characteristic that influences the movement of burglars is that, in the Czech Republic, people do not move homes very often. During Communism, only family houses could be privately owned, everything else was nationalised. The lack of available flats also

meant people stayed in one place for generations. After the fall of the Communism, a housing market needed to be created. Such change comes slowly, and although cities and villages around Prague and Brno experience housing growth, houses are not widely available.

### **Mobility of Offenders**

Studies frequently indicate that offenders commit crime close to home or they do not travel very far (Brantingham & Brantingham, 1981; Stephenson, 1974; Baldwin & Bottoms, 1976; Barker, 1999; Wiles & Costello, 2000; Ratcliffe, 2003; Bernasco & Luykx, 2003). Further, aggregate-level research indicates the average distance travelled is inversely related to the number of crimes in given territory (Morselli & Royer, 2008; Capone & Nichols, 1976; Gabor & Gottheil, 1984; Phillips, 1980; Rhodes & Conly, 1981; Wiles & Costello, 2000). This finding is also consistent with the distance decay function, which states that the frequency of crimes diminishes exponentially as distances from such place increases (Phillips, 1980; Brantingham & Brantingham, 1984; Rossmo, 2000). This hypothesis is based upon the assumption that offenders' knowledge of the area is more detailed and complete when related to the target opportunities (van Koppen & de Keijser, 1997; Rengert, et al., 1999).

There are at least two caveats to this hypothesis, however. First, it is known that within a minimum distance around their home offenders are less likely to commit crime for fear of recognition (Turner, 1969; Canter & Hodge, 2000). Second, as a result of journeys for non-criminal activities, offenders are aware of a larger area, which includes potential targets (Rengert & Wasilchick, 1985).

In case of burglars, it is believed that they are not inhibited by suburb boundaries or barriers (Ratcliffe, 2001), and that they spent hours driving around different communities during the day pre-determining ideal targets and times for their criminal activities (Rengert & Wasilchick, 1985). All these theories, then, raise the question of why burglars do not offend farther from home. That is the question addressed in the present research.

Theories in favour of the "near home hypothesis" acknowledge that opportunities offered by the environment (i.e. spatial distribution of likely targets) influence criminal activity patterns (Cohen & Felson, 1979; Rengert, 1991; Clarke, 1992). Distance travelled and route choice have a strong relationship with the value of property stolen (Capone & Nichols, 1975), greater access to financing travel, availability of time and knowledge of an area (Canter & Gregory, 1993), and the perceived cost and effort ratio (Gärling and Gärling, 1988). How a person evaluates costs and benefits of the various behavioural options, however, is subjective (Hessing & Elfers, 2000), and not necessarily methodological or rational (Cornish & Clarke, 1985; Blackburn, 1995). Research should attempt to address these "subjective" reasons and not rely solely on police data.

An important finding of previous literature for the argument here is that property offenders often travel greater distances than offenders of violent crime (Morselli & Royer, 2008; Capone & Nichols, 1976). Almost all reported studies found the average the crime trips to between 2 and 3 km (Potchak et al, 2002; Kocsis et al., 2002; Laukkanen et al., 2007). Morselli and Royer (2008) found that the offending perimeter can be large as 52 km, and mobile offenders have the perimeter large as 626 km. Laukkanen et al. (2007) in their research predicting the home of serial burglars considered 15 incidents that exceeded 50 km as outliers and dropped them from the sample. Other researchers found that longer distances are travelled by older offenders or for larger monetary gain (Repetto, 1974; Baldwin & Bottoms, 1976; Nichols, 1980; Gabor & Gottheil, 1984; Van Koppen & Jansen, 1998; Snook, 2004) or by

offenders with previous convictions or an arrest record (Baldwin & Bottoms, 1976; Gabor & Gottheil, 1984).

Studies from social and environmental psychology offer a framework for considering the reasons behind the locations of crimes. According to some research in these fields, the driving force of burglary is the offenders' perception of home. According to the psychological theories, home is the centre of emotional significance (Willmott & Young, 1957), self-expression, identity (Godkin 1980; Rapoport, 1982; Proshansky et al, 1983) and base of activity (Rakoff, 1977). Moving outward from home is the concept of territoriality. Territoriality is a source of such feelings as privacy, security given by the control over the environment, and predictability of behaviours, which happen within the environment (Nee & Taylor, 1988). Both of these concepts (home and territoriality) result in a disposition called place-attachment. Place-attachment develops through the positive emotional relationship between an individual and place. It is based on one's satisfaction with the place, evaluation of it, and identification with it (Bonnes & Secchiaroli, 1995). Consequently, it also allows for differentiation between the familiar and unfamiliar environments, the old and new, the known and perceived (Bonnes & Secchiaroli, 1995). These aspects combine to produce specific behaviour (Giuliani, 1991; Naništová, 1998).

An alternative to the use of police data is these psychological theories, necessitating a need to examine the influence of home and the perception of territoriality. These concepts may be even more important in the context of Czech Republic. As stated above Czechs, rarely move, therefore their sense of home and territory is rather strong and can be influential in distances travelled by burglars. This may be further influenced by the presence of a good road and rail network. The concept of chata-going influences burglars in two ways. First, people are comfortable travelling longer distances over the weekend. Second, offenders are aware that chatas are empty during the week and that many people travel to chatas at the weekend, thus providing ample targets at both destinations. These cultural characteristics need to be kept in mind when considering the research presented.

## Methodology

Data used in this study is derived from a sample of 30 male offenders from five low and medium security prisons in the Czech Republic. Offenders were interviewed in 2005 and 2006. In each prison, offenders were pre-selected by a penitentiary psychologist according to the following criteria: more than one conviction for burglary, currently incarcerated for burglary, and identified as a prolific burglar, i.e. a person who has committed more than two burglaries and who has been incarcerated at least twice for property offence or burglary. Offenders participated in the study voluntarily and no rewards were offered. Offenders were interviewed individually by the researcher. The researcher spoke with each offender only once due to the organisational demands of the research upon the penitentiary psychologist who was in charge of the researcher during her visit.

The interviews had a semi-structured format. It lasted from 50 - 70 minutes and included questions prepared before the interview took place. The questions pertained to the process and strategy of burglary, the place and time of the offence, the decision-making process, the items stolen, the risks and witnesses, and the importance of home or place of residence. During the interview, offenders were also asked to draw a sketch map of places where they committed the offences and where they live. For this purpose, they were given A4 format paper and a black marker. Further, the offenders filled out a demographics and criminal history questionnaire

created by the researcher. Although qualitative research is rare when pertaining to mobility of offenders, there are previous qualitative ethnographical studies that found this type of data valid (Wright & Decker, 1994; Rengert & Wasilchick, 2000; Hakim et al., 2001; Ratcliffe, 2006).

The place of residence (home or transitory) was filled in by the offenders in the demographics and criminal history questionnaire. The distances travelled by the offenders were gained by two ways: questions in the interview asking how far one would travel, and by drawing a map of places one burgled. The present research used mental maps as a form of triangulation of the distances specified by the offenders during the interview. In the first stage, the sketched maps served as comparisons with real maps to better describe the distances and spatial distribution of targets. In the second stage the sketched maps served to compare with the distances as stated during the interview. The mental maps offered information regarding the behaviour of offenders in space (Gärling, 1989), the process of decision-making regarding behaviour in certain environments (MacEachren, 1992), and consequent strategies (Downs & Stea, 1973). For the analysis to determine whether the offender committed crime close or far from home, the maps were classified by whether they depicted a specific region or environment (village, part of a city) or large space (county, state).

To analyse the spatial behavior, it was also important to determine the specific meanings “home” and “territory” had to the burglars, including the estimation of kilometres travelled. To address these issues, the following questions were included in the interview with offenders.

- In what area do you burgle?
- What area would you never burgle and why?
- How large is the territory that you call your own?
- How far have you travelled to burgle?
- Does distance play a role in your choice of targets?

The responses were content analysed and coded (0 = absent, 1 = present) according to these criteria:

- Defining territory that the offender calls as own (feels certain attachments toward)
  - Offender did not specify the territory
  - Territory is certain county (a region of Czech republic)
  - Territory is certain village or city
  - Territory is offender’s street, house or flat
- The offender burgles in home area
- The offender burgles in other areas that are
  - Known to him
  - Unknown to him
  - Both known and unknown
- The distance plays a role in searching for targets
  - The offender travels farther from home to offend
  - The offender offends closer to home
  - The distance is not an influential factor in the choice of targets
- Number of kilometres
  - 0 - 10 km
  - 11 - 50 km
  - 51 - 100 km
  - Did not specify, does not matter how far/close when searching for target



*Table 1  
Data for Group 1*

Offender's #	Distance travelled according to maps	Fit of both conditions (distance stated in interview & distance drawn on a map)
2	N/A - Offender drew map of home town	Yes
4	N/A - Offender drew map of home town	Yes
11	N/A - Offender drew map of home town	Yes
17	169 km	No
19	113 km	No
26	N/A - Offender drew map of home town	Yes
29	N/A - Offender drew map of home town	Yes

Only two offenders also drew maps of a large environment. When computing the distances between their home and the cities drawn, it is clear they both travelled further than the indicated distance from the interview (169 and 113 km). The explanations for these discrepancies can be derived from the interviews. In the case of Offender #19, he stated that to him it does not matter how far/close he would offend. Offender #17 provided even more incongruous answers. He stated that he offends closer to home, yet he traveled as far as 169 km. This can be better seen on Map 1 (where the sketch drawn by Offender #17 is compared with real map of Czech Republic; the red A marker is the home of the offender, the blue markers are targets).

*Map 1  
Maps for Offender #17*



## Group 2 - 11 - 50 km

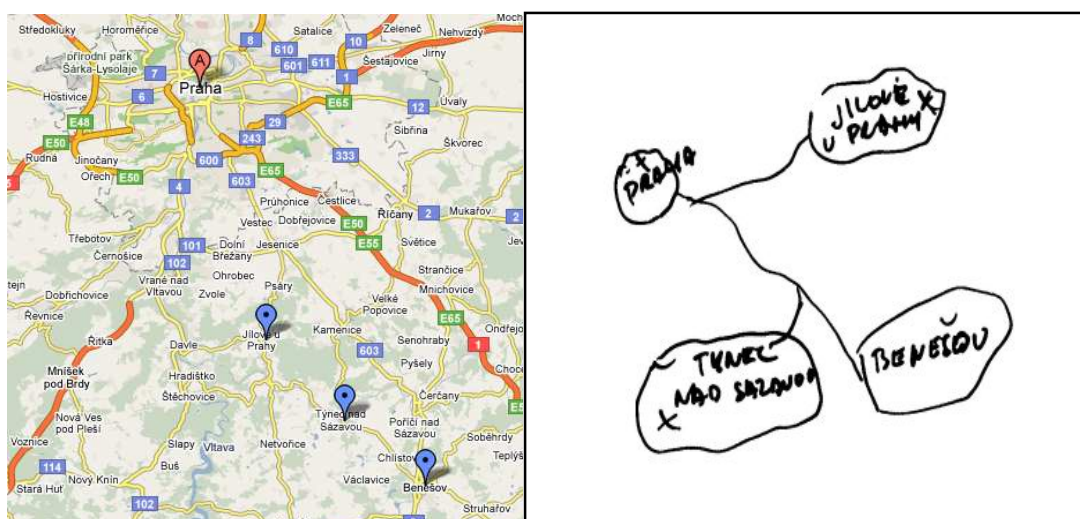
From the comparison of the four offenders who stated in the interview that they traveled distances between 11 and 50 km, three of them fulfilled this condition also according to the distances drawn on maps (see Table 2). These three stated that they offended in known as well as unknown areas. One of them also offended in the hometown. Interestingly, Offender # 21 who did not fit into this category, stated that he offended only in areas unknown to him. This offender stated that to him it did not matter how far/close he would offend.

*Table 2*  
*Data for Group 2*

Offender's #	Distance travelled according to maps	Fit of both conditions (distance stated in interview & distance drawn on a map)
3	43 km	Yes
13	15 km	Yes
18	25 km	Yes
21	215 km	No

Map 2 shows an example of the map from Offender # 3 who fits into this category. His longest distance traveled was 43 km (Praha-Benesov). Again, the red A marker is the home of the offender and the blue markers are targets.

*Map 2*  
*Maps for Offender #3*



**Group 3 - 51 - 100 km**

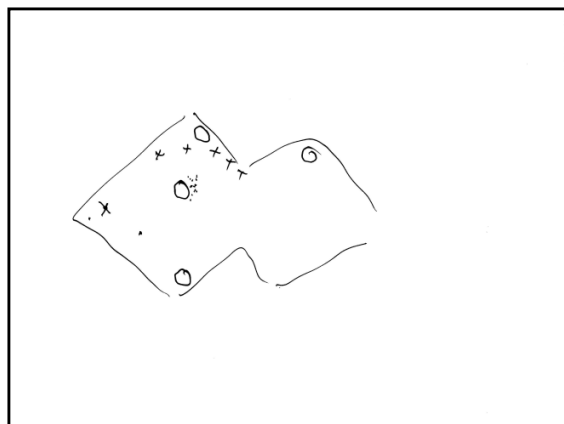
In this category, a new type of map emerges. Five offenders out of the nine drew large maps where cities are depicted only as dots without names. Therefore, we can ascertain that they traveled great distances, but could not give an exact number. Otherwise, 2 offenders fit into this category and 2 do not. The reason for them underestimating the distances travelled is that they did not offend at home or in known areas and that they traveled as far as possible.

The content analysis of the interviews showed that six offenders reported that they did not offend at home. A different six offenders reported that they offended in another known area. All offenders reported that they offended in another unknown area. Of these nine, only two drew maps of smaller areas as well (presumably other unknown areas), whereas the rest drew maps of large areas of varying levels of detail.

*Table 3  
Data for Group 3*

Offender's #	Distance travelled according to maps	Fit of both conditions (distance stated in interview & distance drawn on a map)
6	86 km	Yes
8	100 km	Yes
9	No identifiable cities	Unknown
10	No identifiable cities	Unknown
23	No identifiable cities	Unknown
25	268	No
27	480	No
28	No identifiable cities	Unknown
30	No identifiable cities	Unknown

Below is an example the type of map drawn by these offenders. It is the sketch of Offender #10's large map with unidentified cities.



#### Group 4 - Does Not Matter How Far/Close to Travel to Offend

As can be seen in Table 4 below, this group consists of great variety of offenders' distances. There were three offenders who drew maps of large environments with no identifiable cities, there were two offenders who drew maps of hometowns, there were two offenders who traveled, up to 20 km and there were three offenders who traveled over 100 kilometres. Thus, it is not possible to state which of these offenders belong to this group and which do not. Further, seven offenders stated they offended in their home area; a different seven stated they also offended in other known areas, and six stated they offended in an unknown area.

*Table 4*  
*Data for Group 4*

Offender's #	Distance travelled according to maps
1	173
5	107
7	No identifiable cities
12	No identifiable cities
14	7
15	Offender drew map of home town
16	16
20	490
22	No identifiable cities
24	Offender drew map of home town

As shown in the table, the variance of the distances in this category is quite large. From this, it is apparent that each offender understood the aspects of "close to home, far from home" in different manner. For some offenders "close to home" may mean 7 km and for some 50 km; for some offender "far from home" may mean 50 km and for some 150 km.

#### Discussion and Limitations

This study supports the hypothesis that burglars may travel as far as 150 km to offend. It presents a different view of the journey to crime hypothesis than is contained in much of the extant literature. There are several limitations or qualifications that should be made concerning the present research, however, in relation to how it fits with previous research.

The present research is qualitative in nature as it uses interviews with offenders and maps drawn by them. As the responses of the offenders could not be checked with their files, a question arises as to whether the offenders overestimated or underestimated their answers. In an attempt to address this problem, certain questions were repeated in the interviews, the process of map drawing, and the questionnaire. The answers were then examined to determine any discrepancies. Further, a third party (guard, social worker or penitentiary psychologist) was

always present during the interview. It is a reasonable assumption the offenders were kept somewhat honest by the presence of a person who knew of their history.

Another limitation of the study is the size of the sample. Thirty offenders is a small sample to draw any definite conclusions. It is, however, a large enough sample to demonstrate a question that it is possible for burglars to travel large distances. This study, therefore, needs to be replicated with a larger sample to determine if the results are reliable.

It is also possible that the variance in criminal mobility is specific to Czech Republic due to its geography, rail and road network, and most of all due to the cultural specificity of going to cottages and residential stability. This study should be replicated on offenders in different country to determine if offenders in those countries have a different conception of “close to home/far from home” than was found in the present research.

This study shows that it is necessary to go beyond the use of police data and to determine the understanding of distance from the offenders themselves. Overall, the study questions the “near home” hypothesis of offending by using solely police data, and proposes it is necessary to determine what “near home” mean to offenders by interviewing the offenders themselves.

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