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Chapter 5

The truck driver who bought a café: Offenders on their involvement mechanisms for organized crime

Abstract⁵²

The present study aims at understanding how individuals engage in organized crime activities. Processes responsible for organized crime involvement are still poorly understood, particularly for those who become engaged only later in life. In-depth interviews with 16 inmates, all convicted of participation in organized crime and incarcerated in Dutch prisons, illuminate how individuals at different life stages become involved in crime in general, and in organized crime activities in particular. Most participants we interviewed turn out to have experienced an adult onset in crime. Their involvement mechanisms are analysed and compared with mechanisms applicable to offenders with an early start in crime. It was found that offenders with an early start in crime have a wealth of opportunities and criminal contacts, whereas individuals who become involved in crime later in life are exposed to crime opportunities in conventional settings.

5.1 Introduction

Organized crime, as it is commonly understood, refers to criminal groups involved in a broad range of more or less complex illegal activities. The common feature of these groups is that they are *primarily focused on obtaining illegal profits, systematically commit crimes that seriously damage society and are reasonably capable of shielding their criminal activities from the authorities* (Fijnaut et al., 1998: 26-27). Such activities require collaboration by offenders who together have the necessary knowledge, skills and contacts in order to successfully accomplish all facets of the activities. Therefore, suitable social ties as well as individual abilities are important factors for successful engagement in organized crime activities.

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Earlier studies have revealed that organized crime offenders differ from the profile of an average criminal (see Bovenkerk, 2000; Kleemans and Van de Bunt, 2008). These studies showed that organized crime offenders are not always typical persistent criminals with early problem behaviour and that organized crime engagement cannot be simply explained by the long-term risk factors commonly used to explain criminal behaviour (Kleemans and De Poot, 2008). A substantial proportion of individuals involved in organized crime have rather conventional histories and do not become criminally active until adulthood (chapter 3 of this thesis).

The aim of this study is to clarify mechanisms through which both offenders who are criminally active early in life and offenders who become criminally active after they reached adulthood become involved in organized crime. Mechanisms and processes responsible for involvement in organized crime are still poorly understood, particularly for those with an adult onset in crime (McGee and Farrington, 2010). We build upon prior research on crime causation by clarifying how social ties, individual skills and experiences bring opportunities for engagement in organized crime. Based on 16 in-depth interviews with organized crime offenders in the Netherlands, we illuminate mechanisms through which individuals become involved in organized crime.

5.2 Opportunities and capacities for organized crime

Dutch organized crime is characterized by a diversity of illegal, transnational business activities (see Fijnaut et al., 1998; Van de Bunt and Kleemans, 2007). Drug-trafficking, for example, requires sophisticated manufacturing techniques, logistic processes and complicated procedures; after planning and arranging activities with all the individuals concerned, the executive process starts with the production of narcotics: obtaining chemicals through illegal business, fabricating semi-manufactures and crystallizing the end product. Subsequently, the drugs have to be sold and transported, often abroad. Logistic processes, including covering illegal goods with deck cargos, have to be organized and executed. Furthermore, the flow of money that accompanies the drug trade has to be divided among all parties involved and shielded from the authorities. Although other manifestations of organized crime, such as human trafficking or organized fraud, require a various spectrum of activities from those in the above example of drug-trafficking, all these manifestations share some common ground: they all come down to collaboration among individuals working together in an intricate process of diverse activities. Moreover, many activities in Dutch organized crime are associated with cross-border trade, which makes communication between co-offenders and the transport of goods even more complex. The nature of organized crime makes these criminal activities less easily accessible than many ordinary crimes, such as

shoplifting or violent acts. Many actions require specific skills or experiences, and not everyone will have the opportunity to join a crime group. An interrelationship between skills and opportunities will contribute to involvement in organized crime.

Given the large variety of activities carried out both within a single group and between different organized crime groups, a wide range of knowledge, skills or other contributions can potentially be of interest for a criminal group (see, for example, Kleemans and De Poot, 2008). Offenders with a long-term criminal history are suitable collaborators because they offer criminal know-how, provide a crime group with access to other criminals and are used to the risks and stress inherent in activities in organized crime. Moreover, they already have a criminal reputation, which might inspire confidence. However, some skills or knowledge beneficial to a criminal group can be acquired only through conventional education and experience. Individuals providing such a conventional contribution to a criminal group are likely to have followed a conventional life path up to some point.

In general criminal career research, it is argued that an early onset foretells a prolonged career in crime; the earlier an individual displays deviant behaviour, the more likely he or she is to continue offending for a longer period (see Moffitt and Caspi, 2001; Nagin and Farrington, 1992), and the more serious this delinquent behaviour will be in terms of frequency and persistence (see Blumstein et al., 1986; Farrington, 1983). Based on these common findings, one might expect individuals involved in more serious forms of organized crime to have committed offences throughout various life stages. Those with extensive rap sheets may gradually shift their criminal focus from less serious to more serious offences. Career criminals thus seem likely to qualify for organized crime opportunities through their criminal contacts and experience. However, earlier studies on offenders of organized crime show that an early onset in crime is not a necessary condition for involvement in serious types of crime such as organized crime. It is not only shown that organized crime is an adult business, it is also found that a substantial proportion of organized crime offenders do not become criminally active until adulthood (chapter 3 of this thesis) and have rather conventional occupational histories (Kleemans and Van de Bunt, 2008). Moreover, the presence of organized crime offenders with a late crime onset is robust across several different organized crime activities (drugs, fraud and other activities) and across different roles within criminal groups (leaders, coordinators and lower-level suspects) (chapter 2 of this thesis). The substantial share of adult-onset offenders in organized crime suggests that adult-onset offenders have some advantages over career criminals when it comes to committing organized crime.⁵³

⁵³To our knowledge, (published) studies have not been conducted outside the Netherlands concerning the criminal pathways of organized crime offenders. Studies have been conducted on

Firstly, a late crime onset can be explained by individuals for whom crime becomes an attractive choice later in life, although they had not ever engaged in criminal behaviour before. At a particular moment in their lives, these individuals intentionally search for opportunities for crime and will situate themselves in a context where these opportunities are common. Secondly, late crime onset can be explained by opportunities that appear to individuals because they coincidentally happen to be in a situation that provides easy access to organized crime. These individuals have no preconceived plan, though are faced with a possibility. In an initial effort to determine the causes of organized crime, Albanese (2000) makes a similar distinction between offenders who *organize around available opportunities for crime* and *criminal opportunities that create new offenders*.

For some, opportunities for organized crime evolve only later in life through skills, capacities or contacts that they have acquired in a professional setting (see Kleemans and Van de Bunt, 2008). Lab assistants or financial experts, for example, can use their knowledge and experience for the benefit of a crime group. Crime groups that have to transport goods, such as drugs or cigarettes, benefit from individuals employed in the transport industry. It might be precisely these conventional ties and skills gained through professional training that provide individuals with capacities and contacts creating opportunities for organized crime engagement. Therefore, adult onset and processes causing late onset should be considered in light of opportunities becoming available to these individuals later in life because of the knowledge and contacts they have gained over time. Individuals who engage in crime at later life stages have, in contrast to many early-onset offenders, built a conventional life including a stable job and bonds to society.

Longitudinal studies recognize heterogeneity of criminal behaviour over the life course and often use life stages or transitions in life to explain a reduction in crime when people enter adulthood (see Bersani et al., 2008; Blokland and Nieuwbeerta, 2005). Existing theories that aim at explaining adult-onset offending focus on sudden and gradual weakening of social bonds (Sampson and Laub, 1993; Thornberry and Krohn, 2005). It is argued that marriage, parenthood and a stable job have a protective effect against crime and redirect criminal paths downwards. These changes bring alterations in everyday routines and a closer bond to society. These individuals are thought to have less time and fewer opportunities to commit crimes and hang out with delinquent friends (Laub and Sampson, 2003). Although these life transitions are most often used to explain desistance from crime, life events can also take a turn for the worse and amplify crime. Negative life events such as marital separation, alcohol abuse, unemployment and changes in social relationships are found to

the criminal careers of other specific offender groups, such as white-collar offenders (see, for example, Benson and Kerley, 2000; Weisburd and Waring, 2001).

predict future offending (Farrington et al., 1986; Farrington and West, 1995). In conclusion, life events or transitions, both positively and negatively, have an effect on crime by bringing about changes in both motivation and opportunity structures for crime.

In contrast to assumptions derived from the theory of informal social control, earlier studies on organized crime show that having a stable job may also have an opposite effect because certain occupations can open doors to organized crime opportunities (see, for example, Kleemans and De Poot, 2008; Kleemans and Van de Bunt, 2008). For some, involvement in organized crime can therefore be explained by opportunities arising from their conventional position and related knowledge, access and contacts. A wide variety of occupational settings provide opportunities needed for organized crime, for example when it comes to knowledge, contacts or access to sources otherwise unavailable. Occupations with opportunities for organized crime often involve international contacts and travel movements and entail a high level of autonomy. This autonomy, which can be found in high-level professional positions but also in self-employed individuals owning a small company, brings opportunities to abuse the rules because it makes individuals able to work relatively independently and unsupervised (Åkerström, 1985; Kleemans and Van de Bunt, 2008; Shover, 1971).

In sum, the intricate and long-term process of the activities involved make organized crime accessible only to specific groups of individuals. These activities require collaboration by offenders who together have the necessary knowledge, skills and capacities at their disposal in order to successfully accomplish all facets of the illegal process. The interrelationship of opportunities and capabilities required for organized crime gives shape to the cooperation of co-offenders within a crime group. The current study aims at understanding how individuals become involved in organized crime, by studying mechanisms and opportunities at different life stages for individuals who become involved in crime at an early age and individuals who engage in crime only later in life. We make this distinction because involvement mechanisms are expected to vary across both groups and may be explained by different factors. For both groups, we examine several domains related to the involvement process.

5.3 Methodology

5.3.1 Procedure

For this study, we carried out in-depth semi-structured interviews with 16 inmates all convicted and imprisoned for organized crime. Participation in an organized crime group is a separate section under Dutch law, which allowed

us to select all individuals imprisoned under this section at a particular moment in time. In July 2010, all prisoners serving an irrevocable sentence after a conviction for organized crime were selected. A new selection of the prison population convicted for organized crime was made in November 2010 and January 2011. Of course, these selections overlapped strongly with the first selection, because many inmates convicted for organized crime are serving a rather long prison sentence. Excluded from our sample are offenders who do not speak Dutch or English and those not available for other reasons. All 47 individuals meeting the inclusion criteria were approached by prison staff (we were not allowed to approach them directly) and provided with an information letter, which briefly set out the study and the conditions under which the inmate was to take part. Respondents were given the opportunity to call the researcher and ask for further information. Of those approached, 31 did not wish to participate for several reasons: some of them denied that they had participated in organized crime; others just did not want to talk about their activities. We got the impression that the attitude of prison staff towards the study had an influence on the decision of inmates whether to participate or not: an enthusiastic response of staff members towards our study was positively related to agreement to participate. Via prison staff, we made an appointment to visit the 15 men and 1 woman who agreed to participate in an in-depth interview. They were imprisoned in 13 different prisons throughout the Netherlands. None of the participants was paid (following Copes and Hochstetler, 2006).

5.3.2 Interviews

All interviews were carried out by two interviewers, mainly for safety reasons, and lasted between one-and-a-quarter and two-and-a-half hours. All interviews except one were tape-recorded; one participant did not want the conversation to be tape-recorded, although we were able to take extensive notes in that case. Each interview started with an introduction, explaining the rights of the participant, and the signing of consent forms. A topic list was used addressing all themes relevant to the research questions. Inmates were asked to reflect on their involvement in crime in general and in organized crime in particular. They were asked about how they were related to co-offenders and how they met their co-offenders. Further, they were asked about their life before and in organized crime – their youth, family situation, educational and occupational history, criminal history, financial situation and their view of the future. In sum, we asked them to give a detailed retrospective of their involvement in organized crime activities.

There was no preconceived order or structure to the interview, apart from the fact that all themes had to be covered. The participants were able to talk

freely and add anything they thought would be important. The interviewer directed the conversation at some points to ask for clarification or to aim for a certain topic. The majority of offenders were really obliging and talked extensively about their youth and their criminal activities and reflected on how they got involved in organized crime. For some participants, it took some minutes to soften and become comfortable. Few participants remained reserved or suspicious throughout the conversation. Three inmates denied their part in the criminal activities they were convicted for, although two of them recognized that criminal activities were going on among their acquaintances and were willing to talk about that.

5.3.3 Verdicts and rap sheets

Although the 16 in-depth interviews and thus perceptions of offenders are the central focus of the current study, two other data sources provided additional information. These data sources are used to triangulate what the participants told us (Elffers, 2010). Firstly, we were able to trace the verdicts in the organized crime case of all offenders. Verdicts help in defining the activities the inmates were involved in and the role of offenders in the crime group, and they provide information on the personal situation of offenders, including their antecedents. Secondly, we requested rap sheets from all participants to track their judicial histories. Rap sheets provide an insight into the prevalence, frequency and nature of earlier convictions and are intended to verify and complement the information offenders reported to us. The stories of offenders themselves are largely confirmed by both verdicts and rap sheets.

5.3.4 Participants

Table 7 provides an overview of the participants in the study. The 16 inmates were between 31 and 64 years old at the time of the study; 13 of them were born in the Netherlands, and 3 were born abroad.⁵⁴ They were all convicted of participation in organized crime⁵⁵ and received unconditional prison sentences varying from 3 months to 13 years, with a mean serving time of 5 years

⁵⁴Owing to the exclusion of inmates who did not speak Dutch or English, these numbers possibly are highly influenced by a selection effect.

⁵⁵All participants were convicted under the section of the Dutch criminal code that criminalizes participation in a criminal organization. They were often simultaneously convicted, however, under other sections of the law, relating to the criminal activities they performed within the crime group. Many were convicted under a section of the Dutch Opium Act, some for aggravated theft in conjunction, others for crimes related to violence, weapons, money laundering, extortion, swindling, human trafficking or murder.

Table 7. Overview of participants

Pseudonym	Age at interview (range)	Organized crime type	Role	Age at first self-reported crime	Classified start in crime
Alex	50 – 59	Drugs	Leader	9	Early
Brahim	40 – 49	Drugs	Coordinator	41	Adult
Charles	40 – 49	Swindling	Lower-level	31	Adult
Daniel	60 – 69	Smuggling	Coordinator	47*	Adult
Edgar	60 – 69	Drugs	Leader	32	Adult
Felek	30 – 39	Human trafficking	Coordinator	27	Adult
Greg	40 – 49	Drugs, weapons	Leader	14	Early
Harry	40 – 49	Robberies	Leader	10	Early
Isaac	40 – 49	Smuggling	Facilitator	43	Adult
Jeanette	40 – 49	Fraud	Leader	31	Adult
Kevin	40 – 49	Handling stolen goods	Leader	25	Adult
Luke	30 – 39	Drugs, weapons	Leader	27	Adult
Marlo	60 – 69	Fraud	Facilitator	52	Adult
Najib	30 – 39	Drugs	Leader	15	Early
Oliver	30 – 39	Drugs	Leader	16	Early
Phillip	30 – 39	Drugs	Lower-level	12	Early

*According to his rap sheet, this participant was 41 years old at the time of his first conviction.

and 4 months.⁵⁶ Participants were involved in different types of organized crime activities and fulfilled different roles in these activities. As far as we know, all participants were involved in different criminal groups.

5.3.5 Analysis strategy

All tape-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim. We used inductive techniques in order to strengthen the internal validity of the analysis; the interview transcriptions and research notes were read repeatedly and coded by theme, and these codes were refined during each reading. The topics are all related to the life course of inmates and their involvement in organized crime, especially the origin of their contacts with co-offenders, their opportunities for involvement following from different contexts, and their personal skills, knowledge and experiences with which they contributed to the activities of

⁵⁶A mean of five years' imprisonment is high by Dutch standards. More than half of the prison sentences are under three months. Less than 2 per cent of all prison sentences exceed four years (Statistics Netherlands, 2012).

the criminal group. In the analysis, we distinguished between offenders with an adult onset in crime – 10 participants with a first reported crime after the age of 18 – and inmates with an early start in crime – 6 participants with a first reported crime before the age of 18.⁵⁷

5.4 Results

5.4.1 Opportunities in conventional settings: Adult-onset offenders

Of the participants, 10 reported that they had committed their first offence after they entered adulthood. For three of them, the current sentence followed their first ever arrest. Others had prior convictions, though none of them reported any criminal behaviour before the age of 25. They thus had the opportunity to build a conventional life, including a stable job, social contacts and other bonds to society. At least 7 had a sound basis for building a successful conventional life: they had a good job, they were married, some had children, and they had no substantial financial, physical or psychological problems. However, at some point in their lives they had the opportunity or created their own opportunity to change course. Of these 10 participants with an adult onset, 9 had a stable job at the time they got involved in organized crime activities. Our analysis shows that, for all of them, initial contacts with co-offenders originated in a conventional setting. All 9 participants were occupied in a legal job where they were presented with an opportunity to engage in organized crime.

Edgar,⁵⁸ for example, was born into a respectable family and had a happy youth. After he finished intermediate technical school at the age of 21, he started working as a car seller at a Volkswagen dealer. Edgar had been working there for 10 years when he switched jobs to a different car-dealing company. This is where he came into contact with crime. For Edgar, money was the dominating factor in taking up the offer of his clients to start trafficking drugs for them. Conversely, his clients may have thought of him as a suitable co-offender who showed business instincts in his work as a car dealer. From then on, Edgar was convicted up to 20 times for thefts and crimes related to weapons and drugs, and for being complicit in murder. Now, 30 years later, he is serving a 10-year sentence for holding a leading position in a crime group involved in drugs.

⁵⁷ Respondents labelled early-onset offenders for the purposes of this study are all in fact persistent offenders since they were between 26 and 61 years of age at the time they were convicted for the organized crime case they were imprisoned for at the time of the interview. So, strictly speaking, we are comparing persistent offenders with late-onset offenders.

⁵⁸ All names are pseudonyms.

I was looking for something adventurous and the car business is full of adventure. And you can earn big money [...] If I had stayed at Volkswagen, this would never have happened. Then I would have done something else. In my old job I was surrounded by warm, friendly people, but I worked there for ten years and was looking for something else. BMW and Mercedes seemed more attractive, but it turned out to be a completely different world I did not know about. When I had been working there for about two years, I became involved in the criminal circuit. You are approached by clients from all sides.

Edgar got involved through contacts he acquired during his job. Of the 10 participants with a late crime onset, 9 became involved in the criminal activities during the execution of their jobs. They worked in various industries, such as the transport industry, the catering industry and the financial sector. Moreover, half of the participants with an adult crime onset owned a business at the time they became involved in organized crime. Autonomy and occupational contacts related to this position contribute to a context in which opportunities are more likely to appear.

The story of Brahim illustrates how occupations and lines of business with autonomy are likely to open doors to circumstances favourable to organized crime opportunities. At the same time it shows how he unintentionally came across these opportunities. Brahim married at a young age and had a couple of children. He had been a truck driver with a clean rap sheet for about 20 years and wanted to spend more time with his family. He opened a café and, soon, some of his frequent customers got to know his background. These customers asked Brahim if he knew people who would be willing to transport drugs. Brahim started as a kind of broker between the criminal group and truck drivers, but eventually was sentenced to 12 years imprisonment for transporting large amounts of heroin.

You start talking and ask each other: 'What did you do before and where do you come from?' That's the first thing you do. And when I mentioned I'd been a truck driver for years, that triggered something of course. He should know people, maybe he wants to. But I never wanted to. [...] I wasn't interested at all. I did not need the money and did not bite, it did not fascinate me. After some months, however... After all, they are your frequent customers and you talk to them all the time. There comes a time it goes through your mind that some others you know have the ability to and probably want to do it. At first I thought: I'll do them both a favour and I can earn some additional money, you know. I really did not see the danger in doing it.

Brahim was attractive to the criminal group because of his former job – through his contacts in the transport business – and he was exposed to members of the criminal group because of his current job as the café owner. The brokerage position between the criminal group and his old colleagues gave him a strategically strong position, because he bridged a structural gap between the criminal group and others who would otherwise not have been in contact with each other (Burt, 2005; Morselli, 2009). Brahim was a vital link between the crime group looking for drivers and drivers willing to get involved in criminal activities.

What makes an offender suitable for a crime group differs from group to group and depends on the type of organized crime. Daniel, aged over 60 years, owned two trading companies that were concerned with buying and selling in bulk. These companies used some hangars to store goods. Initially, he was approached by a foreigner with whom he did business. Daniel got involved in a criminal smuggling group, organizing cross-border transports.

It is really easy: [...] I am hungry for a sweet or I need sweets. You own a wholesale business in sweets, so I buy the goods from you. When I buy these sweets from you, a buyer–seller bond arises [...] At a particular moment they asked me if I had storage capacity. . . I got the idea there was more to it than met the eye [...] Well, I analysed the risks; what is the possible sentence, can I work with these people, do these people work accurately? [...] You think about it and you start talking and exploring how do they do this and how they want to do it, and are they trustworthy. You start talking about the finances . . . If I hadn't owned a business, I would never have got involved.

As stated, Edgar, Brahim and Daniel came into contact with organized crime through the execution of their job. All three had something to offer the criminal group: Edgar showed business instincts in his work as a car seller; Daniel had storage capacity available and transport knowledge because of his own trading companies; Brahim was mainly interesting to the crime group because of his social contacts within the transport industry. Apart from practical skills and knowledge, social contacts such as Brahim had are of great value, especially when someone is able to act as a broker between groups that would otherwise not have been in contact with each other (Morselli, 2005). As another participant stated explicitly:

Not everyone is able to work together in a group. So you look for suitable people for certain things based on knowledge, capacities and guts of course. [And, about one of his co-offenders] He can arrange anyone: a carpenter, plasterer, painter, and a chemist who makes you drugs, or when someone has to be eliminated.

5.4.2 A career in crime: Early-onset offenders

Of the 16 participants, 6 had an early start in crime: 5 of them were first convicted by a juvenile court; the sixth had only adult arrests but reported during the interview that he had stolen his first motorbike at the age of 14. Most of them first built up a long list of violent crimes, such as assaults and robberies, before they buckled down to organized crime activities. Three had a relatively carefree youth, like most participants with an adult onset; they had caring parents without financial problems or contact with the police. The other half of the early-onset offenders already had a troubled childhood, experiencing family break-up, parental drug-use, foster care and bad neighbourhoods.

Harry is one of those offenders who had to answer for his actions in a juvenile court, for the first time at the age of 10. He is currently in prison for stealing trucks and cargos in conjunction with others and he got to know some of his co-offenders in prison during earlier custodial sentences. Harry reported that he was like a magnet, attracting people, and as a consequence he has many criminal contacts.

You end up in this environment by coincidence, and it was going from bad to worse. [...] With me, it started when I was young. Problems at home, running away, boarding school, children's home, and yeah you cannot live on air, so you have to start doing things. And you start by stealing a bike, and the bike becomes a scooter, and the scooter becomes a motor, a car and then trucks, you name it [...] You become smarter. When you are young, you do someone else's dirty work, and when you become older and wiser, you start doing it on your own initiative.

Alex was raised in a problem family with a large number of siblings. He was involved in crime from the age of 9 and spent most of his life in prison. He is currently in prison after being convicted as the leader of a criminal group involved in drugs and weapons.

I was sent to community homes from age ten on [...] That's where I learned to steal my first car, so to speak. You know? Because if you centralize crooks, criminals, it's normal they get into more trouble all together. That's how things go. I'm not saying it is to set the fox to watch the geese, but it's a given. In prison, you talk more about misery than about cooking, so to speak. Do you understand? It is a melting pot and a school of course [...] What I said, you have a clique of little bastards. And it's exciting to rob, especially at a young age. At least if that's in your character. And then you are dragged into it. It is just where you were born.

Whereas contacts with co-offenders originated at work for most participants with an adult onset, participants with an early onset, such as Harry and Alex, tended to co-offend with long-time friends. Najib confirms the idea that criminal contacts for early starters originate at an early age, and that these offenders did not grow up under the best conditions. He and his co-offenders lived in the same neighbourhood and grew up together. Some of them used to go to the same school and were already close friends at an early age. Najib was introduced into the drug world by his uncle, who was in this business. Over time, Najib only became more deeply involved and more professional. He more or less evolved from being a drug runner into the leader of a criminal group seemingly without coming across better alternatives. Najib was convicted of participation in a drug crime group and the murder of a co-offender.

I didn't regard it as an organization, I just saw it as a circle of friends, friends I just grew up with in the neighbourhood. And yes, at some point you start doing certain activities with some people. In my case, there were eleven of us, but we definitely didn't see it as an organization or something like that [...] I am used to always having stress in my life. I grew up abroad and came here to live in the city centre, always excitement. I basically didn't have to watch the television to see action, I only had to sit on the balcony to see action, so to speak.

In sum, opportunities for organized crime for participants with an early start in crime are very clear considering their criminal history and criminal contacts. They were not able to hold a 9-to-5 job for more than a few years – although their current activities also require much time and effort. They match the description of career criminals (Blumstein et al., 1986): crime for them is a way of life. The foundations for their opportunities in organized crime lay in their early years, where they bonded with their current co-offenders. By now, they are streetwise, and their criminal know-how and experiences bring them crime opportunities in abundance.

5.4.3 Different intention, same outcome: Early- and adult-onset offenders

Occasionally, the involvement mechanisms are fairly similar for early- and adult-onset offenders, although the initial intention seems to be totally different. For example, owning a business appears to play an important part in the facilitation of opportunities for participants with both an early and a late onset in crime. An important distinction exists, however, between business owners who started off with illegal intentions and business owners who started off with legal intentions and encountered illegal opportunities through this business. All five late-onset participants with a business of their own at the

time they got involved in organized crime reported that they had started to run their company with legal intentions. Their companies all ran a legal business and turned out to open doors to organized crime activities that would otherwise have stayed closed. In other words, their engagement in organized crime activities was facilitated by their legal jobs. In contrast, participants with an early onset reported having launched a business for the benefit of a crime group by using the company as a cover, for example to make contacts, to transport goods or to launder money flows. The plan for criminal activities came first, the company came next. Two inmates, both café owners, illustrate how the same resource can facilitate different involvement mechanisms.

First consider Brahim again, the participant who opened a café after a 20-year conventional career as a truck driver. Now consider Greg, who started his criminal career stealing a motorbike at the age of 14 and is currently serving a 10-year prison sentence after being convicted as the leader of a criminal group involved in drug-trafficking. Up to now, Greg had been involved in trafficking in women, weapon-related crimes and drug-trafficking, among other things. At the age of 18, he opened a café and, unlike Brahim, he was evidently looking for crime contacts and opportunities. By means of his café, he was exposed to new contacts and at the same time he had acquired a certain reputation.

I have always been in it to earn money. Things that were prohibited attracted me. The pressure, the easy money, status [...] I was doing well. I got a nice car and went to Amsterdam a couple of times. You tell them you've got a café and ask them to come over. And one thing led to another, and I got to know people. You should know I did not have a café where the villagers with children came. It was a different kind of café, which attracted a specific clientele ... How should I put it, men who can't bear the daylight [...] You end up in a large network of people. You go to the casino, to sex clubs, and you meet those kinds of people... I also achieved a certain status; you wear some gold, you drive a nice car, you make the money fly. Soon, you have a lot of contacts...

5.5 Discussion

Crime causation is still poorly understood, especially for distinct types of crime, such as organized crime. In order to gain an insight into how individuals become involved in organized crime, we carried out in-depth interviews with 16 inmates who had all been convicted for organized crime. All the participants engaged in organized crime after they entered adulthood, and most of them were quite old at the time they got involved. Some started their crim-

inal career early in life and had built an extensive criminal history; others did not engage in crime until they entered adulthood or even much later.

The current study is limited by the small pool of individuals in the research sample. The research group was limited by the inclusion criteria, because only those convicted and currently imprisoned for organized crime activities were selected. The majority of inmates approached for the study did not wish to participate (31 out of 47), and we have no indication of how the refusers may deviate from the participants with regard to their criminal and/or conventional background or their role in organized crime activities. As a result, the involvement mechanisms presented here relate to the particular group of subjects in this study.

In the analysis, we distinguished between participants who had not engaged in crime before adulthood and offenders who did engage in criminal acts before the age of 18. The opportunities and abilities for organized crime turned out to play a substantially different role for the early-onset and the late-onset groups. Early-onset offenders bring different skills, knowledge and contacts to the table from those of adult-onset offenders with conventional histories, and both are therefore potentially of interest for criminal groups. Late-onset offenders have less criminal experience than those with an early and persistent criminal onset. However, other assets compensate for their lack of criminal experience. They have knowledge based on their educational level and have certain skills, contacts or the means that can be used in the merit of a criminal group.

Of the 16 participants, 10 only reported adult offences. We have provided an insight into the mechanisms behind their adult onset and involvement in organized crime. Existing theories that aim at explaining adult-onset offending focus on sudden and gradual weakening in social bonds (Laub and Sampson, 2003; Thornberry and Krohn, 2005). Based on this assumption, it can be expected that offenders who had not engaged in crime until adulthood had experienced a sudden change in their lives, such as moving, losing a job or a family break-up, resulting in their crime participation. These explanations of crime onsets, however, are not supported by our findings for the participants with an adult crime onset. Although conventional bonds to society are usually considered protective factors against crime (Sampson and Laub, 1993), it seems that involvement in organized crime for the late-onset offenders was facilitated rather than deterred by their professional bonds to the community. For the participants with a late crime onset, adult life – especially work – brought opportunities and temptations for organized crime that were absent during earlier life stages. As the stories of Edgar, the car dealer, and Brahim, the café owner, exemplify, individuals can, intentionally or accidentally, be situated in a context rich with crime opportunities.

Of the 16 participants, 6 showed criminal tendencies from an early age. Their involvement mechanisms for organized crime differ substantially from those of adult-onset offenders. Early-onset offenders match the description of career criminals (Blumstein et al., 1986) as their criminal activities take a central place in their lives. They were not employed on a regular basis; and most of them had no legal work at all. Their involvement is facilitated by foundations laid in their early years; they co-offend with long-time friends or family also criminally active from an early age.

In conclusion, we identified a substantial number of adult-onset offenders engaged in organized crime activities. Their involvement is explained by processes that differ from the mechanisms facilitating the engagement of early-onset offenders. Adult-onset offenders who ended up in organized crime deserve special attention because their participation is explained not by stable characteristics noticeable from an early age, but by settings and situations experienced later in life. Future research should therefore pay particular attention to the rationale of those with stable lives who get involved in criminal behaviour such as organized crime.