

TIMES PHOTOGRAPHER MARY TURNER



A group of Romanians on Park Lane, Westminster. Charities are working to help the most vulnerable go back home

Crime gang tactics used to curb begging

Sean O'Neill Crime Editor

Covert surveillance and financial investigation techniques designed for fighting organised crime will soon be used against beggars in Central London.

Scotland Yard is preparing to deploy specialist skills as it examines whether some groups of itinerant beggars are controlled by overseas networks.

Sir Bernard Hogan-Howe, the Metropolitan Police Commissioner, said that there was concern that some

gangs might be "wandering the capitals of the world" running scams that netted hundreds of thousands of pounds.

The problem in London is concentrated in the City of Westminster where gangs are suspected of targeting the large number of tourists.

"One of the things we have to keep an eye on is the level of begging and busking and sometimes when people move from that into shoplifting and robbery," said Sir Bernard.

"In Westminster, it's a priority and we are looking to see whether there is an organised crime element to that because there have been allegations that groups have come here and moved to Paris and Barcelona.

"We are looking at using organised crime methods to investigate people who appear to be disorganised beggars but may be involved in organised crime because of the level of money involved."

ThamesReach, the homelessness charity, said a particular problem had emerged in the Park Lane area over the past year with groups of beggars, predominantly from Romania.

Mike Nicholas, from the charity, said: "We have seen a more organised group of beggars, often in family situations. Some of them are victims of crime as well as potential perpetrators as they seem to be being exploited by others."

ThamesReach has been working with various authorities and trying to help more vulnerable members of the groups to return home, especially with the onset of colder weather.

Mr Nicholas said the pattern of begging in the West End was markedly different from in the rest of the capital where many beggars were hard drug users. "We discourage giving money to beggars because often you are just lining the pockets of drug dealers."