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# FBI Law Enforcement

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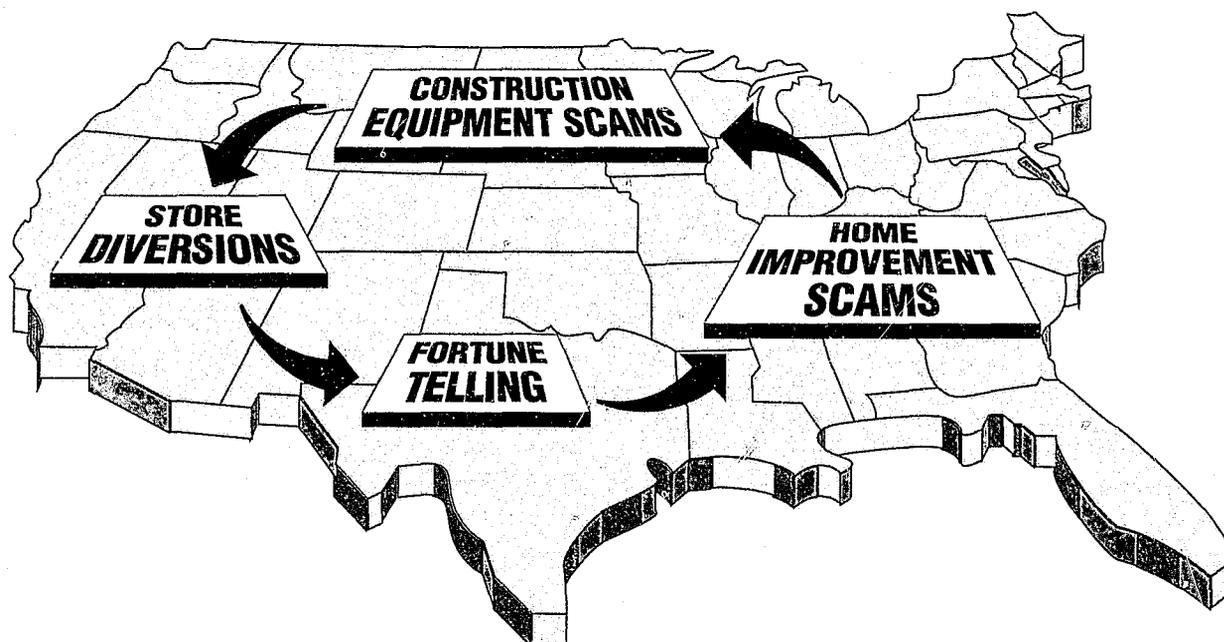
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# Traveling Criminals Take the Money and Run

By  
GARY L. MAZZONE



**T**hroughout the United States, both law enforcement and consumer protection agencies receive complaints daily of con games and other criminal scams. While many of these schemes are perpetrated by con artists who reside and ply their trades only in their local areas, an increasing number of scams are committed by highly mobile criminal groups who travel from area to area stealing from citizens and escaping the detection of law enforcement.

The two major groups of traveling criminals now operating in the United States—the Rom Gypsies and the Travelers—have long

histories in North America. Today, these two separate, and often competing, groups employ similar tactics to steal from unsuspecting victims. By understanding these groups' methods, law enforcement agencies can better protect the citizens of their communities.

## DIFFERENT GROUPS, SIMILAR TACTICS

The Travelers first came to the United States in large numbers during the English migration of the 1700s and then again during the Irish potato famine in the 1840s. Today, an estimated 6,000 to 10,000 Travelers reside in the United States.<sup>1</sup>

Gypsies arrived in North America during the great wave of European migration from 1880 through the early 1900s. Gypsologists estimate that approximately 1 million Rom Gypsies currently reside throughout North America.<sup>2</sup>

The two groups do not interact. Travelers resent being called Gypsies. Gypsies, on the other hand, refer to themselves as the Rom, speak an unwritten language known as Romaines, and do not appreciate being mistaken for Travelers.

Certainly, not all Travelers or Gypsies participate in illicit activity. However, those who do generally carry on criminal

traditions that have evolved over many generations.

### Home Improvement Scams

Typically, Travelers and Gypsies who do engage in crime are on the road plying their trades between 40 and 70 percent of the year. Members of both groups often represent themselves as self-employed home improvement contractors. They may pose as driveway sealers, basement and roof waterproofing specialists, or painters. As with many con artists, their preferred victims are the elderly.

In most cases, the group members do perform some type of work, though of extremely poor quality. They may spray roofs with a steam mist that they represent as sealant. The waterproofing agent used may be, in reality, thinned black paint. Their driveway sealant may be nothing more than drain oil.

The initial prices quoted may often appear quite reasonable, only to be grossly inflated when the job is finished. For example, a driveway may be quoted as requiring four pails of sealant at \$20 a pail. When the job is completed, the contractor tells the victims that there must have been a misunderstanding—the job required 40 pails—and then applies pressure to secure payment.

### Home Invasions

Additionally, both groups have been known to commit home invasions while they negotiate or perform residential improvement jobs, or as a predetermined sole objective. These invasions typically involve one or more group members searching for cash or jewelry, while another member of the group diverts the victim's attention. Alternately, group members may pose as public utility workers to gain entrance to a residence. Home invasions may

also be performed openly in front of elderly victims.

### SPECIALTIES

#### Rom Gypsies

While both Travelers and Rom Gypsies commit many similar crimes, each group also specializes in particular types of criminal schemes. Gypsies, for example, often commit a slight variation of the home invasion scam, using only female group members to perform the con and to gain entry.

Gypsies also specialize in fortune telling—often seeking out elderly victims or individuals who have recently undergone some emotionally distressing experience. These scams usually begin innocently with a quick palm reading for \$5 to \$20. After gleaning information regarding the victims' lives, the "fortuneteller" relies on cunning to ensure that they return repeatedly. Promises of restored relationships, communication with deceased loved ones, or removal of curses are offered with ever-increasing fees. One investigation into fortunetelling con artists uncovered a single victim who had paid several thousand dollars to remove a curse.

Additionally, Rom Gypsies specialize in crimes known as store diversions.<sup>3</sup> Similar to home invasions, the object of store diversions is to steal a business' daily cash receipts. Store diversions may involve up to 20 Gypsies entering a store simultaneously. Some engage clerks in conversation, pretending to need assistance. The conversations may become boisterous, as group



Captain Mazzone serves with the Vernon, Connecticut, Police Department.

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members demand the employees' attention. Some may openly shop-lift to divert the clerks' attention.

Once all employees and managers are handling the influx of troublesome customers, a group member surreptitiously locates the business office and seizes the cash from the deposit bag. As soon as the money is secured, the entire group leaves. Store managers may not have a clue until it is too late—proficient Gypsy criminal groups can carry out this scheme in a matter of minutes.

### Travelers

Travelers may be involved in the sale of tools and shop equipment. Some groups commute across the country to solicit businesses—primarily gas stations, large farms, and construction companies—to buy hydraulic presses, engine pullers, and related tools at inflated prices.

Although the Travelers will bargain over their original price quotes, the merchandise is almost always overpriced. Frequently, the equipment is manufactured using substandard materials and is of poor quality. Travelers have been known to market these items with useless lifetime warranties (the salespersons have no traceable fixed address) under fictitious company names, such as the Carolina Tool and Equipment Company.

### IDENTIFYING FACTORS

Upon receiving reports of any of these types of activities, law enforcement officers should first attempt to determine which of these

groups may be involved. Frequently, this can be determined through the physical descriptions provided by victims. Victims often describe Rom Gypsies as having dark complexions, sometimes misidentifying them as Hispanic or Italian. Male Gypsies are often described as being heavysset; females as wearing low-cut blouses and long skirts, with

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***...interagency cooperation represents perhaps the greatest asset law enforcement can employ in response to these traveling criminals.***

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their hair fixed in a bun. Investigators may find such stereotypical descriptions of limited value. Perhaps more revealing, victims often comment that, when they were among themselves, the offenders spoke a foreign language (Romaines), which the victims may identify as Spanish, Greek, Polish, or Italian.

Conversely, Travelers will be described as having Anglo features with light-to-medium complexions. Their hair may be any color. Many Travelers reside in Southern States and speak with strong southern accents. When they commit crimes in other parts of the country, their

accents provide a particularly helpful clue to investigators.

When engaged in home repair scams, both Rom Gypsies and Travelers typically use pickup trucks. Officers should take note of light-duty vehicles bearing unfamiliar contractors' names and out-of-State registration or license plates—especially trucks with fluid spraying or asphalt storage units in their beds.

Travelers often drive late-model, top-of-the-line trucks. Groups can often be found traveling in caravans on interstate highways, their well-maintained vehicles carrying such heavy equipment as hydraulic presses.

Officers who suspect Rom Gypsy or Traveler activities within their jurisdictions can often locate the groups in inexpensive (but not run-down) motels. Both groups also frequent campgrounds, either public or private. Traveler groups have been known to sell their trailers by advertising them with signs in the campgrounds in which they are staying.

### PROTECTING THE PUBLIC

Upon determining Rom Gypsy- or Traveler-related criminal activity in a jurisdiction, the local law enforcement agency should transmit a teletype to other public safety agencies within a 200-mile radius. Both the Rom Gypsies and the Travelers seem to adhere to the old adage that “a dog does not foul its own yard.” Group members normally establish a “base” for residence and fan out from there, leaving in the early morning and returning late in the afternoon. They will generally try to avoid attracting the attention of the

local law enforcement agency where they have established their base, and thus, may travel an hour or more *before* perpetrating their scams.

Local agencies should also issue press releases warning citizens that these criminals may be operating in the area. These releases should include a description of the scams being committed and should encourage citizens to report immediately to the police any contact with these criminals.

Police-sponsored instructional seminars for merchants associations often prove successful safeguards against store diversions. Such seminars generally teach store managers and employees how to recognize a store diversion in its initial stages and provide merchants with appropriate response strategies.

To protect customers from home invasions, utility companies routinely assist law enforcement agencies by periodically including warning fliers with their bills. These fliers should include a photograph of the utility company's worker identification badge and a warning to customers not to allow unauthorized persons access to their property.

## CONCLUSION

Rom Gypsies and Travelers can be found in nearly every State in the Nation. Their traditional mobility presents a formidable challenge to law enforcement.

Still, their scams and offenses are predictable. Although they have

honed their cunning through generations of criminal activity, they generally prey on the same victims—the vulnerable and the elderly—and commit the same types of crimes in jurisdiction after jurisdiction.

The secret of many Gypsy and Traveler scams is to first gain the trust and confidence of their victims. Accordingly, when dealing with such offenders, investigators should keep in mind this verse from a well-known opera:

Things are seldom what they seem.  
Skim milk masquerades as cream,  
Black sheep dwell in every fold,  
All that glitters is not gold.<sup>4</sup>

Because such groups prey on the ignorance, trust, or bad fortune of others, public safety agencies must be prepared to protect their citizens from these scam artists by quickly investigating reported offenses. And owing to the highly mobile nature of these types of groups, interagency cooperation represents perhaps the greatest asset law enforcement can employ in response to these traveling criminals. ♦

### Endnotes

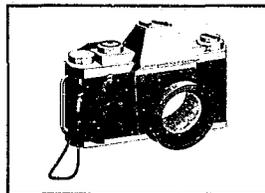
<sup>1</sup> Bruce H. Carter, *Gypsies, Travelers, & Thieves*, South Carolina Criminal Justice Agency, Columbia, South Carolina, 21.

<sup>2</sup> *Gypsy Lifestyles*, the Metropolitan Toronto Police Department, presented at a seminar entitled "Gypsy and Other Traveling Criminal Organizations," May 5, 1992, Portsmouth, New Hampshire.

<sup>3</sup> Robert P. Meiners, "Store Diversion Burglaries," *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*, March 1990, 7.

<sup>4</sup> *HMS Pinafore* (opera), Gilbert and Sullivan.

## Wanted: Photographs



**T**he Law Enforcement staff is always on the lookout for dynamic, law enforcement-related photos for possible publication in the magazine. We are interested in photos that visually depict the many aspects of the law enforcement profession and illustrate the various tasks law enforcement personnel perform.

We can use either black-and-white glossy or color prints or slides, although we prefer prints (5x7 or 8x10). Appropriate credit will be given to contributing photographers when their work appears in the magazine. We suggest that you send duplicate, not original, prints as we do not accept responsibility for prints that may be damaged or lost. Send your photographs to:

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