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Summary

Pathways into organized crime: Criminal opportunities and adult-onset offending

The central aims of this thesis were to expand knowledge on the life courses of individuals who become involved in a criminal group and to explore how they become involved in organized crime. Systematic research on organized crime offenders is scarce, with the exception of case studies reflecting in detail on the life course of a single offender. Life-course criminology, on the other hand, is mainly focused on general offender samples, and relatively few of these samples have data available far into adulthood. Hardly any research has been carried out on the development of offenders committing specific types of crimes.

A multi-method approach was used to accomplish these central aims. The first two empirical chapters employed a quantitative approach to data from the Organized Crime Monitor (OCM), an ongoing research project coordinated by the Research and Documentation Centre (WODC), Dutch Ministry of Security and Justice, Erasmus University Rotterdam and VU University Amsterdam. An extract from the official registers of the Dutch Judicial Documentation System (JDS) of 746 Dutch organized crime offenders who were included in the OCM provided us with judicial histories of these offenders. The second explored criminal histories of organized crime offenders included in the OCM. Several criminal trajectories were distinguished, and offenders with different roles and involved in different types of crime were compared. In the third chapter, judicial histories of these organized crime offenders were compared to judicial histories of the general offender population, using an extract from the JDS of all offenders with a conviction in the Netherlands in 1997. The fourth chapter elaborated on offenders' involvement mechanisms for organized crime based on an extensive analysis of fifteen police files on criminal groups selected from the OCM. The fifth chapter analyzed the narratives of sixteen organized crime offenders, based on in-depth interviews with these inmates on their conventional and criminal lives, and on involvement mechanisms for organized crime. The sixth and concluding chapter reports on the main findings of the thesis and discusses the scope and limitations of the study, while also reflecting on scientific progress and public relevance). Lastly, the thesis ends by providing directions for future research and some concluding remarks.

Activities performed by offenders involved in different types of organized crime vary significantly. Drug smuggling, for example, involves totally different activities from organized fraud. Activities within a single type of organized crime also vary significantly, ranging from the chemist producing the drugs to the person arranging transport and finance, and the street-level drug seller. Therefore, offenders involved in the various types of organized crime and with different responsibilities within a criminal group are also likely to differ in ways that are reflected in their judicial histories.

Gaining insight into involvement mechanisms for organized crime requires a close look at the criminal histories of those involved in organized crime. The second chapter

consequently sought to examine these criminal histories in depth. Firstly, we asked whether any distinct patterns could be distinguished in the criminal histories of organized crime offenders by applying semi-parametric group-based models to these criminal histories in order to identify groups of offenders with similar trajectories of offending over time. Secondly, we examined whether there was a relationship between these criminal patterns and (1) the role an offender performed in a crime group (leader, coordinator, lower-level or other) and (2) the type of organized crime in which the offender was involved (drugs, fraud or other).

Trajectory analyses distinguished four different groups of offenders: early-onset offenders (11%), persistent offenders (30%), adult-onset offenders (40%), and first offenders without any prior judicial contacts (19%, this latter group was excluded from the trajectory analyses). The most important finding in this chapter relates to the high share of adult-onset among organized crime offenders. The group of adult-onset offenders and the first offenders – all adults – together represented almost 60 per cent of the total group of organized crime offenders. Moreover, contrary to what had been expected given the broad range of activities within organized crime, these findings are quite robust as offenders involved in the various types of organized crime (drugs, fraud, or other) and offenders fulfilling different roles within a crime group (leader, coordinator, lower-level or other) were found to be similarly distributed among the trajectory groups.

Whereas the second chapter provided insight into individual histories of organized crime offenders, the third chapter related these histories to those of general offenders. To determine whether the pathways followed by organized crime offenders differed from those followed by ordinary offenders, a systematic comparison was made of criminal histories of offenders included in the OCM and the total population of offenders with a judicial contact in the Netherlands in 1997. Such a comparison expands our knowledge on how organized crime offenders resemble or differ from the general criminal population, thus indicating the extent to which organized crime offenders fit existing theories on criminal careers. For the purpose of the analysis, both groups were made comparable on their age at the time of the criterion case, i.e. the organized crime case for the organized crime offenders and the 1997 case for the general offenders. In this way, two groups of offenders were compared committing an offence at the same moment in their lives, being an organized crime case for one group, and any type of case for the other.

The comparison provided us with four main findings. Firstly, organized crime offenders and general offenders with criterion cases at the same age showed hardly any differences in the age distributions of their first judicial contact; the average age in both groups was found to be 24. Although the main focus of this chapter was on putting characteristics of organized crime offenders' criminal histories into the context of mainstream criminal careers, the finding that adult onset is also frequent among the comparative sample from the general offender population underlines the need for research attention for this group. Although this comparative group was created so as to resemble the age distribution of organized crime offenders at the time of their criterion case, and thus was a relatively old sample, additional analyses showed that the main results of the comparisons were maintained when analyses using the total – non-weighted – general offender group were carried out. Secondly, organized crime offenders were found to have had judicial contacts prior to their criterion case more often than general offenders criminally active at the same stages in their lives, while those with prior judicial contacts had more often received prior prison sentences and

spent a larger proportion of their lives before their criterion case in prison. Another measure of crime seriousness – the statutory maximum punishment for the given offence under Dutch Law – also showed that prior offences committed by organized crime offenders were much more severe. In other words, organized crime offenders resembled general offenders with criterion cases at the same age as far as the age-crime distribution was concerned, but had a more serious criminal history than general offenders. Thirdly, the difference between both groups in terms of offence seriousness was visible from the start of their judicial careers. Organized crime offenders are twice as likely to be sentenced to imprisonment on their first judicial contact, and receive prison sentences three times as long. Statutory maximum punishments are also much higher for first contacts of organized crime offenders than those of general offenders who are criminally active at the same age. Fourthly, the results were robust when we restricted the analyses to only those criterion cases from organized crime offenders and general offenders that related to fraud and drugs separately. Criminal pathways, therefore, cannot be explained by the type of criterion case, either in organized crime or not.

The focus until the third chapter was on the criminal lives of offenders who end up in organized crime. The fourth chapter focused on individual involvement mechanisms for organized crime, with the aim of investigating explanations of the earlier chapters' findings and clarifying how and why individuals engage in organized crime. This fourth chapter provided new insights through qualitative methodology. Information from extensive police files on fifteen criminal groups included in the OCM was used as the basis for discussing involvement mechanisms applying to offenders involved in these criminal groups. For more than 300 offenders involved in these criminal groups, we determined how and why they got involved in organized crime in general, and in the relevant crime group in particular. These analyses focused on how co-offenders got to know each other, on the nature of their contacts, and on what individual offenders contributed to the criminal group.

In most crime groups, offenders are linked by family ties or long-time relationships. Such relationships, which often go back many years, create a solid basis for trust. All the criminal groups were also found to include newly acquired contacts who met later in life, for example in bars, at work, or in prison. Although such cases often lack a basis of trust, these offenders may have specific knowledge or experience and so offer a valuable contribution to a criminal group. Such know-how or skills may follow from either criminal or conventional experience. Long-time criminals are valuable to a crime group as they are used to an adventurous life, have criminal contacts, and are familiar with the need to avoid authorities. Conventionally experienced offenders on the other hand have educational knowledge and professional power, and may also have contacts within the licit world. Many offenders were found to be self-employed, with some of their businesses basically being run as legal businesses, but every so often being used for the benefit of the criminal group by, for example, accepting an occasional consignment of drugs. Other companies are set up solely for the purposes of being used to perform and conceal criminal activities.

The analyses of police files conducted in the previous chapter in order to explore involvement mechanisms led to a wish to focus on the perceptions of offenders themselves. For this purpose, in-depth interviews were carried out with sixteen offenders, all of whom were imprisoned after being convicted of participating in organized crime activities (chapter 5). The main goal of the interviews was to clarify the mechanisms through which these offenders became involved in organized crime.

Two offender groups were distinguished, based on an initial analysis of the interviews. The first group consisted of ten interviewees who only committed crimes during adulthood. Most of them grew up under good conditions and had the opportunity to build a conventional life, including stable bonds to society such as a good job. Nevertheless, these legal jobs – ranging from a truck driver to the owner of a large company – were the source of their involvement in organized crime. Their initial contacts with their future co-offenders originated in an occupational setting. The nature of their jobs made them vulnerable as these jobs opened doors to circumstances favourable to organized crime opportunities, such as an owner of a trading company doing business with his future co-offenders, a café owner receiving future co-offenders in his establishment, or a car salesman selling them a car. The second group consisted of six interviewees who committed crimes from an early age. Most of these individuals had a long record of violent crimes by the time they got involved in organized crime, with three of them having had a troubled childhood and experienced family break-up, parental drug-use and foster care. Their opportunities for organized crime flowed from their criminal histories and contacts.

In line with the central aims of this thesis, the life courses of organized crime offenders were explored using various research methods and samples. An extensive examination of the group of organized crime offenders provided preliminary insight into this group by showing that only small numbers of them engaged in crime early in life, while most of them were first convicted during adulthood. A systematic comparison of individuals engaged in organized crime and a weighted cross-section of the general offender population showed that although they started committing crimes at around the same age, individuals ending up in organized crime got involved in more severe crimes than general offenders from the onset of their careers of offending. In the light of these results, a further exploration focused in more detail on the way in which these individuals evolved towards organized crime. An in-depth analysis of the case files on fifteen crime groups revealed processes and mechanisms leading to organized crime. A wide range of offenders were found to work together in crime groups: relatives who trusted each other, as well as strangers needed for their expertise or facilities, long-time criminals with delinquent experience and contacts, conventionally experienced professionals, and offenders with Dutch nationality and foreigners. In-depth interviews with organized crime offenders confirmed these findings and furthered our understanding of how individuals become engaged in organized crime. The majority of the interviewees committed their first offence as an adult, while most of them met their future co-offenders in a legal occupational setting, and many owned a business that contributed to their transition towards organized crime activities.