



# Corruption as a facilitator of drug trafficking in the port of Rotterdam

## Drivers, strategies and implications

Saba Kassa and Jacopo Costa | September 2025



## About this Working Paper

This Working Paper explores the drivers and strategies of corruption as a facilitator of drug trafficking in the port of Rotterdam, with a specific focus on cocaine trafficking. Through in-depth interviews with stakeholders, a review of judicial cases and desk research, it aims to:

- deepen understanding of the systems and mechanisms of corruption that enable drug trafficking;
- show how trafficking and corruption strategies are changing in response to increased enforcement pressure; and
- provide practical insights on how to further strengthen port resilience.

It contributes to the growing body of work that looks at corruption from a systemic viewpoint, analysing the relationships and adaptive capabilities that allow organised crime to thrive. This research supports efforts to develop more robust and foresight-focused approaches to combat corruption and drug trafficking.

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## Executive summary

This Working Paper examines how corruption facilitates drug trafficking (specifically cocaine) through the port of Rotterdam, looking at the underlying drivers and strategies involved. Legal trade routes and commercial ports are especially attractive because of the high volumes of cargo, which make it possible to conceal illicit cargo under licit cargo. The spatial complexity of the port of Rotterdam also makes it difficult to fully secure it against criminal activity.

Digging deeper into the facilitating factors of trafficking, the paper finds that, paradoxically, a main driver of rising border corruption is the increased political attention on and resources dedicated to fighting trafficking. Desk research and stakeholder interviews highlight that as authorities deploy new technology to improve detection, traffickers face more obstacles to operating effectively. Having someone on the inside then becomes increasingly important (Staring et al., 2019). So, an unintended but important consequence of the strengthened fight against drug trafficking is that corruption becomes even more essential for the operational success of organised crime networks.

This study focuses specifically on the role of customs. Tasked with monitoring the import and export of goods, customs officers are important actors in the fight against drug trafficking. However, their role also makes them vulnerable: they have crucial knowledge on processes and procedures, access to systems and discretionary power that can be exploited by criminals (KPMG, 2021).

The desk research shows that corruption is used strategically to circumvent two important bottlenecks: the container screening and security as cargo enters the port, and the exit of drugs from the port (Staring et al., 2019). Traffickers may seek to obtain key information or direct assistance from customs officers.

These corrupt relationships and the emerging networks between members of crime groups and the customs officials are diverse. Some relationships can be characterised by collusion, where customs officials offer their services or are persuaded to cooperate. This collusion may be opportunistic or targeted. Other relationships can be characterised by coercion. Customs officials may be lured by financial reward, but this is accompanied by intimidation or the threat of violence to ensure that the officer cooperates and continues to cooperate. Our research highlights that the boundary between collusion and coercion is often blurred.

Beyond collusion and coercion, we also see infiltration, which crosses the boundaries between the criminal, public and private. What emerges is less a matter of individual corruption and more akin to regulatory capture, where the public office position is held by a member of the criminal network.

The review of the judicial cases shows that bribes involved in these schemes can amount to millions. To hide and use the illicit gains, traffickers rely on money laundering, disguising its source as legitimate. They often enlist the help of family and friends, a trusted inner circle or professional specialists. They may also hide cash at home or invest it in assets and businesses in the Netherlands or abroad.

A key finding of our research is that the criminal and corruption strategies used to facilitate drug trafficking are highly adaptive. The underlying driver of this adaptability is the unchanging demand for drugs and high profitability of the crime. This pushes traffickers to adopt new strategies to overcome hurdles in supplying the demand.

Corruption strategies adapt in response to new enforcement measures. When control systems are changed and/or strengthened, corruption strategies evolve alongside them. This research identifies some key patterns:

- Stronger detection efforts increase the incentives for corruption.
- Evolving systems encourage a similar shift in corruption strategies.
- Anti-corruption and anti-trafficking measures may change the profile of those most vulnerable to being co-opted.
- The characteristics of corruption can also evolve, from collusion to coercion, to full infiltration of institutions and systems – with blurred lines in between.

Trafficking strategies are similarly adaptive. There have been increased efforts by the port to combat trafficking through enhanced detection and technology. This was initially reflected by increased drug seizures. But since 2024, drugs seizures have declined. The research findings provide an explanation for this: As detection strengthens, more drug seizures are made. But what may happen, too, is a response to these new measures. As the risk of detection increases, criminals may adapt their trafficking strategies to overcome the additional hurdles, including:

- changing concealment strategies; and
- changing modes of transport and trafficking routes, including to ports outside of the Netherlands.

These developments highlight the complexity in understanding the impact of stronger anti-trafficking measures on both corruption and trafficking strategies. Trafficking and corruption are typically measured by detection, for example, by changes in the volume of drug seizures or the number of public officials caught engaging in corruption. But the elephant in the room is that increasingly sophisticated criminal strategies can hide what is really happening. This underscores the need to continuously strengthen our ability to recognise “red flags” of corruption and trafficking. Data-driven tools and refined risk indicators are critical for understanding how crime and corruption strategies are changing.

The evolving nature of criminal strategies is often likened to a game of chess: enforcement makes a move, and criminal networks adapt. But what now seems to be emerging is more troubling. When barriers to drug trafficking increase while demand remains unchanged, crime and corruption strategies adapt in ways that can deepen their impact on society, leading for example to the hardening of crime and associated violence.

This makes anticipating how crime may adapt to changing anti-corruption and anti-trafficking strategies critical. Improved foresight and scenario-building capacities will be vital in order to develop more robust enforcement efforts against drug trafficking and mitigate the negative impact on society.

A holistic approach is essential. Addressing corruption as a facilitator of drug trafficking requires a broad view of crime that focuses on understanding vulnerabilities, leveraging data and harnessing collaboration. The risk of trafficking routes changing are high, therefore, we must use every tool at our disposal to ensure effective and sustainable enforcement efforts.

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# 1 Introduction

Rotterdam is the largest port in Europe. While efficiency and safety are top priorities for the port, as an important logistical hub it becomes inadvertently attractive for drug trafficking, especially of cocaine (Staring et al., 2019). The head of the Seaport Police Rotterdam laments that “the biggest battle against traffickers is their ability to corrupt ports with money and intimidation” (May and Holcova, 2023). This corruption at the border comprises an illegal exchange of resources between border officials (the bribe takers) and private actors (the bribe givers) (Jancsics, 2019, 2020, 2021).

Fighting border corruption as a facilitator of drug trafficking has become an important priority for the Dutch government, with increased attention and resources devoted to it (Staring et al., 2019; Zürcher et al., 2024; Government of the Netherlands, 2021). This is because the illicit drug trade and the corruption that facilitates it come at a high cost to society and the rule of law, impacting health, security and governance (Nistotskaya et al., 2024).

The problem faced by the port of Rotterdam is not unique. Organised crime networks use corruption to facilitate trafficking into, through and out of ports across Europe. Ports in France (Marseille), Germany (Hamburg), Belgium (Antwerp), Italy (Gioia Tauro) and Spain (Valencia) face similar risks. It is an important problem that the Horizon Europe project [FALCON](#) (Fight Against Large-scale Corruption and Organised Crime Networks) aims to address. Law enforcement practitioners, social scientists and data analysis experts join forces in this project to innovate the fight against corruption by leveraging digital tools. This Working Paper is based on research that is part of and contributes towards the FALCON project.

The scale of the problem is significant. Half of Europe’s criminal networks are involved in drug trafficking, either alone or as part of other criminal activities. Crucially, over 70 percent of criminal networks use corruption to facilitate their illegal activities (Europol, 2024). A close examination of this phenomenon in the port of Rotterdam can provide some critical insights into:

- the drivers and aims of border corruption, giving attention to characterising the manner in which corruption deals are carried out and the goals that are pursued by engaging in them; and
- the adaptive nature of corruption in response to innovations aimed at enhancing efficiency and security at the borders.

This paper highlights the drivers and strategies of corruption (with a focus on public officials and specifically customs officials) as a facilitator of drug trafficking (with a focus on cocaine) in the Port of Rotterdam. It further considers the key challenges, opportunities and risks in efforts to address drug trafficking and border corruption. The analysis is based on a desk review, a review of drug-related corruption court cases and five interviews with key experts from academia and law enforcement (see Annex).



## **2 Facilitating factors of drug trafficking and drivers of border corruption**

### **2.1 Facilitating factors of trafficking through the port of Rotterdam**

#### **2.1.1 Modern infrastructure and high cargo volumes at ports**

The Port of Rotterdam is the largest port in Europe. It aims to become the world's safest, most efficient and most sustainable port (Port of Rotterdam Authority, n.d.-a). This is reflected in a modern logistical and digital infrastructure, allowing fast processing of cargo containers (Staring et al., 2019; Zürcher et al., 2024).

An important point is that trafficking takes place on the back of legal trade routes (Staring et al., 2019; Zürcher et al., 2024; Staring et al., 2023). Commercial ports are especially attractive because of the high cargo volumes they process and the possibility to conceal illicit cargo under licit cargo. It is more difficult to detect trafficking in the case of high transport volumes (Zaitch, 2002 as referenced in Eski and Buijt, 2017), and Rotterdam has deep water channels that allow large ships with many containers to dock (Zürcher et al., 2024).

#### **2.1.2 Spatial and operational complexity of ports**

The spatial and operational complexity of ports makes security a challenge.

The large physical size of the port of Rotterdam (over 12,500 ha), volume of goods (the cargo throughput is approximately 436 million tonnes of freight a year) and number of people working on its premises (approximately 1,400 employees work for the Port Authority alone) contribute to its vulnerability (Zürcher et al., 2024; Port of Rotterdam Authority, n.d.-b). The sheer size of the Rotterdam harbour means that it will never be totally secure (Staring et al., 2019).

This is further complicated by the fact that tensions may arise between security objectives and economic objectives in port operations – acting on suspicions of illicit activity may undermine efficiency (Costa et al., 2024). It is important to find a balance between these goals, which at times can be contradictory (Eski, 2019; Staring et al., 2019). This is especially the case in a port environment with many stakeholders and where promoting security is a shared responsibility (Staring et al., 2019). In this context, good partnerships, information sharing and robust investigation and enforcement capacity are critical but at the same time challenging (Government of the Netherlands, 2024; Spapens et al., 2021).

## 2.2 Drivers of border corruption

The Port's enforcement efforts have been bolstered by more political attention and resources, prompting criminal networks to increasingly target public officials in order to override more stringent detection measures.

Since the mid-1990s, the fight against organised crime and drug production/trafficking has been an important political topic in the Netherlands. More recently, there has been an important shift, as the hardening of crime is seen as having an increasingly negative impact on the rule of law and the democratic state (Government of the Netherlands, 2021). This is linked to an increased perception of the negative impact of drug-related crime (Spapens et al., 2021).

In 2021, the then government (Cabinet Rutte III) announced an extra EUR 524 million for tackling subversive crime (Government of the Netherlands, 2021). In 2024, the new government (Cabinet Schoof I) emphasised that security remains an important issue and that it would step up the fight against subversive crime by strengthening laws, detection, punishment, information exchange, the police and intelligence services, and tackling international criminal activity and related corruption (Government of the Netherlands, n.d.-a).

**Stronger political prioritisation and resources have resulted in the ability of the port of Rotterdam to strengthen its efforts to prevent and curb trafficking.** A focus has been on improving technology, digitisation and automation of processes (including the robotisation of container transport). Security is promoted through the use of modern technologies, such as "port keys", "digital safety passports" and "cargocards", which store biometric data of key players in the logistics chain, information on commercial vessels, containers and the companies that are behind the delivery and logistics (Oosting, 2016 as referenced in Staring et al., 2019).

Enforcement has been similarly strengthened. A key initiative is the Hit and Run Cargo (HARC) team, a partnership between Dutch Customs, the Public Prosecution Service, the Seaport Police and the Fiscal Information and Investigation Service (FIOD). The HARC team specialises in investigating and prosecuting drug smuggling and criminal networks and their activities in and around the port of Rotterdam. It was set up over 25 years ago specifically to combat drug trafficking in Rotterdam through joint intelligence gathering (Customs Administration of the Netherlands, n.d.-a; Netherlands Public Prosecution Service, n.d.). The HARC team is responsible for most of the drug seizures in the port (Staring et al., 2019).

## 2.3 More obstacles create greater need for corruption

As increased obstacles make trafficking more difficult, an increased need for corruption emerges.

Whereas previously the likelihood of drugs being detected was perceived as relatively low (Staring et al., 2019), this seems to have changed. The ability

to detect drugs has been strengthened through increased risk analysis and surveillance (Nelen and Kolthoff, 2017). For instance, in 1994, 0.1 percent of cargo was checked. By 2019, this had increased to 0.5 percent (Staring et al., 2019). This approach is paying off. In an interview in 2021, the head of the Seaport Police noted that intensified efforts were leading to more drug seizures (Port of Rotterdam Authority, 2021). Mid-2023 saw the largest drug seizure ever made (Netherlands Public Prosecution Service, 2023).

Now, the combined force of political prioritisation and strengthened detection and automation has increased the potential to disrupt drug trafficking. An unintended consequence is that from the perspective of the drug traffickers, having accomplices embedded inside the port operations has become increasingly important, if not indispensable. This has been recognised by the Dutch Public Prosecution Service and other sources (Roks et al., 2021; Sergi, 2020; KPMG, 2021; Staring et al., 2019, 2023; Netherlands Public Prosecution Service, 2025).

*“If everything works as it should, it is impossible to traffic drugs through the port. To do this, you need some inside help. There is always a corrupt insider who facilitates trafficking.”*

**Interview with a law enforcement stakeholder,**  
16 July 2024

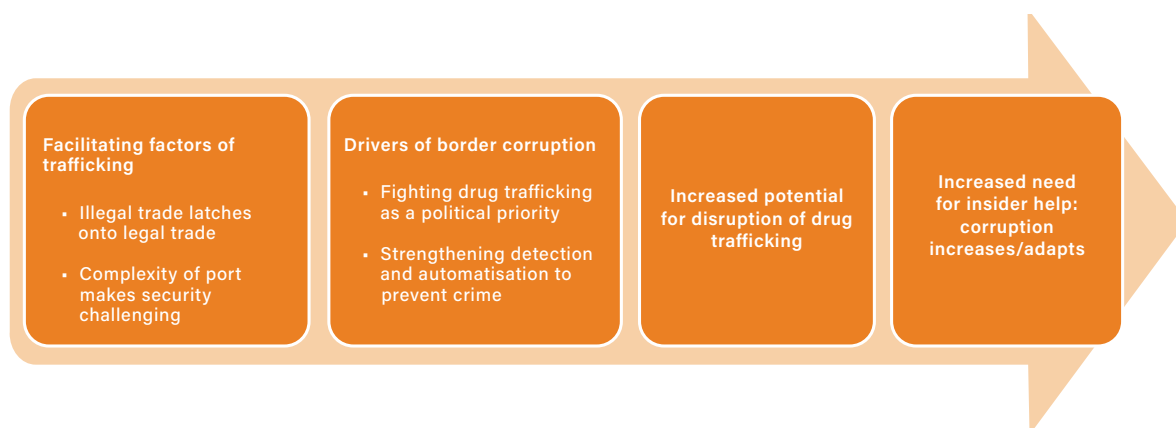


Figure 1: Intensified efforts to fight drug trafficking can lead to a rise in corruption risks.

## 3 Strategies of border corruption

### 3.1 Involvement of organised crime networks

Organised crime networks are involved in the illicit drug trade. A key modus operandi is that cocaine is trafficked by sea from Latin America (i.e. Ecuador, Peru, Venezuela, Colombia and Bolivia) to Europe via the port of Rotterdam. The Netherlands is predominantly a transit country. A common strategy is that the drugs latch onto fruit transports, which require swift processing (Staring et al., 2019; Trimbos Instituut, 2025).

The crime networks are ethnically heterogeneous and have “a small core and informal, flexible structures” (Staring et al., 2019). They have been likened to logistics companies in that they are organised as professional organisations which focus on security, transport and development. For specialised tasks, they can call on specific people or involve people with specific skills, such as money laundering (Staring et al., 2019, 2023).

Building trust and ensuring loyalty is important, so social ties such as family and friends can be a way of bringing people into the network. Robust and solid social connections can also form through shared social spaces, as well as through professional ties such as working together in the port (Staring et al., 2019, 2023). One example of this dynamic is that social ties between groups in the Netherlands and Latin America may help organised crime groups to connect across large geographical areas (Burt, 1992 as referenced in Madarie and Kruisbergen, 2019).

A researcher interviewed for this study suggests that there is no overarching criminal organisation that facilitates access to the port. Instead, different criminal networks have to find their way into and through the port by cultivating relevant relationships through bribery (interview of 5 April 2024). Research shows that several transnational criminal groups – including Italian, British, Albanian and Dutch groups – have cocaine distribution lines through the Netherlands to various countries (Dirksen et al., 2021). Even if their interests and goals differ, criminal networks cooperate (Costa, 2022).

The multidimensionality and fluidity of the cocaine trafficking networks make efforts at eliminating them inherently difficult, as illustrated by the case discussed in the box below.

#### **The case of Ridouan Taghi**

Ridouan Taghi, the leader of the largest drug cartel in the Netherlands, is a key figure in what is arguably the biggest drug trafficking operation in Europe. He was sentenced to life imprisonment in the Netherlands’

Marengo trial, which was the country's most prominent mass trial involving his criminal organisation.

At his peak, Taghi imported an estimated third of all the cocaine entering the Netherlands through Rotterdam's port. He worked with some of Europe's largest trafficking networks, including the Italian Camorra mafia and the Irish Kinahan crime group, and each group benefitted from the others' contacts. Taghi's deputy lived in Colombia and organised the export of cocaine to Europe, allegedly by buying it from the Gaitanistas (Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia).

Several other members of Taghi's network were arrested in Latin America, the Caribbean and in Suriname. Despite the arrest of the leader and others, the network and infrastructure established continued to allow the importation of cocaine. A former associate of Taghi, Leijdekkers, is said to have taken over the network and was found guilty in absentia of international cocaine trafficking and ordering an assassination.

(Sources: Held, 2024; Holligan, 2024; Booty and Bamford, 2025; NL Times, 2024a)

## 3.2 Crime networks and evolving corruption practices

Criminals use a variety of methods to move drugs into and through the port with the aim of ensuring that they will not be detected or confiscated. There are two major bottlenecks in the transit of drugs: getting the drugs into and out of the port. It is at these two points that trafficking most heavily relies on corruption to evade detection and monitoring (Staring, 2021; Madarie and Kruisbergen, 2019).

### 3.2.1 Aim of corruption: evading monitoring and surveillance

For organised crime networks to overcome bottlenecks in drug trafficking, to pass surveillance and get drugs out of the container and out of the port, they need information on logistical processes in the port.

While several public agencies are involved in fighting crime,<sup>1</sup> the role of customs stands out as they are tasked with monitoring the import and export of goods, making them crucial stakeholders in the fight against drug trafficking (Staring et al., 2019). The customs authority carries out a wide range of monitoring,

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<sup>1</sup> The Seaport Police is responsible for vessel surveillance, environmental enforcement, crime prevention and border control. The harbour master deals with the planning and approval of ships and provides inspections and enforcement in the field of environment and safety. The port terminals are responsible for the security of their own premises (Port of Rotterdam Authority, 2022).



signalling and investigative tasks (Port of Rotterdam Authority, 2022). Of the 7.5 million containers that pass through the port each year, 40,000 are scanned and 6,500 are opened, with checks based on risk profiles (Staring et al., 2019).

As detection activities are strengthened, the need for inside help increases, as do the risks for corrupt engagement of customs officers (KPMG, 2021). Customs officers become vulnerable to corruption because, by virtue of their position, they have important knowledge about processes and procedures, access to systems and discretionary power. Customs officers in strategic positions become a particular focus of attention: personnel with knowledge and authorisation to perform risk analyses, and those carrying out checks, such as scan analysts and sniffer dog handlers. As automation means that information is increasingly stored in databases, customs officers with access to these equally become key (KPMG, 2021).

### **3.2.2 Corruption to get drugs into the port**

To ensure drug shipments can get into the port and pass locations of surveillance, criminal actors use corruption to circumvent or avoid control. They bribe staff for knowledge about the logistics and monitoring process. This includes information about pre-arrival risk analyses, scheduled container checks and container locations, and confidential customs information regarding modus operandi of screenings and general weaknesses in the monitoring system. Bribery is similarly used to co-opt public officials who can help evade controls completely, for example by transferring drugs into safe containers that have already been checked or concealing discoveries (Staring et al., 2019).

The most infamous and illustrative corruption case involving drug trafficking through the port of Rotterdam involves a customs officer working as a selector in the pre-arrival section of customs. The official decided which containers would be checked and how. In return for bribes amounting to millions of euros, he would provide criminal groups involved in drug trafficking with information on the location and status of particular containers, and would ensure that certain containers were not checked. One way he did this was by marking a container as cleared, stating that the bill of lading had been requested and checked. The officer also provided information on risk profiles used in the selection process. In 2017, the official was sentenced to 14 years in prison (Roks et al., 2021; Staring et al., 2019; Sonnemans, 2017).

In another example, a customs official was bribed to provide information regarding confidential customs information, including modus operandi regarding the import and the screening of the sending and receiving companies (Judicial case 2019:1103).

Other examples of past corrupt acts by customs officers to evade monitoring and surveillance (see KPMG, 2021) include:

- falsely clearing containers for import without inspection;
- facilitating drugs to be moved to a container that has already been inspected;
- failing to (fully) inspect containers marked as high risk;
- designating many containers for inspection, thereby ensuring that there is not enough capacity to inspect a container containing drugs.

### 3.2.3 Corruption to get drugs out of the port

Corruption also facilitates the exit of drugs from the port. Officers can be bribed to provide information on container location, allow access to the port or the premises where the container is located, move containers to a place where drugs can be more easily extracted, or extract the drugs from the container themselves (Staring et al., 2019; KPMG, 2021).

This relates to two specific methods to remove drugs from containers:

- the “rip-off method”, where the drugs are removed from the container and out of the port before an inspection; and
- the “switch method” where the drugs are switched out to a container that has already passed inspection or is not planned for inspection.

As an example, in one case a customs official was accused of accepting a bribe to divert the physical shipment of a consignment outside the customs territory to the warehouse of the forwarding company involved in the shipment. In this case, 26 kilos of drugs were later found in the container (Judicial case 2019:1103).

### 3.2.4 Typology of corruption aims at border spaces

Across the above examples and cases, a typology of corruption aims at border spaces emerges. Corruption, and bribery in particular, permits criminal actors to obtain **key information** or **direct assistance** needed to pass through the **two main bottlenecks** in the port, the container screening and security as cargo enters the port, and the extraction of drugs from the port.

The key difference between information and direct assistance is the degree of active involvement of the customs official:

- Providing information – e.g. about the logistics and monitoring process – is a more indirect, passive involvement. It can help criminal networks prepare and conceal illicit cargo so it’s not detected.

- Direct help in avoiding detection or moving goods – e.g. clearing a container as compliant without inspection or opening the gate to provide access to port premises containing containers with hidden drugs – requires a more active collaboration.

|                             | Getting drugs into the port and past screenings and security  | Getting drugs safely out of the port  |
|-----------------------------|---|---|
| Obtaining information       | Corruption to obtain information from customs officials, e.g. on the criteria and red flags used by customs for cargo screening, and on how to hide drugs in containers to avoid detection. | Corruption to obtain information from customs officials, e.g. about the location of containers marked for full inspection to ensure that drugs can be removed beforehand.       |
| Obtaining direct assistance | Corruption to get direct help from customs officials to avoid detection of the drugs.<br><br>E.g. Official ensures a specific container is not checked for illegal content.                 | Corruption to get customs officials to facilitate the extraction of the drugs.<br><br>E.g. Official provides illegal access to port premises so criminals can secure the drugs. |

Figure 2: Typology of corruption aims at border spaces.

## 4 Corruption networks: collusion, coercion and infiltration

### 4.1 Building corruption networks

A key theme in this research is the networked nature of crime. Criminal networks often exploit social networks – i.e. networks within the informal and social spheres – to cut across the public and private divide. These social networks are primarily strategic – they are built to facilitate trafficking. Trust and loyalty are crucial, so criminal networks may turn to family and friends where possible. But even without such pre-existing personal ties, officials can be co-opted, and sociality then built up, for example through the reciprocal and repeated exchange of bribes. The ultimate goal is to build a relationship that includes the social elements of expectation of reciprocity, obligation to the group and loyalty (Basel Institute on Governance, 2024; Jancsics and Costa, 2024; Baez-Camargo et al., 2023; Costa, 2022).

On the basis of the conceptual model by David Jancsics, we can broadly characterise the corrupt relationships that emerge between officials and criminal organisations as either collusive or coercive. In collusive relationships, the engagement between the public official and the criminal organisation is framed as mutually beneficial (offering/selling information or providing direct help). In contrast, coercive relationships involve pressure or threats, where the public official is forced to cooperate and provide information or help (Jancsics, 2019; Abdou et al., 2024).

### 4.2 Collusion

Customs officials may offer their services or be lured into collusion by criminals. Motivations are complex. Customs officials in financial difficulty are more likely to become involved with organised crime groups, but corrupt behaviour may also be driven by a desire for a more adventurous or luxurious lifestyle (KPMG, 2021; Nelen and Kolthoff, 2017).

Collusion can be opportunistic or targeted. Because trust is so important in an illicit arrangement, a key *modus operandi* is to enlist accomplices opportunistically from existing social networks, for example via family connections, involvement in sports clubs or having attended the same schools. A more targeted approach may involve identifying customs officials, establishing contact with them outside the work environment and attempting to co-opt them into the criminal network through bribery (KPMG, 2021).

Because criminals employ and proactively build their social networks, it is common for criminals and customs officials to know each other. Strong bonds within family and friendship networks and norms of solidarity may in turn exert

informal pressure on the official to help and remain loyal, thus reinforcing incentives for the abuse of power (KPMG, 2021; Nelen and Kolthoff, 2017).

In relation to the port of Rotterdam, Staring et al. (2023) highlight that family and friendship ties are important factors that facilitate co-optation, but the most important factor is access to and knowledge of the port and control systems. The mixing of professional embeddedness and social networks, and opportunistic and targeted co-optation is highlighted in some recent corruption cases involving customs officials and drug trafficking:

In one case, a customs officer was approached by two men involved in large-scale drug smuggling through his wife's brother. During a meeting at a petrol station on the motorway, the two men told the customs official that they wanted to work together (van Gestel, 2019). Another case involved a trafficker approaching the son of a customs official to provide information on containers, who in turn sought the information from his mother (Netherlands Public Prosecution Service, 2024a). This shows that vulnerability to corruption can extend beyond the public official to their family and friends.

It is expected that the use of social networks of family and friends or online platforms such as social media to establish connection with officials will increase. Criminal networks analyse publicly available information on officials' work and private lives to assess potential targets. In response, a key measure of the Rotterdam port's anti-corruption approach is to advise officials not to post work-related photos on social media, as this can make them a target for criminal organisations (Rotterdamse Haven Veilige Haven, n.d.).

Another tactic is to target and develop ties with multiple officers simultaneously, in order to spread opportunities and risks. A case involving a customs official illustrates this strategic targeting: the official provided a criminal organisation with a list of the names and contact details of fellow customs officials working on scanning containers (Judicial case 2020:12597).

### 4.3 Coercion

Customs officials can also be coerced into corrupt activity. They may be initially lured with a financial reward but intimidation and the threat of violence can ensure continued cooperation (KPMG, 2021; Sergi, 2020; Europol, 2023). In this regard, Rotterdam's head of the Seaport Police discussed the threat of violence and intimidation to provide information to criminal networks, saying: "If you don't say yes the first time, when you're in the shop doing your shopping, they'll throw it into your cart again and maybe try a third time to offer you the money."



There are [also] cases, of course, [where] then they tell people, 'We know where your kids are going to school.'" (May and Holcova, 2023).

Coercion is a dynamic issue. On the one hand, Staring et al. (2023) highlight in their analysis of 10 drug-related cases in the port that excessive violence is "less emphatically and naturally present". On the other, research also shows that organised crime has hardened over the years, increasingly using violence and intimidating public officials (Nelen and Kolthoff, 2017).

Intimidation is achieved through blackmail, threat of violence against the officer or their family or creating financial pressures by offering attractive loans (KPMG, 2021). For example, in one case, an official working for the tax agency provided sensitive personal information to members of a crime group involved in drug trafficking who could then use this information to put the targeted person under pressure to comply (Judicial case 2020:1295).

It is important to recognise that the actual boundaries between collusion and coercion are blurred. Rather than seeing collusion and coercion as separate phenomena, it is better to see them on a continuum, with at one extreme the public official offering and selling information and at the other extreme the criminal actor extorting cooperation through the use of force. Within this continuum, there are various degrees of collusion and coercion. What remains constant is the power imbalance, the exchange of resources for assistance and the relationship's longevity.

## 4.4 Infiltration

Infiltration takes the dynamics of collusion and coercion a step further by completely erasing the boundary between public and private power. It occurs when an individual closely associated with or directly involved in illicit activities proactively acquires the formal position of a public official. Criminals may attempt to infiltrate public and private offices in the port area and embed themselves into the community of personnel through formal employment processes. This provides an opportunity to obtain and share relevant information, establish links with others in the port and, if promoted to a higher position, ensure that other members of the criminal network join the organisation.

There are documented examples of people associated with criminal groups being sent to police or customs training programmes with the specific aim of making a career in these organisations (KPMG, 2021; Europol, 2023). Through long-term strategies such as these, criminal networks can enlarge and conceal their reach into public office by leveraging social capital (Costa, 2017).

In one interview, a researcher suggested that infiltration is the most worrying form of corruption because it is more structural and invisible, and it reduces

the risk of being caught. It transgresses the boundaries between the criminal, public and private. In the long term and in its more extreme and structural forms, infiltration may look less like corruption and more like regulatory capture, where the public office position is held by a member of the criminal network. This means that a system is created or manipulated to work every single time, without the need of bribery or other forms of influence, but through the legal channels (interview of 5 April 2024).

Another researcher noted that infiltration is still poorly understood because it is mistakenly assumed that it occurs only in settings with weak governance. It is essential to gain a deeper understanding of this kind of long-term and strategic investment – which differs greatly from one-off and opportunistic engagement – if efforts to understand and curb border corruption are to succeed (interview of 12 April 2024).

A court case (Judicial case 2020:12597) involving an intercepted conversation between a customs official and a member of a criminal organisation illustrates how infiltration can unfold. The customs officer had previously worked in the pre-arrival department, which is responsible for organising maritime inspections of incoming cargo traffic, but no longer held that function. The member of the criminal network explained that he had organised every aspect of a drug import, except how to bypass the container scan. He suggested that the customs officer should try to resume work in this department, find a relevant connection there, or even apply for other positions relevant to container scanning. If she succeeded, he said, she would have “gold” in her hands, promising EUR 1 million for each successful job. It was found that the customs official did potentially try to assist, as a printed list of the names of officials working in the scanning section was found at her home.

This example shows how collusion, coercion and infiltration cutting across the public-private divide can blend together in practice. The criminal entices the official with the promise of money, while at the same time pressuring her to explore ways to rejoin the scanning team. In doing this, he attempts to strategically position her to help the criminal network to avoid inspections, or to provide information on who might be involved in the container scanning position. The lure of financial gain is key, but other forms of pressure are not excluded. The overarching observation is that networked corruption is multifaceted and adaptive. Moreover, once cooperation is established, the corrupt relationships are long-lasting.

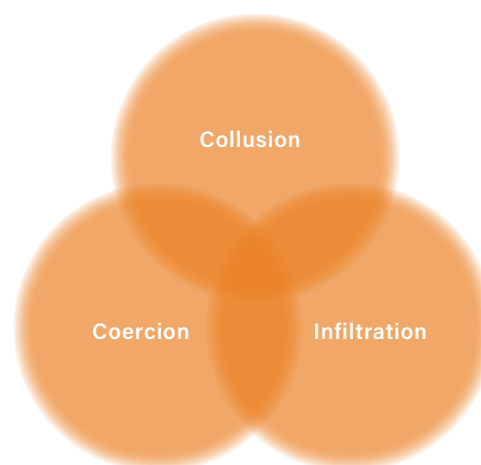


Figure 3: The lines between collusion, coercion and infiltration are often blurred.

## 5 Bribery and money laundering

This section focuses on understanding the private gains associated with border corruption. The guiding question was simple: how do public officials receive a bribe and how do they launder the proceeds? To gain clarity on this question, an analysis was conducted of judicial cases (published online at [rechtspraak.nl](https://uitspraken.rechtspraak.nl/), the website of the courts, appeal courts and special courts in the Netherlands). The focus was on ongoing or completed cases involving bribery of public officials working in the port, including both acquittals and sanctions. The following search terms were used to identify relevant cases:

- An all-fields search with the keywords “corruption Rotterdam harbour” and “customs” combined with a content indication search for “money laundering” resulted in 13 cases.<sup>2</sup>
- A search with the keywords “corruption” and “customs” in the content indication field alone resulted in two additional cases.<sup>3</sup>

The analysis aimed to provide insights into the dynamics of bribery and the money laundering strategies involved, with a focus on bribes made to the public officials, and how that money is hidden and used. Often, the flows and strategies overlap (Abdou et al., 2024). Research shows that, in contexts where criminal networks are pervasive, earning a good salary is not sufficient to discourage corrupt behaviour (Baryal, Patang and Sharaf, 2022; Chalendar et al., 2023; Chêne, 2018; McLinden and Durrani, 2013).

### 5.1 Bribe payments in line with the high profits of drug trafficking

The large profit involved in drug trafficking means that bribes can be very high, too. A report from Europol (2023) shows that bribes are often hundreds of thousands of euros, with the highest amounts paid to those in critical roles – either in kind with a part of the cargo load or as a percentage of the drug value.

In the port of Rotterdam, similar patterns are observed. In fact, the bribes may be even higher, reaching into the millions. Public officials are promised or given a financial gift (private gain) with the understanding that they will abuse their power, by providing information, doing something or failing to act. Bribes are given in various forms, one of which is money.

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2 Search results at [uitspraken.rechtspraak.nl](https://uitspraken.rechtspraak.nl/resultaat?zoekterm=corruptie%20rotterdam%20haven,douane,witwassen&inhoudsindicatie=zt0,zt0,zt2&publicatiestatus=ps1&sort=Relevance): <https://uitspraken.rechtspraak.nl/resultaat?zoekterm=corruptie%20rotterdam%20haven,douane,witwassen&inhoudsindicatie=zt0,zt0,zt2&publicatiestatus=ps1&sort=Relevance>, accessed on 24 April 2024.

3 Search results at [uitspraken.rechtspraak.nl](https://uitspraken.rechtspraak.nl/resultaat?zoekterm=douane,corruptie&inhoudsindicatie=zt2,zt2&publicatiestatus=ps1&sort=Relevance): <https://uitspraken.rechtspraak.nl/resultaat?zoekterm=douane,corruptie&inhoudsindicatie=zt2,zt2&publicatiestatus=ps1&sort=Relevance>, accessed on 24 April 2024.

For example, in one case a customs official working as a selector in the pre-arrival department of customs allegedly supported a criminal network to traffic drugs through the port. The official is accused of accepting gifts ranging from half a million to almost a million euro, promises of future gifts amounting to EUR 3 million, or a sum equal to 7.5 percent of the value of cocaine in containers (Judicial case 2017:5125).

In another case involving a member of a criminal network trafficking drugs through the port, the defendant stated that the payments amount to “two million for the strepen [custom officials] and half a million for the business, logistics and ‘the guys who unload the stuff, the stashes’” (Judicial case 2020:1295). Bribes can also be paid in different forms, such as in drugs or assets (Judicial case 2023:15351).

## 5.2 Social and financial strategies for money laundering

Regardless of the form a bribe is paid in, the proceeds must be integrated into the financial system without attracting attention. This is where money laundering strategies become essential. Cash is king and a necessity. Criminal money is linked to cash, not only because bribes are commonly paid in cash, but because using cash helps to avoid detection in a context of increasing banking surveillance. In the Netherlands, *giro* accounts are closely monitored. There was even an initiative – ultimately rejected – to monitor all transactions of over EUR 100 (Bolsius, 2022). This surveillance pushes corrupt actors to adapt by prioritising physical cash or employing elaborate strategies to launder their proceeds.

Money laundering is about obscuring the illicit origin of money with intent. For example, in one case, a customs official in Rotterdam was accused of habitual money laundering of various sums totalling almost EUR 700,000 (Judicial case 2019:1103).

The cases reviewed illustrate three important strategies in money laundering:

1. The illicit origin of the money is disguised by making it appear to come from a licit source.
2. The money is hidden with the help of family and friends or the inner circle, and/or by enlisting the help of professional specialists.
3. The money is hidden at home in cash or invested in assets and businesses in the Netherlands or abroad.

The first strategy is to **make it seem as if the bribe money has a legal origin**. The cases reviewed show that, when money laundering suspects are found with unexplained funds, they are asked to explain the money’s source – regardless of whether the exact amount of the bribe is known. There are two main responses:

either suspects refuse to answer or they provide explanation for all or part of the money, which can lead to other charges such as tax evasion.

For example, in a case involving a corrupt customs agent working at the port of Rotterdam, the accused claimed that the excess money came from various sources: his mother, online second-hand sales, casino or lottery winnings (in the order of a few thousand euros), and regular gifts from his father – a one-off donation, and cash money that was spent on domestic help and food payments (Judicial case 2019:1103).

In another case the accused explained the money's origin as having come from: winning the lottery, business activities (cafes or thrift shops) and paid work (Judicial case 2022:5588).

The second strategy is to **hide bribe money with the help of trusted networks and/or professional specialists**. Both cash and bank-based funds can be hidden with family members, friends or those who are part of the criminal network. These individuals “keep” the money for the public official (Judicial case 2020:1295).

More elaborate concealment may involve enlisting the support of professional enablers to move money out of the Netherlands. Lawyers or financial specialists can play an important role in facilitating money laundering.

For example, a recent case reported by Dutch media shows how an underworld banker used “encrypted communications to manage a courier network in the Netherlands, moving nearly a quarter of a billion euros in cash for criminals between June 2020 and March 2021” (NL Times, 2024b).

Interviews with stakeholders confirm that money is moved out of the Netherlands using networks of underground banking and/or money mules (interviews of 4 April 2024, 5 April 2024, 12 April 2024 and 16 July 2024).

The third strategy is to **hide cash or convert cash into assets**. Cash may be hidden at home or in safes, exchanged for other currencies or invested in assets and businesses (Judicial case 2020:918).



Examples include:

- Buying luxury items such as expensive watches. In 2023 the Hit and Run Cargo (HARC) team seized more value in luxury designer clothes and accessories than cash (Netherlands Public Prosecution Service, 2024b).
- Investing in high-value assets such as (vacation) houses, cars and boats, in the Netherlands or abroad. In 2024, HARC confiscated over half a million euros in cars and boats (as well as over EUR 400,000 in cash) (Netherlands Public Prosecution Service, 2025).
- Investing in businesses in the Netherlands or abroad, which may involve complex financial structures, or purchasing cryptocurrencies. Financial advisers may assist in establishing business structures that allow money from illegal and legal sources to be mixed (Unger et al., 2018; Pol, 2016).

Cash purchases are restricted in the Netherlands. For example, one cannot buy a house with cash, and transactions above EUR 10,000 should trigger a client investigation (Government of the Netherlands, n.d.-b). To tighten the rules even further, a new law is in the making to lower the maximum allowed cash payment to EUR 3,000 (Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal, 2022). Nevertheless, Unger et al. (2018) find that high-value goods can still be acquired with cash by paying an additional 10–20 percent of the value to avoid the purchase being reported.

Criminals find ways to creatively avoid the rules. This not only undermines the intent of the legislation but also enables a steady stream of illicit money to infiltrate the Dutch economy. The impact is significant: of EUR 13 billion in laundered money generated in the Netherlands in 2014, 53 percent, or EUR 6.9 billion, remains in the Netherlands. These funds are then laundered into the formal economy, frequently with the assistance of financial advisors (Unger, et al. 2018). Beyond the economic impact, the key point of concern is that crime money can be used to finance further crime and, by extension, undermines the rule of law and the democratic state.

## 6 Adaptive criminal and corruption strategies to facilitate drug trafficking

### 6.1 Trafficking and corruption strategies follow the path of least resistance

Trafficking and corruption strategies are not static. An important insight from this study is that criminal and corrupt strategies used to facilitate drug trafficking are highly adaptive, multifaceted and change quickly in response to increased enforcement efforts (Interview of 5 April 2024). Critically, criminal activity will follow the path of least resistance (Costa et al., 2023). This means that when met with obstacles, illicit and corrupt activities will:

- move to different spaces and use different routes (Augustova and Suber 2023);
- become more creative and more difficult to detect (Ortiz 2021); and/or
- involve new actors and functions via corruption and bribes (Europol, 2023).

The underlying driver of this adaptability is the unchanging demand for drugs and the high profitability of the crime. This incentivises traffickers to adopt new strategies to overcome hurdles in supplying the demand. In one interview, a law enforcement stakeholder noted that both drug production and demand are rising, and with them, the profits to be made (interview of 16 July 2024). The falling price of cocaine is another signal of its ready availability (NL Times, 2025).

### 6.2 Corruption strategies are adaptive

At the port of Rotterdam, increased political attention and resources to combat trafficking have led to enhanced detection systems and technology. These efforts have raised the risk of detection for traffickers, making the co-optation of public officials to override the stricter controls more appealing.

#### 6.2.1 Stronger detection systems increase the incentives for and risk of corruption

The unintended consequence of strengthened controls is that criminals become more reliant on inside help to facilitate trafficking (Staring et al., 2019). This is complex to measure. A study testing whether more effective detection and enforcement actors are more susceptible to corruption was unable to robustly confirm the hypothesis (Rovers and Moors, 2019). In addition, comparing the number of cases of corruption that facilitated drug trafficking over time can be misleading as not all cases are detected. Moreover, in an interview, one

researcher also highlighted that our knowledge of corruption comes from criminal investigation reports. Consequently, corruption that goes undetected remains a blind spot (interview of 12 April 2024).

The prevailing consensus nevertheless is that corruption risks in relation to drug trafficking are increasing. On the one hand, as the desk research highlights, this is because strengthened enforcement makes having an accomplice on the inside necessary. On the other hand, as one of stakeholder interview suggests, if everything works as it should, it is impossible to traffic drugs through the port. Conversely, when seizures are made, it indicates that corruption has played a part somewhere in the process. In line with this, Zürcher et al. (2024) identify bribery of law enforcement officers as the most significant drug-related corruption risk at the port. The FALCON project's examination of 19 border-corruption cases further highlights that corrupt actors are primarily motivated by the desire to secure illicit advantage or to conceal illegal activity (Paternoster et al., 2024).

### **6.2.2 Corruption adapts to the adoption of new systems and processes**

While corruption may increase, it can also change: when systems become more efficient or digitised, criminal actors are also incentivised to change their corruption strategies. According to one law enforcement stakeholder, corruption has not increased, rather we are only now seeing the true extent of the problem, with corruption changing (interview of 4 April 2024). The person explained that border corruption used to mean bribing a single guard at a border crossing. Today, increasing efficiency, automation and digitalisation make that one person at the barrier irrelevant. In a port like Rotterdam, where everything is automated, corruption must evolve to target other officials, such as those with access to systems or information. "If you make the process more complex, corruption changes", and generates new vulnerabilities.

### **6.2.3 Corruption risks profiles adapt to new control measures and shift among public officials**

To overcome the bottlenecks in the port and facilitate the movement of drugs, criminal actors depend on insider knowledge of the logistical processes in the port. As controls are strengthened, including through automation, the corruption risk profiles of border staff also change. Criminal networks adapt by targeting officials with strategic knowledge and access. Customs officials are particularly important, as they monitor the import and export of goods and are key players in the fight against drug trafficking. As enforcement efforts increase, these officials become more vulnerable to corruption.

Increased awareness of this risk, partly due to reports of corruption cases, has prompted more efforts to protect customs officials from the influence of criminal organisations. For example, in 2013, a programme called *Integere Haven* brought the municipality, public prosecutor, police, customs, *Deltalinqs*

(the port entrepreneurs' association) and the port authority together to promote integrity and professional behaviour in the port, amongst other things (Staring et al., 2019).

Authorities have developed stronger anti-corruption measures and reduced the discretionary power of those in high-risk positions, such as customs officials. As a result, bribing and co-opting people in these positions becomes less attractive to criminal networks (KPMG, 2021). But when barriers increase in one area, corruption risks may once again shift to a new group.

#### 6.2.4 Corruption morphs, blurring the lines between collusion, coercion and infiltration

Corruption is functional and strategic – it helps criminal actors to solve problems and get things done. The nature of these corrupt engagements can take various forms, such as collusion, coercion and/or infiltration. Our research has found that as increased enforcement efforts raise incentives for corruption to facilitate trafficking, and given the relative power of criminal networks, the line between collusion and coercion can become blurred. If the promise of riches is ineffective in luring public officials, then threats and coercion can be used to increase pressure.

Coercion puts officials in a lose-lose situation. If they refuse to cooperate, they may face threats from criminal networks; and if they comply with the criminal demands, they could be punished by the legal system for engaging in corruption. At the same time, officials can plausibly claim coercion even if they colluded willingly, which can complicate enforcement.

The issue is further complicated by infiltration, which collapses the boundary between public office and the criminal network. Collusion and coercion can result in public officials being co-opted. Infiltration takes this to a next level by planting members of the criminal network into public office positions.



Figure 4: Corruption adapts in the face of changing enforcement.

## 6.3 Trafficking strategies are equally adaptive

### 6.3.1 Strengthened detection has impacted the number of drug seizures

Efforts to combat drug trafficking at the port of Rotterdam have been intensified through enhanced detection and advanced technology. Now, for example, all shipping containers from Latin America are checked. Initially, stronger measures to counter drug trafficking led to more drug seizures (Port of Rotterdam Authority, 2021). However, in 2024 and 2025 the number of seizures dropped. Authorities equally attribute the decline to strengthened enforcement measures against drug trafficking. Similar patterns are emerging in the larger north-west European seaports (Customs Administration of the Netherlands, 2024; Appleby, 2024; European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction and Europol, 2024; Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, 2024).

At first glance, one might think that the strengthened enforcement measures were successful in reducing drug trafficking. This could potentially be the case, but it may also be a premature conclusion. With consistently high demand for drugs on the market, drug trafficking is unlikely to decrease.

Another explanation may be that, as the risk of detection increased, criminal networks have adapted their trafficking strategies in response to the increased hurdles, resulting in fewer numbers of seizures with time.

There are two broad ways in which criminals may have adapted their strategies:

- Changing concealment strategies
- Changing modes of transport and switching trafficking routes altogether

*“The criminals always find the weakest spot.”*

Interview with a law enforcement stakeholder, 16 July 2024

### 6.3.2 Changing concealment strategies

#### Evolving concealment methods

Concealment strategies are becoming increasingly sophisticated. Recent drug seizures have seen cocaine uncovered in places more original than fruit shipments, for example, in shipments of scrap metal, wooden beams, engines, furniture, batches of spirits or timber. More intricate strategies have also been seen, including hiding drugs in the flaps of boxes of bananas, or embedding kilos of cocaine in thousands of individual boxes in a telescopic crane from South America (Netherlands Public Prosecution Service, 2025; Rotterdamse Haven Veilige Haven 2024).

One interviewer also spoke about cocaine being washed into clothes or mixed with coal or oil (interview of 16 July 2024). In a recent online interview, the head of the Seaport Police explains that liquid cocaine is especially difficult to detect:



it cannot be identified by x-ray scanners or sniffer dogs, and confirming its presence can take up to two weeks in a lab (Dalby, 2024).

### **Spreading the risks with smaller but more shipments**

Although the total amount of cocaine seized has decreased at the port of Rotterdam, interestingly, the number of shipments intercepted has actually increased slightly. A possible explanation hints at another change in concealment strategies: trafficking networks are spreading the risk by smuggling smaller quantities in more shipments, in a strategy known as “shrinkage” (Netherlands Public Prosecution Service, 2025; Minchin, 2025).

## **6.3.3 Changing modes of transport and trafficking routes**

### **Shifting modes of transport to avoid detection**

A new initiative at the port of Rotterdam seeks to make it more difficult for criminal networks to obtain the container reference codes needed to pick up containers (Europol, 2023). This initiative called the “Chain of Trust” was developed by both government and industry actors to improve digital security of port logistics and reduce opportunities for fraud, particularly for truck-based transport (Vertrouwensketen, n.d.).<sup>4</sup> The aim is to ensure that the process of picking up import containers and transferring them onto trucks will be more closely monitored, so that only the authorised person is picking up the container.

However pick-up via truck is not the only way that containers are collected and transported out of the port. One stakeholder suggested that, as truck transport is more closely monitored, traffickers potentially shift to trains. This is supported by an increase in the number of broken seals found around railway tracks (interview of 4 April 2024).

### **Rerouting trafficking to other Dutch ports**

An increase in drug seizures at smaller ports in the Netherlands suggests the possibility that trafficking is being rerouted. It is unclear whether this links directly to increased enforcement measures in Rotterdam or is a separate phenomenon (Netherlands Public Prosecution Service, 2025; Van der Wiele, 2024).

### **International displacement of trafficking routes**

The most significant adaptive strategy appears to be diverting drug trafficking to ports and transit points in other countries. As barriers increase in the northern ports of Antwerp, Rotterdam and Hamburg making these ports less attractive, trafficking routes are shifting towards southern points in France, Spain and Portugal, where drug seizures are increasing (Cavalari et al., 2025; Fernández, 2024).

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4 Other complementary measures include reducing the notice period for customs controls and speeding up the implementation of such controls to prevent drugs from being removed from the container beforehand (Customs Administration of the Netherlands, n.d.-b).

Similarly, transit routes are shifting, with drugs destined for Europe being transported from Latin America through transit ports in North and West Africa (Cavalari et al., 2025).

This adaptation strategy underscores the importance of international cooperation on security and fighting crime (Staring et al., 2023).



Figure 5: Strengthened enforcement also changes trafficking strategies.

## 6.4 The problem with understanding hidden and complex corruption and crime strategies

The research highlights that drug trafficking is driven by supply and demand. As long as demand is not addressed, supply remains highly profitable. The consequences are significant. Increased barriers to drug trafficking in the port of Rotterdam have increased the need for inside help to facilitate trafficking (Staring et al., 2019). The dynamics of this corruption are complex: corruption risks rise, corruption goals and targets may change, and corruption practices may morph from collusion to coercion to infiltration. Meanwhile, traffickers adapt their strategies in terms of concealment methods and trafficking routes.

There are two overarching considerations. First, **understanding the impact of stronger anti-trafficking measures on corruption and crime strategies is very complex**. A discussion with a law enforcement stakeholder highlights the challenge of interpreting what it means when drug seizures are down: it could be a temporary drop, it could mean that fewer drugs are being shipped through the port of Rotterdam or that concealment methods have changed (interview of 16 July 2024). Fluctuations in the drug seizure figure alone are not an indicator of the scale of the drug trafficking problem, nor of the success of stronger enforcement efforts, as there may be many explanations at play (Staring et al., 2023). The same challenge applies when measuring corruption: the number of reported corruption cases does not accurately reflect the actual prevalence of corruption.

Both drug trafficking and corruption are measured by detection, for instance, through changes in the number of drug seizures or public officials caught engaging in corruption. But the elephant in the room is that increasingly sophisticated criminal strategies can hide the real picture.

Is a drop in seizure figures an indicator that trafficking has been rerouted? Or is the same volume still passing through the port with more sophisticated concealment and corruption strategies? Are adaptive strategies mutually exclusive or layered? Are they used in parallel, or is one activated only when the other has not proven feasible? Are trafficking routes really this elastic?

These questions underscore the need to continuously strengthen our ability to detect the “red flags” of corruption and trafficking. Data-driven tools to characterise risk indicators are critical to understanding how crime and corruption strategies may be adapting (Abdou et al., 2024; Cascone et al., n.d.).

The second consideration is that **both trafficking and corruption strategies are constantly evolving**. This is often likened to a chess game: enforcement makes a move, the criminal networks adapt. But what seems to be emerging is more troubling. The unintended consequence of increasing barriers to drug trafficking – in a context where demand remains unchanged – is that it fuels increasingly sophisticated crime and corruption strategies that may have a greater negative impact on society. This is reflected in several key developments:

1. The recent fall in the price of cocaine, attributed to a flooding of European markets. Seizures are increasingly considered as a cost of doing business – as pre-calculated loss (O’Keeffe, 2023).
2. The hardening of crime and increasing violence associated with drug trafficking (Halsema, 2024).
3. A shift in corruption practices, where the need to secure inside help can now incentivise coercion or deeper infiltration.
4. The growing role of legitimate businesses and services in helping criminals evade detection and launder the proceeds of crime (Government of the Netherlands, n.d.-a).

These developments underscore the need for strategic foresight. Anticipating how crime may adapt in unexpected ways to changing anti-corruption and anti-trafficking strategies is critical to the development of more robust enforcement efforts and the mitigation of negative impacts on society.

## 6.5 Practitioner insights on how to deal with the adaptive nature of crime

A key topic of discussion in stakeholder interviews was how best to respond to the adaptive nature of crime. These were the main ideas, complemented by further insights from desk research:

- **The need for a holistic view of crime.** As crime and corruption adapt, it is important to have a broad understanding of the problem. This includes recognising how smuggling can shift to other ports, utilise other modes of transport, or involve different actors. It also means a broader perception and understanding of corruption (interview of 26 March 2024).
- **A focus on vulnerabilities.** It is important to understand present and future vulnerabilities in logistics processes and strategic positions to increase port resilience rather than reacting to specific incidents. This can also improve efficiency and security (interviews of 4 April and 16 July 2024).
- **Using data smartly.** Understanding the flow of goods and profiling it in a way that can highlight anomalies is critical (interviews of 4 April, 5 April and 12 April 2024). At the same time, a focus on big data should not come at the expense of intuition, practical experience and evaluating past successes and failures (interview of 12 April 2024).
- **Building partnerships.** Cooperation, collaboration and information sharing among all public and private stakeholders and enforcement actors is crucial. Strengthening resilience to crime must be a shared goal. The complexity of the port means that security can only be achieved with multi-stakeholder partnerships, characterised by trust, communication and shared commitment to pursuing port-centric efforts (interviews of 4 April, 12 April and 16 July 2024).
- **Strengthening strategic foresight.** Technology is a double-edged sword – by the time it is adopted, it may already be outdated (interview of 5 April 2024). It is also important to look ahead and see that as one area of operations becomes more secure through enhanced processes, criminals may shift the target for corruption (interview of 4 April 2024).

- **The need for robust IT security/cybersecurity.** An additional issue to keep in mind is that technology and automation create new vulnerabilities, for example, through cybercrime (Staring et al., 2023). A recent case highlights the challenge. Drug traffickers hired a hacker to infiltrate the port IT network in Rotterdam and Antwerp to identify the optimal shipping containers for hiding contraband and their exact location (May and Holcova, 2023).

## 7 Conclusion

This report examines the drivers and strategies of corruption as a facilitator of drug trafficking (with a focus on cocaine) in the port of Rotterdam. It shows that in the context of stronger anti-trafficking measures and unchanged demand for drugs, crime and corruption strategies follow the path of least resistance.

Corruption is both strategic and functional. Social networks are built and nurtured strategically to facilitate corrupt exchanges. These networks are instrumental because trust and loyalty are important in hiding illegal behaviour. Corruption is diverse and complex, ranging from bribery and coercion to infiltration. Once established, corrupt relationships are long-lasting.

A network view of corruption is critical to understanding the evolution of corrupt practices and strategies adopted to bribe public officials and launder the proceeds of crime. The money involved in these drug trafficking schemes is in the millions, so the strategies for laundering the proceeds are sophisticated. Strengthening financial investigations in drug trafficking investigations is therefore critical, as is the introduction of innovative measures such as non-conviction-based confiscation (Zürcher et al., 2024).

Our research shows that both corruption and trafficking strategies are not static but rather adaptive. Increasing the barriers to drug trafficking can intensify corruption risks, change the aims and targets of corruption, and cause the characteristics of corruption to morph from collusion, to coercion or infiltration. Similarly, trafficking strategies adapt, from changing concealment strategies to changing modes of transport and using alternative trafficking routes. These in turn can increase corruption risks in other ports.

Consequently, continuously strengthening a system of red flags with refined data to better characterise risk indicators is critical to enhancing efforts to curb drug trafficking. So too is leveraging anticipatory governance through strategic foresight and scenario building. Thinking about future risks helps us to implement more robust countermeasures today.

This is vital, as understanding how trafficking and corruption strategies adapt in response to increased enforcement efforts is complex, and the effects of adaptive crime strategies place ever-increasing costs to society.



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## Judicial cases

|            |   |
|------------|---|
| 2017:5125  | <p>Judgment of the Rotterdam District Court in Case number ROT 10/750163-14, 4 July 2017.</p> <p>Summary: A customs officer in the port of Rotterdam is accused of accepting bribes that facilitated the import of large quantities of cocaine, as well as laundering the money earned from this.</p> <p><a href="https://uitspraken.rechtspraak.nl/details?id=ECLI:NL:RBROT:2017:5125&amp;showbutton=true&amp;keyword=corruptie%2Brotterdam%2Bhaven,douane,witwassen&amp;idx=1">https://uitspraken.rechtspraak.nl/details?id=ECLI:NL:RBROT:2017:5125&amp;showbutton=true&amp;keyword=corruptie%2Brotterdam%2Bhaven,douane,witwassen&amp;idx=1</a> s into t</p>   |
| 2019:1103  | <p>Judgment of the Rotterdam District Court in Case number 10/996540-15, 14 February 2019.</p> <p>Summary: A customs official is accused of accepting bribes to facilitate drugs trafficking and associated money laundering and was sentenced to two years in prison.</p> <p><a href="https://uitspraken.rechtspraak.nl/details?id=ECLI:NL:RBROT:2019:1103&amp;showbutton=true&amp;keyword=corruptie%2Brotterdam%2Bhaven,douane,corruptie&amp;idx=1">https://uitspraken.rechtspraak.nl/details?id=ECLI:NL:RBROT:2019:1103&amp;showbutton=true&amp;keyword=corruptie%2Brotterdam%2Bhaven,douane,corruptie&amp;idx=1</a></p>   |
| 2020:918   | <p>Judgment of the Court of Appeal in The Hague in Case number 22-003159-17, 18 May 2020.</p> <p>Summary: The defendant was convicted of, among other things, bribing a customs official, conspiracy to import narcotics and preparatory acts in that regard, as well as laundering large sums of money, and was sentenced to 10 years' imprisonment.</p> <p><a href="https://uitspraken.rechtspraak.nl/details?id=ECLI:NL:GHDHA:2020:918&amp;showbutton=true&amp;keyword=corruptie%2Brotterdam%2Bhaven,douane,witwassen&amp;idx=10">https://uitspraken.rechtspraak.nl/details?id=ECLI:NL:GHDHA:2020:918&amp;showbutton=true&amp;keyword=corruptie%2Brotterdam%2Bhaven,douane,witwassen&amp;idx=10</a></p>  |
| 2020:12597 | <p>Judgment of the Rotterdam District Court in Case number 10/960044-19, 22 December 2020.</p> <p>Summary: Customs official convicted of accepting bribes, breaching official secrecy and money laundering in connection with drug trafficking.</p> <p><a href="https://uitspraken.rechtspraak.nl/details?id=ECLI:NL:RBROT:2020:12597&amp;showbutton=true&amp;keyword=corruptie%2Brotterdam%2Bhaven,douane,witwassen&amp;idx=9">https://uitspraken.rechtspraak.nl/details?id=ECLI:NL:RBROT:2020:12597&amp;showbutton=true&amp;keyword=corruptie%2Brotterdam%2Bhaven,douane,witwassen&amp;idx=9</a></p>  |
| 2020:1295  | <p>Judgment of the Rotterdam District Court in Case number 10/960373-16, 17 February 2020.</p> <p>Summary: The defendant (working for the tax office) was convicted for participating in a criminal organisation that was involved in importing cocaine via the port of Rotterdam and related offences such as extortion, money laundering and bribery, and was sentenced to nine years' imprisonment.</p> <p><a href="https://uitspraken.rechtspraak.nl/details?id=ECLI:NL:RBROT:2020:1295&amp;showbutton=true&amp;keyword=corruptie%2Brotterdam%2Bhaven,douane,witwassen&amp;idx=2">https://uitspraken.rechtspraak.nl/details?id=ECLI:NL:RBROT:2020:1295&amp;showbutton=true&amp;keyword=corruptie%2Brotterdam%2Bhaven,douane,witwassen&amp;idx=2</a></p> |
| 2022:5588  | <p>Judgment of the Rotterdam District Court in Case number 10/750306-18, 21 June 2022.</p> <p>Summary: Customs official is convicted of money laundering.</p> <p><a href="https://uitspraken.rechtspraak.nl/details?id=ECLI:NL:RBROT:2022:5588&amp;showbutton=true&amp;keyword=corruptie%2Brotterdam%2Bhaven,douane,witwassen&amp;idx=8">https://uitspraken.rechtspraak.nl/details?id=ECLI:NL:RBROT:2022:5588&amp;showbutton=true&amp;keyword=corruptie%2Brotterdam%2Bhaven,douane,witwassen&amp;idx=8</a></p>  |
| 2023:15351 | <p>Judgment of the District Court in The Hague in Case number 09/767131-19 en 99/000229-57 (VI), 12 October 2023.</p> <p>Summary: The defendant is convicted for preparing to traffic hard drugs, leading a criminal organisation, attempting to bribe a customs official in the port of Rotterdam, possession of a firearm and money laundering.</p> <p><a href="https://uitspraken.rechtspraak.nl/details?id=ECLI:NL:RBDHA:2023:15351&amp;showbutton=true&amp;keyword=corruptie%2Brotterdam%2Bhaven,douane,witwassen&amp;idx=13">https://uitspraken.rechtspraak.nl/details?id=ECLI:NL:RBDHA:2023:15351&amp;showbutton=true&amp;keyword=corruptie%2Brotterdam%2Bhaven,douane,witwassen&amp;idx=13</a></p>  |

Annex: Overview of stakeholder interviews

| # | Type of stakeholder | Date          |
|---|---------------------|---------------|
| 1 | Academia/researcher | 26 March 2024 |
| 2 | Law enforcement     | 4 April 2024  |
| 3 | Academia/researcher | 5 April 2024  |
| 4 | Academia/researcher | 12 April 2024 |
| 5 | Law enforcement     | 12 July 2024  |