# Hidden drug lords evade spotlight while orchestrating UK trafficking empires



The landscape of drug trafficking in the UK is as complex as it is concerning. While street-level gang members often dominate media narratives—highlighting their flashy lifestyles through social media—there exists a clandestine tier of organised crime that operates from the shadows, wielding considerable power without the same visibility. These figures, commonly referred to as 'Mr Bigs,' orchestrate vast criminal enterprises, distancing themselves from the street-level bravado that characterises visible gang activity.

Historically, the emergence of encrypted communications platforms, notably EncroChat, has illuminated this hidden world, leading to significant law enforcement breakthroughs. The infiltration of EncroChat, conducted by Dutch and French authorities, allowed the UK's National Crime Agency to expose the intertwining of legitimate business with illegal activities. Over 1,200 criminals have since faced justice, including many seemingly respectable individuals. Gary Carroll, an organised crime expert, articulated a stark contrast between the street gangs and their high-level counterparts. He stated, “The street gangs are all about bravado, YouTube fame and BBC radio music slots…but [the big players] are too smart for that and know it draws attention.”

Recent busts have revealed the extent of this underground network, highlighting individuals like Thomas Maher, an Irish haulage firm owner whose life of apparent respectability masked a drug operation that trafficked £1.5 million worth of cocaine from the Netherlands to Ireland. With a lifestyle that included luxury vehicles, Maher’s façade crumbled under meticulous scrutiny, ultimately leading to a 14-year prison sentence. Similarly, Richard Weild, a car dealer who boasted about earning £30,000 a week from his drug empire, utilised vehicles designed for legitimate businesses to evade detection, demonstrating the cunning adaptability of these crime figures.

The psychological characteristics of these criminals have also been examined, with insights from Dr David Holmes, a criminal psychologist, suggesting that many possess traits associated with psychopathy or a certain schizoitype disposition. “These are people who may themselves have used drugs socially and been given the opportunity somewhere down the line to get involved in the finance side or import or export,” he noted. This ability to juggle ordinary lives while engaging in high-stakes criminality starkly contrasts the often ostentatious behaviours exhibited by lower-tier gang members.

In the broader context, international drug trafficking is not limited to the UK’s borders. Authorities recently apprehended Christopher Neil, a British trafficker coordinating cocaine shipments for the Clan del Golfo cartel from Colombia. His arrest, a product of international collaboration, underscores the global nature of drug crime and the complexity of enforcement mechanisms.

As law enforcement agencies ramp up efforts to combat both street crime and sophisticated trafficking networks, the dichotomy between the visible and invisible worlds of drug crime becomes increasingly apparent. Operations like Venetic and Eternal, targeting encrypted platforms and producing extensive arrests and prosecutions, indicate a concerted effort to dismantle the infrastructure that supports these illicit activities. Over 400 criminals received sentences totalling thousands of years in prison, demonstrating the significant strides being made against organised crime.

Yet, as sophisticated networks continue to evolve, so too must the strategies for dismantling them. The recent arrest of Christopher Ashurst, who fled to multiple countries while trafficking significant quantities of drugs, exemplifies the persistent challenges faced by law enforcement. His arrest in Amsterdam underlines the necessity of international cooperation in curbing drug trafficking threats.

While public interest often gravitates towards the more sensational aspects of gang culture, the real threat lies in the shadows, where the most dangerous criminals operate undetected. The continuous battle against these hidden drug lords requires innovative approaches and unwavering vigilance as they increasingly integrate their illegal activities with seemingly benign business practices. The fight against their far-reaching influence is far from over, but recent successes herald a significant turning point in law enforcement efforts across the UK and beyond.

### Reference Map

1. Paragraphs 1, 2, 4, 5
2. Paragraphs 3, 5
3. Paragraph 7
4. Paragraph 6
5. Paragraphs 6
6. Paragraph 5
7. Paragraph 5

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14388811/secret-world-Britains-invisible-drug-lords.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.apnews.com/article/041f97e1486366242d6f4f59c7c1e34a> - In December 2024, Colombian authorities, in collaboration with Interpol, arrested Christopher Neil, a British drug trafficker, in Medellín. Described as 'invisible' due to his low-profile lifestyle, Neil was coordinating cocaine trafficking from Colombia to the UK for the Clan del Golfo cartel. He had been residing in Colombia since December 2018 and is wanted in the UK for trafficking and money laundering. His capture was facilitated by tracking a vehicle in Medellín and monitoring a multi-million-dollar transaction between the UK and Colombia.
3. <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-lancashire-66800949> - In September 2023, Christopher Ashurst, a 36-year-old drug dealer from Blackburn, was jailed for 10 years after being arrested in Amsterdam. Ashurst had fled to Spain and Mexico before his capture. He was supplying large quantities of cocaine, heroin, ketamine, and cannabis. His arrest was part of Operation Venetic, a national investigation into organised crime following the cracking of the EncroChat encrypted messaging platform. The EncroChat servers were taken down in 2020 following an investigation led by the National Crime Agency.
4. <https://news.sky.com/story/kingpins-among-more-than-400-criminals-jailed-in-met-police-encrochat-operation-12978782> - In October 2023, the Metropolitan Police announced that more than 400 criminals, including senior 'kingpins' in organised crime, had been jailed for a total of 3,722 years after a significant operation targeting the EncroChat encrypted messaging platform. The operation, named Operation Eternal, began in March 2020 and led to 942 arrests, with 784 charged and 426 convicted. Three tonnes of Class A and B drugs and 49 guns were seized. The operation was described as 'the most significant operation targeting organised crime figures in the Met’s history'.
5. <https://www.sussex.police.uk/news/sussex/news/court-results/20-years-jail-for-drug-dealers-linked-to-encrochat-operation/> - In February 2025, Isshaq Khan and his nephew Jan Lee were sentenced to more than 20 years in prison for their roles in a drug-dealing operation linked to the EncroChat encrypted communications platform. Both were arrested as part of the National Crime Agency’s Operation Venetic in 2020. The investigation revealed that Khan and Lee were handling hundreds of thousands of pounds and dealing with multi-kilos of cocaine and cannabis. They both pleaded guilty and were sentenced at Lewes Crown Court.
6. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cl5kjej0pnqo> - In April 2024, Bedfordshire Police secured convictions against three men from Luton who sold encrypted devices to supply drugs and firearms. Jason Russo, 33, was sentenced to five years in jail, while Jamil Ahmed, 26, and Mohammed Miah, 32, received 18-month community orders. The men equipped organised crime groups across the country with the EncroChat messaging system, which was widely used by criminals to smuggle drugs and guns into and around the UK. The case was described as a 'landmark' and set a 'real precedent'.
7. <https://www.sundayworld.com/crime/world-crime/police-nab-gang-that-smuggled-cocaine-worth-198m-into-the-uk-through-dubai-contact/41228268.html> - A gang of 21 criminals who smuggled cocaine worth £165 million (€198 million) into the UK from Dubai were sentenced to a total of 167 years in jail after being apprehended through the EncroChat operation. Led by Paldip Mahngar, 45, operating from a house in Derby, the gang made an estimated £165 million over a 408-day crime spree. They coordinated with a Dubai contact, referred to as being on a 'mill a week', and at one point were thought to be raking in as much as £400,000 (€480k) a day through their 'offices' in Derby and Luton.