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Outlaw Motorcycle Clubs and Organized Crime

ABSTRACT

Outlaw motorcycle clubs have spread across the globe. Their members have been associated with serious crime, and law enforcement often perceives them to be a form of organized crime. Outlaw bikers are disproportionately engaged in crime, but the role of the club itself in these crimes remains unclear. Three scenarios describe possible relations between clubs and the crimes of their members. In the “bad apple” scenario, members individually engage in crime; club membership may offer advantages in enabling and facilitating offending. In the “club within a club” scenario, members engage in crimes separate from the club, but because of the number of members involved, including high-ranking members, the club itself appears to be taking part. The club can be said to function as a criminal organization only when the formal organizational chain of command takes part in organization of the crime, lower level members regard senior members’ leadership in the crime as legitimate, and the crime is generally understood as “club business.” All three scenarios may play out simultaneously within one club with regard to different crimes.

Fact and fiction interweave concerning the origins, evolution, and practices of outlaw motorcycle clubs. What Mario Puzo’s (1969) acclaimed novel *The Godfather* and Francis Ford Coppola’s follow-up film trilogy did for public and mafiosi perceptions of the mafia, Hunter S. Thompson’s

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(1966) book *Hell's Angels* and ensuing biker exploitation films did for outlaw motorcycle clubs (Seate 2000; Stanfield 2018). Together they inspired working-class youths around the globe to establish outlaw motorcycle clubs (Perlman 2007). The “outlaw” label originally meant only that clubs were not affiliated with the American Motorcyclist Association (AMA). However, the movies depicting bikers as modern-day frontiersmen, often battling a corrupt system, gave added significance to the “outlaw” label (Dulaney 2006; Sánchez-Jankowski 2018). The stylized version of reality the films provided led youths to aspire to live up to the Hollywood biker image. While Hollywood bikers like Peter Fonda and Jack Nicholson, sometimes literally, got away with murder on the big screen, many outlaw bikers’ deviant behavior got them into trouble with the law in real life.¹

In the half century since publication of Thompson’s book, law enforcement agencies in many countries have come to see outlaw biker clubs as public security threats, and outlaw bikers have repeatedly been associated with serious crimes, including murder, drug trafficking, and extortion (e.g., Interpol 1984; Organized Crime Consulting Committee 1986; Europol 2005; Australian Crime Commission 2012). As a result, law enforcement, politicians, and the media usually refer to them as outlaw motorcycle “gangs.” The term gang, however, evokes a plethora of meanings (Hallsworth and Young 2008), including some that are intrinsically linked to urban North America and may not readily apply to European and other contexts (van Gemert and Weerman 2015). Finally, use of the term gang tends to create a false dichotomy between good and bad motorcycle clubs (Roks and Van Ruitenburg 2018). Hence, following others’ lead (e.g., Quinn and Koch 2003; Veno 2009), we use “club” as a more neutral and less prejudicial term. This acknowledges that outlaw motorcycle clubs are clubs in the narrow sense of the word, often officially registered associations, and that there appear to be great variations in criminal involvement among outlaw biker clubs and among different branches of the same club (Quinn and Koch 2003; Barker and Human 2009; Lauchs and Staines 2019).

¹ Some writers further differentiate between outlaw clubs and 1 percent or one-percenter clubs (Wethern and Colnett 2004; Dulaney 2006). Both are unaffiliated with the AMA. The latter are said to have promoted club membership from a mere hobby into an all-encompassing lifestyle, including the antiestablishment attitude associated with being an “outlaw.” In the academic literature, the terms outlaw motorcycle clubs and 1 percent clubs are sometimes used interchangeably to refer to 1 percent clubs (e.g., Barker 2015).

Academic interest in outlaw biker clubs, especially when compared with street gangs and organized crime groups such as the Italian and American mafias, has been scant and leaves fundamental questions unanswered (Bain and Lauchs 2017). In this essay, we ask what can be learned if outlaw motorcycle clubs are approached through the lens of organized crime research. From an organized crime perspective, outlaw biker clubs are an interesting object of study for several reasons; they are highly visible, formal organizations and their members, unlike in stereotypical organized crime groups, have not traditionally come from minority backgrounds (Barker 2007). Our interest, broadly speaking, is in where outlaw bikers fit in discussions of the organization of crimes and criminals. The question is not simply, "Are outlaw biker clubs a form of organized crime?" That would do justice neither to the complexity of the outlaw biker phenomenon nor to the complexity of the concept of organized crime.

We focus on two main themes. One is the criminality of outlaw bikers, a subject around which much of the pertinent empirical research is centered. The second concerns the functions of outlaw motorcycle clubs as organizational entities in relation to crimes committed by their members. This is as much a conceptual as an empirical question, one on which the need for further research is most urgent. We address other issues concerning outlaw biker clubs only in passing or not at all. These include the links between outlaw bikers and other criminal groups such as mafia associations, street gangs, and prison gangs; overlaps between the outlaw biker subculture and political groups such as right-wing extremists; and outlaw biker clubs acting as proxies of the state (Abadinsky 2013; Barker 2015; Klement 2019; Zabyelina 2019; Harris 2020).

The essay is divided into three sections. Section I provides a brief overview of the outlaw biker phenomenon and how it is perceived by law enforcement agencies. In Section II, we review what is known about the involvement of members of outlaw biker clubs in various types of crimes. We propose a typology of biker crime, distinguishing among lifestyle crimes, entrepreneurial crimes, and symbolic crimes. These crimes are diversely motivated; their organization involves distinctive requirements and constraints that influence different ways they typically relate to a club's formal organization. In Section III, we distinguish three different scenarios in which the criminal behavior of outlaw bikers is or can be related to the club. These scenarios can play out separately or simultaneously for different crimes within the same club or chapter. We employ

a situational perspective, thus rejecting a simple one-dimensional conception of outlaw motorcycle clubs as criminal organizations.

I. Outlaw Motorcycle Clubs

The origins of the outlaw biker subculture are usually traced to adrenaline-craving World War II veterans who, having survived the horrors of war, clung to their military machines in an effort to retain some of the thrill of their fighting tours (Yates 1999; Reynolds 2000; McBee 2015). These blue-collar men, socialized into the masculine brotherhood of the army, are said not to have felt at home in the middle-class motorcycle clubs sanctioned by the AMA and, as a consequence, established their own clubs (Dulaney 2006; Barker 2015). Lurid club names, such as the Booze Fighters and the Pissed Off Bastards of Bloomington (POBOB), bespoke their antiestablishment attitudes (Wood 2003). In a notorious incident in Hollister, California, on July 4, 1947, over 500 non-AMA-affiliated bikers are reported to have crashed the annual AMA-organized Gypsy Tour, behaving drunk and disorderly and solidifying the image of non-AMA, or “outlaw,” clubs as antisocial and a menace to society (Fuglsang 2001; Veno 2007, 2009; Barker 2015).² The subsequent media storm would likely long ago have been forgotten, if reports of this and similar incidents had not inspired the first movie to bring the biker subculture to the screen, Laslo Benedek’s film *The Wild One*, starring a young Marlon Brando as the leader of an outlaw biker club called the Black Rebels Motorcycle Club (Austin, Gagne, and Orend 2010).³ It was loosely based on historical events, and Brando’s adversary in the film, Lee Marvin, allegedly modeled his character on “Wino” Willy Forkner, an infamous member of the Booze Fighters and an active participant in the Hollister incident (Barker 2007). *The Wild One* was sedate by today’s standards, but controversy surrounded it. It was banned in the United Kingdom, which enhanced Brando’s rebel image and enlarged the movies’ influence on youth culture throughout the Western world (Farrant 2016).

² Female bikers and biker clubs were present in Hollister (e.g., the Tracy Gear Jammers), but gendered media accounts helped forge the outlaw biker as a deviant male identity (Hoiland 2018).

³ Most notably, disturbances in Riverside, California, during the Memorial Day Weekend Gypsy Tour of 1948 that reportedly involved over 1,000 motorcyclists and led to the death of a woman associated with one of the male bikers (Reynolds 2000).

A. *Hells Angels*

In 1948, former POBOB Motorcycle Club member Otto Friedli established an outlaw motorcycle club in Fontana, California, that would become the most iconic of all, the Hells Angels Motorcycle Club (HAMC) (Barker 2018). Named after a 1930 war movie and numerous World War II bomber squadrons that used the name, several unrelated clubs calling themselves “Hells Angels” became active in California during this time. Largely through the efforts of future HAMC president Ralph “Sonny” Barger, these clubs merged in the mid-1950s and adopted uniform attire, organizational structure, and admission criteria (Barger 2001). The original Hells Angels were recognizable by their sleeveless denim vests, which had an embroidered club logo—a winged skull wearing a pilot’s cap—as a center patch on the back, together with an arched top rocker stating the club’s name, and an arched bottom rocker naming the city, or sometimes the state, where the club was chartered. The HAMC issued written regulations that governed the weekly meeting of charter members, specified procedures for acceptance of new members, and set out general rules of “good conduct” such as “no fighting among club members” and “no using dope during a meeting” (Barger 2001). The rules required ownership of a motorcycle, attesting to the motorcycle being “the dominant symbol of subcultural commitment” (Wolf 1991, p. 85).

The Californian Hells Angels’ notoriety rose quickly after publication of Thompson’s acclaimed journalistic account *Hell’s Angels*. The unexpected success of the 1966 movie *The Wild Angels*, starring members of the Venice, California, HAMC charter as supporting actors to Peter Fonda and Nancy Sinatra, all but transformed the HAMC from local to international celebrities (Perlman 2007). The Californian Hells Angels advised on and starred in other biker films including *Hells Angels on Wheels* (1969) with Jack Nicholson. International biker magazines such as *Easyriders*, available from 1970 onward, did the rest (Fuglsang 2002).

The Hells Angels’ media image drew attention from young bike-riding toughs around the globe who adopted the imagery of their US role models. The Californian Hells Angels began to accept local clubs outside California as official HAMC chapters. Already by 1961 the HAMC had an officially recognized chapter in Auckland, New Zealand; the first Australian charter in Sydney followed in 1968 (Veno 2009; Lauchs 2019b). In 1969 the first European chapter was set up in the United Kingdom. Other European countries, including Switzerland in 1970, Germany in

1973, and the Netherlands in 1978, soon followed. In retrospect, the HAMC's expansion appears not to have been strategically planned but often to have been initiated by local biker groups, in some cases using the name "Hells Angels" and wanting recognition by the Californian HAMC (e.g., Schutten, Vugts, and Middelburg 2004). In April 2019 the Hells Angels website showed an HAMC presence in 58 countries on five continents.⁴

B. Chicago Outlaws

Other US-based clubs were organized, both regionally and internationally. Among them were the Chicago Outlaws, whose roots go back to the McCook Outlaws of Cook County, Illinois, established as early as 1936. In 1954, the Chicago Outlaws adopted leather jackets as official club dress and a logo depicting a skull and two crossed pistons, affectionately referred to as "Charlie," which closely resembled the logo of Brando's fictional motorcycle club in *The Wild One*. In 1964, several local clubs merged under the name Outlaw Nation, with Chicago designated as the mother chapter. In 1977, perhaps not coincidentally the year the HAMC opened its first Canadian chapter, the Canadian outlaw motorcycle club Satan's Choice joined the Outlaws in a so-called patch-over, becoming the first non-US Outlaws chapter. The Outlaws had no presence abroad until 1993 when a French chapter was established; a Norwegian chapter was set up in 1995. Other European clubs followed, some of which had used the Outlaw name for decades. The Outlaws Motorcycle Club website at the time of writing showed chapters in 28 countries.⁵

C. Bandidos

The Bandidos Motorcycle Club was established in San Leon, Texas, in 1966 during the height of the Hollywood biker craze. International chapters were established in Australia in 1983 and France in 1989. Together with the Hells Angels, Outlaws, the US-confined Pagans Motorcycle Club, the Mongols, and the Sons of Silence, the Bandidos are among the major US outlaw motorcycle clubs (Barker 2015). Global expansion, however, can have downsides. According to the Bandidos website, the US mother chapter, unhappy with growing "differences of opinion with

⁴ See <http://hells-angels.com/world>.

⁵ See <http://www.outlawsmcworld.com>.

regard to club values and definitions,” decided in 2007 to sever all ties with Bandidos chapters outside the United States. The US Bandidos redesigned its signature “Fat Mexican” logo to underline its independence. European, Asian, and Australian chapters have continued to use the older version. At the time of writing, the US Bandidos website coexisted with the “official Bandidos website.”⁶ The latter was redesigned as the Bandidos Motorcycle Club Worldwide website, showing chapters in 32 countries, including the United States.⁷

D. Other Countries’ Clubs

The popularity of the outlaw biker subculture, and the dominance of the Hells Angels, led clubs elsewhere in the world to (re)cast themselves into the HAMC mold (McNab 2013; Silverstone and Crane 2017). Many adopted similar signature clothing and logos, bylaws and regulations, and organizational structure. More than 5,000 distinct clubs have been formed in the history of the outlaw motorcycle subculture, most outside North America, including 50 percent in Europe, 18 percent in Latin America, 6 percent in East Asia, 5 percent in Australia and New Zealand, 2 percent in the Middle East and North Africa, and 1 percent in South Africa (Lauchs 2019b). Some domestic clubs later patched over to one of the internationally active US clubs; others stuck to their original colors. The major US clubs, especially the Hells Angels, provided the prototype on which other outlaw clubs pattern themselves. The US clubs however do not, or no longer, dominate the outlaw biker scene in many places outside the United States and Canada, in sheer numbers or in influence. Some indigenous clubs, such as Australia’s Rebels Motorcycle Club and the Netherlands’s Satudarah Motorcycle Club, have begun establishing chapters in the United States. The Hells Angels, however, retain their mythical status (Veno 2009; Barker 2015).

E. Organizational Structure

The Californian Hells Angels provided a template for outlaw bikers in appearance and behavior. They also provided a blueprint for the organizational structures of outlaw biker clubs, which almost always use the

⁶ See <https://www.bandidosmcunitedstates.com>.

⁷ See <https://www.bandidosmc.com>. The Dutch weekly *Panorama* reported something similar about the Mongols Motorcycle Club, which expanded internationally but disestablished many of its European chapters in 2017 (de Hoogh 2017).

same or similar names to define certain command positions (Abadinsky 2013; Barker 2015). Figure 1 depicts the formal structure typical for outlaw motorcycle clubs from which there are few fundamental deviations.

The club is organized in local units called charters or chapters. Each chapter has to have a physical location where it holds club meetings. Most often these locations are clubhouses that are “a central part of biker life” (Veno 2009, p. 94) and demonstrate the club’s vitality and persistence. Some are heavily fortified to safeguard members from attacks by rival gangs and from law enforcement actions (Wolf 1991).

One chapter typically acts as the “mother chapter.” This position may be permanently held by the founding chapter, or may alternate between different chapters over shorter or longer intervals. Orders regarding club business flow from the mother chapter to the local chapters (Wolf 1991). However, binding decisions transcending individual chapters may also be made at regional, national, or international meetings (Barker 2015).

A special position is held by so-called nomads, elite members who are not part of a local chapter and who may be organized in special nomad chapters. Their increased mobility allows them to function as rapid response teams for the club, which gives them an elevated status (Veno 2009; Barker 2015; Ahlsdorf 2017).

The local chapters widely follow the same model (McGuire 1987; Mallory 2012; Abadinsky 2013). They are commonly headed by a president, formally the highest rank, and a vice president who is second in

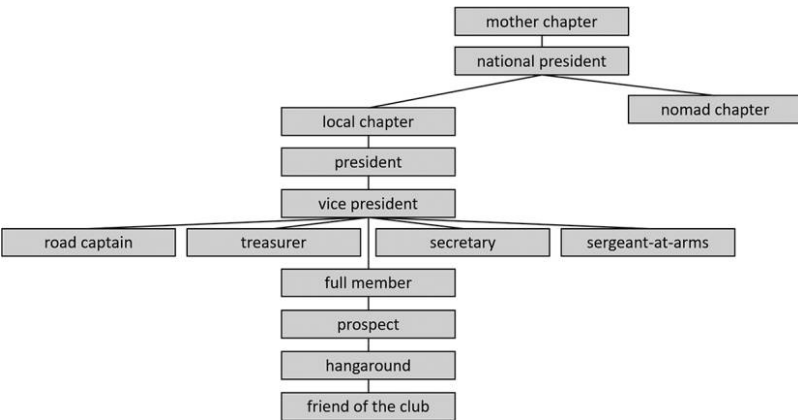


FIG. 1.—Formal structure typical for outlaw motorcycle clubs

rank. The mother chapter provides the club's national president. Below the vice president are a number of officer ranks more or less horizontally differentiated by function. These include the road captain, treasurer, secretary, and sergeant-at-arms. Patches typically worn on the front of the individual's biker vest identify its wearer's rank. The road captain is responsible for organizing the logistics of runs or ride outs. The treasurer is responsible for financial administration, including collecting membership dues and managing the "defense fund" from which financial support is given to members facing criminal charges or doing prison time. The secretary organizes and takes notes during obligatory weekly and incidental meetings of full members, commonly referred to as church meetings. While the other board functions are primarily bureaucratic, the sergeant-at-arms is responsible for internal discipline and enforcement of club rules. He is also responsible for meting out punishment to members who are found disobedient. His authority to use force against fellow members places him somewhat closer in the hierarchy to the president and vice president. Together with the president and vice president, the road captain, treasurer, secretary, and sergeant-at-arms form the chapter's board (Abadinsky 2013; Barker 2015; Ahlsdorf 2017). An exceptional case is the Finks Motorcycle Club in Australia, which has either only one formal position, the sergeant-at-arms, according to one source (Veno 2009), or three, the sergeant-at-arms, treasurer, and secretary, according to another (Lauchs 2019a).

Each chapter has a number of full members, recognizable by a vest with both the top and bottom rocker and the center patch depicting the club's logo. Although members take orders from chapter board members, the board's power is limited by a system of direct democracy, usually a show of hands, by which decisions about club business are made. All members have an equal say. For most decisions, the majority rules, although some may require a qualified majority or unanimity (Veno 2009; Ahlsdorf 2017). The legitimacy of the board's decisions depends heavily on whether they are considered to benefit the club, rather than individual board members. Board members thus constantly face the danger of being degraded or, like other members, being expelled, in good or bad standing, by a vote of the members. "Big" Willem van Boxtel, longtime national president of the Dutch Hells Angels, for example, was voted out in bad standing after allegedly remaining silent about a plan to liquidate an associate of the Amsterdam chapter on club grounds (Schutten, Vugts, and Middelburg 2004; Burgwal 2012).

People who aspire to full membership typically go through an elaborate initiation phase. On the outskirts of the club are “hangarounds” and “friends of the club,” although some clubs do not distinguish between the two. To become a friend, a person needs one or more members to vouch for him. The sponsors act as mentors throughout the initiation period and usually afterward as well. Friends may need to be accepted by majority vote during a church meeting (Wolf 1991; Barker 2015). This ritual repeats itself when friends are promoted to become hangarounds and hangarounds are promoted to prospect status. The prospect status, which may last from a few weeks to several years, is solidified by wearing a biker vest with just the bottom rocker. The prospect is not yet a full member but enjoys recognition for making it to the semifinals. Prospects may be present during church meetings but do not vote. Like individuals, entire chapters can obtain prospect status, for instance when chapters of native clubs want or are invited or pressured to patch over to a larger local or international club (Wolf 1991; Veno 2009; Barker 2015).

The lengthy initiation phase serves practical and symbolic functions. Practically, from the perspective of wannabes, it provides a first feel of the outlaw biker lifestyle and an opportunity to evaluate whether the lifestyle fits their aspirations. It also allows existing members to size up potential brothers. Symbolically, the initiation phase functions primarily to detach prospective members from their civilian ties and to transform the individual’s principal identity to that of outlaw biker. Full membership requires members to place club concerns over private concerns at all times (Wolf 1991; Veno 2009).

Sometimes violent initiation rites, obligatory participation in social events, and cultivated animosity with rival groups serve to strengthen the ritualistic kinship ties and maintain the extreme level of brotherly altruism expected between members (Wolf 1991). An important drawback of all-encompassing ritual kinship is that it limits the pool of potential members to people already socialized into at least some of the core values that dominate the outlaw biker psyche (see Paoli 2003).

Many outlaw motorcycle clubs have formalized the requirements for joining the club, and the procedures that govern the club’s functioning and decision-making, in a set of written rules and regulations. In some clubs, including the Hells Angels and the Bandidos, they are referred to as bylaws (Barger 2001; Caine 2009). Other clubs, such as the Pagans, refer to club rules. The Outlaws refer to the “national constitution” that

governs the behavior of all Outlaw members in the United States (Mal-lory 2012). The Mongols' website shows the five "commandments" ap-plicable to members of the Mongols nation worldwide.⁸

The written rules may describe requirements for becoming a member and define procedural steps to be taken during the process. The Bandidos bylaws, for example, state that individual members must own at least a 750 cc Harley-Davidson or facsimile, should have their motorcycle fully functioning for at least 335 days per year, and pay monthly membership dues of \$25. New chapters are to pay "a one-time donation of \$1,000" to the national treasury. Membership requirements usually reflect the ex-clusivity of the club. Many rules aim to safeguard the club against infil-tration by members considered "inferior" because they are not genuine bikers or are law enforcement personnel, and thereby protect the club's reputation.

The bylaws often refer to how decisions on club matters are made, denoting, for example, in which body votes are cast, who is allowed to vote, how individual votes are weighed, and the size of the majority needed for a decision to be accepted. Finally, the written rules list dos and don'ts for members. The Mongols' commandments, for example, include "A Mongol never steals from another Mongol," "A Mongol never causes an-other Mongol to get arrested in any shape, way, or form," and "A Mongol never uses his patch for personal gain."

Some bylaws specify penalties for transgression of the rules. Trans-gression of the Hells Angels bylaws, for instance, may result in a mone-tary fine, an "ass-whipping," "possible loss of patch," or "automatic kick-out from club" (Wolf 1991, p. 355). In general, members' obligations reflect the core values of the ritualistic biker brotherhood and efforts to safeguard club members from outside interference. Some rules are meant to prevent members from behaving in ways that can have negative consequences for the club. An example is the infamous "no drug burns" rule in the Hells Angels bylaws that sought to protect the club from re-taliation by disenfranchised business partners in a member's or members' illicit enterprise (Barger 2001).

Finally, many of the bigger clubs have puppet or support clubs. Many are motorcycle clubs themselves that officially affiliate with a bigger club— for example, by pledging their support on their website. Support clubs

⁸ See <https://www.mongolsmc.com/about>.

provide a pool from which outlaw motorcycle clubs can select potential members or, many times, a group of individuals who have a prospect—however distant—of possible membership and are willing to work hard to satisfy the whims of the outlaw bikers. According to law enforcement officials, this may include dirty work that reduces the risk of full members being implicated in crimes. Finally, support club membership may augment the club's ranks in periods of intergang rivalry and violence (Barker 2017). The Hells Angels in Denmark, for example, established AK81, an acronym for "Always Ready," with the "8" and "1" referring to the eighth and first letter in the alphabet: "H"ells "A"ngels. Members of AK81 are not required to ride a motorcycle or wear a biker vest, and their appearance is more like that of a street gang (Klement 2016a).

F. Law Enforcement Perceptions

During the 1950s and early 1960s, outlaw motorcycle clubs were seen primarily as a public menace, known mostly for drunken and disorderly behavior. Local law enforcement agencies, increasingly aware of criminal involvement of outlaw bikers, launched undercover operations during the 1970s. Using findings of local operations, the FBI targeted Sonny Barger and the Oakland Hells Angels as a criminal organization under the federal Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act (RICO) enacted in 1970 to provide tools for use against organized crime groups. In the subsequent trial that ended in 1980, Barger was acquitted as the jury found no proof that the crimes committed were part of club policy. Since then, numerous Hells Angels and members of other outlaw biker clubs have been successfully prosecuted under RICO, partly for involvement in profit-making crimes such as drug trafficking and partly for violent acts against rival biker groups.

For many years, prosecutors failed to establish that an outlaw motorcycle club or chapter as such qualified as a criminal enterprise (Lauchs, Bain, and Bell 2015). This has changed only recently. For example, in 2018 a jury found that the Mongols constituted a criminal enterprise responsible for murder, narcotics trafficking, and drug transactions (Department of Justice 2019).

Despite the early failures of RICO prosecutions, outlaw motorcycle clubs came to be viewed in the United States as an organized crime threat akin to the Italian-American mafia and other criminal groups organized along ethnic lines. Adding outlaw bikers with their white Anglo-Saxon background to the category of "non-traditional organized crime" (President's

Commission on Organized Crime 1983) may have been a convenient way to diffuse allegations of ethnic bias in conceptualization of organized crime.

Other countries' perceptions of outlaw bikers also shifted from public nuisance to organized crime threat. Typically, interclub violence galvanized law enforcement agencies to adopt a repressive approach to outlaw motorcycle clubs. As early as the 1970s, Australia, Canada, Denmark, and other countries experienced violent clashes between rival biker groups that left several bikers dead or wounded (Cherry 2005; Langton 2010; Katz 2011; McNab 2013). New levels of alarm were reached when biker violence took tolls among innocent bystanders, particularly the "Canadian Biker War" between the Rock Machine and the Hells Angels that lasted from 1994 until 2001 and resulted in 160 murders, including an 11-year-old boy. The "Great Nordic Biker War" between Hells Angels and Bandidos resulted in 11 bikers' deaths in Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden between 1994 and 1997 in addition to the death of one bystander and the maiming of several others in bomb attacks (Barker 2015). In countries in which biker violence reaches these levels, outlaw motorcycle clubs tend to symbolize organized crime (Morselli 2009; Katz 2011; Korsell and Larsson 2011).

In other countries, law enforcement perceptions have followed different paths. In Germany, for example, it was not interclub violence but alleged involvement in forced prostitution and extortion that prompted the first determined government response to outlaw bikers. In 1983 the first German charter of the Hells Angels, located in Hamburg, was rescinded and several of its members were put on trial (Geurtjens, Nelen, and Vanderhallen 2018).

The Netherlands did not experience excessive interclub violence, in large part because of the Hells Angels' dominance of the Dutch bikers scene. In the absence of official policies on organized crime, handling of outlaw bikers changed from regulated tolerance during the 1970s and early 1980s to *laissez-faire* during the late 1980s and 1990s. Not until 2000 did Dutch authorities adopt a more repressive stance, especially toward the Hells Angels (Blokland, Soudijn, and Teng 2014; Geurtjens, Nelen, and Vanderhallen 2018). By that time, outlaw motorcycle clubs had a prominent place on international law enforcement agendas.

In 1991, following a Danish initiative, Interpol launched "Project Rockers," centered on the creation of a network of police experts on outlaw motorcycle clubs. By 1999, 27 countries tied by the presence of the

Hells Angels, including 21 from Europe, the United States, Canada, Brazil, South Africa, Australia, and New Zealand, participated (Smith 1998; Bjorngaard 1999; Barker 2015). In 1996, the nascent European police agency Europol launched its own biker-related project, “Operation Monitor,” under the aegis of the Danish National Police. It sought to collect and exchange intelligence on outlaw motorcycle clubs with a special focus on drug trafficking. “Operation Monitor” prompted member states to look more closely at their domestic outlaw biker scenes (Heitmüller 2014).

The overall picture from a law enforcement perspective mainly evolved along two lines. First, in many countries outlaw biker violence reached a point at which it could no longer be described as merely rebellious, especially when innocent bystanders began to fall victim to biker warfare. Second, outlaw bikers increasingly engaged in more organized types of crime, leading law enforcement agencies increasingly to perceive them as internationally operating criminal organizations.

II. Outlaw Bikers and (Organized) Crimes

The contention that outlaw motorcycle clubs have evolved into criminal organizations has two basic implications: that their members are systematically engaged in criminal activities, and that the clubs play a key role in their members’ criminal conduct. We examine both suggestions, starting with the criminal involvement of outlaw bikers. First, however, we clarify what types of crimes are at issue.

A. Types of Biker Crime

It is a truism that not all crimes are the same. There are differences not only in their seriousness, however defined, but also categorical differences concerning, for example, the nature of victimization when there is an identifiable victim, and the meaning and function that criminal acts have for perpetrators. A differentiated understanding of criminal activities, as opposed to a broad-brush concept of crime, is important in the study of criminal organizations because of interconnectedness and interdependencies between what organizations do and how they are structured. According to one view, for example, criminal structures need to be viewed primarily as “emergent properties” of criminal behavior (Cornish and Clarke 2002, p. 52).

Accordingly, we begin discussion of outlaw motorcycle clubs in the context of organized crime by differentiating among types of crime members commit, before considering to what extent and in what ways their crimes can meaningfully be attributed to the clubs.

Official and journalistic accounts often refer indiscriminately to any kind of criminal involvement as evidence of the criminal nature of biker clubs. Academic writings take a more nuanced approach. Quinn and Koch (2003), for example, offer a “rough division” of biker crime into four categories along two dimensions, the level of planning and preparation and the underlying purpose of criminal conduct. By differentiating among spontaneous and planned expressive acts, short-term instrumental acts, and ongoing instrumental enterprises, they allow for gradations between more or less “organized” crimes and emphasize differences between “acts of violence and hedonism” driven by impulses and emotions and entrepreneurial behavior oriented toward material gain (Quinn and Koch 2003, p. 295).

Similarly, Lauchs, Bain, and Bell (2015) distinguish “organized crime associated” offenses for profit and “barbarian culture” offenses. Barbarian culture offenses “match the traditional notion of an outsider subculture that acts in a manner unacceptable to society” and include traffic offenses, drunk and disorderly behavior, and minor drug offenses (p. 27). Planned aggressive acts not associated with crimes for profit are also viewed as barbarian.

The Quinn and Koch (2003) typology and the distinction between “organized crime associated” and “barbarian culture” offenses are valuable but do not sufficiently capture the different ways in which members’ criminal conduct may pertain to the biker subculture and to biker clubs as organizational entities. Cognizant of the inconvenience associated with the addition of another classification scheme, we nonetheless opt for a tripartite distinction of outlaw biker crimes centered on their purposes and meanings. Distinguishing proximal from distal goals, and economic from symbolic goals, we arrive at the following typology:

Lifestyle crimes: criminal acts associated with behaviors that constitute prominent elements of the outlaw biker subculture.

Symbolic crimes: criminal acts that feed into the status and reputation of the individual member, chapter, or club.

Entrepreneurial crimes: criminal acts committed for profit that benefit the individual member, chapter, or club.

Lifestyle crimes are typically related to riding and partying as key elements of the outlaw biker subculture. Emblematic examples include traffic violations and minor drug offenses associated with recreational use of illegal substances. Impulsive predatory crimes such as stealing spare parts of parked motorcycles, or robbing passersby for gas money, are also regarded as lifestyle crimes as they do little to enhance the financial standing of the individual member or the club. To the extent that outlaw bikers' sexual morality, which tends to conceive of women as property of individual bikers or of the club as a whole (Hopper and Moore 1990; Wolf 1991), clashes with mainstream norms, some sexual offenses such as statutory rape can also be classified as lifestyle crimes. So can some acts of violence prevalent among outlaw bikers, such as domestic violence, that do little to increase the perpetrator's status within the subculture (Smith 2002).

Symbolic crimes have the potential to affect the subcultural standing of those involved. Often, although not necessarily, they are acts of violence. Symbolic crimes typically result from honor contests that provide bikers opportunity to boost their status and reputation at others' expense. Symbolic crimes thus serve a more distant goal that goes beyond the offending situation. Especially violence directed toward socially close individuals has the potential to result in symbolic resources (Gould 2003; Gravel et al. 2018). Nonviolent symbolic crimes, for instance, could include breaking and entering to steal rival clubs' paraphernalia, or damaging a rival club's property by setting fire to their clubhouse. Symbolic crimes also include planned expressive acts of violence toward rival peers (Klement 2019). Within the hypermasculine outlaw biker world, lifestyle crimes such as spontaneous bar brawls can quickly acquire symbolic meaning. Should an individual biker be the losing party, retaliation is likely, often with help from a number of brothers, providing symbolic relevance to any further violent encounters (Quinn and Koch 2003).

Finally, entrepreneurial crimes potentially yield material profit. Like symbolic crimes, the aims of entrepreneurial crimes are often not immediate, which distinguishes them from lifestyle crimes. Entrepreneurial crimes can be predatory, simply costly to the victim, or market based, with illegal goods or services provided for an agreed-on price. Entrepreneurial crimes include criminal acts committed in preparation for making a criminal profit, such as manufacture of illegal drugs. Entrepreneurial crimes can be nonviolent or violent (e.g., extortion); their key aim is to enhance the material position of the individual member or club.

As with symbolic and lifestyle crimes, there is a clear link between entrepreneurial crimes and lifestyle crimes in that the biker lifestyle encourages some entrepreneurial crimes and not others. Being a frequent patron of nightclubs and shabby bars is more likely to incite drug dealing and forced prostitution than bankruptcy fraud or insider trading.

A miscellaneous “other” category remains that cannot be linked to the biker subculture. This includes such crimes as downloading child pornography from the internet, which is neither entrepreneurial nor symbolic and does not spring from subcultural biker behaviors or values.

Lifestyle crimes are a justifiable cause for societal concern, but for students of organized crime, bikers’ involvement in ongoing profit-making crimes and excessive symbolic violence are more relevant. Profit-making crimes, when successfully perpetrated, yield material gains larger than can be instantly used or spent, creating a need for outlets for illicit goods and ways to launder illicit proceeds. Whether one or a few members, cliques, or entire chapters are involved is an empirical question rather than a defining characteristic. This is also true of symbolic crimes. Given that although individual and club reputations are highly intertwined, the honor contested is often perceived to be the club’s and to require participation of many if not all members. Symbolic crimes range from spontaneous to planned but often require at least some coordination.

B. Extent of Criminal Involvement of Outlaw Motorcycle Club Members

There is substantial evidence that members of outlaw motorcycle clubs are more extensively involved in crime than are members of other motorcycle clubs or of the general population. This is not surprising. Criminal tendencies and records are not a disadvantage to people who aspire to membership in an outlaw club; to the contrary, they are usually an advantage. The clubs themselves, by bringing together criminally active people and by engaging in lifestyle and symbolic crimes, make criminal involvement more likely.

1. *Crime Prevalence.* Surprisingly few studies have systematically charted the level and scope of criminal activities of outlaw motorcycle club members. Table 1 shows studies that have used law enforcement data to examine the prevalence of criminal involvement among members of outlaw motorcycle clubs and, less often, of members of their support or puppet clubs.

Canadian research covering 63 clubs active in Quebec during 1973–88 found that 70 percent of 1,530 outlaw bikers in the sample had a

TABLE 1
Studies That Have Used Law Enforcement Data to Examine the Prevalence of Criminal Involvement among Members
of Outlaw Motorcycle Clubs

Source	Country	Sample Size	Club(s)	Criminal Involvement (%)	Measure of Criminal Involvement
OMC members:					
Tremblay et al. 1989	Canada	1,530	HAMC	70	Conviction
Barker 2015	Canada	249	HAMC	82	Conviction
BRÅ 1999	Sweden	100	HAMC, BMC	75	Conviction
Rostami and Mondani 2019	Sweden	1,142	HAMC	97	Suspicion
Klement 2016a	Denmark	307	HAMC, BMC, NNNMC	96	Conviction
Klement 2016b	Denmark	396	HAMC, BMC, NNNMC	92	Conviction
Blokland et al. 2019	Netherlands	601	Multiple	82	Conviction
Blokland, Van der Leest, and Soudijn 2019	Netherlands	1,617	Multiple	86	Conviction
Houghton 2014	Australia	...	Multiple	47	Conviction
Lauchs 2019a	Australia	64	Finks	100	Conviction
Support club members:					
Rostami and Mondani 2019	Sweden	1,866	RDMC, RWC	95	Suspicion
Klement 2016b	Denmark	554	HAMC, BMC, NNNMC	87	Conviction
Blokland et al. 2019	Netherlands	473	puppet clubs Multiple	78	Conviction

NOTE.—OMC = Outlaw Motorcycle Club; HAMC = Hells Angels Motorcycle Club; BMC = Bandidos Motorcycle Club; NNNMC = No Name Motorcycle Club (Danish indigenous club); RDMC = Red Devils Motorcycle Club; RWC = Red and White Crew.

criminal record (Tremblay et al. 1989). Law enforcement data eclectically published during a more recent period of intensified intergang rivalry among Canadian outlaw biker clubs suggest even higher percentages (cited in Barker 2015, pp. 148–49).

Criminal justice contacts are also prevalent among Scandinavian outlaw motorcycle club members. A Swedish study of 80 Hells Angels and 20 Bandidos found that three-quarters had been convicted at least once (BRÅ 1999). Rostami and Mondani (2019), in a network study of the Swedish Hells Angels, found that 97 percent of members in their sample had been officially registered as a crime suspect. In a series of publications, Klement and colleagues (Klement, Kyvsgaard, and Pedersen 2011; Klement and Pedersen 2013; Klement 2016*a*, 2016*b*) report on criminal careers of people identified as Danish outlaw bikers in the Police Intelligence Database (PID). More than one in 10 had been convicted at least once before being registered as outlaw bikers in the PID.

One of us, with colleagues, has studied the criminal careers of people officially registered by law enforcement personnel in the Netherlands as outlaw bikers (Blokland, Soudijn, and Teng 2014; Blokland, Van der Leest, and Soudijn 2018, 2019; Blokland et al. 2019). These studies used conviction data to reconstruct the juvenile and adult criminal careers of outlaw motorcycle club and support club members. Guilty verdicts, prosecutorial fines, and prosecutorial waivers for policy reasons were counted as “convictions”; acquittals and prosecutorial waivers for technical reasons were disregarded. The first study found that 82 percent of 601 outlaw bikers reported to be affiliated with an outlaw biker club between 2008 and 2013 were convicted at least once between age 12 and mid-2013. These individuals, who included full members, prospects, and hangarounds, were 44 years of age on average when convicted. A follow-up study found that nearly 86 percent of 1,617 registered outlaw motorcycle club members in the sample were convicted at least once between 2010 and 2015 (Blokland, Van der Leest, and Soudijn 2019).

Finally, of all known outlaw motorcycle club members in Queensland, Australia, 47 percent had a criminal record for one or more serious offenses (excluding traffic offenses and petty crime; Houghton 2014). A recent study on Australia’s Gold Coast Finks Motorcycle Club found that all members had committed traffic offenses and many had committed minor drug offenses (Lauchs 2019*a*).

Crime prevalence also appears to be high among members of support or puppet clubs. Rostami and Mondani (2019) found that 95 percent of

police-identified Swedish members of the Hells Angels' support clubs the Red Devils and Red and White Crew had been suspected of a crime. Klement (2016b) found that 87 percent of 554 Danish puppet and support club members had been convicted at least once. Blokland, Van der Leest, and Soudijn (2019) found a slightly lower prevalence (78 percent) among Dutch support club members.

Caution is needed, however, when drawing conclusions from studies using samples of police-identified outlaw bikers, as they may suffer from sampling bias. Criminally active outlaw bikers are more likely to end up in the sample than are their law-abiding brethren; this will inflate the percentage of convicted outlaw motorcycle club members. The extent to which selective sampling distorts findings depends on the conviction rate among outlaw bikers not included in the sample, and the extent to which the sample includes the total outlaw biker population. Assuming different hypothetical conviction rates among unidentified outlaw bikers and different levels of population coverage, Blokland, Van der Leest, and Soudijn (2019) estimated that the "true" conviction rate among members of Dutch outlaw motorcycle clubs is likely to be between 56 and 86 percent. Because the crime prevalence in an age-matched random sample of 300 Dutch male motorcycle owners who were not known to the police as outlaw bikers was a little over 32 percent, it is safe to conclude that criminal involvement among outlaw bikers in the Netherlands is higher than in the general male population.

2. *Crime Frequency.* Crime prevalence indicated by the presence or absence of a criminal record is a crude measure of criminal involvement. Individuals with a single conviction and others with many each count as one and contribute equally to the prevalence rate. Information on the frequency of convictions of outlaw bikers enriches the picture.

Studies differ in the length and nature of the period examined in ways that may affect the frequency of offending recorded. The database used in the Blokland and colleagues studies (Blokland, Van der Leest, and Soudijn 2019; Blokland et al. 2019), for example, includes both club membership years and preceding years. Percentages reported by Klement (2016a, 2016b) in contrast pertain primarily to the period before becoming an outlaw biker (defined as before registration in the PID).

Criminal careers studies of the general offender population usually find conviction frequency highly skewed to the left: most offenders have only a few convictions, but a small minority accumulate many. This pattern characterized non-outlaw bikers in the Dutch studies, as the first

pane in figure 2 shows. In contrast, the distribution of conviction frequency in both Dutch outlaw biker samples (second and third panes) is far more equal and even skewed to the right; more than one in four were convicted 10 or more times. The fourth pane in figure 2 shows the distribution of conviction frequency in the Danish biker sample (although differences between the Danish and Dutch studies make the data not fully comparable). Offending frequency among Danish bikers has a more pronounced rightward skew, meaning that the majority have extensive criminal records. Similar comparative patterns were found for Dutch and Danish support and puppet club members.

Additional research on criminal career dimensions of outlaw bikers before, during, and after club membership is clearly needed. Existing evidence suggests that outlaw bikers disproportionately engage in crime compared to the general population and do so at higher than average rates.

3. *Crime Mix.* Crime mix refers to the nature of the offenses committed. Organized crime researchers are likely to be most interested in entrepreneurial crimes and symbolic interclub violence. Arrest or conviction data, however, usually distinguish between different kinds of offenses only by reference to criminal code sections. This does not distinguish the various kinds of outlaw biker crimes as we have conceptualized them. Broad categories such as “assault,” for example, include behavior ranging from domestic violence and barroom skirmishes to preplanned interclub clashes. These data do, however, show that outlaw bikers’ criminal involvement extends well beyond lifestyle crimes.

A 2015 National Alliance of Gang Investigators Associations survey asked respondents about outlaw bikers’ involvement in various types of crime. Outlaw bikers were reported to be most often engaged in assaults and weapons possession (in over 50 jurisdictions) and threats and intimidation (over 40 jurisdictions); this may reflect the outlaw biker subculture’s hypermasculine nature and likely pertains to both lifestyle and symbolic violence. Outlaw bikers were also reported to be involved in street-level drug dealing (over 40 jurisdictions) and large-scale manufacture and distribution of narcotics (both in over 20 jurisdictions). Respondents from more than 10 jurisdictions reported bikers’ involvement in money laundering (Federal Bureau of Investigation 2015).

These findings are broadly consistent with findings of a similar 2003 survey of 1,061 US law enforcement agencies (cited by Barker 2015, pp. 94–95). Ninety percent of the agencies reported outlaw bikers in

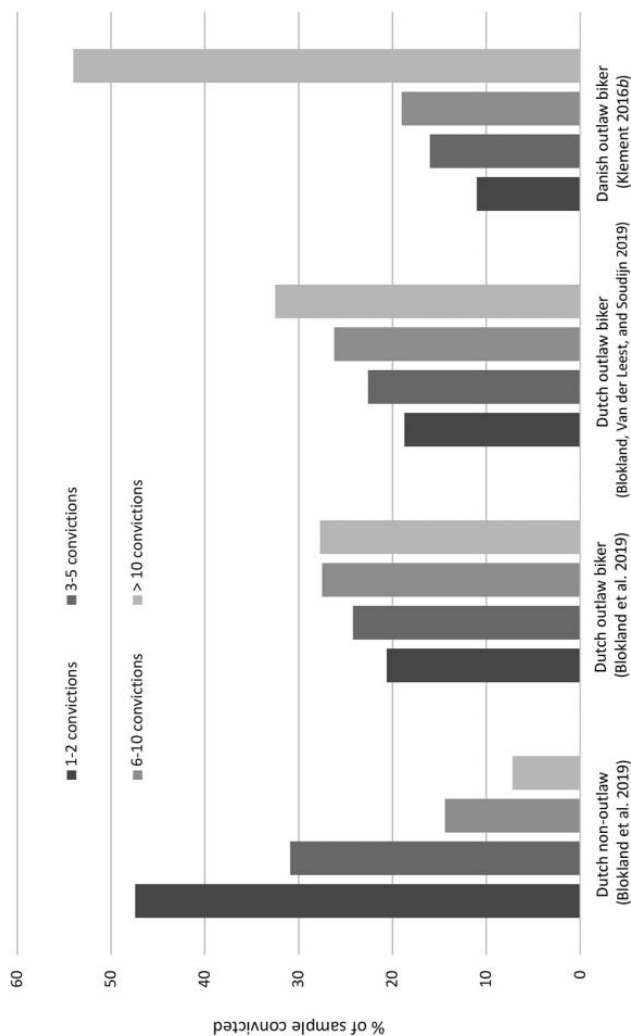


FIG. 2.—Distribution of conviction frequency, Danish and Dutch studies

their respective jurisdictions frequently or occasionally engaged in distributing narcotics, and 76 percent reported frequent or occasional involvement in manufacture of narcotics. More than half reported frequent or occasional involvement in money laundering. The criminal repertoire of outlaw bikers in the United States thus encompasses lifestyle and symbolic crimes and entrepreneurial crimes aimed at making and concealing criminal profit.

Only a few other studies have reported on outlaw bikers' criminal involvement. Of crimes of the population of outlaw bikers registered between 1984 and 1988 in Quebec province, 25 percent were property crimes, 8 percent were violent offenses, and 28 percent involved narcotics (Alain 2003). Klement (2016a) found that 69 percent of members of the Danish Hells Angels, Bandidos, and No Name Motorcycle Club known to the police were convicted at least once of a violent offense. Fifty-nine percent were convicted of drug possessions, often pertaining to the individual's own use and thus most likely reflect lifestyle crime. Thirty-four percent were convicted of sale or trafficking of narcotics, both entrepreneurial offenses. Of support club members' narcotics offenses, 49 percent were for possession and 22 percent were for sale or trafficking.

Blokland, Van der Leest, and Soudijn (2019) found that 85.2 percent of the outlaw bikers in their sample were convicted of a traffic offense at least once. Over half (56.7 percent) were convicted of at least one violent offense and more than a third (34.6 percent) at least once of a drug offense. Under Dutch prosecutorial policy, possession of a small amount of drugs for personal use is tolerated, which means convictions for drug offenses signify entrepreneurial crimes. Other entrepreneurial crimes (referred to as "organized crimes"), of which 11.7 percent of the sample were convicted, included extortion, money laundering, and human trafficking. Percentages for support club members were largely comparable, though they were less often convicted of violent (49.7 percent), drug (25.7 percent), and "organized" crimes (7.8 percent).

Blokland and David (2016), in an analysis of 40 crimes mentioned in 27 court files pertaining to Dutch outlaw motorcycle club members between 1999 and 2017, found that 80 percent involved entrepreneurial crimes. In one described instance of symbolic violence, "twenty to thirty" members of a Dutch indigenous outlaw motorcycle club raided the clubhouse of a non-outlaw club located in their territory and, threatening arson, forced its abandonment.

Geurtjens (2019) used the Quinn and Koch (2003) crimes typology in a study of 185 news articles from local newspapers in the Meuse Rhine Euroregion (parts of Belgium, Germany, and the Netherlands) pertaining to the four largest outlaw biker clubs in the area (Hells Angels, Bandidos, Satudarah, and Outlaws). Twenty-four percent of 85 criminal incidents could be categorized as “spontaneous expressive acts,” 22 percent as “planned aggressive acts,” and 39 percent as pertaining to “ongoing instrumental enterprises.” Barker and Human (2009) in a similar study of newspaper articles concluded that half of all crimes between 1980 and 2005 concerning the four big US outlaw motorcycle clubs—Hells Angels, Outlaws, Bandidos, and Pagans—concerned ongoing instrumental enterprises.

Finally, Australian data analyzed by Goldsworthy and McGillivray (2017) indicate that 4,323 criminal charges between April 2008 and April 2014 resulting in guilty verdicts involved Queensland members of outlaw motorcycle clubs. The charges included 595 counts of drug possession (14 percent of all charges) and 285 counts of committing public nuisance (nearly 7 percent); both can be categorized as lifestyle crimes. Entrepreneurial crimes made up only about 2 percent of the guilty verdicts, including 102 counts of producing, trafficking in, or supplying drugs. Another Queensland study limited its scope to serious crimes, excluding lifestyle crimes such as traffic offenses and minor drug possession. Through the end of 2016, 112 members of outlaw motorcycle clubs received guilty verdicts. Fifty (45 percent) received a prison sentence for violent crimes, 29 (26 percent) for drug offenses, 11 (10 percent) for firearms offenses, and 14 (13 percent) for other crimes (Lauchs and Staines 2019).

III. Outlaw Motorcycle Clubs and (Organized) Crimes

Participation of members of an outlaw motorcycle club in criminal activities, including ongoing organized crimes, does not necessarily make the club a criminal organization. Indiscriminate law enforcement use of such terms as “criminal organization,” “organized crime group,” or “crime syndicate” concerning outlaw motorcycle clubs masks fundamental and ongoing conceptual debates. These debates, which center on the importance of analytically separating groups as organizational entities from their members as individuals, also occur in relation to mafia groups

(Anderson 1979; Haller 1992; Paoli 2003) and street gangs (Decker, Bynum, and Weisel 1998; Densley 2012, 2014).

A. Street Gangs, Organized Crime Groups, and Outlaw Motorcycle Clubs

Law enforcement agencies commonly refer to outlaw motorcycle clubs as outlaw motorcycle gangs to denote that they are criminal organizations, not “clubs.” What gang scholars consider to be a gang, however, is different from what organized crime scholars consider to be an organized crime group (Roks and Van Ruitenburg 2018). As a first step toward a better understanding of how outlaw motorcycle clubs relate to both gangs and organized crime groups, building on Decker and Pyrooz (2015) we compare these two kinds of groups along two defining dimensions: structure and activity.

Gangs have been defined as “any durable, street-oriented youth group, whose involvement in illegal activity is part of its group identity” (Klein and Maxson 2006, p. 4). Other definitions exist (Ball and Curry [1995] and Curry [2015] provide overviews), including elements such as “a general lack of discipline that characterizes the control that gangs have over gang members” (Decker and Pyrooz 2014, p. 282). The dominant view is that many street gangs are diffuse aggregations of individuals and lack an obvious hierarchical structure, clearly defined leadership, levels of membership, membership roles and obligations, and precise gang boundaries. Leadership appears to be highly situational, membership requirements to be transitory, and membership to be blurry at best, both to law enforcement and to self-acclaimed gang members. Most gangs do not hold regular meetings, have written rules of conduct, or manage to enforce significant levels of discipline on members. The young ages of many gang members may contribute to this. Exceptions to this common image, however, exist. Some gangs have more rational, instrumental structures and operate in many ways that resemble legitimate corporations (e.g., Venkatesh and Levitt 2000).

Organized crime researchers have reached a similar consensus. The once prevailing image of organized crime groups was of pyramidal structured enterprises in which each individual is allocated a clear set of tasks and responsibilities. That has given way to a more fluid and dynamic conception in which criminals cooperate in loose, situationally defined networks that allow them to adapt to continuously changing opportunities and constraints in the criminal markets in which they operate (e.g.,

Bruinsma and Bernasco 2004; Bouchard and Morselli 2014). As with gangs, exceptions exist. Some criminal businesses have features that mirror legitimate corporations (von Lampe 2016a). People engaged in organized crime organization are typically older than street gang members (Kleemans and de Poot 2008).

The main difference between street gangs and organized crime groups therefore lies not so much in how they are positioned on the organizational continuum but rather in their activities (Decker and Pyrooz 2015, p. 298). Constructing and maintaining the collective identity of the gang is key for gang members and is reflected in the types of crimes they typically commit. Turf is often central to a gang's identity and much of the violence gang members commit is motivated by perceived violations of actual or symbolic turf boundaries by members of other gangs. As a result, intergang violence is common even in the absence of feared or real infringements of criminal markets. To optimally serve its symbolic purpose, violence is often committed in public and features excessive displays of power. A drive-by shooting may not be as accurate as a coordinated assassination, but in symbolic violence, the statement is what counts.

In contrast, organized crime groups, understood in terms of illegal enterprises, tend to seek economic rather than symbolic goals; the main driver of collaboration is to maximize illegal profit from predatory crime or provision of illegal goods and services. Violence may occur but is usually instrumental to achievement of economic goals—for example, to overcome resisting victims, intimidate potential witnesses and informants, or deal with criminal competition. Even in organized crime groups such as mafia associations that function as mutual aid societies and territorially based underworld governments, use of symbolic violence is limited and largely confined to phases of organizational disarray (Catino 2014; Lupo 2015). Violence has high costs. Excessive use attracts unwanted law enforcement attention, which is bad for illicit business. Avoidance of violence seems to characterize organized crime groups (von Lampe 2016a).

Figure 3 summarizes conventional wisdom concerning similarities and differences between street gangs and organized crime groups along a structural organizational dimension that runs from informal-diffused (disorganized) to instrumental-rational (organized), and a goal orientation dimension that runs from symbolic to economic. Groups on the informal-diffused end of the continuum lack a clear hierarchy, formal meetings are rare or nonexistent, and codes of conduct are limited to secrecy and loyalty (Decker and Curry 2000; Morselli 2009). Groups

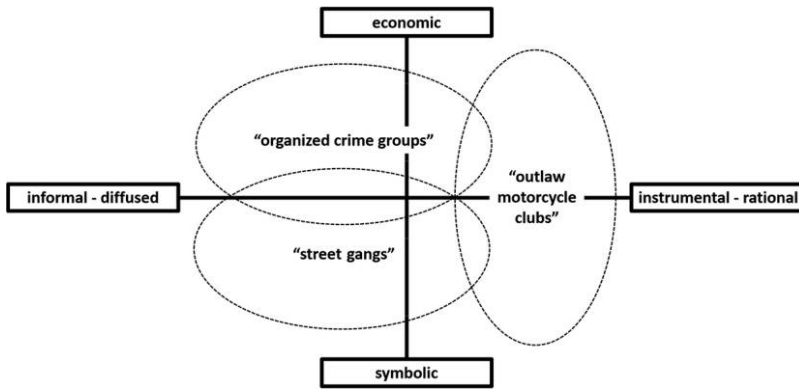


FIG. 3.—Similarities and differences between street gangs and organized crime groups

at the instrumental-rational end of the continuum have a vertical structure, coordinated actions, and clearly demarcated boundaries. Symbolic goals or functions include peer affiliation, friendship, revenge, and turf. Criminal groups on the economic end of these dimensions seem to care less about symbolism and more about making money (Decker and Pyrooz 2015).

Both street gangs and organized crime groups appear to gravitate toward the informal-diffused end of the structural dimension, with the exception of mafia associations. They have a formalized structure and display some level of vertical differentiation, at least with respect to individual mafia families (Catino 2014). Outlaw motorcycle clubs, like mafia associations, tend to present themselves as strongly hierarchical organizations with clearly described membership obligations and strictly defined boundaries. Some are registered legal entities and have copyrighted their colors and patches to prevent unauthorized use. The Hells Angels have gone to court to challenge unauthorized use of their name and logo (Kuldova 2017).

Outlaw motorcycle gangs are associated with both entrepreneurial and symbolic crimes. Outlaw bikers have been convicted for profitable illicit activities such as narcotics production and distribution and trafficking in guns and humans but are also known for extremely violent public displays of intergang rivalry that appear motivated by honor and revenge rather than by potential revenues. Their goals thus run the full spectrum from purely symbolic to purely economic.

Compared to street gangs and organized crime groups, outlaw biker clubs fall on the instrumental-rational end of the organizational continuum. Their criminal behavior seems to transcend the divide between symbolic and entrepreneurial more than either street gangs or organized crime groups.

Figure 3 provides a useful starting point to understand how outlaw motorcycle clubs compare to street gangs and organized crime groups, but it is based on generalizations that call for more refined examination. First, implicit to positioning the three types of groups along the organizational dimension is the assumption that group structure is always and unequivocally linked to members' criminal activities. Second, placing entrepreneurial and symbolic crimes on opposite sides of a continuum may imply that particular types of crime are mutually exclusive in a group's criminal repertoire. Both these implications are premature.

B. Crime and Its Relation to the Club as an Organizational Entity

Closely linked to the criminal involvement of outlaw bikers is the question of how their crimes relate to clubs and chapters as organizational entities. There are different notions about this. Veno (2009, p. 179), for example, argues that profit-making crime—namely, drug crimes—cannot be ascribed to clubs or chapters as a whole: “The members do it, but it’s not a club-organized thing.” Sometimes, outlaw biker clubs are portrayed as supporting criminal activities without direct involvement—for example, by providing a network of trusted contacts (Quinn and Koch 2003) and an intimidating reputation (Wolf 1991, p. 127; Quinn and Forsyth 2011), or providing a forum for resolution of conflicts (Piano 2017).

A symbiotic relationship is sometimes assumed to exist between the profit-making illegal activities of individual members and the club as a whole. Quinn and Forsyth (2011) argue that clubs largely rely on their members to raise funds without asking too many questions and may provide seed-money loans for criminal businesses. Sometimes, outlaw biker clubs or chapters are considered to be directly involved in the sense that a club “directly supervises the organized criminality of its members” (Quinn and Forsyth 2011, p. 228). Barker and Human (2009) suggest that there is a continuum of clubs and chapters, including some in which only a few members engage in serious criminal activities, some composed of small groups of criminally active members who operate with

or without tacit approval of the club as a whole, and some that function “as gangs oriented toward criminal profit” (p. 175; see also Barker 2015; Lauchs, Bain, and Bell 2015).

C. A Situational Approach

We adopt a situational approach. By this we mean that how crime relates to the club or chapter as an organizational entity may differ for different types of crime and may differ even for one type of crime from one occasion to the next. Rather than conclude that crime is “not a club-organized thing” or that some clubs function as “gangs,” we believe that crime may be completely separate from the club or chapter on one occasion, while being club business the next, depending on the particular circumstances. Below we examine three analytically distinct scenarios of links between outlaw motorcycle clubs and crime (fig. 4; see also von Lampe 2019). Given the paucity of valid data, we use these scenarios primarily as heuristic devices rather than as a classificatory scheme to organize known cases.

The first scenario, “bad apples,” acknowledges that there may be only limited overlap between outlaw motorcycle clubs and the activities of criminally active members. For example, it is well established that gang members, and outlaw bikers, often cooperate with co-offenders outside the gang (Morselli 2009; Bouchard and Konarski 2013). In the “bad apple” scenario, individual members engage in criminal activities as independent operators on their

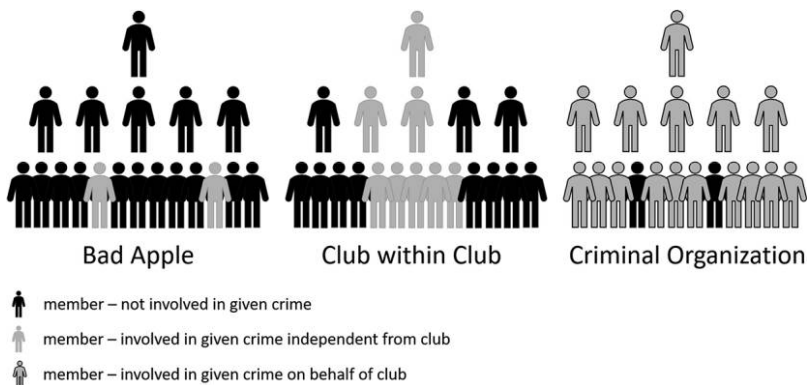


FIG. 4.—Scenarios of links between outlaw motorcycle clubs and crime

own, with other club members, or with nonmembers. In these cases, club members are essentially autonomous in their decisions to commit a given crime and in their choices regarding the specifics of the crime. Outlaw motorcycle clubs sometimes characterize members implicated in criminal conduct as bad apples, insisting that having criminals among their members is not unique to outlaw biker clubs and that members commit crimes on their own, as a private matter (see Veno 2009, p. 62; Barker 2015, p. 44).

The second scenario we will discuss, “club within a club,” is similar to the bad apple scenario in that members commit crimes on their own account. However, the situation is different in that most if not all members, and especially the club or chapter leadership, are involved. A large overlap exists between the formal club structure and a parallel structure engaged in crime; from the outside it may appear that the club as a club is committing these crimes. Importantly, however, relations and interactions within the parallel structure do not follow the same logic as the formal club structure. For example, authority derived from formal positions in the club hierarchy may not carry over to decisions with respect to criminal activity. This scenario is neither purely hypothetical (see, e.g., Morselli 2009) nor does it apply exclusively to outlaw motorcycle clubs. Gang researchers have observed that drugs are sometimes distributed through the ranks from gang leaders to lower level members but that “drug sales are fundamentally an individual or small-group activity, not coordinated by the collective gang. The gang instead provides the reputational and criminogenic resources to sustain the enterprise” (Densley 2014, p. 533).

In the third scenario, “criminal organizations,” outlaw motorcycle clubs, or their chapters, engage in criminal activities as organizational entities. This scenario corresponds to the law enforcement agency claim that outlaw motorcycle clubs have morphed into “highly structured criminal organizations” (Federal Bureau of Investigation 2009, p. 8). The decision to commit a crime is made collectively through the established decision-making mechanism, club resources are invested, and individuals directly involved act on behalf, and in the interest, of the club. Not all members are necessarily involved, but if crime is considered to be club business it can be assumed to be backed by the entire membership.

These three scenarios could play out simultaneously within a given outlaw motorcycle club or chapter. Depending on the situation, members may act as independent operators, or as members of a criminal

organization. This may apply to crimes for profit as well as symbolic crimes and lifestyle crimes. For example, several club members may commit a rape on club premises. This could be viewed as a bad apple scenario in which the perpetrators take advantage of the relative safety of the club environment, trusting fellow members not to talk to the police. Within the same club or chapter there may also be a large group of members, including senior members, who run an extortion racket using the power of the patch to intimidate victims, which would fit the club within a club scenario. Finally, the club or chapter may decide to dismantle a newly formed rival club by forcefully seizing its club colors. This fits the club as criminal organization scenario.

1. The Bad Apple Scenario. The bad apple scenario reflects how outlaw motorcycle clubs were initially portrayed. In the absence of evidence to the contrary, it likely remains the predominant pattern with crimes being committed by members in “a freelance fashion” (Monterosso 2018, p. 691). The scarce empirical research provides little evidence one way or the other. However, co-offending data suggest that most biker crime is individual crime, assuming that more than one member will likely be involved when a club acts as an organizational entity. Existing research shows that outlaw bikers who commit crimes tend to operate as lone offenders or to co-offend with nonmembers rather than in groups of fellow outlaw bikers. Blokland and David (2016), analyzing 27 criminal cases involving members of outlaw motorcycle clubs as suspects, found that more than one outlaw biker was implicated in only one-third of the cases. Rostami and Mondani (2019), with samples of thousands of cases, examined Swedish co-offending data for members of the Hells Angels and two support clubs. Only a small fraction of collaborations involved members of the same group. Among Hells Angels, only 13.2 percent of co-offending ties were to another Hells Angels member. Of those intragroup ties, 74 percent connected members of the same chapter (Rostami and Mondani 2019, p. 45).

In the bad apple scenario, by definition, outlaw motorcycle clubs as such do not commit crimes. This does not imply, however, that they play no role. Quite to the contrary, outlaw motorcycle clubs by their very nature may in a number of ways influence and promote the criminal conduct of their members. This is most relevant to the bad apple scenario but also applies to the other two scenarios.

Outlaw motorcycle clubs provide members a social environment that is tolerant of and often sympathetic toward criminal conduct, even when

criminal involvement is limited and individual criminal conduct is neither implicitly nor explicitly encouraged by the club as such. In part, this is a function of the people outlaw biker clubs tend to attract and recruit. Law enforcement data since at least the mid-1960s have consistently shown that disproportionately high shares of outlaw bikers have criminal records. Research has found some support for the selection hypothesis that outlaw motorcycle clubs prefer to recruit criminally inclined individuals (Thornberry et al. 1993; Klement 2016b; Blokland et al. 2019). Ethnographic research shows that violence is an integral part of the outlaw biker subculture within the larger context of the “saloon society milieu” (Quinn 2001, p. 390). Accordingly, proven ability and willingness to use violence, regardless of its legality, can be a key criterion for acceptance as a member (Wolf 1991; Veno 2009).

There are conflicting accounts about whether clubs require prospective members to commit a crime, possibly even murder (Marsden and Sher 2007). Where this practice reportedly exists, it is thought to be aimed at preventing infiltration by undercover police officers (Lavigne 1989; Veno 2009). Regardless of the truth of these claims, outlaw motorcycle clubs, including the more “conservative” and less criminally oriented, appear generally to be intent on refusing entry to current or former police officers (Wolf 1991; Barker 2015). In contrast, a criminal background is not an exclusion criterion. The historically high share of convicted offenders among outlaw bikers is reflected in outlaw bikers’ self-perceptions (Barger 2001, p. 124: “most of us were card-carrying felons”) and in norms and practices adopted to cope with this situation. For example, jail time is one of the few excuses recognized by club bylaws for not complying with duties such as maintaining a roadworthy motorcycle or attending club meetings (Wolf 1991; Veno 2009; Abadinsky 2013).

The effects of selecting criminally inclined individuals are reinforced by a process that Wolf (1991, p. 100) has described as “an expected norm” of a probationary period for new members: the “disaffiliation” from social ties outside of the club. This means that affiliation goes hand in hand with weakening of bonds to conventional society and thereby weakening mechanisms of informal social control (Sampson and Laub 1997). However, while disaffiliation may affect friendship networks and possibly intimate partnerships, it does not necessarily lead to new members giving up employment or entrepreneurship in the legal economy (Wolf 1991; Barger 2001).

Outlaw motorcycle clubs do not generally hold members accountable for involvement in criminal activities, and, accordingly, there is no loss in formal or informal status connected with being implicated in a crime. The prevailing rationale seems to be that an outlaw biker “can do anything he wants to do” (Spurgeon 2011, p. 319) as long as he does not violate norms of the outlaw biker subculture or specific rules of his club (Veno 2009; Quinn and Forsyth 2011). For example, many outlaw biker clubs have traditionally banned use but not sale of intravenous drugs (Wolf 1991). According to a former high-ranking member of the Outlaws motorcycle club, the rule was “What a man did on his own time was his own business” (Spurgeon 2011, p. 319).

Rules against drug dealing seem to exist only to the extent that there could be negative repercussions for the club, such as the “no drug burns” rule of the Hells Angels that forbids members ripping off partners in drug deals (Barger 2001, p. 46). In a similar vein, the Edmonton chapter of the Rebels forbade members to wear their club colors or any other club symbols when selling drugs (Wolf 1991, p. 268).

It would be a rare occurrence for an outlaw biker to be expelled for a crime he has committed. In one such exceptional case mentioned by Barker (2015), a member of the Bandidos was forced out after having killed a popular former boxing champion. Another, mostly unwritten, outlaw biker rule forbids cooperation with law enforcement and disclosure of club-related information to outsiders and specifically to the media (Wolf 1991; Veno 2009; Barker 2015).

As a consequence, outlaw bikers who prepare or carry out criminal activities can rely on others not to divulge incriminating information. In turn, all members regardless of their criminal inclination subject themselves to the real possibility that they will have to remain silent about crimes of other members, and that “their silence and inaction gives tacit support and increases the likelihood that criminal behavior will continue and progress” (Barker 2015, p. 101).

Outlaw motorcycle clubs may also support the criminal conduct of members in more direct ways as a by-product of features of their normative and institutional framework—namely, those concerning group cohesion and mutual aid. Clubs may provide funds to members in need, which may include members using these funds as investment capital for illegal activities (Quinn and Forsyth 2011), or clubs putting up money to post bail or pay retainers for lawyers (Barger 2001; Veno 2009).

In a more comprehensive way, outlaw motorcycle clubs are based on the notion of ritual brotherhood. As Veno (2009, p. 88) explains, “When members call each other ‘brother’ they actually mean it. For many, the club becomes their family, particularly if they’ve come from dysfunctional homes.” A key facet of the notion of brotherhood is an obligation to lend mutual assistance in a system of interpersonal reciprocity that encompasses a wide range of spheres from sharing motorcycle parts to providing emotional support in crises, but also includes providing shelter to fellow members who are fugitives from the law (Wolf 1991). Encapsulated in the system of mutual assistance is the principle of mutual protection: “All members of the club will support a fellow member when threatened” (Wolf 1991, p. 98). The rule is supposed to apply “under any circumstances” (Wolf 1991, p. 127) and “no matter what the cause” (Barger 2001, p. 67; see also Quinn and Koch 2003). While members face repercussions internally if they abuse the outlaw biker code of honor for personal interests, externally the rule establishes a protective shield in that nonmembers are discouraged from taking action against members (Wolf 1991). When members engage in illegal activities on their own, they remain under the protection of fellow club members, be it against predatory criminals or against disloyal business partners.

The generalized expectation that an outlaw biker can count on unquestioned support from fellow club members, along with the outlaw bikers’ reputation for violence, feeds into what is called the “power of the patch” (Smith 1990; Wolf 1991; Barker 2015; Lauchs, Bain, and Bell 2015). The term refers to the intimidating and fear-instilling effect of wearing the colors of an outlaw motorcycle club; what Barker (2015, p. 11) calls “intimidation by reputation.” The power of the patch means that criminally inclined outlaw bikers not only operate behind a protective shield but possess intimidation capital that they can use as an asset in criminal activities—for example, to intimidate victims or witnesses (Wolf 1991; Barker 2015) or law enforcement officials (Gomez del Prado 2011).

Blokland and David (2016) report that outlaw bikers appearing as suspects in criminal cases they analyzed regularly referred to their membership in an outlaw motorcycle club to emphasize numerical and physical dominance over their victims. In this respect, essentially everything outlaw motorcycle clubs and individual outlaw bikers do that strengthens the power of the patch facilitates and benefits their criminal conducts. This includes symbolic crime—namely, violence in interclub

conflicts—and aggressive and violent behavior more generally. Importantly, following an argument Marcus Felson (2006) has made with respect to street gangs, the power of the patch could be bolstered by members of other clubs and even by nonaffiliated bikers so long as the public and the media do not differentiate between clubs or categories of bikers.

A further crime-promoting effect of belonging to an outlaw motorcycle club could be that formation of criminal network ties is facilitated. Outlaw motorcycle clubs, with their high proportions of criminally inclined members, inevitably function as offender convergence settings where potential partners in crime meet and socialize (Felson 2003; Kleemans and De Poot 2008). In addition, selective recruiting and emphases on mutual loyalty and support should provide a basis for trust even between members who are not in regular face-to-face contact (Paoli 2003). This may be particularly significant given the wide geographical reach of intraclub ties in large international clubs with chapters in various countries and continents. A high-ranking Hells Angel and FBI informant reported that members of the UK Hells Angels sought to import cocaine from Brazil and, when they could not find a supplier, asked members of the Rio de Janeiro chapter to find one for them (Lavigne 1997).

For some of the same reasons that bring outlaw bikers together, outsiders may view them as desirable partners in crime. Membership in an outlaw motorcycle club implies qualities such as adherence to a code of silence and willingness to use violence that are commonly valued in the underworld. Outlaw bikers may also be attractive crime partners because of the power of the patch—for example, to collect loansharking debts: “The bikers are recruited because of their ‘tough-guy’ image and because they are close-mouthed and will not talk when apprehended by police” (Pennsylvania Crime Commission 1991, p. 201; see also Wolf 1991). At the same time, they seem accessible because of their visibility. They are reportedly often contacted by outsiders who assume that outlaw motorcycle clubs sell drugs (Veno 2009).

The bad apple scenario illuminates characteristics that outlaw motorcycle clubs share with some organized crime groups, such as the southern Italian mafia associations, Chinese triads, and Japanese yakuza, all of which are associational criminal structures (von Lampe 2016a, 2016b). Francis Ianni (1975), in his seminal study of criminal networks in New York, distinguished “two forms of behavioral organizations” that he called “associational networks” (p. 293) and “entrepreneurial networks”

(p. 307). Entrepreneurial networks exist to profit from crime. Associational networks foster mutual trust among criminals, promote a basic criminal code of conduct, and shape criminal reputations (Ianni 1975).

Patricia Adler (1985, p. 63), observing drug smugglers and wholesalers in Southern California, similarly distinguished business structures in the form of partnerships, groups, and supplier-customer relations from “friendship networks” consisting of “social affiliations,” some having “business overtones,” and “a larger circle of acquaintances which was composed of dealers and smugglers the individual knew socially, yet with whom he or she had no business dealings.” Mark H. Haller (1992), examining the Philadelphia family of the Italian-American Cosa Nostra, offered essentially the same distinction. He concluded that the mafia family served three functions: as a fraternal order fostering “male bonding and social prestige for members,” as a businessmen’s association through which “members make useful business contacts, learn about business opportunities, and perform mutual favors for fellow members and their associates,” and as an association that sets and enforces rules among members similar to lawyers’ self-governance in bar associations (Haller 1992, pp. 2–4).

Hartmann and von Lampe (2008) provided another example of an associational criminal structure with parallels to outlaw motorcycle clubs. They studied the German underworld of the 1920s and 1930s, focusing on the Ringvereine that were originally officially chartered mutual aid associations of ex-convicts. The Ringvereine had an active club life with regular meetings, excursions, and social events, including lavish funeral processions for deceased members. Legal expenses were paid from club coffers, as was support for members and their families during times of imprisonment. Pins, rings, and other club insignia made members recognizable to outsiders. This made it easy for members to make use of the Ringvereine’s reputational value.

Organizations with associational criminal structures tend to have four basic features that also characterize outlaw motorcycle clubs: bonding, communication, mutual support, and a code of conduct. From friendship networks of drug traffickers to mafia organizations, associational criminal structures create and reinforce affectionate bonds that give members a sense of belonging and convey exclusivity and elitism, which can translate into enhanced social status. Solidarity and cohesion among members facilitate relatively safe communication of criminally relevant information, and the internal system of mutual assistance and support

facilitates access to resources for commission of crimes and for mitigating risks of arrest and incarceration. Finally, outlaw motorcycle clubs fit the mold in that they express a normative consensus in the absence of applicable and binding social norms that regulate deviant and criminal behavior, thereby increasing predictability and reducing uncertainty in interactions among criminals (von Lampe 2016b).

Associational criminal structures vary on some dimensions, including their degree of illegality, their visibility, and their formalization and organizational complexity. In all of these respects, outlaw motorcycle clubs are at one end of the continuum. Importantly, the clubs have noncriminal origins and, unless they have been banned by the authorities, typically are registered legal associations. In this respect they resemble Chinese triads and the Ringvereine, which started out as mutual aid societies of migrant workers in China and of ex-convicts in Germany, respectively, and sometimes retained this status while engaging in criminal activities (Chu 2000; Hartmann and von Lampe 2008).

Another variation exists with respect to visibility. Most associational criminal structures are secretive; affiliation may become apparent only after close observation (Hobbs 1989). Some, however, are easily recognizable through tattoos, such as the post-Soviet fraternity of the thieves-in-law (Cheloukhine and Haberland 2011); pins, such as with the Ringvereine; or clothing, as with some street gangs (Decker, Katz, and Webb 2008). All in this respect resemble outlaw biker clubs.

2. Clubs within Clubs. In the bad apple scenario, some members are involved in a particular criminal activity, but most are not. This is a fairly strong indication that a distinction should be made between what members do as individuals and what clubs do as clubs. In the club within a club scenario, things are far less obvious. From a distance it may appear that the club is organizing and carrying out crimes. On closer inspection, the criminal operation is parallel to but separate from the club.

Classification of outlaw motorcycle clubs as criminal organizations is often a matter of degree, hinging on the proportion of members involved in criminal activity (Wolf 1991). From this perspective, the club within a club scenario might seem to involve hair splitting. However, if outlaw motorcycle clubs are to be the units of analysis, the focus should be on a particular club as an “extra-individual entity” (Ahrne 1990, p. 37), defined by structures, procedures, and resources, and capable of agency. Whether crimes involving members can meaningfully be attributed to the club depends on the roles these structures, procedures,

and resources play. The entire membership, including the leadership, could commit crimes collectively without qualifying as a case of a club as a criminal organization so long as the crimes occur outside of the functioning of the club as such.

Lack of pertinent research makes it difficult to offer concrete examples of the club within a club scenario. Law enforcement, journalists, and autobiographical accounts typically lack the level of detail necessary to determine into which of our three scenarios a given case falls. Hells Angels involvement in the illegal drug trade in Quebec in the late 1990s may exemplify the club within a club scenario. Extensive investigations over several years implicated dozens of Hells Angels members, especially in its elite Nomad chapter, together with members of a support club and numerous nonmembers. The Nomads and the support club were alleged to exist solely to commit crimes for profit (Morselli 2009). Network analysis of surveillance data revealed, however, that the structure of the drug trafficking network only partly mirrored the formal structure of the Hells Angels. The 12 members of the Nomad chapter were not the most central players in the overall scheme, and some lower ranking participants (including Nomad prospects and support club members) held more influential positions in the trafficking network than did most of the Nomads (Morselli 2009, 2010).

The Pagans motorcycle club (PMC) of the 1970s and 1980s offers another possible example. At the time PMC had its strongest presence in Pennsylvania. Investigations showed that Pagans members and associates, including senior members, were involved in drug trafficking, mostly of methamphetamine and phencyclidine (PCP). In 1984, 22 PMC members and associates, including the president, vice president, sergeant-at-arms, and eight other members of the mother club were indicted for various drug-related offenses. The indictments alleged that the defendants used “the structure and organization of the PMC to organize, facilitate and control the manufacture and distribution of controlled substances both within the PMC and outside of it” (United States Attorney for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania 1984, p. 21819). This appears to be an example of an outlaw motorcycle club functioning as a criminal organization, but a more in-depth analysis by the Pennsylvania Crime Commission (1991) suggests that it better fits the club within the club scenario.

The Pennsylvania Crime Commission described the typical pattern as involving an outside supplier who provides drugs to a member of the

mother club who in turn provides the drugs to chapter presidents in the relevant geographical areas. The local club presidents divide the drugs among their members for further distribution through their respective associates. According to the Pennsylvania Crime Commission, the mother club's members are not collectively and directly involved in selling drugs. Instead, they grant permission to networks within the club to distribute drugs and, in turn, profit through tribute or kickbacks by which mother club members receive a percentage of the profits. The commission stresses that the "formal structure of the outlaw club ... is not necessarily the same as its economic structure, which tends to be fairly decentralized. Income-gathering activities frequently involve small, operationally independent unit—small work groups or partnerships among members which may also include nonmember associates" (Pennsylvania Crime Commission 1991, p. 194).

The club within the club scenario could be quite common. There have been many failed attempts by law enforcement authorities to establish that a particular club, or chapter, qualifies as a criminal enterprise under RICO laws in the United States (Quinn 2001, pp. 386–87; Lauchs, Bain, and Bell 2015, pp. 71, 79). There is also reason to believe that clubs, for purposes of self-preservation, make conscious efforts to separate the formal club structure from criminal conduct (Quinn 2001). For example, in a Hells Angels meeting that was secretly taped by an FBI informant, Ralph "Sonny" Barger declared, "We got to get one thing straight with everybody: what goes on in this room is one hundred percent legal. We don't talk about illegal things here. Because if you're doing anything illegal, I don't want to know about it 'cause it's not club business" (Lavigne 1997, pp. 197–98).

From a theoretical perspective, outlaw motorcycle clubs may be ill-suited to operate as criminal businesses given their formalized structure and public exposure. It is often said in the organized crime literature that criminal organizations tend to "have relatively simple structures" (Southerland and Potter 1993, p. 254) and that illegal businesses tend to be "localized, fragmented, ephemeral, and undiversified" (Reuter 1983, p. 131). The underlying rationale is that illegality imposes constraints on organizational sophistication, growth, and visibility, at least when laws are strictly enforced (Paoli, Greenfield, and Reuter 2009, pp. 204–6). From this angle, conducting illegal businesses through an outlaw motorcycle club is counterintuitive. Arthur Veno (2009, p. 173) observed, "If you're

going to commit serious crime you don't brand yourself outlaws, wear the most provocative clothes you can muster, and break every society norm (and most road rules) you can."

3. *Clubs as Criminal Organizations.* The likely frequency of the club within the club phenomenon does not rule out the possibility that outlaw motorcycle clubs at times function as criminal organizations. Factors specific to particular clubs might offset some of the constraints of illegality. Even if outlaw motorcycle clubs are ill-suited to functioning as criminal organizations for profit-making crime, they may be involved in other types of crime.

The club as criminal organization view of outlaw motorcycle clubs appears to be widely shared among law enforcement officials and journalists. The academic literature is much more cautious. Some authors, however, argue that some outlaw biker clubs, or chapters of some clubs, fall into this category (see, e.g., Wolf 1991; Barker 2015). Remarkably, the standards that arguably make this classification appropriate have received scant attention. The reasons for classifying an outlaw motorcycle club as a criminal organization usually remain implicit.

Barker emphasizes the degree to which the membership is involved in criminal activities. He highlights two dimensions: "the extent of the members' involvement in organized crime" and "whether the club's officers and leaders are involved in the planning and execution of these criminal activities" (Barker 2015, p. 73). Under these circumstances, Barker suggests, the criminally oriented leadership and majority of members can take advantage of the traditional outlaw biker club structure and procedures to recruit trusted accomplices and insulate senior members from prosecution (Barker 2015, p. 102; Australian Crime Commission, citation in Lauchs, Bain, and Bell 2015, p. 71).

Lauchs and colleagues hint at two different constellations: a biker club or chapter directing crime "through the mechanisms of . . . a hierarchy," which could mean that the formal club structure doubles as a business or that illegal business activity is delegated to individual members or third parties, and "through loose networks of members working with their associates," which suggests that the club or chapter as an organizational entity has no direct involvement and merely provides social or cultural context for the conduct of individual members (Lauchs, Bain, and Bell 2015, p. 26). In a further elaboration of the first notion, Lauchs (2019a, p. 292) specifies that a club could be considered a criminal organization when senior members use "their authority within the club to direct

criminal activity by other members and associates,” which signals that “the club has serious criminal activity as its goal.”

Other criteria could be considered. One might ask whether club resources are used, whether the risk of loss is borne by the club or by individual members, or whether in members’ understanding criminal activities are legitimated by and an expression of “what the club stands for.” A litmus test would be to ask by what logic orders are given and followed, and what happens if orders are not followed or if members act in ways detrimental to successful completion of a criminal project. Will they be reprimanded for violating the club’s norms and values or for violating contractual obligations?

By default, the analysis centers on the formal authority structure of the club that combines elements of participatory and representative democracy. Some decisions are made by the membership as a whole, some by the elected leadership that may be half of a chapter’s members, and some by individual elected office holders who have power to direct and discipline members within certain limits and within defined areas of responsibility (Wolf 1991).

As Letizia Paoli (2003, p. 44) has observed of the Sicilian mafia, outlaw motorcycle clubs may experience a shift “toward a patrimonial form of domination” in which leaders surround themselves with loyal followers who provide a permanent basis of power. Assertion of power might be somewhat limited by tradition, but formal mechanisms of legitimization and control would be devalued. Outlaw motorcycle clubs have experienced violent internal power struggles (Edwards 2012) and subtler schemes to control chapters, such as by buying votes (Veno 2009). In these cases, attention has to be paid not to formal structures but to how the club’s decision-making mechanisms relate to criminal activities of members.

When these standards are used, it is not easy to find undisputable examples of outlaw motorcycle clubs operating as criminal organizations. Limited empirical research and lack of sufficiently detailed journalistic and law enforcement accounts make the search for illustrative cases difficult. Drawing on Wolf’s (1991) ethnographic research, we have identified at least two incidents that seem to fit the club as criminal organization scenario. Both involve symbolic crimes. The Edmonton chapter of the Rebels engaged in a violent confrontation with a unit of paratroopers stationed nearby who frequented a bar the Rebels had adopted as their club bar. Plans of action were drawn up initially by the members present at the bar and subsequently at a formal club meeting.

Wolf (1991) details a comparable event arising from a rivalry between outlaw motorcycle clubs in which a Rebels chapter acted as an organizational unit in committing violent crimes. An out-of-town outlaw motorcycle club established an Edmonton chapter. This prompted the officers of the Rebels club to meet with the officers of an allied biker club and devise a plan of action. The Rebels and their allies stormed a meeting of the rival club, assaulted those present, and confiscated their club colors. These were burned on the spot except for one jacket that was put on display in the Rebels clubhouse.

Another, peculiar, case of crime-for-profit that seems attributable to an outlaw motorcycle club is described in the autobiography of a former leading member of the Outlaws. To raise funds to cover mounting legal bills, the club had butane lighters imprinted with the slogan "Support Your Local Outlaws." When it learned that lighters supplied by a Canadian business could only be sold at a loss after paying import duties, the Outlaws decided to smuggle the lighters into the United States (Spurgeon 2011). This case shows an outlaw motorcycle club willing to commit crimes for profit, of course, but it does not really fit the image of a business structure geared toward the provision of illegal goods and services.

A more classic case of crime for profit involves a triple murder, which received massive media attention, of members of the Dutch Nomads chapter of the Hells Angels. The story was reconstructed from wiretap information and witness testimonies (Schutten, Vugts, and Middelburg 2004; Van den Heuvel and Huisjes 2009). This case illustrates a complex situational interplay among the different scenarios. The president of the Dutch Hells Angels Nomads chapter and a local drug dealer apparently arranged a shipment of nearly 300 kilograms of cocaine from the Dutch Antilles to the Netherlands. The cocaine was provided by a Colombian cartel. Allegedly, the president and two fellow Nomads stole the cocaine with no intention of remunerating the Colombian cartel. This would fit the club within a club scenario and involve an entrepreneurial crime that evolved from market-based to predatory.

According to law enforcement, the 14 remaining Nomads, fearing indiscriminate retaliation by the Colombian cartel, killed the president and his collaborators in the Hells Angels clubhouse during a church meeting and dumped their bodies in a nearby canal. Eighteen bullets from three different guns were recovered from the three bodies. All three had been shot through their right hands, suggesting punishment for the

“drug burn.” In the legal aftermath, all 14 Nomads members present at the church meeting refused to testify. All were initially convicted of manslaughter by the district court but were later acquitted by the court of appeals. The court did not doubt the prosecutor’s narrative of events but concluded that it could not be proven who had fired the fatal shots. Accepting the prosecutor’s account, the president and his henchmen fell victim to internal discipline carried out in accordance with club rules (Schutten, Vugts, and Middelburg 2004; Van den Heuvel and Huisjes 2009). Theft of the drugs exposed fellow members to the vengeance of a conned business partner. That had ramifications at the club level and resulted in club action to protect its interests.

Yet another link between crimes for profit and outlaw motorcycle gangs was found in an analysis of 183 interviews with “relatively successful adult offenders” conducted by undergraduate students of the University of Montreal between 1996 and 2007 (Tremblay, Bouchard, and Petit 2009, p. 28). Tremblay, Bouchard, and Petit (2009) provide evidence that the Hells Angels dominated the drug trade in Quebec. They estimate that nearly 50 percent of the cocaine dealing jobs and 25 percent of the workforce in the cannabis cultivation industry in the province were under the influence of the Hells Angels; these drug market participants directly or indirectly depended on the Hells Angels to sell or obtain drug supplies. According to Tremblay and colleagues, the Hells Angels functioned “as a chamber of commerce” with “about 100 affiliated or ‘franchised’ entrepreneurs who share the same trademark, logo or banner” and who “are themselves relatively autonomous entrepreneurs seeking partners to conduct business” (Tremblay, Bouchard, and Petit 2009, pp. 34–35).

The empirical biker literature, however, lacks studies of entrepreneurial biker gangs that resemble the corporate street gang described by Venkatesh and Levitt (2000). Local sets of a Chicago-based gang organized drug dealing with a staff of paid members who received fixed salaries. The local sets operated under the supervision of a central leadership board, which controlled procurement of drugs from sanctioned suppliers and regularly collected a franchise payment of a percentage of illicit profits. Recruitment and promotion were based on economic performance, and failure to meet economic goals was treated as a group transgression. Venkatesh and Levitt characterize this business model as the outcome of a process by which the gang lost its original character and its ideology of a social-support network rooted in ritual kinship.

Their interpretation of the underlying dynamics of gang evolution resembles a narrative of outlaw bikers whose interests shift from motorcycles to illicit profit making that has been a common thread since the 1970s in debates about outlaw motorcycle gangs (see Nossen 1975).

D. Intersecting the Biker Crime Typology with the Three Scenarios

We approach the subject of biker clubs functioning as criminal organizations broadly, rather than focus on the narrow question of whether outlaw motorcycle clubs function as illegal businesses in markets for illegal goods and services. In this section, we discuss the roles of clubs and chapters in lifestyle, symbolic, and entrepreneurial crimes and examine the roles outlaw motorcycle clubs play in governance of illegal markets and criminal milieus. This differentiated approach appears warranted because different types of crimes may have different meanings and implications for the clubs and place different demands on the clubs' structure and resources.

Lifestyle crimes include, for example, receiving stolen goods for club purposes such as holding parties or outfitting the clubhouse. These types of crimes are directly related to the outlaw biker subculture and to the club's core social and cultural functions. Club participation in these activities, as clubs, evokes the broader pattern of kinds of deviant and criminal behavior among members that fit the bad apple or club within a club scenarios.

Symbolic crimes carried out by outlaw motorcycle clubs are typically discussed in relation to interclub conflicts within the outlaw biker subculture (e.g., Morselli, Tanguay, and Labalette 2008; Klement 2019). However, there can also be instances when clubs seek to enhance their status and reputation in the wider saloon society. This is exemplified by the anecdote reported about actions of the Edmonton Rebels against a paratroopers unit for control of their club bar. A view commonly expressed in the academic literature is that violent confrontations between clubs are inherent in the outlaw biker subculture and are not necessarily related to competition in, or control over, illegal markets (Wolf 1991; Veno 2009; Quinn and Forsyth 2011; Grundvall 2018).

Wolf (1991) argues that interclub rivalries can be explained by four drivers that are all tied to territoriality. The first is personal pride that patch holders feel about belonging to the dominant club in an area. The second is group power. Wolf proposes that the club with the greatest

territorial status will attract the best recruits and be better positioned in interactions with clubs in other territories. The third is the desire to reduce uncertainty in relations between the biker subculture and the host society. By controlling the number of outlaw biker clubs and the behavior of outlaw bikers in its territory, a dominant club can reduce risks of conflict and police harassment. Wolf observes that ordinary citizens tend not to differentiate between biker clubs so that actions of one club affect all outlaw bikers in the area. The fourth driver, securing profits from drug dealing, prostitution, and extortion, is central in journalistic and law enforcement interpretations of biker violence but according to Wolf and other scholars characterizes only some clubs.

On Wolf's argument, symbolic crimes, especially against rival clubs, are in outlaw motorcycle clubs' perceived self-interest. That these crimes happen should be no surprise. This does not rule out the possibility, however, that individual members and cliques within a club sometimes take matters into their own hands.

We discuss links between entrepreneurial crimes and outlaw motorcycle clubs in relation to the bad apple and club within a club scenarios. We caution against hasty assumptions that clubs, or chapters, function as profit-making illegal businesses given that constraints of illegality tend to favor small, fragmented, and inconspicuous structures. A profit orientation is not traditionally an element of the outlaw biker subculture. A shift toward a business model would cause "ideological confusion" (Venkatesh and Levitt 2000, p. 444) about the club's purposes that would likely be exacerbated by a shift in recruitment emphasis from "righteous bikers" to entrepreneurs.

The regulatory function Tremblay, Bouchard, and Petit (2009) ascribe to Hells Angels in the Quebec drug trade is a more likely scenario. By allowing drug dealers to operate under their trademark, outlaw motorcycle clubs extend the protective and intimidating effect of the power of the patch to a wider circle of non-patch holders, thereby lowering their costs of operation and increasing costs for nonaffiliated market participants who lack alternative backing. To the extent that an outlaw motorcycle club is the only provider of franchised protection, it resembles mafia groups that siphon off a share of the profits generated in illegal or legal markets under mafia control (Schelling 1971; Reuter 1983; Gambetta 1993). Some of the same considerations that make outlaw motorcycle clubs ill-suited to function as illegal businesses may facilitate assumption of a governance function within the underworld.

Outlaw motorcycle clubs have a military potential based on their numbers, who include the members and associates of a given chapter but potentially the entire outlaw motorcycle club. Established clubs tend to be embedded in criminal milieus, which gives them capability to collect intelligence on those who might defy and challenge their power. Their hierarchical structure facilitates processing of intelligence and coordinated responses to challenges. Importantly, they possess a characteristic most underworld competitors lack: recognizability. Groups that seek to provide protection need to advertise their existence and their services and to build and maintain a reputation for effective use of violence (Gambetta 1993). Outlaw motorcycle clubs are visible and distinguishable, which provides a clearer reference point for reputation than clandestine criminal groups can easily achieve. They can easily detect imposters and take drastic measures against unauthorized nonmembers who display club symbols (see, e.g., Christie 2016). In addition, they have established rules and standards for recruitment of new members and leadership succession, which facilitates maintenance of a collective identity and reputation despite fluctuations in membership and generational change (Gambetta 2009).

There is, however, reason to believe that outlaw motorcycle groups' capacity to gain underworld control is limited. To establish dominance, they may have to engage in violent confrontations with less conspicuous groups. Their high visibility and the fixed locations of their clubhouses put them in a distinct disadvantage; they offer much easier targets for attack than do their nonbiker opponents.

A number of propositions have been offered about the extent and nature of links between outlaw biker clubs and organized crime. The main emphasis is on crime for profit. It is frequently said that such connections need not exist for all outlaw biker clubs. Some clubs, and some chapters, may not be at all involved in serious crime. Even within a club or a chapter that is notorious for serious criminal involvement, some members may not participate (Wolf 1991; Quinn and Koch 2003; Barker 2015).

One common theme in the academic debate is that outlaw bikers fall into two groups: criminally oriented "entrepreneurs" and "purists" who pursue a deviant lifestyle centered on motorcycling (Quinn and Forsyth 2011, p. 217). Quinn and Koch (2003, p. 283) describe a "continuum of behavioral orientations" and caution that "each club, chapter, and situation is unique and dynamic and requires specific examination."

There is no scholarly consensus about the dynamics of relationships between various orientations. One view is that there are shifts back and forth and the criminal orientation tends to become dominant in times of intense interclub rivalries when illegal profits are needed to cover the costs of gang warfare (Quinn 2001; Barker and Human 2009). Another view is that there is a general trend toward increasing criminal involvement. Veno (2009) suggests that police repression has had a negative selection effect and motivated law-abiding members to quit, thus empowering members with a criminal orientation to shape clubs' and chapters' character.

Piano (2017, 2018), drawing on the economic theory of clubs, interprets organizational changes since the 1970s as indicators of a general transformation of outlaw motorcycle clubs into criminal enterprises. The formation of overarching hierarchical structures, he argues, typically with a mother chapter at the top, has occurred in response to increasing involvement of bikers in the underground economy. At the same time, traditional means of producing group cohesion and loyalty—namely, sacrifice and stigma—may have lost out to economic incentives.

From another perspective, purists and entrepreneurs depend on each other: purists rely on funds generated by entrepreneurs, who in turn depend on “purists” to maintain the cohesion and reputation of the traditional outlaw biker fraternity (Quinn and Forsyth 2011, p. 217; see also Lauchs, Bain, and Bell 2015).

IV. Conclusion

Figure 3 depicted the conventional wisdom about the relative position of outlaw motorcycle clubs, street gangs, and organized crime groups in a two-dimensional space defined by the level of organizational structure and the aims of group members' crimes. Outlaw motorcycle clubs may be more structured as organizational entities than are street gangs or organized crime groups, but this does not mean that the organization of club members' criminal behavior follows the hierarchical logic of the club itself. Links between outlaw motorcycle clubs and crime can be manifold, varying with the degree to which criminal activities and structures overlap with club activities and structures and with the degree of involvement in lifestyle, symbolic, and entrepreneurial crimes. Only under the club as a criminal organization scenario do criminal activities and organizational

structure overlap completely. The other scenarios make less use of the organizational structure of the club. Criminal activities under the bad apple scenario fall furthest to the diffused end of the spectrum, as figure 5 shows.

At present, we have no basis for gauging the relative empirical importance of the various constellations. This would require in-depth analyses of a large number of well-documented cases involving a representative sample of outlaw motorcycle clubs. We conclude, however, contrary to conventional media and law enforcement agency portrayals, that motorcycle clubs functioning as illegal businesses in the pursuit of illicit profits is an unlikely scenario. The assumption that biker clubs or chapters operate as criminal organizations is most plausible when criminal activities are closely related to the self-perception and the nature of outlaw motorcycle clubs. This is the case with lifestyle and symbolic crimes, particularly in violent conflicts between biker clubs. Outlaw motorcycle clubs are, however, comparatively well-situated to acquire positions of power in the underworld—for example, in establishing protection systems for illegal drug market entrepreneurs.

Even when outlaw motorcycle clubs as such do not commit crimes, they can contribute to the commission of crimes because of their recruitment of criminally inclined individuals, their deviant subcultures including a code of silence, and the intimidating and protective effects of the power of the patch. In this respect, they have more in common with mafia associations than Hollywood appeal. Like mafias, they provide their

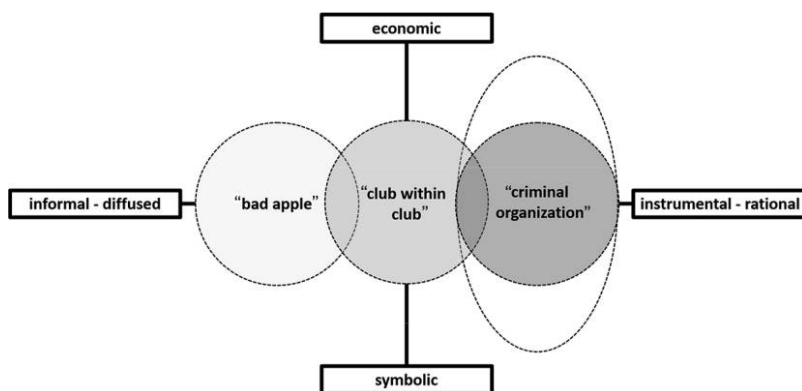


FIG. 5.—Spectrum of organizational structure

members a ritualized sense of brotherhood and protection in the absence of legal recourse. Unlike mafias, however, outlaw motorcycle clubs in most countries seem to lack extensive underworld alliances; this limits their criminal potential outside the nightlife economy. Outlaw motorcycle clubs' territorial control, when it exists, tends to be limited to the biker subculture and in most countries does not encompass the underworld as a whole or legitimate economic sectors. Despite some mafia-like characteristics, outlaw motorcycle clubs should not routinely be categorized as criminal organizations. Careful case-by-case analyses are needed of the different roles they potentially play in the criminal activities of their members.

Our conclusions have policy and research implications. We endorse Quinn and Koch's (2003) observation that each biker club and each situation needs to be examined separately. Assessments require a differentiated approach that accounts for differences in the prevalence and nature of the crimes committed by bikers, and clubs' and chapters' different roles in relation to these crimes. There is, for example, no clear link between the level of criminal involvement of individual bikers and the degree to which a particular club or chapter can meaningfully be characterized as a criminal organization. Ignoring this can easily lead to excessive or misdirected measures. At the same time, the claim that biker crime is just a matter of bad apples neither withstands empirical scrutiny nor acknowledges that outlaw biker clubs by their very nature can support and shape criminal conduct—for example, through the power of the patch. Policies such as restrictions on public display of club symbols thus can potentially be appropriate crime-reducing measures (Bjørge 2019), even involving clubs that have no links to crime except through bad apples.

Our most important conclusion is the need for further research. We need better understanding of the inner workings of outlaw biker clubs, of mechanisms and dynamics in the development of individual clubs and chapters, and of the overall outlaw biker subculture. Comparatively little is known about the world of outlaw bikers. The best evidence so far comes from ethnographic research and quantitative analyses of law enforcement data. Both approaches face structural obstacles. Ethnographers must deal with a difficult-to-reach population and with research funding that often imposes strict timetables that are fundamentally at odds with the imperatives and uncertainties of field research. Analysis of law enforcement data depends on the willingness of state agencies to

allow access to data. Not surprisingly, quantitative studies typically come from countries that are prominent in organized crime research because their law enforcement communities are generally more research friendly. There is a need for case studies of criminally involved biker clubs, based on interviews with bikers and comprehensive analyses of police intelligence, that can better illuminate the inner workings of outlaw motorcycle gangs in relation to their members' crimes.

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