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Chapter 3

Comparing criminal careers of organized crime offenders and general offenders

Abstract³⁵

Organized crime differs substantially from high-volume crime, at least theoretically. But do offenders differ as well? This study makes an extensive comparison between offenders who engage in organized crime at a particular moment in their lives and general offenders, based on various dimensions of their criminal careers. Many organized crime offenders do not have judicial contacts before adulthood. Surprisingly, this turns out to be the case for the comparison group as well. However, organized crime offenders do more often have previous judicial contacts, and those previous contacts are also far more serious. These general findings are robust; they also hold when the comparisons are restricted to organized crime offenders and general offenders who have engaged in drug crimes and fraud cases.

3.1 Organized versus ordinary crime

Organized crime differs substantially from ordinary crime, leading one to assume that organized crime offenders differ from ordinary crime offenders in ways that translate into differences in the criminal careers displayed by these different offenders. The purpose of this paper is to test the merit of this assumption and to compare the criminal careers of those involved in organized crime with the criminal careers of those involved in conventional crimes.

Crime is often described as behaviour that involves the pursuit of immediate pleasure. Ordinary crimes require little in the way of effort, planning and preparation, and also hardly require any specific skills or contacts. As a result, the profits of criminal acts are generally low. In line with this description of crime, offenders are often characterized as impulsive, short-sighted and risk-seeking. At first glance, organized crime does not fit this general description of crime. Dutch organized crime groups are primarily focused on obtaining illegal profits, systematically commit crimes that seriously damage

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society and are reasonably capable of shielding their criminal activities from the authorities (Fijnaut et al., 1998: 26-27). Organized crime typically is a long-term process, which often requires months of preparation time and consists of multiple activities that are scattered temporally as well as geographically, making coordination necessary. Owing to its relative complexity and logistical requirements, organized crime seems to require a certain intelligence level and specific organizational skills. In addition, the successful execution of organized crime requires close collaboration with co-offenders. Social contacts are important in explaining involvement in organized crime, because they provide access to co-offenders, buyers and suppliers (Kleemans and Van de Bunt, 1999; Morselli, 2005).

These different requirements for organized crime indicate that standard criminological theories may not be suitable to explain involvement in organized crime. Some forms of organized crime, such as organized fraud, are rather complex and require certain intellectual capacities, special skills and knowledge. Therefore it is likely that offenders performing these activities may have followed other – more conventional – career paths that provided the opportunity to learn these skills, rather than having lived a life of crime. On the other hand, it can also be argued that organized crime offenders are the more seasoned criminals, and thus are likely to have a long judicial history.

Although research on criminal careers has flourished during recent decades, it has primarily focused on juveniles, adolescents and high-volume crime. The abundance of research into these topics contrasts sharply with a lack of solid empirical research on the criminal careers of different types of offender, particularly adult offenders, or offenders committing different types of crime, such as organized crime. Research that has focused on organized crime has predominantly produced insights into organizational structures and processes. These findings are mostly based on in-depth studies of a small number of offenders, often even a single offender in the form of a biography, and thus do not speak on criminal career issues for the group of organized crime offenders as a whole. Given that general criminological theories seem ill suited to explain organized crime, it is unclear whether accepted criminological knowledge stemming from criminal career research can be applied to organized crime offenders.

3.1.1 Offender-focused theories

Personality theories explain crime and other analogous behaviours by stable individual characteristics and long-term risk factors (see, for example, Farrington, 2003; LeBlanc and Loeber, 1998; Thornberry, 1996). Self-control is probably one of the most discussed characteristics related to deviant behaviour (Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990). Individuals with low self-control have

a tendency to be impulsive, self-centred, adventurous and out for immediate pleasure. Because criminal, anti-social and other unconventional behaviour can all be regarded as manifestations of this single underlying trait, individuals low in self-control are unlikely to stick to a particular deviant trade but instead engage in a variety of deviant behaviours. Pursuing this line of reasoning further, Gottfredson and Hirschi deny the existence of different types of offenders committing different types of crime. Concepts such as white-collar crime and organized crime are incompatible with their view because, as they see it, there is only one type of offender, who is in principle capable of committing all types of crime, and hence no separate theories are needed. Although Gottfredson and Hirschi acknowledge that some offenders will be found working together for a certain period of time, these collaborations are often believed to just be accidental contacts. Therefore the organizational aspect of so-called organized crime and the social skills believed to be needed are just an illusion (Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990: 213). From Gottfredson and Hirschi's perspective, organized crime is just another form of deviance, requiring no separate theories to explain it. From this it follows that the criminal careers of organized crime offenders are predicted to show similar features – such as age of onset and crime seriousness – as those of ordinary offenders.

However, other offender-focused theories do assume differences between offenders – for instance between organized and disorganized offenders – based on the way they commit their crimes (see, for example, Kocsis et al., 2002; Ressler et al., 1992). Generally speaking, organized criminals plan, premeditate and stage their crimes carefully to prevent the police from finding evidence, which reflects their intelligence. In contrast, disorganized offenders tend to commit unplanned crimes and to be young and sloppy, often under the influence of drugs or alcohol or suffering from a mental disorder. Contrary to Gottfredson and Hirschi's point of view, this line of reasoning would lead to the expectation that the criminal careers of organized crime offenders consist of fewer (but more serious) offences when compared with the careers of general offenders.

3.1.2 Situation-focused theories

Offender-focused theories largely ignore the importance of situations and opportunities in explaining criminal career patterns. Gradually, however, more attention is being paid to situational contexts as an explanatory factor for involvement in crime, often in connection with specific kinds of crime or specific kinds of criminals (for example, Hay and Forrest, 2008; Weisburd et al., 1990; Weisburd and Waring, 2001). Theories on organized crime specifically emphasize situational factors because organized crime often capitalizes on existing social networks. Recently, Kleemans and De Poot (2008) introduced the the-

oretical concept of *social opportunity structure* – social ties providing access to profitable criminal opportunities – to explain involvement in organized crime and related phenomena, such as late-onset offending and people switching from conventional jobs into organized crime. They studied about 1000 offenders who were involved in organized crime in the Netherlands. Compared with general offenders, older offenders were found to be overrepresented in their sample. Kleemans and De Poot use qualitative information from police files to illustrate different roads that can lead to involvement in organized crime. According to these authors, specific skills, opportunities or contacts obtained later in life, for instance through work or leisure activities, can provide possibilities to switch from legal to illegal activities. Theories stressing situational factors assume that opportunities for organized crime typically evolve later in life. In general therefore, compared with general offenders, organized crime offenders are more likely to have a later age of criminal onset.

3.1.3 Middle-ground theories

Mirroring the contrast sketched above, psychologists have debated whether personality traits or the situation are more predictive of individual behaviour. Whereas the precise extent to which personality characteristics and situations influence behaviour is still – and will probably stay – unclear, it is broadly recognized that behaviour most likely is a function of both personality and situational context. In this light, it has been argued that neither the personality nor the situational side of this debate is adequate, and both movements should be integrated in one middle-ground theoretical perspective (Fleeson and Nofhle, 2009).

With regard to involvement in white-collar crime, Leeper Piquero and Benson (2004) propose such a middle-ground explanation, which they call the *punctuated situationally dependent theory of offending*. This theory assumes that white-collar criminals, like common offenders, are criminally active during adolescence. Again like most common offenders, they tend to desist from crime as they age and increasingly pursue conventional careers. Unlike ordinary offenders, however, white-collar crime offenders restart offending when they reach their thirties or forties. Owing to the shifted opportunity structure resulting from their conventional attainments, and unlike the offences committed in their teens, the offences committed by these offenders later in life are typically white-collar crimes. External factors, such as a personal or occupational crisis the offender is going through, and opportunities that result from a certain occupational status are claimed to explain this adult revival in crime. Situational opportunities – such as a new job or social contacts – can thus function as desistance mechanisms when they give access to legitimate means to obtain desirable goals, but they can also function as involvement

mechanisms, because they provide access to illegitimate means to obtain these goals (Kleemans and De Poot 2008).

When we apply such a middle-ground theory to organized crime, we expect organized crime offenders to resemble common offenders in some respects, but to differ from them in others. Following this middle-ground theory of crime explanation, organized crime offenders are expected to resemble ordinary offenders in their crime frequency patterns in the early years of their criminal careers, but to differ from them at later stages because of the opportunities they obtain. Organized crime offenders are expected to engage in more serious crimes because they seem to be more willing to invest time and effort in order to obtain a larger payoff than ordinary offenders, especially later in life.

3.2 Previous empirical findings

Research on organized crime has expanded in the past two decades and produced a vast biographical literature on organized criminals. These biographies, however, mostly focus on organizational structures, positions that individuals take within a criminal network, financial gain and mentored criminals (see, for example, Firestone, 1993; Morselli, 2001) and say little about criminal career dimensions. To the extent they do deal with criminal careers, these biographies often portray the life histories of the interesting, more important, leading individuals of a criminal network and as a result are not representative of the criminal careers of organized crime offenders in general. A first attempt to describe the personality of prominent organized crime figures was made by Bovenkerk (2000). He argued that the personality traits of the leaders of a criminal network basically correspond to those of successful legal entrepreneurs: extravert, conscientious, controlled impulsive, adventurous and megalomaniac. They may not be as badly adapted as would be expected based on their involvement in a serious form of crime.

As far as we know, no straightforward comparisons between the criminal careers of organized crime offenders and of ordinary offenders have been made so far. However, some comparison research has been done on white-collar offenders. Many studies conclude that white-collar offenders differ significantly from high-volume offenders on a variety of criminal career characteristics. White-collar offenders, compared with high-volume offenders, have a later start in crime, commit fewer crimes overall (Weisburd et al., 1990), have fewer prior arrests and have a higher mean specialization coefficient (Benson and Moore, 1992). Leeper Piquero and Benson (2004) showed that white-collar offenders do not fit the widely found and accepted relationship between age and crime. They noted concerning careers in white-collar crime: 'the typical white-collar offender greatly differs from the typical street offender and does

not appear to fit into the proposed explanations of life-course offending patterns.’ The shift to more situational explanations of (careers in) crime can also be found in other studies, mostly on specific offender samples. Weisburd et al. (1990: 145) examined a group of white-collar offenders and argue that ‘situation plays a central role in explaining participation in crime for most offenders in this sample . . . situational opportunities play an important role in defining why offenders commit crimes at specific junctures’. Although some overlap is recognized between both offender groups, the results of these studies convincingly support a view of white-collar offenders being a separate group that differs from common offenders.

3.3 Research questions

Situational factors are often used to explain involvement in specific, out of the ordinary types of crime. The purpose of this study is to investigate whether the crime patterns of the perpetrators of such a particular type of crime – organized crime – resemble or differ from the crime patterns of the perpetrators of ordinary crimes. The main research question for this study therefore is: Do organized crime offenders differ from general offenders with respect to their criminal ancestry? We make a systematic comparison between offender groups on their run-up to either an organized crime case or a common crime case by examining the prevalence, frequency and seriousness of their prior offending. We first draw a broad comparison between two distinct groups of offenders: a unique sample of offenders all engaged in organized crime at a particular moment in their lives and a selection of the Dutch population of general offenders who are criminally active at the same ages as the organized crime offenders. Second, we select judicial contacts related to fraud and drugs from both offender groups. This way we can discern whether differences between common offenders and organized crime offenders depend on the crime types they commit or on the degree of organization with which these crimes are carried out. This also offers the possibility to test the robustness of the findings of our general comparison between offender groups.

3.4 Data

3.4.1 Organized crime offenders

For information on organized crime offenders we used the Dutch Organized Crime Monitor (OCM). For the period 1994–2006, 120 large-scale Dutch police investigations of criminal groups have been systematically analysed, producing a wide cross-section of various forms of organized crime. Dutch organized crime groups are primarily engaged in transit crime – international smuggling

activities such as drug trafficking, smuggling illegal immigrants, human trafficking and arms trafficking. A total of 1623 offenders were involved in the 120 investigated criminal groups. For the purposes of this study, we are interested in their individual pathways towards the criterion case in organized crime. We therefore analyse judicial contacts that took place before their organized crime cases. We examine whether these organized crime offenders can be distinguished from general offenders based on their judicial history. Owing to the transnational orientation of many activities, many foreign offenders are involved in organized crime. Information on prior arrests for foreign offenders is considered to be unreliable because the Dutch judicial system does not contain data on judicial contacts in other countries. For that reason, comparisons for both offender groups are restricted to offenders born in the Netherlands.³⁶

Information on the criterion cases of the remaining 795 offenders was coupled to information on their prior judicial contacts. This information is derived from the Dutch Judicial Documentation System (JDS), which contains information on all judicial contacts that are registered at the Dutch Public Prosecutor's Office from the age of 12 onwards.³⁷ Every record of a judicial contact contains the registration date, along with details of the suspect, the crime and the way the case was dealt with.³⁸ However, a total of 49 offenders (6 per cent) could not be traced and linked with their information from the JDS.³⁹ For the remaining 746 offenders (687 men and 59 women), all information regarding their criterion offence and all other judicial records is known.

3.4.2 Comparison group of general offenders

Organized crime offenders are compared with general offenders. We use a cross-section of general offenders by selecting all offenders with a conviction in the Netherlands in 1997 – their criterion case. Organized crime offenders are older at the time of their criterion case than offenders from the general offender population at their 1997 offence (Kleemans and De Poot, 2008). Figure 3

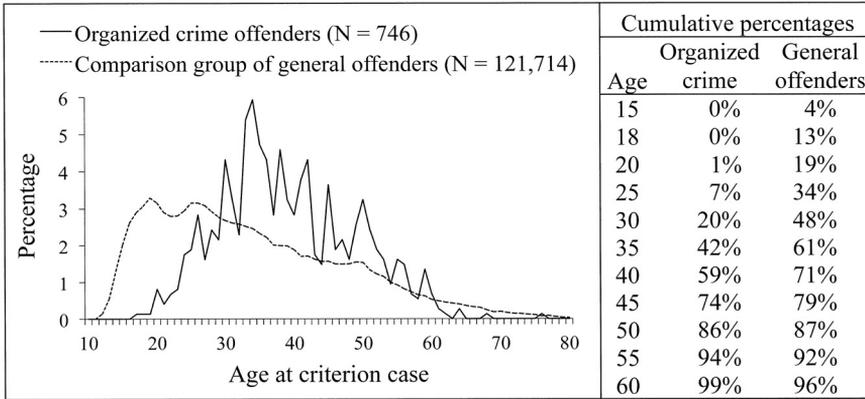
³⁶However, this still leaves open the possibility that these offenders were convicted in countries other than the Netherlands and this may underestimate the criminal histories of, in particular, those involved in transnational organized crime.

³⁷The Dutch Judicial Documentation System comprises historical judicial records from 1943 on.

³⁸Cases may result in a conviction, acquittal, prosecutorial fine or waiver. In the Dutch criminal justice system, the public prosecutor has the discretionary power not to prosecute every case forwarded by the police. The public prosecutor may decide to drop the case for technical, procedural or policy considerations (technical or policy waiver).

³⁹The fact that certain offenders were not found in the JDS can be attributed to two causes. First, missing offenders could have been prosecuted outside the Netherlands for their organized crime case, and therefore not have a Dutch judicial record. In some circumstances, case descriptions do indeed mention foreign convictions. A second explanation for not finding matching information from the JDS is that offenders are not properly registered in the JDS or names and surnames are spelled differently.

Figure 3. Distribution of age at criterion case



shows the criterion case age distribution for both the organized crime offenders and the comparison general offender (CGO) population. Organized crime (OC) offenders are on average 39 years old at the time of their criterion case, against 34 years for the general offender population. Almost 1 out of 5 general offenders is 20 years old or younger at the time of their criterion case, whereas just 1 out of 100 OC offenders commit their criterion case before or at age 20. This age difference at the criterion case would affect further comparisons.

We therefore deliberately make a selection from the general offender population in order to have a comparison group of general offenders that resembles the organized crime offenders with regard to the age at their criterion case (that is, the case that entered the system in 1997). This way, we can compare OC offenders and general offenders who are at the same stages of their lives. This comparison group is created from a JDS extraction of all offenders with a judicial contact in 1997 (173,464 offenders). Firstly, we selected only those offenders born in the Netherlands, as we did for OC offenders. For the 121,714 offenders who remain, data are available on their criterion case (the 1997 case) and all their other contacts with the Dutch judicial authorities. Because ages at the time of the criterion case reflect a wider range for the general offender population than for the OC offenders, analyses are limited to those general offenders aged 17-75. The general offender population is now limited to 109,719 offenders. Next, the remaining general offenders are weighted in such a way that the age distribution at the criterion case corresponds to the age distribution of the offenders of organized crime.

In sum, we compare two offender groups with the same age distribution: a group of offenders who are involved in a criminal group committing organized crime, and a comparison group of general offenders. For the sake of convenience, we refer to offenders from the OCM with a criterion case in orga-

nized crime as OC offenders. It is important to note that, when the text refers to OC offenders, this does not imply that their total criminal career is in organized crime. In fact we will show that the majority of OC offenders committed one or many common crimes before turning to organized crime. The comparison group of general offenders with a criterion case in 1997 are referred to as CGO offenders.

3.4.3 Dependent measures

Offenders from the OCM are compared with the comparison group of general offenders with a criterion case in 1997 with regard to their criterion case (the organized crime case or the 1997 case), their prior judicial contacts and their first judicial contact. We compare these career data on age, prevalence and frequency of offending, and seriousness of offending.

Measures of prevalence and frequency are self-evident; measures of crime seriousness, however, are more problematic. Definitions of seriousness vary widely (see, for example, Cullen et al., 1982; Schrager and Short, 1980). We will not explore the problems associated with measuring the seriousness of offences, but instead use two simple measures. Firstly, we use the judicial settlement of cases by comparing the percentage of offenders who received an unconditional prison sentence. In addition, the mean duration of these prison sentences is compared. However, judicial settlements are not purely a reflection of the seriousness of an offence. Other variables, such as the offender's individual circumstances, can greatly affect the sentence. But for the current study the most important disadvantage of this seriousness measure is the influence of prior judicial contacts on the imposed sentence. For this reason we also use a seriousness measure that is independent of the judicial history, namely the statutory maximum punishment under Dutch law.⁴⁰ This measure is independent of criminal history, although it does not take into account the conditions under which the offence took place. All offences are categorized based on their statutory maximum punishment. The least serious offences have a maximum penalty of less than four years imprisonment, a middle category of offences has a penalty of between four and eight years, and the most severe cases have a penalty of at least eight years.

⁴⁰Under Dutch law, judges have the discretionary power to impose a prison sentence that is lower than the maximum statutory prison sentence based on either the circumstances of the case or the personality of the suspect. Although sentencing guidelines are used in the Dutch criminal justice system, no mandatory minimum sentences apply for particular offences.

3.5 Results

3.5.1 Criterion case

General measures of the criminal careers of OC and CGO offenders are shown in table 5. Only 16 per cent of the general offenders is female. In organized crime, this underrepresentation of women – or overrepresentation of men – is even larger. As many as 92 per cent of the offenders in the OCM are male.⁴¹ It is no surprise that the criterion cases of OC offenders are punished more severely than the criterion cases of CGO offenders: 7 per cent of the CGO offenders receive a prison sentence, against 37 per cent of the OC offenders. Moreover, the prison terms of OC offenders are much longer than the prison terms of CGO offenders: respectively, 34 months and 8 months. Figure 4 shows the mean maximum penalty of the criterion case for both OC and CGO offenders. OC offenders are found to have considerably more serious criterion offences than CGO offenders. Only 10 per cent of the OC offenders have a maximum sentence of less than four years for their criterion case, compared with 65 per cent of the CGO offenders.

3.5.2 Prior offences

In the build-up to the criterion case, some offenders have never been prosecuted for criminal behaviour. Others may already have extensive criminal careers before their criterion case. Table 5 shows that as many as 84 per cent of the OC offenders are found to have prior judicial contacts, whereas only 65 per cent of the CGO offenders have judicial contacts before their criterion case. OC offenders much more often have prior judicial contacts, but those offenders with prior contacts do have approximately the same number of prior contacts as CGO offenders with prior contacts.

Leeper Piquero and Benson (2004) suggested that white-collar offenders commit ordinary crimes during adolescence, then show a period of intermittency (temporary desistance), and start committing white-collar crimes later in life. To test this assumption for OC offenders, figure 5 shows mean intermittency measured in years for the total judicial history of both OC offenders and CGO offenders. For example, at the age of 28, on average, OC offenders had their most recent judicial contact about two years earlier. In the case of a temporary lull in offending, as suggested by Leeper Piquero and Benson, the intermittency curve would have the shape of a bell curve, with a peak during the least active period. The criminal history of CGO offenders can be characterized by continuously increasing intermittency periods. This would

⁴¹This finding is in line with the demographic characteristics of white-collar offenders: in the white-collar sample of Wheeler et al. (1988a), approximately 85 per cent are male, against 69 per cent of their common criminal sample.

Table 5. Criminal career characteristics

	OC offenders	CGO offenders
<i>Criterion case</i>		
N	746	109,719
Percentage male	92%	84%
Age	38.7	38.7*
Prison sentence	37%	7%
Time of imprisonment (months)	34.4	7.7
<i>Prior offences**</i>		
At least one prior offence	84%	65%
Number of prior offences	9.4	9.3
At least one prison sentence	46%	31%
Total time in prison (months)	30.7	17.6
<i>First case***</i>		
N	623	71,249
Age	24.2	24.9
Prison sentence	10%	5%
Time of imprisonment (months)	9.7	3.0

*The average age at the criterion case for the general offender population equals 34. Because of the weights added to CGO offenders, their criterion case age equals the criterion case age of offenders of organized crime.

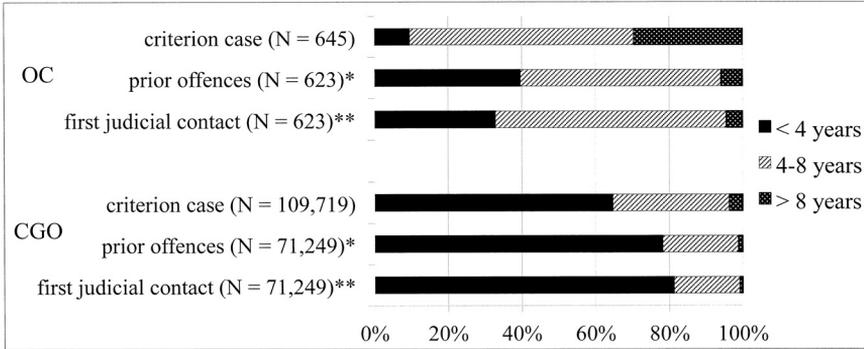
**Only offenders with prior offences are taken into account.

***Offenders without judicial contacts before their criterion case (with the first case being their criterion case), are omitted from this section of the table, because the criterion case is selected based on its type for OC offenders.

be expected based on a decreasing frequency of offending as individuals grow older. From age 23 on, intermittency diverges between CGO and OC offenders. CGO offenders show longer intermittency periods and more persistence from that point on. OC offenders, on the other hand, show less intermittency throughout their judicial career, particularly in their thirties and forties. Intermittency rises (and, at the same time, the frequency of offending decreases) up to the age of 32, and shows a decline around the mid-thirties when offenders become more active. Unlike the prediction of Leeper Piquero and Benson for white-collar offenders, the OC offenders in this study do not show a clear intermittency period in their criminal careers towards organized crime.⁴²

⁴²Intermittency periods are always overestimated, assuming that an offender is not caught for every crime he or she commits. If we assume police effectiveness to be lower for OC offenders (which would make sense because organized crime is well shielded by definition), their intermittency periods would be even shorter. Differences between OC offenders and CGO offenders would be even larger if we keep in mind differences in police effectiveness between the two groups.

Figure 4. Maximum penalties for relevant offences



*Only offenders with prior offences are taken into account.
 **Only offenders with prior offences are taken into account. Percentages of punishment threats are first computed on individual level, and averaged afterwards.

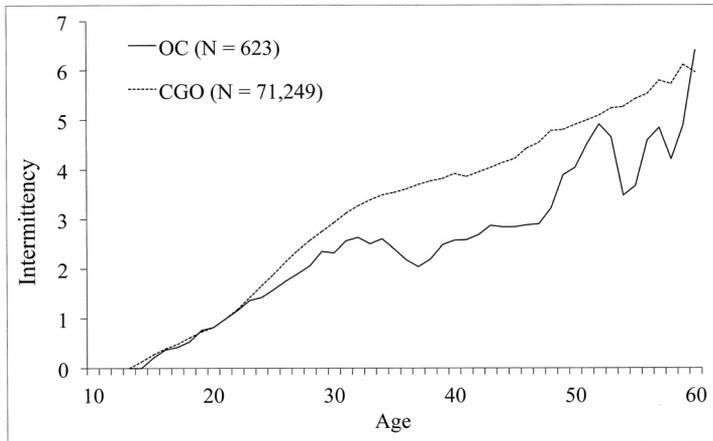
Almost half of the OC offenders with prior judicial contacts have at least one prior prison sentence, against only 31 per cent of the CGO offenders with prior judicial contacts (table 5). Moreover, OC offenders with prior judicial contacts have spent more time in prison before their criterion case than CGO offenders with prior contacts (31 months against 18 months).⁴³ Prior offences are also found to be more serious for OC offenders than for CGO offenders based on punishment threats (figure 4). On average, 78 per cent of the prior offences of CGO offenders have a punishment threat of less than four years' imprisonment, and only 1 per cent of their offences have a punishment threat of more than eight years. OC offenders have on average 6 per cent of their offences in the eight years or more category, and just 40 per cent of their offences have a maximum penalty of less than four years imprisonment.

3.5.3 First judicial contacts

In addition to the total criminal history, first judicial contacts are compared between OC and CGO offenders. For respectively 16 per cent and 35 per cent of the offenders, the first judicial contact is simultaneously their criterion offence (they have no prior judicial contacts). Therefore only those offenders with prior judicial contacts are taken into account when examining the first judicial contact. The mean age at first judicial contact is just over 24 years for OC offenders (table 5). This relatively high age fits earlier quantitative examination of criminal careers in organized crime (Kleemans and De Poot, 2008). Surprisingly, however, the average onset age of the general offenders is even

⁴³This reflects their total time spent in prison; it does not have to be 31 months or 18 months unbroken but can also be two or more separate prison sentences.

Figure 5. Intermittency in the offenders' judicial ancestry*



*Controlled for imprisonment.

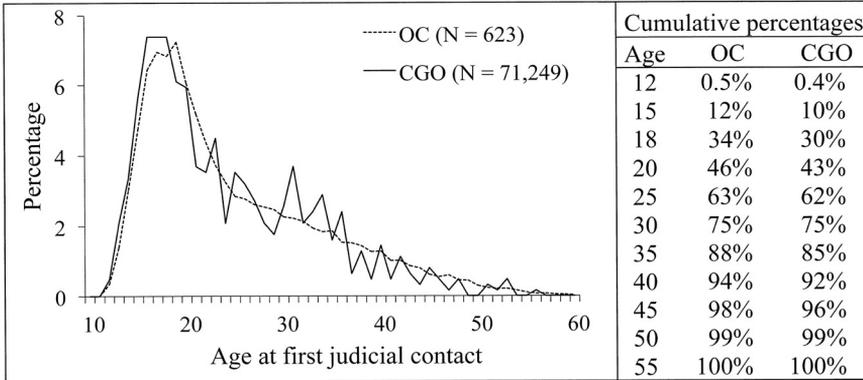
higher (24.9 years on average).⁴⁴ This finding contrasts sharply with the bulk of life-course studies that focus on an earlier age frame. Figure 6 shows the distributions of age at first judicial contact for both offender groups as well as the cumulative percentages, which indicate the proportion of offenders who had their criminal onset at a specific age. The age of first judicial contact of CGO offenders is very similar to the age distribution of the OC offenders.

Despite the similarity in age, OC offenders have to spend time in prison after their first judicial contact almost twice as often as CGO offenders. Moreover, when they receive a prison sentence, this sentence is more than three times as high. OC offenders not only have higher maximum penalty offences for their criterion cases and prior offences, but the maximum penalties for their first judicial contact differ considerably too (figure 4). One out of three OC offenders has a maximum penalty of less than four years for their first offence, against 81 per cent of the CGO offenders. The majority of OC offenders have a maximum penalty of four to eight years (63 per cent) for their first offence, and 4 per cent of the OC offenders have their first judicial contact for an offence with a maximum penalty of more than eight years.

In the criminal career literature, a common finding is the relationship between an early-onset age and offence frequency (see, for example, Farrington, 2003). Figure 7 shows the mean lambda (annual rate of offending) in the judicial history by onset age for both offender groups. For example, OC offenders with an onset age of 25 have an average lambda around 0.5 during their crim-

⁴⁴When we take the total general offender population into account and not just the limited and weighted comparison group, they are still older at the time of their first judicial contact than would be expected (23.6 years).

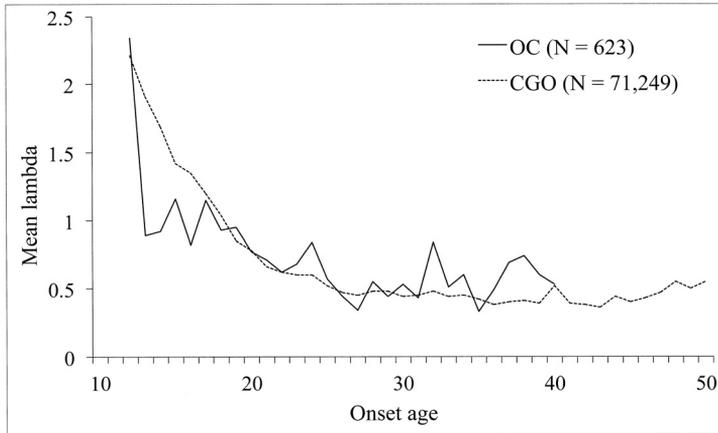
Figure 6. Distribution of age at first judicial contact (criterion case excluded)



inal career up to their criterion case. For CGO offenders, the assumption on the relationship between onset age and lambda is confirmed: offenders with early-onset ages show on average a higher rate of offending. This relationship also exists, though somewhat weaker, for OC offenders. Figure 8 shows the relationship between onset age and seriousness of offending during the criminal history. Seriousness is given by the mean number of years an offender had been imprisoned before his or her criterion case. Generally, early onset is assumed to predict the commission of more serious offences throughout the criminal career (see, for example, Piquero and Chung, 2001). CGO offenders, again, validate this assumption. Seriousness decreases as onset age increases. Although in OC offenders onset age and offending seriousness are also negatively correlated, this relationship is less strong for OC offenders (the fluctuation is partly caused by the small sample sizes for each onset age).

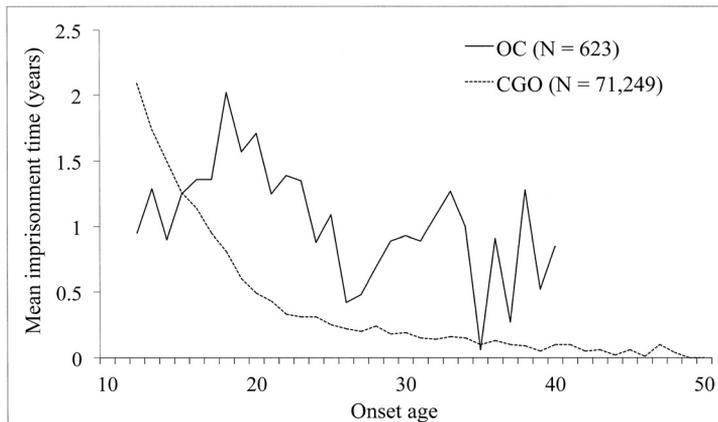
Overall, the findings sketch a two-sided picture of criminal careers towards organized crime as opposed to the criminal careers of general offenders. Age distributions of first judicial contacts are highly similar for OC offenders and CGO offenders. On the other hand, considerable differences are found in seriousness, as measured by prison sentences and punishment threats; OC offenders commit more serious crimes prior to the criterion case, and even their first judicial contact is generally more serious than those of CGO offenders. These findings support a middle-ground theory of crime. On the one hand, OC offenders are as old and as criminally active, and even more active, as the comparison group of general offenders in their judicial history. On the other hand, findings on crime seriousness demonstrate that perpetrators of organized crime are more serious from their first judicial contact onwards.

Figure 7. Mean lambda in the judicial ancestry by onset age*



*Controlled for imprisonment.

Figure 8. Mean seriousness of offending in the judicial history by onset age*



*Controlled for imprisonment.

3.5.4 Fraud and drugs

It is quite possible that the differences we found on several dimensions of the criminal career can be attributed to the diverse nature of the offences the two groups commit. To establish whether differences between the OC offenders and the comparison group of general offenders can be attributed to the nature of their criterion offence in itself, we carried out some additional analyses. A considerable number of the studied organized crime groups were involved in drugs cases or in organized fraud. Drug and fraud offences can, however,

also be committed individually. We therefore carry out additional analyses in which we restrict both offender groups to those offenders who had a drugs- or fraud-related criterion offence.

We drew a new selection from the general offender population (1997 extraction) of offenders convicted for fraud or drugs. Drugs crimes are considered to be all crimes that are labelled with a section of the Dutch opium act, and we consider the following crime types to cover fraud: forgery, embezzlement and counterfeiting. 364 of the OC offenders had a drugs-related criterion case (49 per cent), 94 were involved in organized fraud (13 per cent). Although drugs and fraud together account for a large part of organized crime, these crime types account for only less than 10 per cent in the general offender population (6 per cent fraud and 3 per cent drugs). At the time of the criterion case, OC offenders are older than offenders from the general offender population. Offenders with a fraud case in organized crime are on average 41 years old, and fraud offenders from the general offender population are on average four years younger. For drugs offenders there is a mean age difference of eight years between the two offender groups. Again, we create comparison groups of general offenders that resemble the criterion case age distribution of OC offenders. We assign weights to both drugs and fraud offenders separately in such a way that these comparison groups resemble the criterion case age distribution of OC offenders (one consisting of fraud offenders and one consisting of drugs offenders). Four groups are created: (1) offenders with an organized crime case related to fraud, (2) a comparison group of general offenders with a criterion case related to fraud, (3) offenders with an organized crime case related to drugs, and (4) a comparison group of general offenders with a criterion case related to drugs – abbreviated (1) OC fraud, (2) CGO fraud, (3) OC drugs, (4) CGO drugs.

Offenders with a crime related to fraud – both the OC and CGO offenders – are expected to differ from drugs offenders. Fraud in particular is a crime that follows from certain opportunities or power in professional life and is often strongly linked to legal occupations and legal activities (Levi, 2008; Middleton and Levi, 2004). Therefore, fraud offenders are expected to more often follow a more or less conventional life, and are thus likely to have fewer prior judicial contacts and to be older at the time of their first offence. On the other hand, drug trafficking – with illegal suppliers and illegal buyers – is expected to have more connections to the criminal underworld, and perpetrators of drugs crimes are therefore expected to have more correspondence to traditional crime patterns, with an early start in crime.

As we have seen before, OC offenders much more often receive a prison sentence for their criterion case than CGO offenders (table 5). This also holds when we focus on these specific crime types (table 6). Drugs offenders, both in organized crime and individually, more often end up in prison than fraud

Table 6. Criminal career characteristics for fraud and drug offenders

	Fraud		Drugs	
	OC	CGO	OC	CGO
<i>Criterion case</i>				
N	94	4814	364	3571
Percentage male	98%	70%	95%	85%
Age	41.3	41.3*	38.6	38.6*
Prison sentence	29%	7%	56%	20%
Time of imprisonment (months)	33.4	5.9	38.2	17.7
<i>Prior offences**</i>				
At least one prior offence	84%	59%	88%	81%
Number of prior offences	8.9	7.4	9.8	11.3
At least one prison sentence	41%	30%	51%	46%
Total time in prison (months)	27.0	13.9	32.2	18.6
<i>First case***</i>				
N	79	2827	320	2909
Age	26.9	27.2	22.9	23.4
Prison sentence	6%	6%	11%	8%
Time of imprisonment (months)	12.0	2.5	8.3	4.0

*The average age at the criterion case for the general offender population equals 37 for fraud offenders and 31 for drugs offenders. Because of the weights added to CGO offenders, their criterion case age equals the criterion case age of offenders of organized crime.

**Only offenders with prior offences are taken into account.

***Offenders without judicial contacts before their criterion case (with the first case being their criterion case), are omitted from this section of the table, because the criterion case is selected based on its type for OC offenders.

offenders do. Furthermore, OC offenders are imprisoned longer than CGO offenders, regardless of the type of criterion offence.

The number of prior judicial contacts does not differ substantially between both offender groups and between both types of crime. CGO drugs offenders more often have prior judicial contacts than CGO fraud offenders or the total CGO sample. In both offender groups, drugs offenders more often have had a prison sentence before their criterion case than fraud offenders. OC offenders, in drugs or fraud, more often have been in prison and have been imprisoned approximately twice as long compared with CGO offenders. No large differences exist between offenders with fraud criterion cases and offenders with drugs criterion cases.

Clear differences are observed in the judicial histories of OC offenders compared with CGO offenders with similar types of criterion cases. But are these differences already visible at the start of their judicial career? Offenders with fraud as their criterion case – whether in an organized context or not – are on

average four years older than offenders with a drugs criterion case when they experience their first judicial contact. No age differences exist within offence types. OC drugs offenders are more often imprisoned as a consequence of their first judicial contact than are CGO drugs offenders. Moreover, they have to spend twice as long in prison. The proportion of fraud offenders who are imprisoned as a consequence of their first judicial contact is the same for both offender groups. However, the duration of this imprisonment is on average 2 months for CGO offenders whereas it is 12 months for OC offenders.

3.6 Discussion and conclusions

Recent theories emphasize the role of situational factors in explaining why offenders get involved in particular kinds of crime. Expectations about the dimensions of criminal careers derived from these theories differ substantially from what is considered *accepted knowledge* on criminal careers. The main purpose of this study was to investigate whether organized crime offenders resemble common offenders or differ from them with regard to their criminal careers. Based on our findings we conclude that, although there are similarities, there are also striking differences between the criminal careers of offenders who get involved in organized crime at a particular moment in their lives and a comparison group of general offenders.

Compared with general offenders, organized crime offenders are less likely to be first offenders at the time of their criterion case. For offenders who had prior convictions, the average number of convictions was similar. Organized crime offenders, however, did have a more serious criminal history in terms of offence seriousness. For example, the period those involved in organized crime spent in prison was twice as long as those involved in general offending. Most strikingly, this difference in offence seriousness is noticeable from the onset of the criminal career: offenders with a criterion case in organized crime are twice as likely to be sentenced to imprisonment following their first judicial contact than are general offenders. In addition, when their first judicial record leads to a prison sentence, organized crime offenders are imprisoned three times longer than offenders in the comparison group of general offenders. Surprisingly, the age/conviction patterns of both offender groups are very similar.⁴⁵ Both organized crime offenders and general offenders still criminally active in their late thirties show hardly any differences in terms of the age distribution of their first judicial contacts, and the average age of first conviction is 24 years. Organized crime offenders do seem to have a more persistent offending pattern than common criminals, whose intermittency periods get longer as they get older.

⁴⁵Additional analyses show that the unlimited and unweighted total general offender population is very similar to this distribution too.

The results on fraud and drugs offenders both in the organized context and in the comparison group of general offenders show the robustness of our findings. Moreover, these comparisons provide additional information on differences within offender groups. Considerable differences between – among other things – the seriousness of previous offences and other aspects of the criminal history remain when controlling for the type of criterion case.

Organized crime offenders thus seem to differ from general offenders from the start, not so much in the onset age or the frequency of their judicial contacts, but in the seriousness of their criminal behaviour. Despite their offending seriousness and relatively flat rate of offending, having their first judicial contact in their mid-twenties means that organized crime offenders do not fit the standard image of persistent offenders as individuals who lack self-control or problematic children whose anti-social behaviour grows from bad to worse with age. Instead, our results seem to support the idea central to middle-ground theory: Organized crime offenders are not born criminals but choose to take advantage of their circumstances as a result of opportunities becoming available to them, or becoming more appealing to them compared with other alternatives.

The current study is limited by the use of official records. The so-called *dark number* problem is a common problem in criminological research using official records. The discrepancy between the number of observed offences and the number of real offences may be larger for organized crime offenders because of organized crime's transnational character. Although we limited our analyses to offenders born in the Netherlands for that reason, these Dutch offenders are still more likely than common offenders to have been convicted abroad for offences that we are unaware of. In addition, organized crime is by definition well shielded from the authorities (Fijnaut et al., 1998) and may therefore be less likely to come to light. If, indeed, the dark number is larger for those involved in organized crime, the differences between organized crime offenders and general offenders would only be amplified.

To summarize, the results from our study indicate that organized crime offenders are more serious criminals from the outset. Although the criminal behaviour of organized crime offenders is also less concentrated at the beginning of their criminal careers and therefore seems more persistent, organized crime offenders do not show a record of early problem behaviour. Standard explanations of persistent criminal careers that focus on stable individual characteristics therefore do not seem to be generalizable to organized crime offenders. Instead, the most likely candidates to explain the criminal career patterns of organized crime offenders seem to be the circumstances experienced during adulthood.