Pathways into organized crime

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Chapter 6

General conclusions

6.1 Aims

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. This sixth and concluding chapter reports on the main findings of the thesis (section 6.2) and discusses the scope and limitations of the study (section 6.3), while also reflecting on scientific progress and

public relevance (sections 6.4 and 6.5). Lastly, the thesis ends by providing directions for future research (section 6.6) and some concluding remarks (section 6.7).

6.2   Summary of the main results

6.2.1   Variation within the group of organized crime offenders

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.

6.2.2 Variation among offenders: Organized crime offenders and a general offender population

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.

6.2.3   Involvement mechanisms for organized crime

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 compa-

nies are set up solely for the purposes of being used to perform and conceal criminal activities.

6.2.4   In-depth interviews on involvement mechanisms

The analyses of police files conducted in the previous chapter in order 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.

6.2.5   Recapitulation

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.

6.3 Discussion

This section discusses the data selection (section 6.3.1) and methodological considerations (section 6.3.2) of this thesis. It elaborates on the challenges brought along by operating at the interface of two research traditions (section 6.3.3), while also discussing the findings of adult-onset offending as this is one of the main themes in this thesis (section 6.3.4).

6.3.1 Data selection and restrictions

Samples of organized crime offenders are in short supply. Most studies concerning organized crime offenders reflect only on a small sample of offenders or analyze a single life course in detail (see, for example, Cromwell and Birzer, 2012; Mustain and Capeci, 2002). A large sample of organized crime offenders such as the OCM is unique in its sample size, as well as in the amount of information, both quantitative and qualitative, that it provides. Nevertheless, the OCM is not without its limitations. Obtaining a sample that randomly reflects organized crime in the Netherlands is extremely difficult. If register data are used, findings are always highly influenced by the selective police priorities that make some criminal activities and crime groups more prone to police interference than others. As such, the selection of cases in the OCM is by no means a random reflection of organized crime in the Netherlands. The aim for the OCM is to obtain a strategically selective sample (see also Kleemans, 2012). Cases for the OCM are selected on the basis of an inventory among all district courts, (national) police teams, and the investigation squad of the Dutch Fiscal Police (FIOD-ESC). From all cases provided, a sample of 120 cases was taken in a way that would add most to our existing knowledge of organized crime. In more practical terms, this meant selecting frequently occurring cases

such as crime groups involved in trafficking drugs, but also less frequently investigated types of organized crime such as human smuggling and organized fraud.

Findings presented in the second chapter showed that the fact that some types of organized crime were oversampled and other types were undersampled in the OCM was not a major concern for the scope of this thesis. Basic statistics on judicial careers were not found to vary substantially between offenders involved in the different types of organized crime. Statistics for offenders engaged in drug-related activities, for example, did not differ significantly from those for other organized crime offenders in respect of the number of judicial contacts before their organized crime case. Moreover, when we divided offenders into groups with similar judicial trajectories, offenders engaged in different types of organized offences were found to be spread similarly across these trajectories. Overall, there was no indication of any substantial differences in criminal pathways between offenders engaged in the different types of organized crime. Criminal careers were found to be relatively homogenous across the different types of organized crime, and the fact that we used a broad sample of organized crime activities endorsed this finding.

For the second chapter, we made a selection from the OCM that included only offenders born in the Netherlands and those who had lived in the Netherlands since the age of 12 or younger. As a consequence of the transnational character of most organized crime activities, many offenders involved did not grow up in the Netherlands. In this respect, the studied population deviated considerably from the total Dutch offender population. Only 53 per cent of offenders in the OCM were born in the Netherlands, compared with 71 per cent in the JDS extract of general offenders. Judicial records of those who have lived part of their lives or still live outside the Netherlands cannot be considered complete judicial histories as the JDS only holds information on contacts with the Dutch criminal justice authorities, and no information is available on what may have occurred in other criminal justice systems. The analysis in the third chapter focused on offenders born in the Netherlands. A somewhat tighter restriction was applied than for chapter 2 as it was impossible to determine, in the case of the comparative group of general offenders, which offenders had been born abroad, but had lived in the Netherlands since the age of 12 or earlier. In conclusion, the main focus in chapters 2 and 3 was on the criminal careers of Dutch organized crime offenders.

The police files selected for the study presented in the fourth chapter were drawn from all 120 cases included in the OCM. The initial selection of these cases was determined by the availability of police files as not all 120 police files were still accessible. All the available files were listed and a quick scan was made to estimate the amount of useful information included on individual involvement processes. The final selection was made in a way that best

reflected the heterogeneity of organized crime and its offenders. This selection included crime groups consisting of 8 to 49 offenders, native and foreign offenders, and crime groups involved in different types of activities ranging from drug-related activities to human trafficking and organized fraud. The study based on police files was the only one in the thesis in which foreign offenders were included to their full extent as relevant information for this study – involvement mechanisms and relationships between offenders – can be considered equally complete for natives and foreigners in the police files. Although this selection of cases and offenders was not obtained randomly, it comprised a heterogeneous sample of crime groups, offenders and criminal activities.

The interview study (chapter 5) is the only chapter in this thesis that did not use data from the OCM and involved the difficulty of selecting and approaching detainees. Selecting interviewees based on their conviction meant that not all imprisoned organized crime offenders were included. We know from the OCM that only a proportion of organized crime offenders gets convicted under the section of Dutch Law that criminalizes participation in a criminal organization.[59] Others are convicted under more activity-related sections of the law such as those relating to money laundering, drug or human trafficking, fraud, or the weapons and fire arms legislation. The fact that we selected only those convicted under the organized crime section meant we had a restricted selection of organized crime offenders. On the other hand, it is difficult to select organized crime offenders on the basis of their rap sheets as the latter often do not show whether the activities for which they were convicted involved organized crime. Many crimes can be committed in either an organized form or not. Selecting all offenders convicted for drug-related activities would also incorrectly include those involved in drugs, but not in organized crime. Selecting only those convicted under the organized crime section of the law means the number of false positives can be considered zero, even though the selection is smaller, and the group of false negatives can be considered large.

This selection strategy was only the first step in approaching convicted detainees. An additional selection criterion meant that only Dutch or English-speaking interviewees were included in the study. A total of 47 detainees met

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[59]We know from the offenders included in the OCM that only around 40 per cent get convicted for the criterion case in organized crime under the *Organized Crime Act* (Deelneming aan criminele organisatie, Art. 140 WvSr). Offenders with a leading role or coordinating role in a crime group get convicted slightly more often for violation of the *Organized Crime Act* (respectively 54 per cent and 52 per cent) than lower-level offenders (33 per cent). Also, offenders involved in drugs get more often convicted under this particular Act (38 per cent) than offenders involved in fraud cases (25 per cent). Consequently, we can safely assume that offenders with more important roles in a criminal group and offenders involved in drugs are overrepresented in the interview study.

these criteria and were approached to take part in the study. In the end, sixteen of them agreed to participate. Such a low response rate raises the issue of selection bias, which was hard to explore in this study. We had very limited information available on those who did not agree to take part. Although we had some information on why they refused, many of their reasons could only be guessed at. What we did have information on was their current prison sentence for the organized crime case. Those who agreed to take part (16 detainees) had been sentenced to an average term of imprisonment of 5 years and 4 months. Those who did not agree to take part (31 detainees) were serving prison sentences with a mean length of 4 years and 8 months. The prison sentences imposed on the two groups did not differ significantly (t = 0.61, p = 0.55). However, the mean prison sentence imposed on Dutch-born offenders included in the OCM was 2 years and 10 months (see chapter 3, table 5) and thus was much lower. Owing to the language barrier, foreign offenders were underexposed in both this chapter and chapters 2 and 3. Of the total of sixteen participants, three were born abroad (19 per cent) and only one interview was conducted in English. Nevertheless, the detainees interviewed represented a heterogeneous sample of organized crime offenders: younger and older offenders (aged from 31 to 64), leaders, coordinators and lower-level offenders in a crime group, and offenders crimes such as drug-related activities, human trafficking and fraud.

In conclusion, constructing a random sample of organized crime offenders is not feasible. All the findings in this thesis relate, therefore, to the limited context of the selected sample. In other words, the 120 criminal groups and selected offenders in the case of the quantitative chapters, the fifteen crime groups in the case of the file study, and the sixteen inmates in the case of the interviews. Despite these limitations, the data sources used in this study present a wide range of offenders and criminal activities. The constraints we faced correspond to those in other comparable studies (see, for example, Antonopoulos, 2008; Fijnaut et al., 1998). There are no alternative methods or data sources available at present that allow more far-reaching generalizations. The OCM is in fact a unique data source, also when compared to other international attempts to study organized crime.

6.3.2 Mixed-method approach and methodological considerations

Like the samples used, the methods used in this thesis have their limitations. Semi-parametric group-based trajectory modelling was used to identify groups of organized crime offenders with similar criminal patterns over time (chapter 2). Some cautions have previously been raised regarding the interpretation of trajectory groups (see Nagin and Tremblay, 2005a, 2005b; Sampson and Laub, 2005a). Trajectory groups should be seen as an approximation

of a more complex underlying reality. Individuals do not *belong* to a trajectory group, and should not be thought to follow the trajectory curve perfectly. Their criminal careers just fit one trajectory group best, and so they are classified in that group. The process of determining the number of trajectory groups to be distinguished in order to best represent the data is rather arbitrary, although various indices provide guidance on the optimal number of groups. Applying trajectory modelling to a continuously heterogeneous group will anyway identify a small number of latent classes. Trajectory modelling does not, therefore, provide an *a priori* test of whether multiple groups exist, but instead already assumes some underlying offender types in the data (Skardhamar, 2010). On the other hand and contrary to more classical ways of offender classification (such as classifying offenders with more than ten crimes as chronic offenders), group-based modelling is objective in that the groups do not only reflect random variation (Piquero, 2008). The methodology does not make parametric assumptions about the distribution, such as assumptions on the number of unobserved groups in the data.

In the comparison between the criminal histories of organized crime offenders and those of general offenders, two groups were created that were criminally active at the same stages of their lives (chapter 3). Based on the age distribution at the time of their criterion offence (being the organized crime case or the 1997 case respectively; see also figure 3), weights were assigned to general offenders such that their age distribution corresponded to the age distribution of the group of organized crime offenders. In doing so, two groups of individuals were created that were convicted at the same age; one group for organized crime activities and one group for random criminal activities. This way, differences between both groups could be attributed to differences between the two offender groups rather than to their age differences. Although these weighted comparisons were the result of a careful consideration, this procedure also had certain disadvantages. The comparative analyses did not show raw parallels between organized crime offenders and the general offender population; in other word, general offenders committing crime only in early adolescence (before the age of 17) were not included in the analyses. Additional analyses, however, showed that the main results of the comparisons were maintained when analyses were carried out using the total – non-weighted – general offender group (see also footnotes 44 and 45).

Involvement mechanisms for organized crime offenders are studied in this thesis using two different methodological approaches and data sources: police files and offender interviews. Using police files for scientific purposes requires a certain level of vigilance since information is gathered for investigative purposes such as searching for the truth and creating a body of evidence (see, for example, Fijnaut et al., 1998). The most valuable information on involvement mechanisms found in the police files was obtained from records

of interrogations (chapter 4). Most offenders were interrogated many times and were asked about different aspects of their lives and their criminal activities. The motivational aspects were the hardest to capture from the interrogation records, probably because these do not contribute to the body of evidence in the prosecution process. Therefore, offender interviews were carried out examining the perceptions of offenders themselves (chapter 5). Copes and Hochstetler (2010) list several methodological issues to be taken into account when interviewing captive criminals. They warn, for example, against a bias towards unsuccessful offenders when relying on an incapacitated population. This is especially important when, for example, studying decision-making in the crime process as these inmates apparently have made ineffective decisions. However, research indicates that imprisoned offenders do not differ much from those not or not yet caught (Shover, 1996). In addition, the interviews conducted for this thesis did not focus on crime processes or crime success; instead the aim was to explore the lives of organized crime offenders and to understand how these individuals became involved in organized crime. Brookman (2010) pleads for methodological triangulation by complementing interview data with official documents and other sources so as to create cross-validated findings. Verdicts and rap sheets were therefore collected for all inmates interviewed for the current study. In a broader context, this thesis used a variety of sources mirroring different perspectives and contexts. The validity was also increased by recording the interviews on tape and converting them to verbatim transcripts so as to allow systematic analyses of the interview data.

Despite the limitations of the data and methods used in the thesis, the richness of the data allowed the exploring of multiple sources and perspectives, as well as the use of multiple methodological approaches. The thesis used information from a wide variety of sources – police files, verdicts, judicial careers and offender interviews – and several methodological approaches to analyze these data. The first empirical chapter starts with a study of a large number of subjects, making a broad comparison on criminal pathways, and ultimately narrows down in the final empirical chapter to a study small in number, but rich in information. The first and second empirical chapters are mainly based on large-scale datasets, allowing for quantitative analyses on a large group of offenders. The third empirical chapter analyzes police files in detail, thus allowing for a closer view of offenders and their cooperation in fifteen organized crime groups. These first three empirical chapters all use official data. This changes in the final empirical chapter, where the perspectives of the offenders themselves guide the discussion.

All the methods used in this thesis have their own strengths and weaknesses, although both quantitative and qualitative approaches are compatible and findings based on one approach should complete findings based on the

other. While the shape of criminal histories, for example, was drawn in the first two empirical chapters, the qualitative studies gave meaning to these careers. A proper use of a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods has great advantages over using a single method. Both provide different perspectives on a single phenomenon, and their combined use allows for a broad spectrum of conclusions. Combining several research methods also increases the validity of the findings.

Although a diverse range of information on and from organized crime offenders and their activities was potentially interesting for the purposes of this thesis, such information could not easily be retrieved from a single perspective or source or using a single research method. The OCM is unique in that it combines multiple sources of information on a large number of criminal groups involved in various types of organized crime, and on an even larger number of offenders involved in these criminal groups. It also provides information on individuals within crime groups, thus allowing examination of crime groups, of individuals in these groups, and of interrelationships between individuals in these groups. All the case analyses carried out by OCM research team included interviews with police officers and public prosecutors, as well as examinations of official records, observation reports and interrogations. A substantial part of this information was categorised and coded. All the information gathered on an individual offender level was linked to the individual judicial careers of the offenders.

This thesis was able to benefit from the richness of the OCM. In order to track criminal pathways using group-modelling techniques, quantitative information on judicial contacts was linked to qualitative information on the specific type of organized crime and the roles individuals played in a crime group (chapter 2). In drawing a parallel between organized crime and general offenders, we primarily used quantitative information on criminal pathways was used (chapter 3), while our exploration of involvement processes was based on qualitative analyses of information obtained from police files (chapter 4). The final empirical chapter, which was the only one not using data from the OCM, comprised an important part of the multi-method approach used. In this study, information was obtained directly from the offenders themselves in the form of interviews with individuals convicted for participation in organized crime activities (chapter 5). In conclusion, this thesis favours a multi-source and multi-method approach in the study of criminal life courses.

6.3.3 Criminological traditions and theoretical challenges

Criminological research encompasses various traditions. This thesis aimed to unite two of these traditions: organized crime research and life-course criminology. The intersection of these traditions had previously remained untouch-

ed. Generally, it lacks a life-course perspective in the study of special offender groups and life-course criminology has a strong focus on high-volume crime. The focus in the organized crime research tradition is on multiple manifestations and scopes of crime groups: mechanisms, processes and group dynamics. In other words, its focus is on collectives and contexts rather than on individuals. With the exception of biographies and autobiographies, organized crime research rarely studies individual offenders. The criminal career tradition, probably the past century's most emergent tradition, takes a different approach and concentrates on individual offenders. Its focus is on explanations of criminal behaviour, especially early in life, and on self-control, nurturing and the transitions during adolescence and young adulthood (see, for example, Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990). More recent studies have incorporated more sociological explanations, such as the influence of work, marriage or parenthood on criminal careers (see, for example, Sampson et al., 2006).

The research aims and perspectives of these two traditions are thus essentially different, in addition to the substantial methodological differences. Organized crime researchers frequently prefer qualitative techniques, such as in-depth interviews, case file studies and ethnographic fieldwork. Their studies result in detailed explanations of crime groups and their manifestations, but are narrow in scope. Researchers studying criminal pathways, by contrast, tend to use quantitative techniques on large datasets. Their studies result in conclusions on descriptive and causal relationships of criminal careers, but tend to be general rather than offence- or offender-specific.

The study at hand illustrates this gap in the literature between two criminological research traditions and has sought to build a bridge between individual-focused criminal career research and contextual research into organized crime. The scope of this thesis was therefore to explore the criminal life courses of a subpopulation of offenders, those involved in organized crime, and to examine to which extent knowledge to date on criminal careers and crime involvement mechanisms applies equally to organized crime offenders. Existing ideas on criminal careers and accepted theories on crime causation were found not to fit offenders involved in organized crime. In conclusion, the study of smaller groups of offenders (identified by their type of crime, age or other unique features) can help our understanding of crime and show the extent of variation within larger samples.

6.3.4 Age of crime onset

One of the most remarkable findings of this thesis is the number of organized crime offenders experiencing a late onset of their criminal careers. The phenomenon of adult-onset offending features so prominently in this thesis that it deserves serious theoretical and empirical consideration. Contrary to expec-

tations based on mainstream criminological literature, offenders who end up in organized crime were often found to commit their first registered crimes as adults. Only a minority had experienced a longstanding career in crime before becoming involved in organized crime. These findings demonstrate that knowledge based on general offenders does not easily generalize to specific subgroups such as organized crime offenders. The findings on the number of adult-onset offenders contradict common explanations of the shape of the classical age-crime curve. While the peak of this curve is attributed to the many adolescents temporarily engaging in crime, its flattening is explained by the small group of persistent offenders who start their criminal career early and carry on offending far into adulthood (see Moffitt, 1993). However, this commonly given explanation tends to overlook the bulk of offenders who start their criminal career only after reaching adulthood. Adult-onset offenders seem to offend with a lower frequency, but constitute a large share of the total number of offenders.

Scholars only recently cautioned against this exclusive focus on young offenders. As Cullen (2011: 287 and 304) unmistakably stated, "For over a half century, criminology has been dominated by a paradigm – adolescence-limited criminology [...] I will argue that this paradigm is bankrupt and should be discarded." Recent studies have paid particular attention to the prevalence of and possible explanations for adult-onset offending (see Gomez- Smith and Piquero, 2005; Krohn et al., 2013; Zara and Farrington, 2009, 2010). The striking number of adult-onset offenders is not limited, however, to organized crime offenders. A handful of birth cohort studies of common offenders that follow individuals long enough to identify adult-onset crime have systematically recognized a high share of adult-onset offenders. Between one quarter and one half of the criminal samples of cohorts drawn in, for instance, Racine, Stockholm and Philadelphia started offending in adulthood (see Carrington et al., 2005; Eggleston and Laub, 2002; Gomez-Smith and Piquero, 2005; Kratzer and Hodgins, 1999; Stattin et al., 1989; Wolfgang et al., 1987). Moreover, it is not reasonable to ignore adult-onset offenders as they are known to commit far more serious offences than early-starting and persistent offenders (see, for example, Wolfgang et al., 1987).

These findings on crime onset seem to contradict the general idea that criminal behaviour starts at a young age, especially for those who persist in offending (see, for example, Cohen, 1986; Wikström, 1987). This therefore raises a wider criminological issue. In other words, is early onset indeed the rule rather than the exception? Or is late onset more common among general offenders? Data readily obtained from Statistics Netherlands offered evidence for the latter and confirmed the findings on the overall offender population expressed in this thesis. A total of 80 per cent of all first offenders in the Netherlands in 2010 were adults (over the age of 18), while more than half were over

the age of 25 (Statistics Netherlands, 2013).[60] How can this be reconciled with the overload of studies almost exclusively identifying juvenile crime onset? And, more interestingly, how can adult-onset offending be explained?

Firstly, the focus on juveniles and adolescents stems from the common assumption that adult offending requires early anti-social behaviour (see, for example, Moffitt and Caspi, 2001). Criminologists fix their eyes on youths in a belief that the problem should be tackled at the source. Whereas the processes causing someone to offend during adolescence are well studied (see Farrington et al., 1990), extant studies shed insufficient light on adult-onset offending, both theoretically and empirically. Juveniles are also a relatively easy group to approach for research purposes as they are clustered in large groups at schools. The processes causing someone to offend during juvenile and adolescent years are therefore well studied and focus primarily on personality characteristics and early risk factors in seeking to explain crime. Secondly, most empirical longitudinal studies are limited to a relatively early and short follow-up and are therefore unable to identify phenomena other than the early onset of criminal behaviour. The underrepresentation of older offenders in criminological research is not surprising if we consider the data used in longitudinal studies on criminal careers. Piquero (2008), for example, showed that out of 50 samples used in criminal career research between 1993 and 2006, only half included information on individuals after the age of 18, and only a fifth had data available after the age of 30.[61] Adult-onset offenders are therefore excluded in advance in most studies. All in all, the focus on young offenders has for years been a vicious circle: studies only include youth, attention is paid to explanations for and crime patterns of young offenders, and youth crime is seen as representing all criminal behaviour, which in turn accounts for the focus on young offenders. Even if part of a studied sample of offenders is found to have adult onset, this part of the total group is frequently ignored or brushed aside theoretically. As a result, onset in early years is well studied and much better understood than adult onset.

Some have argued that adult onset is an artefact and caused by a detection effect (see McGee and Farrington, 2010). Individuals first registered for crime as adults may also have committed offences at an earlier age. The use of self-reported crime rates may lower the onset age of criminal behaviour and, therefore, the extent of adult onset. Some offenders who are first convicted as adults will also have committed juvenile delinquency that remained undetected. McGee and Farrington (2010) analyzed 37 adult-onset offenders

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[60]These results hold true if the sample is restricted to native Dutch offenders (to correct for individuals who may also have committed crimes outside the Netherlands), and are equally valid for men and women.

[61]Most of these studies are longitudinal and many are still ongoing. By now, therefore, these samples should have a longer age span, thus enabling analyses of and explanations for adult-onset offending.

by comparing self-reported and official data and concluded that 30 per cent of the adult-onset offenders identified had committed self-reported offending between the ages of 10 and 18. Nevertheless, the frequency of their self-reported offending frequency within this period is significantly lower than for early-onset offenders. So, while adult onset is probably somewhat overestimated due to the use of official data, it would seem that the large numbers of adult-onset offenders cannot be totally explained or nullified by shortcomings in official data. In a follow-up study, Zara (2012) argues that although late-onset offenders do not commit crimes early in their lives, they show an underlying pattern of risk factors from the age of 8 onwards. She suggests that late-onset offenders have a delayed risk for offending, caused by emotional and psychological difficulties, from an early age.

Sampson and Laub (2005b) explain stability and change in criminal propensity over the life span by the concept of informal social control. According to their age-graded theory of informal social control, adult social bonds, such as job stability and strong marital attachment, inhibit adult criminal behaviour. At the same time, persistent criminal behaviour into adulthood is explained by a lack of social control. Sampson and Laub (2005b: 167) also give a possible explanation of late onset: "For instance, late onset of criminal behaviour can be accounted for by weak social bonds in adulthood, despite a background of nondelinquent behaviour." However, the research conducted for this thesis showed that informal social control mechanisms could also stimulate instead of inhibit criminal behaviour. Involvement in organized crime was often facilitated rather than deterred by professional bonds to the community. For participants with a late crime onset, adult life – especially working life – opened doors to opportunities and temptations that had stayed closed during earlier stages of life. Late-onset criminal behaviour cannot simply be explained by a lack of social bonds to society. Instead, adult-onset criminal behaviour would seem to be better explained by settings and situations experienced later in life.

In conclusion, expectations on the actual number of adult-onset offenders are ambiguous. On the one hand, some offenders identified as adult onsetters will have committed undetected crimes as juveniles, thus causing an overrepresentation of this group. On the other hand, adult-onset offenders are largely underrepresented as a consequence of limited data sources. Offenders committing their first crime at the age of 30 or 35 fall outside the scope of most studies. Offence types cautiously linked to adult onset, such as sexual offences, fraud and organized crime, also have relatively low clearance rates. The numbers of adult-onset offenders in studies that follow individuals further into adulthood cannot be ignored, while these numbers will also keep rising as individuals are followed to older ages. Since the prevalence of adult-onset offending was found to be higher than previously expected, the need to explain these criminal pathways has become more important. Furthermore,

adult-onset offending was found not to be limited to one-time offenders or minor offences. What stands out is that much more research is needed on the prevalence and causes of adult-onset offending. A better understanding of the mechanisms and processes that cause adult-onset crime will contribute to knowledge on the causations and manifestations of crime.

6.4 Scientific progress

This thesis relates directly to received wisdom in both life-course criminology and organized crime research. Life courses of organized crime offenders, especially larger samples, have rarely been studied. This thesis has consequently resulted in new knowledge on and insights into the life courses of organized crime offenders. Although the majority of organized crime offenders were found to have experienced adult onset, some had committed crimes from an early age and persisted offending in adulthood. The substantial share of adult-onset offenders in organized crime was confirmed by judicial records, police files and offender interviews. These results proved to be quite robust when we differentiated between distinct types of organized crime and offenders with distinct positions within a criminal group. Those who started committing crimes at an early age were found to be as likely as first-time offenders to have a leading or lower-level position in a criminal group. Offenders with similar criminal pathways were also found to be involved in different types of organized crime activities. In conclusion, although organized crime involves many different activities and offender responsibilities, no connection was found between these activities and responsibilities and the criminal pathways of offenders.

From the perspective of Gottfredson and Hirschi's (1990) general theory of crime, organized crime is just an expression of a single underlying trait explaining all types of crime: low self-control. They deny the existence of different types of offenders, and thus argue that no significant differences exist between offenders committing different types of crime. This thesis challenges their argument. Organized crime offenders differ from general offenders from the start, not so much in the age of onset or the frequency of their judicial contacts, but rather in the seriousness of their criminal behaviour. 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 goes from bad to worse with age.[62] Organized crime offenders' criminal behaviour is not so much concentrated at the beginning of their criminal careers as these offenders do not necessarily show a record of early problem

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[62]Earlier studies on particular offender groups confirm this finding. Crimes committed by corporate crime offenders, for example, are related to control surpluses rahter than control deficits (Leeper Piquero and Piquero, 2006).

behaviour. Standard explanations of persistent criminal careers that focus on stable individual characteristics would not seem, therefore, to fit organized crime offenders. Therefore, findings on organized crime offenders' criminal careers would seem hard to reconcile with the static theory proposed by Gottfredson and Hirschi.

This thesis also showed that late onset would not seem such an exceptional phenomenon, as demonstrated by the age distributions of organized crime offenders and a comparison group of general offenders. Adult-onset offending was found to be a more common phenomenon, also in general offender populations, and has only recently started receiving more attention (see Krohn et al., 2013; McGee and Farrington, 2010; Zara, 2012). The results presented in this thesis therefore add to the expanding literature on adult-onset offenders as they relate directly to received wisdoms on criminal careers. Although serious offenders are thought to experience an early onset in crime, early onset does not seem to be a necessary condition for involvement in serious types of crime such as organized crime. In addition, offending peaks in early adolescence according to the widely accepted age-crime curve (Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1986), while most organized crime offenders in our sample did not even engage in crime before adulthood, regardless of the type of organized crime and their role in a criminal group. The primary explanation for these remarkable findings is that most research on adult offenders to date has concentrated on persistence or desistence instead of on onset.

Desistence in adulthood is commonly explained by strong social bonds inhibiting criminal behaviour, such as acquiring a stable job or strong social ties, while persistence of criminal behaviour into adulthood is often explained by the absence of social bonds to society or turning points in life that separate an individual from society, also later in life (Laub and Sampson, 2003). Although conventional bonds to society are usually considered protective factors for crime, this thesis showed that positive social bonds may also have a downside as they provide opportunities for involvement in organized crime. Many offenders were found to have become involved in a criminal group through co-offenders they met at work. Such social bonds are not equally accessible for everybody and in all stages of life. From this perspective, adult onset and alternative career patterns may be less surprising than in central life-course theories emphasizing long-term risk factors and personal deficiencies.

The idea of *social opportunity structures* as an explanation for organized crime involvement was introduced by Kleemans and De Poot (2008). This thesis was able to extend this explanation and add a new perspective: that of the perspective of the offenders themselves. Situationally oriented theories allow for distinct pathways and older offenders as they explain criminal behaviour by the situational context rather than personality traits. Analyses of the police files showed that most crime groups constitute a mix of family ties and newly

acquired contacts. Family ties and long-time relationships in a crime group follow differential association theory, whereby individuals learn attitudes and skills through others. Beside family ties, most contacts within crime groups were found to be relatively recent. While family ties ensure a basis of trust within a criminal group, other ties enlarge the collective knowledge, skills, and pool of contacts. Such resources can often only be acquired by individuals that have reached a certain age and experience, typically through their working life and contacts.

6.5   Public relevance

The criminal policy implications of this thesis lie specifically in efforts to reduce crime. Organized crime is not as visible in society as many other manifestations of criminal behaviour, such as assault, burglary or violence. Most organized crime activities do not create direct victims, and nor do they take place openly. Current perspectives assume offenders to start at a young age – especially offenders involved in serious crimes such as organized crime – and interference is consequently usually directed at this young age frame. Better knowledge of organized crime offenders and an improved understanding of how and why they become involved will help us to understand how to intervene in their life paths. The question of how individuals engage in crime is surely of central concern in efforts to prevent crime.

From a preventive perspective, it is often argued that offenders, especially serious offenders to be, have to be identified as soon as possible (see, for example, Farrington and Welsh, 2007). If that idea is accepted, one should focus on this group as early as possible as early detection and prevention may be effective for those who engage in crime from an early age. Such a call for early prevention may easily, however, lead to a unilateral focus on juveniles and adolescents, whereas the high number of late-onset offenders among organized crime offenders identified in this thesis emphasize the importance of methods other than early prevention. Early prevention strategies will affect only a selective group of organized crime offenders as most of these offenders engage in crime only later on in life. In addition to early prevention, therefore, other actions are also needed to intervene in the pathways of those who will otherwise end up in organized crime.

A convenient opportunity structure, and especially contacts with future co-offenders, was shown to be of vital importance for successful engagement in organized crime. Thus, situational prevention directed at the settings of crime rather than at the individuals who commit the crime would seem more promising than an approach targeting the offender. Investigative techniques should also, therefore, focus on opportunities flowing from conventional careers. While social bonds such as having a job are normally regarded as protec-

tive factors, contacts for organized crime offenders are often crime-related and therefore have an opposite effect by facilitating crime. This thesis showed that many offenders get involved in organized crime in an occupational setting, and that some lines of business offer more opportunities than others. Many of the offenders studied in this thesis got involved through their jobs in the transport industry or their own, usually small business. Especially for those working relatively independently and unsupervised have the opportunity to misuse this autonomy and start abusing the rules through their privileged access. Occupational settings also serve as an opportunity structure for multiple types of organized crime. Extending this finding to public policy would require similar approaches to be applied to offenders at different levels in a criminal group and offenders involved in different types of organized crime. More supervision and regulation of specific at-risk businesses and those in executive positions in such businesses will reduce their opportunities to misuse their positions.

6.6   Future research

The findings of this thesis are an inducement for at least three future research directions. Firstly, the thesis shows the importance of studying the extraordinary cases in an ordinary way. Studies on criminal careers and crime causation generally focus on general offender populations and only provide an aggregated reflection of the variability within these larger groups. Studies on individuals engaging in a specific crime, such as organized crime or white-collar crime, will test the tenability of received knowledge and well-founded theories. This thesis also shows how these smaller groups relate to the larger group of general samples and is therefore a recommendation for further study into specific offender groups (defined by types of offences, age or other characteristics). Widely used research methods should then be applied so that the results can be compared with what has previously been found and is known. Groups may be defined by offender characteristics, such as their origin or onset age, or by the types of offences committed, such as white-collar crime or organized crime.

A second direction for further research could be to extend this study of the involvement mechanisms of those engaging in organized crime. This thesis examined criminal pathways of organized crime offenders and compared them to those of general offenders, but the analyses were limited to prevalence, frequency and seriousness of offending over time. A particular interesting issue, albeit not studied in this thesis, are the types of offences that were committed prior to organized crime. This thesis found that those ending up in organized crime started off offending more seriously than general offenders. The thesis did not elaborate, however, on whether there was any specializa-

tion or escalation in offending among those ending up in organized crime. Another interesting issue, which was also not examined in this thesis, is that of co-offending careers. It would firstly be interesting to know whether future organized crime offenders tend to commit crimes collectively before they engage in organized crime activities. Secondly, the question of whether offenders working together in organized crime also previously committed crimes together could be examined. In other words, do their criminal pathways show any prior overlap? Co-offending careers would give insight into how criminal pathways of co-offenders relate to each other, and how these cooperative relationships develop over time. Another possible path for future research relates to the mechanisms and processes that directly and indirectly prompt individuals to engage in organized crime. Unravelling a single involvement mechanism – such as occupational ties, conventional experience or criminal know-how – would provide more detailed information on this aspect. Although the interview study revealed some interesting findings, such as the mechanisms behind adult onset, it was limited by its small size of the sample.

Thirdly, another finding brings us back to general offender samples and existing general ideas on criminal careers. Results presented in the third chapter showed that both a substantial proportion of organized crime offenders and a substantial proportion of the general offender population start offending in adulthood. While criminologists tend to accept as a regularity that most offenders age out of crime, adult-onset offenders actually account for the majority of the Dutch general offending population. Adult-onset offenders are underrepresented in criminological research. The focus on young offenders and early crime onset is justified by the belief that offending usually takes place early in life, and that adult offending is preceded by early anti-social behaviour (see, for example, Moffitt and Caspi, 2001; Robins, 1978). Late-onset criminal behaviour cannot simply be explained by stable individual characteristics noticeable from an early age onwards. Instead, adult-onset criminal behaviour seems better explained by settings and situations experienced later in life. Knowledge on adult-onset offending would benefit from an extensive review of the literature, both theoretically and empirically, and studies combining multiple methodologies. Such a multi-method approach would help in exploring the magnitude of a detection effect so as to determine whether, and to what extent, adult onset is an artefact. Finally and most importantly, explanations of and processes leading to adult-onset offending should be explored further, since this thesis has shown that explanations for organized crime offenders experiencing adult onset often follow from positive bonds to society and thus conflict with the age-graded theory of informal social control (Sampson and Laub, 1993).

6.7 Conclusions

Pathways into organized crime often find their basis in later stages of life. Only a minority of organized crime offenders are early-onset criminals and become involved in crime after a troubled childhood or through delinquent friends. The majority of organized crime offenders become involved in crime only after reaching adulthood and choose to take advantage of opportunities becoming available to them later in life, or becoming more appealing to them than other alternatives. Explanations for adult onset among organized crime offenders fit the *social opportunity structure proposed* by Kleemans and De Poot (2008), who identified substantial differences between the developmental paths of organized crime offenders and general offenders. The more systematic analyses performed in this thesis refined these differences, but also found similarities between both groups. While age distributions of organized crime offenders and a comparative sample from the general offender population are relatively equal, organized crime offenders differ from general offenders from the start and engage in more serious crimes throughout their judicial career.

The results of this thesis challenge several generally accepted wisdoms in life-course criminology. Organized crime offenders do not follow the rules of a general theory of crime, which assumes only one type of offenders capable of versatile offending from a single underlying trait. Furthermore, the explanations of adult onset in crime discussed in this thesis put the mechanisms frequently used to explain desistance from crime in an entirely different light. The accepted theories state that mechanisms of informal social control, such as acquiring a stable job, tend to inhibit crime. This thesis found, however, an opposite effect of these mechanisms: bonds to society were found to facilitate rather than deter opportunities for organized crime, with occupational contexts in particular creating opportunities for contacts and resources for engagement in organized crime. In other words, mechanisms usually considered protective factors against crime were found to provide opportunities for organized crime activities.

In summary, this thesis explored the life courses of organized crime offenders and specifically what made them engage in organized crime activities. Answers were sought in various directions and obtained from different sources and perspectives. The main conclusion reads that the most likely candidates for explaining the criminal career patterns of organized crime offenders would seem to be opportunities and settings experienced in adulthood.