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Criminal Careers in Organized Crime and Social Opportunity Structure

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the main findings of quantitative and qualitative research into the criminal careers of about 1000 offenders who were involved in 80 extensively analysed cases of organized crime. The paper analyses how and when offenders become known to the criminal justice authorities, studies in depth the criminal careers of 'starters' and analyses in detail the criminal careers of (ring)leaders and 'nodal' offenders. Because social ties play an important role in organized crime, the paper emphasizes that the *social opportunity structure*, defined as social ties providing access to profitable criminal opportunities, is extremely important for explaining involvement in organized crime. It explains why certain offenders 'progress' to certain types of organized crime whereas others become involved only later on in life. Social opportunity structure may also explain interesting phenomena such as 'late starters' – people without any appreciable criminal history – and people in conventional jobs who switch careers.

KEY WORDS

Criminal Careers / Developmental and Life-Course Criminology / Organized Crime / Qualitative Research / Theory.

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 (Paoli 2003; Dorn et al. 2005; Morselli 2005; Steffensmeier and Ulmer 2005). What we know about criminal careers basically stems from research into juveniles, adolescents and high-volume crime. In recent

years developmental and life-course criminology have made great progress (see, e.g. Blumstein et al. 1986; LeBlanc and Loeber 1998; Piquero et al. 2003; Farrington 2003, 2005). We have much more knowledge about criminal careers than before and some authors have even formulated basic facts and patterns that theories should address (e.g. Farrington 2003, 2005; Laub 2006).

Nevertheless, this research tradition implicitly tends to ignore certain kinds of offender, particularly adult offenders, and certain types of crime, particularly organized crime and white-collar crime (Weisburd and Waring 2001; Leeper Piquero and Benson 2004; Steffensmeier and Ulmer 2005; Shover and Hochstetler 2006). Steffensmeier and Ulmer (2005: 293–311) state that traditional theories focus too much on ‘losers’ and ‘bottom-barrel thieves and hustlers’ and that research into more profitable criminal activities might generate new insights.

In this paper we present the main findings of our extensive research into the criminal careers of about 1000 offenders who were involved in 80 cases of organized crime¹ that have been analysed as part of a continuing research project, the ‘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).² 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

¹ In the literature, we find a constantly recurring discussion on whether organized crime should be defined in terms of the characteristics of groups or of criminal activities (for an overview, see Paoli 2002; Fijnaut and Paoli 2004). In the Organized Crime Monitor, organized crime is mainly distinguished from terrorism, corporate crime, group crime and other types of crime by the characteristics of the groups involved. Following the Fijnaut research group (Fijnaut et al. 1998), groups are considered to be organized crime groups when they are focused primarily on obtaining illegal profits; systematically commit crimes with serious damage to society; and are reasonably capable of shielding their criminal activities from the authorities. Shielding illegal activities from the authorities is possible using various strategies: for example, corruption, violence, intimidation, store fronts, coded communication, counter-surveillance, media manipulation, and the use of experts such as notaries public, lawyers and accountants.

² Each case study always starts with structured interviews with police officers and public prosecutors. After these interviews we analyse and summarize the police files. For empirical researchers this direct access to police files is unique, compared with the situation in other countries. In describing and analysing these files, we make use of an extensive checklist that elaborates upon the following leading questions: What is the composition of the group and how do offenders cooperate? What kinds of illegal activity do they engage in and how do they operate? How do they interact with the opportunities and risks of their environment? What are the proceeds of the criminal activities and how do they spend these proceeds? Transcripts of wiretaps, together with data obtained from police observations and interrogations of victims and offenders, often provide us with a detailed and interesting look into the social world of organized crime.

Dutch Judicial Documentation System (JDS), providing us with information about individual characteristics and official judicial records.³

The analysis in this paper 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 1995–9.⁴ 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 cooperate? 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.

In the first section we address some main findings of developmental and life-course criminology: are these findings relevant for research into criminal careers in organized crime or do we have to pose new questions and provide new answers? Furthermore, we introduce the theoretical concept of ‘social opportunity structure’ – social ties providing access to profitable criminal opportunities – and demonstrate that this concept is highly relevant for explaining some interesting findings from our research. In the second section, we analyse how and when offenders become known to the criminal justice authorities, and what this means for what we know and do not know about the criminal history of offenders. In the third section, we study in depth the criminal careers of ‘starters’ to find out how people become involved in organized crime. In the fourth section, we analyse the criminal careers of (ring)leaders and ‘nodal’ offenders – main suspects who fulfilled an executive function in criminal groups or criminal networks. The last section elaborates upon the relevance of these findings for existing and future research into criminal careers.

³ The JDS provides an overview of all individuals and legal entities that have come into contact with the judicial system in the Netherlands suspected of a criminal offence (for more information about this data source and the use of these data for the WODC Recidivism Monitor, see Wartna et al. 2004). The fact that certain suspects cannot be matched may be owing to two causes. First, people may not have a judicial record in the Netherlands because they were prosecuted abroad for a crime for which they became known to us. This can also be derived from the various case descriptions. Secondly, the lack of information about suspects may be for more ‘technical’ reasons: suspects are not, or not properly, registered in the JDS or they cannot be properly linked because of differences in the registration of their first names, surnames, etc.

⁴ In one of the analysed cases – Case 33 (Nigerian trafficking in women) – none of the people involved were found in the JDS.

Careers in organized crime: New questions, new answers?

Research into high-volume crime and juvenile and adolescent offenders influences considerably our current knowledge and ideas on criminal careers (for an overview, see Piquero et al. 2003). One of the strongest links that such research has identified over many years is the link between age and crime (e.g. Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990). The prevalence of offending rises steeply in the early teenage years and reaches a peak between the ages of 15 and 17. The prevalence of offending then gradually declines over the rest of the life course (Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990: 124–44; Farrington 2003, 2005). Opinions differ regarding the interpretation of the age–crime curve. Some argue that the pattern more or less applies to each individual (e.g. Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990). Others believe that the overall pattern masks distinct groups having sharply different criminal careers. The best-known theory proposing distinct types of antisocial behaviour is Moffitt's (1993, 2003). She distinguishes between a large group of people who engage in crime and antisocial behaviour mostly during adolescence ('adolescence-limited' offenders) and a small group of people who are antisocial from an early age, engage in crime in adolescence and remain active in crime and other forms of antisocial behaviour throughout their lives ('life-course persistent').⁵ The explanation for 'life-course-persistent' criminal behaviour is generally sought in fairly stable biological or psychological characteristics – often deficiencies – such as low intelligence, high impulsivity or low self-control. Moffitt argues that early problem behaviour is an indicator that a person belongs to the life-course-persistent group and that antisocial and criminal behaviour is likely to continue into later life.

The change in the prevalence of offending with age is regarded by some authors as a 'natural law' that needs no further explanation (Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990). On the other hand, representatives of developmental and life-course criminology devote considerable attention to explaining the start, development and termination of such (short) criminal careers (see, e.g., Sampson and Laub 1993; Thornberry 1996; LeBlanc and Loeber 1998; Laub and Sampson 2003; Piquero et al. 2003; Farrington 2003, 2005; Laub 2006). Desistance is explained, for instance, by life events such as getting a (stable) job, developing a (stable) relationship or having children (e.g. Laub and Sampson 2001, 2003).

⁵ Moffitt (2003, 2006) has elaborated upon this basic idea, distinguishing other groups as well. Other authors too distinguish different groups, based on various offending trajectories (e.g. Nagin et al. 1995; Blokland et al. 2005). Opinions, however, differ concerning the theoretical relevance of this approach (Laub and Sampson 2003; Sampson and Laub 2005; Nagin and Tremblay 2005).

Age and organized crime

Before we discuss whether these insights are applicable to criminal careers in organized crime, it is important to note that the population we studied deviates considerably from the total offender population⁶ in two ways. First, our group of suspects includes no juveniles at all. None of these offenders was younger than 18 at the time of the index case, and only 7 percent were between 18 and 24 years old (see Table 1). The few 18- and 19-year-olds we come across are brothers, sons, daughters or cousins of other group members. Older offenders were of course once young themselves, but the question is how exactly such offenders end up in organized crime: do they 'progress' from juvenile crime or do they become involved in other ways and/or when older? For example, a study was recently published of 2565 known juvenile offenders in Amsterdam aged 23 years to find out – based on police information – to what extent they were involved in organized crime (Pennings et al. 2006). Even with this relatively 'old' group and with a very broad definition of organized crime,⁷ less than 1 percent of the offenders showed 'possible involvement'.

A second striking difference is the overrepresentation of older offenders. The suspects are mostly men⁸ aged between 30 and 50 years: 43 percent are aged between 30 and 39, 23 percent between 40 and 49, and 10 percent are even aged 50 or more. In total, three-quarters of the suspects are older than 30. The overrepresentation of these older age groups and the striking absence of juveniles are also shown in Table 1.

In our view, this particular age distribution reflects the fact that we are dealing with a highly specific group that does not come within the focus of traditional research into criminal careers. It is therefore interesting to find out how these criminal careers develop and which mechanisms play a role. In traditional theories, the prevailing line of reasoning is – loosely – that there is something wrong with offenders who continue along the path of crime: either a biological or a psychological deficit (such as lack of self-control), which could explain life-course persistent offending; or a social deficit (such as lack

⁶ The total offender population comprises offenders with at least one criminal offence that was dealt with in 1997.

⁷ The distribution of drugs and small-scale smuggling (e.g. of cannabis) are also categorized as organized crime, and not too stringent requirements are placed on proof of 'possible involvement'.

⁸ The literature on crime is largely unanimous about the fact that crime is mostly a male activity (for a summary, see e.g. Chesney-Lind and Pasko 2003). The population we studied does not deviate on this point: 91 percent of offenders were male and only 9 percent female. However, this does not alter the fact that women may play an important and independent role. This often underexposed role of women is developed further in the first monitor report (Kleemans et al. 1998: 48–51; Kleemans and Van de Bunt 1999) and has also been studied by others (see e.g. Fiandaca 2007).

Table 1 Age distribution of the population of offenders in organized crime (N = 979) compared with the age distribution of the total JDS population (N = 153,252)

Age	Offenders in organized crime	Total offender population
12–17 years	0%	9%
18–24 years	7%	22%
25–29 years	18%	16%
30–39 years	43%	25%
40–49 years	23%	15%
≥ 50 years	10%	13%

of conventional ties or stakes in conformity), which could explain offending limited to one part of the life course, since the problem may be resolved when offenders find a regular job or enter into stable relationships with wife and children.

We believe that such explanations are of limited value in explaining the phenomena we encounter when studying careers in organized crime. These criminal activities generally take place in the later stages of life, they evidently do not ‘wear off by themselves in due course’, and a substantial number of offenders do have a job, a wife and/or children. One may also question whether it is irrational to continue with (organized) crime if offenders have the opportunity to develop profitable criminal activities.⁹

Organized crime and social opportunity structure

Is organized crime different from high-volume crime? Various crimes, such as property crime and violent crime, are simply open to everyone. Yet things are somewhat more complicated where organized crime is concerned. Although each type of organized crime imposes different requirements, there are a number of strikingly common features that differ from those of high-volume crime.

⁹ Steffensmeier and Ulmer (2005) see little value in explanations that emphasize the biological and/or psychological deficiencies of offenders. Such explanations, according to them, would also grossly exaggerate the self-control and rationality of the general population. Morselli et al. (2006: 36) follow a different line of reasoning: ‘the behavioural components inherent in low self-control (impulsive, simple-task oriented, risk seeking, physicality, self-centred, and short-tempered) can all be expressed as key assets (quick-thinking, uncomplicated, risk seeking, action-oriented, individualistic, and unforgiving-ruthless) in many competitive settings’. Bovenkerk (2000) also states that certain individual character traits would be conducive to a career in organized crime (‘extraversion, controlled impulsiveness, a sense of adventure, megalomania and Narcissistic Personality Disorder’).

The first feature is the greater importance of social relations (see, for an overview, Kleemans and Van de Bunt 1999, 2003; Morselli 2001, 2003, 2005). Without access to suppliers and clients/customers, one cannot really get started. Trust is also important, because these activities involve significant financial risks (see, for example, Potter 1994; Gambetta 2000; Bruinsma and Bernasco 2004; Von Lampe and Johansen 2004). For this reason, existing social ties are used or illegal business relationships have to be built up. Not everyone has suitable social ties and building up such relationships takes time and energy.

The second common feature is the transnational character of many of these criminal activities (Kleemans 2007). Many types of organized crime boil down to international smuggling activities – drug trafficking, smuggling illegal immigrants, human trafficking for sexual exploitation, arms trafficking, trafficking in stolen vehicles, and other transnational illegal activities such as money laundering and tax evasion (cigarette smuggling, European Union fraud, for example). Not all offenders have access to these transnational contacts, and some have access only later on in life.

A third common feature is that the crimes committed are considerably more complex logistically than is high-volume crime (e.g. Sieber and Bögel 1993; Cornish and Clarke 2002), which explains why more co-offenders are generally required for the crime to be successfully committed. This means that seeking and finding suitable co-offenders is an important aspect (see, e.g. Reiss 1988; Tremblay 1993; Warr 2002; Waring and Weisburd 2002). Reliance on co-offenders from within one's own social circle is not always sufficient, because they may not possess the necessary capabilities. Contacts with the legal world are also important for transport, money transactions and shielding activities from the authorities. Not every offender has such contacts.

Because social relations play an important role in organized crime, we emphasize that the *social opportunity structure*¹⁰ – social ties providing access to profitable criminal opportunities – is extremely important for explaining involvement in organized crime. It explains why certain offenders 'progress' to certain types of organized crime and why several offenders often become involved in organized crime only later on in life (when they do have the contacts they need, which they often lack when younger). It may also

¹⁰ This theoretical concept merges opportunity theory (e.g. Clarke and Felson 1993) and social network theory (e.g. Burt 1992, 2005; Morselli 2005). In the tradition of strain theory, Cloward (1959) and Cloward and Ohlin (1960) used the concept of differential opportunity structure and access to illegitimate means. More recently, Hagan and McCarthy (1997) have used the concept of criminal capital.

explain the interesting phenomenon of 'late starters' without any appreciable criminal history.

The usual suspects?

Transit crime and unknown offenders

About one in three offenders (28 percent) did not have any previous judicial records preceding the index case. These 'unknown offenders' are largely people who were not born in the Netherlands and came to live or reside there at a later date. A substantial proportion of the offenders are unknown to the criminal justice authorities owing 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, either in the Netherlands or abroad. It is therefore not surprising that this knowledge is obtained only once investigative police powers are deployed during large-scale investigations. Such investigations often reveal suspects who at the time of the criminal investigation were unknown to the police, whereas the investigations indicate that they must have already been active for quite some time (Huisman et al. 2003). The nature of transit crime thus is reflected in the fact that about one in three offenders fall into the hands of the police only during an ongoing investigation.

Known offenders

How long have the other offenders been known to the criminal justice authorities? First, we distinguished between offenders who had lived in the Netherlands since they were 12 years old or younger, and others. For the first group, crimes committed in the Netherlands or established in a Dutch investigation will in principle be recorded in the JDS. In this sense, these JDS histories can be regarded as 'complete'.¹¹ For offenders who have lived part of their lives or still live outside the Netherlands, records cannot be considered as 'complete'. The JDS holds information on contacts only with the Dutch judicial authorities. What has occurred in the criminal justice system outside the Netherlands therefore remains unknown to us.

¹¹ As already noted, these JDS histories are incomplete in other ways, too, because only crimes that have been investigated and solved are studied. In this sense, it is better to refer to these as 'judicial' careers rather than 'criminal' careers.

Hence, we divided the offenders into a group with a reasonably complete judicial record and a group with potentially less reliable information about their criminal past. A total of 619 persons (561 men and 58 women) fall into the first group, and 360 persons (331 men and 29 women) in the second. We refer to these groups as 'raised in the Netherlands' or 'not raised in the Netherlands'.

Judicial contacts

Table 2 shows that for roughly one in three offenders (28 percent) the index case was the first judicial contact, 16 percent had one or more judicial contacts in the period up to five years preceding the index case, 12 percent in the period from 6 to 10 years and 33 percent in the period from 11 to 20 years; and 12 percent already had judicial contacts more than 20 years before the index case.

That some offenders are unknown to the Dutch criminal justice authorities is not only owing to the fact that some of them were raised or are still living abroad. Of the offenders who were raised in the Netherlands, some 16 percent still did not have any previous judicial records; 10 percent had their first judicial contact in the five years preceding the index case and 12 percent in the 6–10 years before. More than 60 percent of the offenders had their first contact more than 10 years before the index case, and 17 percent even more than 20 years earlier. Most members of this group can therefore safely be regarded as 'usual suspects' who are known to the criminal justice authorities.

Table 2 Period of offenders' activity in crime before the index case

	<i>N</i>	<i>Group with complete JD history (N = 619)</i>	<i>Group with possibly incomplete JD history (N = 354)</i>	<i>Total group (N = 979)</i>
No previous contacts	275	16%	49%	28%
0–5 years	152	10%	24%	16%
6–10 years	114	12%	11%	12%
11–20 years	325	45%	13%	33%
>20 years	113	17%	3%	12%
Total	979	100%	100%	100%

Age, crime and organized crime

On average the offenders were about 27 years old when they had their first judicial record¹² and about 37 years old at the time of the index case.¹³ This is noteworthy for at least two reasons. First, the offenders were relatively old when they came to our attention for the index cases, but also when they had their first judicial contact. At the average age of 27, the average criminal career would have long come to an end. Secondly, the average age masks the differences between early and late starters. Of the offenders studied, 26 percent had their first judicial contact before the age of 20. An early start is quite 'natural', particularly for persistent offenders. On the other hand, 40 percent of the offenders were between 20 and 30 years old when they came up against the criminal justice authorities for the first time, and 34 percent were older than 30 years at the time of the first contact.¹⁴ The fact that a substantial number of the offenders had their first judicial contact relatively late in life is something that requires further explanation. Did these people start to commit crimes only later on in life, or had they managed effectively to evade the criminal justice authorities?

Involvement mechanisms and the 'late starters' phenomenon

In this section we shall examine the more general mechanisms through which people get involved in organized crime, based on an analysis of 92 'starters': suspects who were raised in the Netherlands and were involved in one of the studied cases but did not have any other judicial contacts before. What is interesting about these starters is that they had not 'progressed' from high-volume crime. These 'starters' also included many 'late starters' aged 30 years and older.

Social ties

Social ties play an important role in organized crime, as early studies by Albin (1971), Ianni and Reuss-Ianni (1972) and Chambliss (1978) have

¹² The 'age of onset' is, on average, 25 years for offenders who were raised in the Netherlands and 31 years for offenders who were raised outside the Netherlands.

¹³ Offenders who were raised in the Netherlands were, on average, 38 years old at the time of the index case; the others were, on average, 34 years old.

¹⁴ Of the offenders who were raised in the Netherlands, 37 percent had their first contact with the criminal justice authorities before the age of 20, 37 percent between the ages of 20 and 30, and 27 percent were older than 30 at the time of their first contact with the criminal justice authorities.

demonstrated, as have more recent studies (e.g. Finckenauer and Waring 1998; Kleemans and Van de Bunt 1999; Zhang and Chin 2002; Morselli 2005; Natarajan 2006). Elaborating upon the social embeddedness of organized crime, Kleemans and Van de Bunt (1999) challenge the traditional view on recruitment, which is that criminal organizations recruit 'outsiders', who start by doing the 'dirty jobs' and who are able to climb the ladder by proving their capability. In contrast to this traditional view, Kleemans and Van de Bunt find that social ties and the transfer of knowledge and contacts create a kind of *social snowball effect*: people get in touch with organized crime activities through their social relations and, as they proceed, their dependence on the resources of other people (such as money, knowledge and contacts) gradually declines; subsequently they choose their own ways, generating new criminal associations, and attracting people from their own social environment, and the story repeats itself.

This pulling power of the immediate social environment is something we also discover among the starters in the cases we studied. First, this applies to the involvement of girlfriends, wives and partners:

The girlfriend of the principal suspect is 25 years old at the time of the index case. She got to know him when she was working in his brother's foreign exchange bureau. Now she runs the antique shop that acts as a cover for the illegal exchange of drugs money. She also fiddles the books, because none of the shops generates any significant turnover. (Case 74)¹⁵

In addition, sons, daughters, brothers, sisters and half-brothers become involved in criminal activities, a fact that is also known from research into high-volume crime. People have a much greater chance of getting involved in crime if they are born into a family in which parents or older brothers are already active in crime (e.g. Farrington et al. 1996; Thornberry et al. 2003; Van de Rakt et al. 2006). However, our cases show that involvement in organized crime is not only transferred from parent to child. It can also be transferred from child to parent, even at a later stage in life:

B is 56 years old at the time of the index case. His daughter becomes associated with A who is involved in manufacturing synthetic drugs. Attracted by the 'big bucks' and luxury lifestyle of his 'son-in-law', B becomes more and more involved in A's criminal activities: he helps to manufacture the drugs, buys legal ingredients and gets involved in selling amphetamine powder. Together with his son-in-law he plays an important role in a synthetic drugs network. (Case 3)

Besides these family relationships, we also see the involvement of family friends, childhood or student friends and a woman neighbour who hid a large

¹⁵ Case numbers refer to the 80 cases that are summarized in appendix 3 of Kleemans et al. (2002).

amount of money for the principal suspect in her house, counted the money and did some of the bookkeeping. Existing social relationships underlie the involvement of these 'starters'.

Work, profession and social ties

Several starters possess specific skills through their work, occupation or employment history.¹⁶ For example, we see starters who are active in the fields of transport (road, sea and air transport, but also occupations such as importer/exporter or customs official) and financial and legal advice (bookkeeper, (ex-)employee of the tax administration or customs, lawyer, (ex-)employee at a foreign exchange bureau or bank employee) and all kinds of independent entrepreneur.

Mineral oil – transported within the European Union while deferring payment of duty – is put on the market by a group without paying Value Added Tax (VAT) and duty by forging customs stamps on documents. C, a customs official aged 47 years, provides customs stamps (stamp impressions), original letter paper and information on permits, and also explains how to commit fraud. The commodities are traded through a number of paper companies, and through a number of legal companies. At a certain moment C realizes the extent of the fraud and decides to step back. His role is then taken over by D. (Case 67)

Contacts with other suspects come about in various cases through work and occupational contacts, or because people work for a particular business:

I (23 years) and H (46 years) have no previous judicial records. They are employed by a transport company involved in the transport of hashish. I is married to the daughter of the previous owner of the business, and works as a planner. H works as a manager, bookkeeper and administrator. They hire vehicles through an affiliated company and arrange for a licence, a driver and documents that are necessary to carry out the hashish transport, whereby the company itself must be kept out of things. (Case 45)

Work and occupation-related contacts may therefore underlie criminal cooperation and involvement in organized crime. However, these examples also illustrate that work and occupation-related contacts often coincide with social relations, either because people find a job through these social relations or because working relationships develop into more or less close social relations.

¹⁶ For a review of the complex relationship between crime and work, see Fagan and Freeman (1999).

Leisure activities and sidelines

People from many different social worlds may also meet through leisure activities and sidelines (see, more generally, e.g. Feld 1981):

B is a municipal official and organizes the checks under the Aliens Act. Through the motorbike club he knows brothel owner A, who got involved in trafficking in women only at a later stage in life. A reports his women to B, sometimes in the presence of the women concerned. B is very taken with A and his ladies. Their common interests (motorbikes and women) gradually develop into a friendship. B forges documents for the women concerned and ensures that they do not undergo checks under the Aliens Act. He provides the prostitutes with residence permits, relying on the policy of tolerance of the municipality and police. In addition, he sometimes collects women from abroad and involves himself in running the brothel (one of the analysed cases).

Leisure activities and sidelines also act as a catalyst for contacts between parties from different social worlds. Local cafés, night life, parties, ‘after parties’, drugs outlets, brothels, shooting clubs or motorbike clubs – these are all places and occasions where all sorts of people meet. These meetings are particularly important for developing contacts between representatives of the ‘underworld’ and the ‘licit world’ who otherwise would be less likely to come across each other in everyday life.

Life events

In life-course criminology, much attention is paid to life events such as getting a regular job, developing a long-term relationship or having children (e.g. Sampson and Laub 1993; Laub and Sampson 2003). When we focus on the starters in the cases we analysed, what stands out most is the importance of life events related to or causing a financial setback: people who are financially down and out become bankrupt or are heavily in debt and subsequently become involved in organized crime:

J (30 years) comes into contact with A when he runs into financial problems. A can readily lend him money and is not worried if the money cannot be repaid quickly. A now has a hold on J, because J owes him a lot of money. A forces him to rent premises and set them up as an XTC laboratory. The index case can be regarded as the start of a criminal career in organized crime: after the index case J comes into contact with the criminal justice authorities at the ages of 36 and 38 years owing to offences under the Opium Act. (Case 5)

C (49 years) was first a car mechanic and later a process operator. After far-reaching changes in his personal life, he starts gambling and gets into financial difficulties. Through his daughter and her boyfriend he hears that a member of his ‘son-in-law’s’ family deals in the ‘grey market’ of currency trading. C asks this person (A) if he can come and work for him as an exchange agent. Initially A is not very keen, but eventually agrees. (Case 52)

What is striking about these cases is that the parties intertwine because the criminal reputation of the 'generous' money lenders or 'employers' is flaunted in the immediate social environment. Particularly noteworthy is that the initiative comes not just from the lenders but also from those who find themselves in financial difficulties.

Recruitment?

In some cases, recruitment by criminal groups takes place in a highly targeted way. In Case 21, for example, individuals with specific technical know-how are approached:

A is a technically highly capable individual, one of his activities being message tapping. Through a hackers' journal he gets to know I (27 years). He seeks contact with I because the latter can develop software with which A can tap into messages. He also approaches G, a 36-year-old electronics specialist, to modify and improve the software that has been bought. (Case 21)

In the production of illegal CDs, too, we find examples of people with specific technical know-how being recruited (Case 40 and Case 60). Even so, the deliberate recruitment of 'outsiders' would seem to be the exception rather than the rule. Starters get involved in many varied ways in organized crime: through existing social ties, through work- and occupation-related contacts, through leisure activities and sidelines and as a result of certain 'life events'. The *social opportunity structure* determines who at what moment can obtain access to profitable criminal activities. This social opportunity structure also explains the phenomenon of late starters: some situations occur only later on in a person's life. In addition, involvement in organized crime may provide a way out later on in life only when life situations such as bankruptcy and problematic debt arise.

The paths along which involvement in organized crime comes about are therefore very varied (compare also Laub and Sampson 2003). Moreover, these paths may evolve only at a later age. One aspect worth noting is that in many cases the starters themselves play an active rather than a passive role. Sometimes the initiative comes directly from the starters themselves. They often have something to offer, creating a situation of mutual dependence.

Careers of (ring)leaders and nodal offenders

The 'starters' in organized crime provide a good picture of the various paths along which involvement in organized crime may develop. Yet what can be said about the 'leaders'? Do the same mechanisms play a role with them?

Or are these offenders born to commit crimes and do they progress – unlike the starters – from high-volume crime to organized crime? And, if that is the case, how?

In order to answer these questions, we analyse here the careers of 66 (ring)leaders and ‘nodal’ offenders, who were raised in the Netherlands – main suspects who fulfilled an executive function in the criminal groups or criminal networks in the index cases.¹⁷ These offenders were, on average, 39 years old at the time of the index case, had 12 previous contacts with the criminal justice authorities and were, on average, 23 years old at the time of their first contact with these authorities. However, these averages mask significant differences between the careers of these offenders. Some have been familiar to the criminal justice authorities since the age of 12 and have a long criminal record, whereas others came to the attention of the criminal justice authorities only when older. Roughly half (46 percent) came into contact with the criminal justice authorities before the age of 20.

According to Moffitt’s theory (1993), problem behaviour early in life is an important indicator for criminal behaviour when older. As well as problem behaviour at an early age, one would expect ‘persistent offenders’ to have been in trouble with the law at a young age. However, for a substantial number of the leaders we studied this is evidently not the case: 54 percent were 20 years or older when they came into contact with the criminal justice authorities for the first time.

In addition, a substantial number of these offenders do not fit the pattern of a career in crime that is typified by problem behaviour at a young age, dropping out from school, unemployment and crime. If we look at the occupational background of the leaders we studied, 32 of them had been engaged in a legal occupation (or still were at the time of the index case). The occupational background of 15 offenders is unknown; and 19 offenders had been involved only in criminal activities and/or illegal trade in the past.

Professions and opportunity structures

A significant number of the leaders thus made a switch from a legal occupational background to organized crime. Among these 32 offenders, a

¹⁷ Based on the information from police files, we assigned codes to ‘(ring)leaders and nodal offenders’, ‘coordinators’, ‘lower-level suspects’ and ‘facilitators’. The selected sample of 66 ‘(ring)leaders and nodal offenders’ is conservative, because ‘coordinators’ and ‘facilitators’ are also more important in criminal networks than ‘lower-level suspects’. The selected 66 suspects represent 52 percent of the total number of suspects who played a leading role. The others (48 percent) were raised and/or were living abroad, so that the JDS histories may be regarded as ‘possibly incomplete’.

distinction can be made between a group of 19 with a background in legal trade (including import and export) and a group of 13 with other types of occupation – people from the business sector, the construction industry, assembly, hotels and catering, financial services or government. How did these offenders become involved in organized crime?

Criminal activities extending from legal activities

In a number of cases there is a direct relationship between legal activities and illegal activities. Particularly in fraud cases we find suspects without any appreciable criminal record who get involved in illegal activities in response to opportunities that arise during their day-to-day work. Examples are the 55-year-old main suspect in an oil fraud case (Case 39), the 38-year-old main suspect in another oil fraud case (Case 67) and a corporate banker who managed a sizeable organization involved in investment fraud and swindling (Case 72). Another example concerns two legal weapons dealers. This case also illustrates that social relationships, working relationships, leisure activities and sidelines can be closely interwoven:

Through a shooting club, marine engineer A comes into contact with B, a toolmaker he knows from his school days. This contact is further intensified through club life and their common interest in shooting and weapons. At a certain moment A and B decide to turn their hobby into a job and set up a business specializing in modifying and repairing weapons – a speciality of B. The business does not do particularly well. When the opportunity emerges to take over a well-known weapons dealership, they seize their chance. A contributes the cash and B the machines and know-how. A is responsible for finance and administration, and B for the engineering.

Through the shooting club and weapons trade fairs, B goes on to establish contacts with a Belgian weapons dealer. From their common interest, hobby and occupation a friendship develops. Initially these contacts lead to a long-term commercial relationship, in which illegal weapons are also occasionally traded.

At a certain moment this Belgian asks B to cooperate in a scam that a number of Belgian weapons dealers have been carrying out for some time. The Belgians put weapons on the black market on a large scale by exporting them – on paper – and then trading them illegally. It is advantageous to them to export the weapons through a business outside Belgium.

The Dutch parties A and B take up the proposal, and therefore become drawn into the illegal arms trade. In exchange they receive an agent's fee and may buy weapons from the Belgians at a reduced rate. (Case 78)

For people with a legal commercial business, such as the above-mentioned oil and weapons dealers, illegal activities can sometimes become completely interwoven with their daily pattern of activities. The move into illegal activities would then not seem to be a very big step. However, an illegal component is introduced in their legal business operations. Audits of the accounts

and physical inspections are the main risk factors here, but in the above cases the inspections were inadequate.

Switching from legal to illegal commodities

Another group of offenders makes a bigger switch, from legal to illegal commodities, probably motivated by the big profits that can be obtained in the trade in prohibited commodities such as narcotics. An important difference is that, with these illegal commodities, other suppliers and other customers are involved. However, those people with a background in trade have the advantage that they are familiar with the laws of the market and what is involved in domestic and international trade. Contacts in legal trades, such as those with transport companies, may also be useful for illegal trade. In addition, a number of offenders have start-up capital and logistics facilities.

In some ways nothing really changes for these offenders, and the illegal trade can continue alongside the legal trade. However, a major difference is that the illegal trade involves new risks (Reuter 1983; Potter 1994): deception and betrayal by co-offenders, and risks from the police and customs (regular checks, seizures, police investigations and sting operations). Effective shielding of criminal activities from the authorities may take a lot of time and effort. The move into illegal trade may therefore lead to a completely new lifestyle, in which the organization of the criminal activities and shielding them from the authorities have far-reaching consequences for the offenders' day-to-day lives.

Life events

Illegal opportunities extending from legal activities are seized upon by some professionals but not by others. This means there is 'opportunity' on the one hand, and 'agency' on the other hand (Laub and Sampson 2003). Illegal opportunities sometimes arise more or less accidentally. For example, life events may bring illegal opportunities within reach of people without any appreciable criminal history, or make it more attractive compared with existing alternatives.

A is 60 years old at the time of the index case. He runs a brothel in which many Eastern European women are at work. Before A gets involved in the prostitution business, he works as a spray painter with a car firm and carries out repairs to cars in his own repair workshop. At a certain moment he falls ill and is unable to continue working as a spray painter. During this period he meets the manager of a sex club. He works for six months for this person in the club. A is a member of a motorbike club. During the 1980s he raced on circuits in Eastern Europe, from which he has kept up with many female acquaintances. When the borders open,

he goes to collect these women. He begins with four women and his business gradually becomes larger and larger. He takes over the lease from the sex club manager and develops his contacts further in Eastern Europe. As described earlier, he is assisted by municipal official B, a contact through the motorbike club. (One of the analysed cases)

During the first 56 years of his life, A does not get into trouble at all with the criminal justice authorities. A's criminal career begins at the moment that – as a result of a *life event* (illness) – he exchanges his work as a spray painter for a job in the prostitution sector. After this career switch he is guilty not only of trafficking in women but also of aggravated assault and the possession of firearms. These offences are closely interwoven with his new pattern of illegal activities.

A was successful in the prostitution sector because of the opportunity structure offered by his social contacts. Through his leisure activities (women and motorbikes) he knew both women from Eastern Europe and the municipal official who could issue them with residence permits and therefore allow them to work.

The mechanisms discussed earlier to explain late starters – social ties, working relationships, leisure activities and sidelines, as well as life events – are all found in this case. What is also important here is that the opportunity to engage in illegal activities presents itself only later on in life, and is then seized upon after a life event (illness and incapacity for work). However, it is clearly a turning point, not for the better (e.g. Sampson and Laub 1993) but for the worse. Financial setbacks and problematic debt situations may also fulfil such a role.

Lifetime careers in crime?

In the preceding section we looked in greater depth at offenders who had made a clear switch from legal to illegal activities. These offenders thus differ from the stereotypical pattern of a career in crime characterized by early problem behaviour, dropping out from school, unemployment and crime. Another point on which these offenders differ from this stereotypical pattern is that a large number of them get into trouble with the law only in later life. Of the 32 offenders with a background in a conventional occupation, 25 came into contact with the criminal justice authorities only after the age of 20, and 7 before the age of 20.

However, among the total group of offenders studied (66), a substantial number (30) had already been in trouble with the law before the age of 20. The rest of this section will focus on this group. How did their criminal careers develop? What pathways and patterns can be identified? Below we will discuss in turn: the versatile but regionally constrained 'local hero' (versatility, the

local context as opportunity and constraint); progression through an increase in scale (specialization); progression through capital accumulation; and expertise, contacts and network formation.

The 'local hero': Versatility and the opportunities and constraints of the local context

Some offenders have strong local roots, from which they derive both their strength and their weakness. For example, in Cases 17, 18 and 19 we see strongly locally rooted offenders engaged in all kinds of illegal and semi-legal activities. Their local roots and social contacts enabled them to become involved in all kinds of legal and illegal trade. However, they had one constraint: they could not or did not want to extend beyond their own region, nor did they have any specific skills or expertise that made them attractive to offenders from other regions or countries. This is why they can be described as 'local heroes' (Kleemans et al. 2002: 74–5). Within the limits of the local context they exploit the opportunities that arise to make illegal profits.

A group of offenders have known each other since childhood in the neighbourhood, at boxing school and in night life, and have been committing crimes, including violent crimes, in varying compositions from a young age. One of the offenders in particular has built up a violent reputation by shooting down a person in broad daylight.

All the suspects have long criminal records that began at a young age. At the time of the index case these offenders are involved in extortion, the narcotics trade, growing weed, rip deals, swindling, illegal lotteries and employing personnel without paying social insurance and taxes. These persons also earn money from a sex club. However, it is striking that the criminal records of some of these individuals do not show any clear change. In the later period too, when they get involved in other, more profitable, criminal activities, they still get into trouble with the law for high-volume crime such as theft, bar fights and public order offences. (Case 17)

The local context forms the backdrop to these types of crime. The local social contacts, whereby legality and illegality are often interwoven, also offer opportunities to operate in the grey area between legality and illegality or to cross the boundary between illegality and the legitimate world, for example by making investments. Case 17 shows activities in the grey area between illegality and legality (growing weed, illegal lotteries, employment of personnel without paying social insurance and taxes, a tolerated sex club), while Case 79 – in addition to growing weed, narcotics trade, weapons trading and currency exchange – illuminates links with (tolerated) 'coffee shops' (cannabis outlets) and a garage/car company.

An important question, however, is whether these 'local heroes' are able to move beyond their own region. Many lack the necessary contacts to do so.

Nor are they approached by offenders from other regions or countries because of specific skills or expertise. They therefore remain constrained in their own region, concentrating on the opportunities that arise to make legal, semi-legal and illegal profits. In so doing they develop into versatile, locally rooted illegal entrepreneurs. Yet such versatility is also a consequence of the constraints of the local context.

In other cases, particularly those involving the production and export of synthetic drugs, locally rooted offenders are linked to profitable export markets through 'marketplace Amsterdam' and the activities of brokers, without having to put a foot in these export markets themselves. In such cases there are profitable opportunities for specialization and increases in scale.

Progression through increases in scale (specialization)

Profitable illegal activities may, through increases in scale, gradually supersede other illegal activities, so that in practice some kind of specialization develops. Examples are the local XTC producers already referred to, who obtain access through brokers to potentially profitable export markets. Through this, local heroes can emerge as major players at a national level, but sometimes at an international level too. With more traditional types of crime, such as car and motorbike theft, processes of increases in scale and specialization also occur.

The core of the group consists of five childhood friends who at the time of the index case are about 30 years old. They live on benefits and have been involved in theft and burglary from a young age. The money they earn through such activities is spent on alcohol, drugs, parties and motorbikes. Gradually they concentrate on the theft of expensive motorbikes and expensive cars. A is the most important figure in the group. He presents himself as the leader and has connections to sell on the stolen vehicles. The core group spots, steals and temporarily hides the vehicles and then delivers them to clients. This amounts to a full-time job in the summer months when lots of motorbikes are on the streets. A organizes the activities and earns the money. He also makes use of acquaintances and friends who inform him if they see a suitable vehicle or know of people who could temporarily hide away stolen vehicles. (Case 76)

What is interesting about this case is that the criminal record of A (93 judicial records) shows an ascending line: from theft and burglary, through increases in scale to the systematic theft of expensive motorbikes and expensive cars. This successful activity increasingly determined A's day-to-day life, and his social network gathered more and more around this activity. However, this is not the whole story:

At a certain moment a number of the key members, including A, become involved in armed robberies, burglaries and ram raids. The targets are financial companies,

jewellers and fashion stores. The group cooperates with some 10 Surinamese offenders. This collaboration develops when A gets to know the leader of these Surinamese (I). The Surinamese possess weapons and have some experience of armed robberies. The Dutch members can easily get hold of a getaway car (stolen or otherwise) and can also offload the jewellery and clothing through A's receivers. (Case 76)

The meeting between A and I therefore gave rise to new opportunities and/or challenges for both groups. The criminal career of A shows a certain development and some fixed patterns, but certainly did not progress in a perfectly straight line (see also Steffensmeier and Ulmer 2005).¹⁸

Progression through capital accumulation

Assets acquired through high-volume crime such as burglary and robberies can also be used to negotiate the transition to organized crime:

A and B have known each other since nursery school. At a young age they commit their first house burglaries and robberies. After a number of years they decide to invest their illegal money in the narcotics trade. This way a criminal group arises that initially generates cash from producing and trading synthetic drugs. Although A and B themselves are not expert in the area of synthetic drugs, their criminal assets enable them to buy the necessary knowledge and equipment from other criminal groups. However, the group does not restrict itself to synthetic drugs. It also exports hashish for other organizations and earns cash in the marijuana trade. In fact, this group deals in all areas of the drugs trade if there is money to be earned from it.

A and B have a violent reputation and both have brothers who are nationally notorious criminals. In the 10 years that A and B have been running this narcotics group, their power, influence and turnover have become progressively greater. (Case 45)

The criminal records of these leaders show a shift when they moved into the narcotics trade. When A and B were young (18 and 14 years), they had judicial records mainly for housebreaking and robbery. From the moment they moved into the drugs trade, they no longer had any judicial contacts for these crimes, yet they did have other judicial contacts for assault, firearms possession and traffic offences. Targeted police investigations into these

¹⁸ The pattern of increases in scale also occurs with a major group of suspects who do appear in the cases we studied but fall outside this analysis because they usually did not grow up in the Netherlands. These are mostly people suspected of transnational drugs trafficking within strongly ethnically determined networks. More specifically these networks involve Turks operating in the heroin trade and Latin Americans operating in the cocaine trade. As a result of migration, transnational networks are created that offer a good opportunity structure for transnational trade (see also Kleemans and Van de Bunt 1999). If the transports are successful, their frequency can be readily increased and profits reinvested in new transports.

suspects twice came to a dead end. The criminal record of the past 10 years therefore gives an impression not so much of criminal careers but rather of the moments when those offenders – whose main activities remained out of view – nevertheless came into contact with the criminal justice authorities, largely through violent crime or traffic offences.

Capital accumulation is an important stepping stone towards organized crime, because it creates the opportunity to invest in illegal activities and to play an increasingly prominent role in the criminal circuit. In addition, it provides the opportunity for risk limitation. What is interesting about the careers of the various (ring)leaders is that capital accumulation also gave them the opportunity to become a ‘background operator’, for instance by investing in drugs transportation that was actually carried out by others, by guaranteeing certain transactions, or by investing money in prostitution, hotel and catering outlets, and property.

Skills, contacts and network formation

Some careers begin to accelerate because offenders possess or develop a particular expertise that other offenders depend on. For example, a lack of transnational contacts or skills in the area of transport or handling money (laundering) represents a significant bottleneck for offenders involved in transit crime. There are also certain crime-specific bottlenecks, such as in human trafficking (forging documents) or in the production of synthetic drugs (precursors,¹⁹ equipment, and – in the past – knowledge of the production process). Offenders who possess this knowledge or these contacts can quickly develop in the criminal environment because they can be independent players, they are attractive as partners in collaborative ventures and/or they supply their services to other criminal groups. Network formation takes place because others are dependent on and make use of this specific expertise:

A is initially known as a container thief. Up to the age of 40 he regularly has judicial contacts, mainly aggravated theft, but also for issuing forged money, vandalism and the possession of prohibited firearms. During this time he develops many contacts in the criminal circuit as well as in the port.

A begins organizing hashish transports, particularly to the United Kingdom, presumably around the age of 40. A's group becomes known in the criminal world. Consequently other criminal groups ask A to arrange transports of narcotics for them. In a short time his operation grows from a small group transporting a few kilos of hashish into a successful business transporting 10,000 kilos a week. For these transports, cover loads are used that are transported between existing companies,

¹⁹ ‘Precursor’ is a general term for the basic compound in the chemical reaction that produces, for instance, MDMA (XTC).

some of which have been taken over or have been set up especially for this purpose. The transport is taken care of by regular transport companies. A does not focus only on transporting hashish, but is also involved in trading a range of narcotics (including hashish, XTC and amphetamines), precursors and fake brand clothing. (One of the analysed cases)

What is interesting about this case is the fast growth of A. For a large part of his life, the police considered him as one of the many offenders involved in aggravated theft. However, in a relatively short time he emerged as a major player in the transport of narcotics and the trade in precursors. It is also interesting that, as A's independent criminal trade grew, criminal groups called on his services too. They hitched a lift on the skills of A, and A in turn profited from this.

Expertise is therefore a major pull factor in the criminal environment. In the past, knowledge about producing XTC was very sparse and several criminal groups had to rely on the same laboratory experts. Now, it is the precursors and the equipment that are the new bottlenecks. Offenders who can solve these bottlenecks are attractive to others involved in this business, which leads to network formation:

B has been operating in the synthetic drugs world for a long time and is well known for his chemical knowledge. He has been committing crimes against property since he was 18 years old, and as a result he is well embedded in the criminal circuit and knows many people. Since the age of 22 he has specialized in manufacturing synthetic drugs. He did this for many years before moving on to sell everything required to produce synthetic drugs, including portable labs and chemical knowledge. This way he successfully takes advantage of a need, because there are plenty of groups who want to produce synthetic drugs but only a few offenders who have the chemical knowledge and requirements needed to do so independently. His legal company supplies precursors, other chemicals and equipment to various criminal groups. Besides that his business is involved in manufacturing new designer drugs. (One of the analysed cases)

In these cases the offenders initially do not have an occupation. They start a criminal career and develop expertise. Through this expertise, networks are formed *around* them. Through their links with the licit world these offenders have much to offer (transport, equipment, resources and expertise for the production of synthetic drugs). It is important to note that the successful progression of their criminal career is not due just to their own actions, a point that is stressed in the literature on social networks (for example, Burt 1992, 2005). The principal catalyst is the formation of networks *around* them: co-offenders tell other offenders about the specific expertise of these people, and those offenders then make contact. We find similar mechanisms at work with document forgers and currency exchangers. In the cases we studied, however, these offenders were usually not born

and raised in the Netherlands. Therefore they fall outside the scope of this analysis.

Discussion

Focusing on criminal careers in organized crime generates some refreshing empirical and theoretical insights. Because social ties play an important role in organized crime, we emphasize that the *social opportunity structure* – social ties providing access to profitable criminal opportunities – is extremely important for explaining involvement in organized crime. It explains why certain offenders ‘progress’ to particular types of organized crime and why several offenders become involved only when older, at a time when they eventually have the contacts and opportunities they need for these activities. Social opportunity structure may also explain interesting phenomena such as ‘late starters’ – people without any appreciable criminal history – and legally employed people switching careers.

Developmental and life-course criminology has made a major contribution to our knowledge of criminal careers. Yet its powerful, dominant methodology – analysing large longitudinal data sets – also has some drawbacks by focusing primarily on young offenders, high-volume crime and the individual characteristics of offenders. Older offenders are studied only if they can be traced and if they are willing to cooperate with additional sweeps, creating both ‘sample attrition’ and – which is more important – self-selection. Furthermore, it is hard to incorporate in such longitudinal studies the social context of crime and criminal careers, including co-offending. So the most important innovation in this line of research stems from including life narratives, providing researchers with the opportunity to put criminal careers in a social context (e.g. Laub and Sampson 2003).

Our analysis is based on a broad sample of a highly specific population of offenders who are involved in organized crime. The analysis combines qualitative and quantitative information and has several pros and cons. Our empirical findings should not be misinterpreted as findings from a representative sample. Yet, from a theoretical point of view, these findings are very important in drawing attention to underexposed phenomena and mechanisms that are present in our data set and go beyond incidental case studies.

Our findings also pose several challenges for criminal career research. First, studies on older offenders and on particular types of crime, such as organized crime and white-collar crime, might refocus attention on social context and on co-offenders promoting certain pathways in crime. Co-offending is still an understudied aspect in criminal career research. Secondly, our findings challenge the traditional boundaries between legality and illegality.

Social ties cross boundaries between legality and illegality, as do some people's activities at some times in their lives. Therefore we have paid attention to social ties, work relations, sidelines, leisure activities and life events, all of which create opportunities for involvement in organized crime, even for people with no appreciable criminal history. Thirdly, criminal career research should focus not only on adolescence but also on later stages in life. Our study points to important changes in criminal careers that occur with age, even after important life events that typify settling down, such as finding a job, finding a partner and having children. Fourthly, studying these stages in life should go beyond a preoccupation with desistance. Desistance cannot be explained by stakes in conformity alone; another important factor is a lack of profitable criminal opportunities (Steffensmeier and Ulmer 2005). One could argue that this is particularly salient at stages in life when making money is more important than it is in adolescence. Likewise, Morselli et al. (2006) have argued that mentors are crucial in finding profitable criminal activities and coping with the risks of a life in crime. Our findings might add network formation, which stimulates involvement in organized crime and makes desistance less attractive owing to the negative social repercussions. It also adds the option of functioning as a 'background operator', modifying the risks of a profitable life in crime. Just as the quantitative and qualitative analysis of 'ordinary' offenders by Laub and Sampson (2003) discovered shared beginnings and divergent lives, analysing criminal careers in organized crime illuminates divergent beginnings and divergent pathways throughout.

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