

Summary

Criminal careers in organized crime

There is a great lack of knowledge about criminal careers in organized crime, with the exception of several (auto)biographies and case studies of mafia groups. What we know about criminal careers basically stems from research into juveniles, adolescents, and high volume crime. In this report we present the main findings of our extensive research into the criminal careers of about a thousand offenders who were involved in eighty cases of organized crime that have been analysed as part of a continuing research project, the so-called Organized Crime Monitor. The main sources of this research project are files of closed Dutch police investigations of criminal groups, often spanning a period of two or more years (for more information, see Kleemans and Van de Bunt, 1999; Kleemans et al., 1998, 2002; Kleemans, 2007). These empirically rich case studies provide us with qualitative contextual information about these offenders' criminal careers. Furthermore, we were able to trace the rap sheets of 90 percent of the 1092 suspects in the Dutch Judicial Documentation System (Dutch acronym: JDS), providing us with information about individual characteristics and official judicial records.

The analysis in this report is based upon quantitative and qualitative information about the criminal careers of 979 suspects who were involved in 79 different organized crime cases for which prosecution started in the period 1995-1999. These are referred to as 'the index cases'. As in other countries, the trials of these cases – in the first instance and on appeal – may take several years. A unique aspect of this research project is that we are able to combine quantitative information about official judicial records with qualitative information about the context of offenders and their criminal careers: With whom did they co-operate? What relations existed between offenders? Which activities were carried out? What part did offenders play in these activities? What is known from intrusive investigation methods and existing police information about their criminal careers? Combining quantitative and qualitative information, we were able to answer some basic questions and investigate some specific issues in greater detail.

Main research findings

In the Netherlands and elsewhere, rather a lot of attention has been paid to the risk of young people becoming involved in organized crime through recruitment. Current findings, however, compel us to have a wider take on criminal careers in organized crime.

In the first place, it turns out that there are no young offenders in the group of suspects studied by us: none of the offenders is under 18 at the time of the index case and only 7% is aged between 18 and 24. Older offenders – compared to the total JDS population – are also overrepresented. In total, about three quarters of the offenders are aged thirty or older.

Secondly, it turns out that the criminal justice authorities have no idea about the antecedents of 28% of the offenders. It is not until the investigation that these offenders come within the scope of the Dutch criminal justice authorities. These 'unknown offenders' to a large extent are offenders that were born elsewhere and

came to live or reside in the Netherlands at a later date. A substantial proportion of the offenders are unknown to the criminal justice authorities due to the very nature of the criminal activities they are involved in. Many organized crime activities boil down to transnational illegal trade and other transnational illegal activities (transit crime). With transit crime (import, transit, export) it is usually difficult for the authorities to gain a full picture of all the actors active in these activities, either in the Netherlands or abroad.

Thirdly, there is a large number of 'known offenders': 72% of the offenders have had a brush with the Dutch judicial system. A striking feature in the judicial record of the offenders is the fact that they had little to fear from the Dutch judicial system until the index case. In total, 31 per cent of all offenders had been sentenced to a term of imprisonment, and 15 per cent had served more than 12 months.

On average, offenders are aged approximately 27 when they come into contact with the Dutch judicial system for the first time. Although an early start is fairly standard, especially for people with a long criminal career, only twenty-five per cent of all offenders come into contact with the Dutch judicial system before reaching the age of twenty. On the other hand, 40% of the offenders are aged between 20 and 30 when they first have trouble with the law, and 34% is even older than 30 at the time of their first contact with the judicial system.

If we want to find out how we could identify in an early stage that someone gets involved in (organized) crime, it is important that we verify the way in which people become involved in organized crime and how people 'make a career'. An analysis of 92 'starters' shows that people get involved in many different ways in forms of organized crime: existing social relationships, through work and professional relationships, through leisure activities and sidelines, through certain life events and through recruitment. This also explains the phenomenon of the late starters: some opportunities to carry out profitable criminal activities do not arise until later in someone's life. In addition, some opportunities are grasped only later in life, as a consequence of life events such as bankruptcy and serious debts. In other words, there are several roads that lead to involvement in organized crime. These roads cannot be taken until later in life. In many cases, a striking aspect is that starters play an active rather than a passive role.

An analysis of the careers of 66 'ringleaders' or nodal offenders demonstrates that the standard image of 'a life of crime' only is true to some extent. A significant part of the ringleaders switched at a certain point in time to organized crime from their former occupation. Among these 32 offenders a distinction can be made between a group of 19 offenders with a background in legal trade (including import and export) and a group of 13 offenders with other types of occupation, people from the business sector, the construction industry, assembly, hotels and catering, financial services or government. Some offenders carry out their criminal activities as an extension of their legal activities. Others clearly switched at some point in time from their lawful occupation to the trade in illegal goods. Apart from the opportunity element, this switch also involves an element of choice (agency), as a result of which the lives of these offenders change course and increasingly become dominated by organizing criminal activities and shielding these from the criminal justice authorities. Last but not least, life events – also later in life – may bring certain illegal opportunities within reach of people with a negligible criminal career, or may become more appealing compared to other alternatives. It is true for all these offenders with a professional background, of which the majority did not come into contact with the law until after

their twentieth birthday, that it is anything but evident that they were already on the 'police radar'. They are 'newcomers' – usually later in life – that take advantage of the opportunities and contacts their jobs offer them.

In the overall group of ringleaders studied (66), a substantial part of the offenders (30) have already had a brush with the police before they were twenty. Some of them grew, thanks to their local roots, to be versatile 'local heroes'. However, they do not have the necessary contacts to outgrow their region, nor do they have any specific skills that make them interesting for associates from outside their region. Therefore, their own region is their limit, and – thanks to their contacts – they remain focused on the opportunities that present themselves to make a profit, engaging in legal, semi-legal and illegal activities. Their versatility is also a result of the restrictions of the local context. Some of them, for example local XTC manufacturers, manage to gain access to interesting export markets via brokers. As a result, these local heroes can develop into big players, at national or, sometimes, even international level. This is also true for other offenders that know how to optimize economies of scale. Thanks to scaling, profitable illegal activities can gradually take over from other illegal activities, which in practice usually results in a sort of specialization. In respect of some offenders, we also see that capital acquired by criminal activities, such as burglaries and robberies, is sometimes used to switch to forms of organized crime, in particular the trade in illegal drugs. Capital is an important stepping stone, as it creates opportunities to invest in illegal activities. In addition, it creates opportunities for an increase in scale and limitation of risk. Risks can be limited at a given moment by engaging in less risky, semi-legal or legal activities or by a more 'backstage' involvement in activities. Finally, some criminal careers gain momentum because offenders have or develop specific expertise which many other offenders depend on: transnational contacts, skills regarding transport or money laundering. These are essential bottlenecks for many offenders that are active in transit crime. There are also certain crime-specific bottlenecks, such as in human trafficking (forgery) or in the production of synthetic drugs (precursors, hardware, and – in the past – knowledge of the manufacturing process). For that reason, offenders with this know-how or these contacts have the possibility of moving up the 'ladder' in criminal circles. Not only because of their own actions, but also because of the network that is formed by others around these individuals: offenders tell other offenders about specific expertise of this or that individual, which prompts the other offenders to contact them.